

Amy Borovoy, *The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Codependency, and the Politics of Nurturance in Postwar Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xvii + 234 pages.

People who spend time in Tokyo learn to watch where they're walking when traveling home late at night. As unpleasant as it sounds, urban train stations often have puddles of the sticky results left by drunken riders who have gotten sick. These veritable minefields remind even the casual observer that drinking continues to be a key cultural activity and that the unpleasant results of alcohol are tolerated, if not excused. As anthropologist Amy Borovoy points out in *The Too-Good Wife: Alcohol, Codependency, and the Politics of Nurturance in Postwar Japan*, the vibrant clusters of social practices surrounding alcohol consumption in Japan are regularly believed to strengthen ties between co-workers, friends, and colleagues. Moreover, for many white-collar workers, drinking is part of the job, and mandatory carousing is justified as a surefire way to temporarily dissolve office hierarchies while simultaneously promoting more business deals. Drinking practices, though, are not limited to the business world: getting together for a drink is an important activity in many informal groups and clubs, as well.

Although important to her analysis, the culture of drinking is not ultimately Borovoy's target in *The Too-Good Wife*. Instead, she locates her ethnography within a mental health center in Tokyo designed to assist wives and mothers dealing with repercussions of alcoholism, as well as with "family problems" more generally. Borovoy beautifully describes how these women's attempts to be good wives and mothers expose contradictions and conflicts in the normative idealizations of femininity, creating complicated dilemmas the women discuss in group therapy sessions. Like women in other cultural contexts, these women are trying to support their husbands without furthering the alcohol dependencies from which these men suffer. In American self-help terminology, they want to support the men but not their addictions. However, as Borovoy describes, these dilemmas are com-

pounded by the histories and politics of being a wife in Japan. Specifically, wives and mothers have been imagined as infinitely enduring; they are idealized as fostering almost total dependence in their family members. Borovoy traces the shifts in these constructions of femininity, playing particular attention to the changing ideal of “good wives and wise mothers” (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母) and its contemporary versions. Although idealizations of women have changed, in Borovoy’s words, “managing family problems through attentive care and sheer endurance is explicitly considered the role of a wife and mother” (p. 3). In these ways, a wife and mother’s key characteristics are idealized to include endurance, patience, and constant support for dependent family members.

Because these constructs link being a good wife and mother with cultivating and supporting dependence, Borovoy was surprised to hear counselors and patients using the vocabulary of “codependence” to describe their family problems. According to this rhetoric, originally conceived in American Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, when family members assist addicts—by covering for them, cleaning them up, or lending them money—they enable the addictions. In these terms, it is possible to be a “too-good wife” if a woman helps a dependent husband to such an extent that he never needs to solve his own problems.

Although the term “codependence” might be recognizable to American audiences, the term does not hold similar self-help cachet in Japan. As Borovoy explains in a historical review of counseling and psychology in Japan, “dependence” or “the desire to be passively loved” (*amae* 甘え) are more familiar terms to describe intimate relationships. Key sociological or psychosocial works about Japanese society, such as Takeo Doi’s *The Anatomy of Dependence* and Chie Nakane’s *Japanese Society*, are framed around the idea that intimate relationships in Japan are built through such dependence.¹ One of the mental health center’s counselors commented on dependence in Japan when she said, “Japan itself was a ‘culture of codependency’” (p. 14).

Such hyperbole aside, the women in Borovoy’s counseling group are dealing with the aftereffects of both their husbands’ alcoholism and the nascent medicalization of their ways of being wives and mothers. In group conversations, women contemplate theories of codependency that suggest their spousal or maternal support could be causing the problems they’re trying to solve. Using the rhetoric of codependence, one participant describes her relationship with her alcoholic husband and son like feeling as if she’s “soaking in dirty lukewarm water,” a situation that, Borovoy explains, “has the markings of a warm, intimate family environment and was thus difficult to leave—and yet that was ultimately untenable” (p. 3).

Despite this example, few women easily accept the dictums of codependence. Because they find it hard to believe that a wife or mother’s endurance could harm someone she’s trying to help, this ethnography is a

detailed account of how women contest and partially accept codependence rhetoric. The rhetoric becomes particularly contested when women are struggling to help their children, rather than their alcoholic husbands, through problems. For instance, Borovoy presents the case of one woman who had to visit a juvenile delinquency office after her daughter got in a fight. While there, she was asked to fill out a form including a question asking if she had breastfed her daughter. Borovoy uses this example to demonstrate her point that the “women at the Center were often called upon . . . to intervene on behalf of their children or apologize for them . . . [and] the women continually asked themselves if they had done something wrong to make their children into substance abusers” (p. 153). In another case, Mizuta-san goes to visit her adult son who is living on his own, but, in her description of the visit during a subsequent counseling group session, she explains how much she is still looking after all his needs. Borovoy concludes: “Mizuta-san had taken in virtually every detail of her son’s life and environs, but surveillance of her son’s personal hygiene, the order of his space, and his schedule was not regarded as unusual for a mother. In fact, she told the story as evidence of her own ‘recovery’” (p. 152).

Indeed, despite the title, this book makes the case that being a too-good mother and a too-good wife can be very different experiences, and that although codependence rhetoric suggests a similar solution for both problems, the women at this center approach them very differently. For mothers trying to cope with and fix their children’s problems—including drug addiction and large debts—the practices required by codependency theories are *too-tough* love. As Borovoy astutely points out, denying their children all forms of dependent love would also mean that the mothers would lose the pleasure they find in being mothers, the “motherly love and intimacy” (p. 160). For these reasons, women at the Center find it easier to refuse to help their husbands than to help their children.

That said, the women are surprisingly unwilling to imagine leaving their husbands. In Borovoy’s counseling group of about forty women, only one eventually divorced, and the few women who left their family homes eventually returned. Borovoy offers two possible explanations for such patterns, both of which are plausible. First, homes and family lives offer women fulfillment, power, and friendship networks. Simply put, women get much more than a husband when they are wives. In Borovoy’s terms “marriage was both a source of discontent and [the women’s] salvation” (p. 106). Second, her informants were born in the 1930s and ’40s, and because the research was conducted in the early 1990s, the women were in their fifties and sixties. Age impacts these women’s aversion to divorce because their generational cohort’s relatively conservative ideas about marriage make them more inclined to stay in difficult marriages. Further, their ages and employment histories would make it hard to earn enough money

if they struck out on their own. Given the recent boom in media coverage and imagings of “later-life divorce” (*jukunen rikon* 熟年離婚), the difference fifteen years later is striking. Yet Borovoy, now teaching at Princeton, has successfully translated her 1995 Stanford dissertation into a text that remains very relevant today.

Ultimately, Borovoy has provided not only a rich ethnographic perspective on what it feels like to live in a family with problems but also a sound representation of contemporary moral discussions about what it means to be a good person, woman, wife, and mother in Japan. Interweaving perspectives from counselors and women in therapy with her own experiences as an American feminist and mother living in Tokyo, Borovoy spends considerable self-reflexive energy analyzing her own instincts and responses to what she’s heard. In all, *The Too-Good Wife* is a compelling ethnography of the lived debates surrounding personhood and family life in urban Japan.

ALLISON ALEXY
Yale University

Note

¹Takeo Doi, *The Anatomy of Dependence* (New York: Kodansha International, 1973); Chie Nakane, *Japanese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).