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“The price of belonging in a Japanese sharehouse”

Japanese sharehouses depart from more traditional spaces of belonging in several ways: membership is theoretically open to all, contingent only on interest and the ability to pay rent; tenure is not only elective but “flexible,” accommodating the needs of a transient workforce; and, at least in theory, it is a space of emancipation from gender- and age-based identities operant in other spheres (in particular, the workplace and the family home). In practice, however, belonging within the sharehouse is subject to familiar pitfalls and burdens of belonging, including the rejection and erasure of otherness.

This proposed paper, based on fieldwork in a mid-sized, mixed-sex sharehouse in Osaka, Japan, describes the way that housemates policed their own self-expression and -presentation according to highly gendered norms, apparently in response to tacit but palpable peer pressure. Deviating from social norms, whether through conduct (excessive independence; the appearance of sexual impropriety) or personal attributes (old age; single motherhood), invited social sanctions in the form of gossip and alienation. Thus, through ethnographic observations of the shifting micro-politics of the sharehouse and the expulsion of “strangeness” (*kawatte iru*), this chapter will illustrate that belonging is an ongoing performance that may demand the sacrifice of individual needs and desires at the altar of togetherness rather than a secure state of being. It considers the limitations and consequences of belonging, even in an experimental space— begging the question, is belonging inherently or inevitably repressive and exclusionary?