

# What Can Be Said? Communication and the Intimacy of Ethnographic Fieldwork



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**June 24th, Thursday, 5:30 pm – 7:00 pm,  
Room 301, 3F Building 10**

As the divorce rate in Japan continues to climb, suggesting that over one third of current marriages will eventually end in divorce, a new market for marital counseling has boomed. Despite all the diversity in styles and content of counseling, marital difficulties are increasingly likely to be linked to "communication" problems. Although "communication" can euphemistically describe a variety of behaviors, verbalization of the phrase "I love you" has come to be seen as a contested marker of marital health. To some, marriages are stronger when spouses say, rather than only demonstrate, love. As outlined in popular media on the topic, this advice marks a shift from commonly acceptable styles of intimacy, specifically the idea that (good) love "should be like air" – always present but not verbalized. This older ideal represents true conjugal affection as unvoiced, and suggests that love that has to be declared might not be real.

This presentation considers divorce, and the moves people make to avoid it, to trace people's debates over how intimacy should be performed and articulated. I use these discussions about what makes a good marriage, or reduces divorce risk, to ask questions as fundamental to anthropology's representational project as they are to determining the strength of Japanese marriages: What can be communicated? What should be communicated? With my informants who are struggling to determine when talking helps and when it hurts marriages, I describe my research methods to ask what I can say of what I heard and saw.

**Allison Alexy** is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Lafayette College. Her research considers the structures and forms of intimacy in contemporary Japan, with particular emphasis on divorce and family change. With Richard Ronald, she is co-editor of a forthcoming volume entitled, "Home and Family in Contemporary Japan: Continuity and Transformation." Her newer research considers international child custody conflicts that involve Japanese citizens. She holds a doctorate from Yale University and has been funded by Fulbright IIE and the Japan Foundation.

Lecture in English. No prior registration required.