One line of development in writings on the Japanese firm over the last 15 years has stressed certain "distinctively Japanese" elements in the typical social organization of firms. With varying emphases, Abegglen (1958), Matsushima and Nakano (1958), Levine (1958), Vogel (1963), Whitehill and Takezawa (1968), and Dore (1973) have argued that the key elements are the seniority wage system, familistic management and lifetime commitment (permanent employment)—i.e., employees stay in the same firm throughout their work life and employers do not resort to layoffs or discharges. A particularly striking proposition is that this form of social organization is more characteristic of Japan's large, technologically modernized firms than of its small-scale, technologically less advanced firms. It is these technologically modernized, leading Japanese firms that have overtaken their West European competitor firms in sales, and are beginning to overtake some of the leading U.S. firms (Fortune, 1963, 1971, 1972). If they are this successful in performance, and assuming that their social organization has something to do with their performance, the nature of this social organization becomes extremely important.

We shall refer to this view of Japanese firms as the "paternalism-lifetime commitment" model. The term "model" is used in a scientific, not an ethical sense, i.e., as a theoretical or analytical statement about a limited set of properties of the world and their relationships, not as a statement of what ought to be, or as a goal necessarily to be emulated. The purpose of this paper is to subject this model to close theoretical and empirical scrutiny, on the basis of recent research by ourselves and others. Our procedure will be to ask (a) if the model is valid, what predictions, inferences or consequences for the relationships among aspects of factory social organization should follow from it? And (b) are
these predictions, etc., confirmed when tested against systematic empirical data? We shall test the following parts of the model: (1) age and interfim mobility; (2) mobility and lifetime commitment norms and values; (3) the consequences of mobility; (4) the determinants of lifetime commitment; and (5) trends in interfim mobility.

Any attempt to test the model immediately runs into the difficulty that its current status is ambiguous. On the one side, it has been challenged by several Japanese and Western social scientists (Tominaga, 1961, 1962; Taira, 1962; Noda, 1963; Cole, 1971, 1972). Given the cumulated negative evidence and arguments, some writers now believe that to present new empirical tests of the model is to attack a straw man. A related problem is that different writers have interpreted the model in quite divergent ways when it comes to the question of what kind of empirical data would disconfirm it. As a result, the inferences, implications or predictions which one person draws from the model and tests against new data may be regarded by another person as a naive test of a naive version of the model. On the other side, in some quarters the model appears still to be alive and even thriving. Abegglen (1969) continues to assert the essential correctness of his original position in more recent writings, claiming that alleged changes in factory social organization are more apparent than real. Moreover, Dore’s (1973) new monograph comparing Japanese and British employment systems will probably give the paternalism-lifetime commitment model a new lease on life.

Most of the controversy to date has been over the problem: is the typical social organization of large Japanese firms basically different from that of Western (especially U.S.) firms? The empirical data brought to bear on this question have consisted either of aggregated data for all firms studied in each society (Whitehill and Takezawa, 1968), or of the comparison of specific firms in two societies (Dore, 1973). This paper addresses itself to a different problem. We do not present cross-national organizational comparisons. The problem posed is: how useful is the paternalism-lifetime commitment model for comprehending variation among firms within Japan? We are less interested in the issue of whether there is less interfim mobility and more lifetime commitment in Japan than in other advanced industrial societies than in the issue of whether, in various Japanese firms, the conditions and consequences of interfim mobility and lifetime commitment are what the model asserts they are.