**Topic Oriented Ethnography**

The Work-Life Balance of Japan

During my field placement, I observed multiple cultural distinctions compared to America. As mentioned in my first cultural journal, one difference that caught my eye initially as I shadowed Kazuki, my male coworker, was that the guests working out at the gym all appeared to be around 60 years of age or older, or a housewife. I interpreted the reasoning for this being that elderly customers and housewives are retired and have more free time. Japanese people tend to have an intense work life compared to Americans. After the university, the average Japanese person will spend most of their day working and will maybe go out to drink with coworkers after. The rest of the time is perhaps spent sleeping or spending time with family. The Japanese have little extra time. Making time to expend more physical energy by “working out” will probably be the last thing on their mind. Therefore, the gym memberships are left for the retired folk and stay-at-home significant others.

For this topic-oriented ethnography, it is concentrated on the reasons for the age distinction between American and Japanese gym members. The reasoning is that Japanese people tend to work way more hours than American people, so there is less free time for a gym membership. The focus will be centered on the Japanese work life, comparing the Japanese work-life to other countries, and possible solutions for the hectic work life.

According *Business Dictionary*, work-life balance is a comfortable state of equilibrium achieved between an employee’s primary priorities of their employment position (career and ambition) and their private lifestyle (health, pleasure, leisure, family and spiritual development). An important
aspect of work-life balance is the amount of time a person spends at work.

Evidence suggests that long work hours may impair personal health, jeopardize safety and increase stress. More recent statistics showed the situation hasn’t changed. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 22.3% of Japanese employees worked 50 hours or more per week in 2015. The percentage is significantly a lot higher than many European nations: UK (13%) France (8.2%), Germany (5.3%), Italy (3.7%).

Even with other countries such as Korea who is near the same level, Japan puts in more work hours. A lot of the Japanese overtime hours are left unrecorded (cloaked overtime), therefore not taken into consideration when generating the statistics.

Japanese people are hard working and highly dedicated to their jobs. They consistently put long hours of work for their employer. What do they get in return: a decent pension, benefits, and lifetime employment. Other motives include showing loyalty to one’s company. The possible origin of this loyalty comes from the Japanese culture of living for one’s master or superior. But at what costs does this life of loyalty to a company have? For some, it could be fatal. There is actually a term that was added to the Oxford English dictionary in 2002 that symbolizes this serious cost. "Karōshi", a too-often used word that represents the dilemma of overworked Japanese workers. The meaning of Karōshi is “death by overwork”. Overworking to death has become a major issue in Japan. It is a choice topic to shine light on amongst the media circles. It is often covered as a social issue by the Japanese media. As well as foreign media, the topic is viewed as a portrayal of the Japanese society and culture. The actual causes of Karōshi deaths are from developed health issues that result in
heart attacks and strokes due to long periods of high-level stress. Overworking can effect mental health as well and lead to high levels of depression. Which then can lead to suicide. This has its own termed coined to it: かろうじてつ. Karojisatsu literally translated to overwork suicide. “Sudden deaths of any employee who works an average of 65 hours per week or more for more than 4 weeks or on average 60 hours or more per week for more than 8 weeks may be karōshi” (Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW). Moreover, nearly one-fourth of male employees (7.8 million) clocked in more than 60 hours per week of work in 1988 (Labor Force Survey). This is 2.4 times increase compared to the numbers based in 1975. Even though the statistics threshold is 60 hours and above, a typical workweek can easily be 70-90 hours per week. More often than not, the additional work is done as concealed overtime, where the employer “turns a blind eye” and the employee does his work off the clock.

In 1969, the first recorded case of karōshi transpired. Almost a decade later in 1978, the concept was given the name “karoshi”. Some high-ranking corporate executives died without any hints of illness leading up to their deaths. The deaths were picked up by the media and quickly developed growing concerns from the public, since they too were putting just as many hours into their jobs as the dead executives. There were so many concerns that the government published typed karoshi as a cause of death option. In 2005, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) reported that 328 Japanese employees suffered the ill fate of karōshi. The number is a little over 7 times higher than the recorded result in 2000. These numbers maybe not completely correct and there is a high chance that there is more karoshi than recorded. Most families tend to accept the death with silence and don’t push
the issue any further. And most companies won’t outright accept responsibility for the deaths. Therefore, lawyers and scholars estimated the actual annual number of karoshi victims. The number resulted being around 9,000 deaths, which is near the annual number for traffic fatalities.

There are also indirect fatal effects from the overworking culture in Japan. Parents in Japan report the balance of work and family commitment to be very difficult. The combination of workplace practices, including long hours and commuting times, and considerable private housing and education costs are making young people reluctant about establishing a family. Many Japanese women first want to establish a career in regular employment before having children. Even with parental leave entitlements, mothers end up in non-regular employment, on temporary contracts on low pay, limited earnings and no health/pension insurance. Consequently, young Japanese postpone marriage, delay parenthood and often have fewer children than intended. In 2012, only 6 countries in the OECD had fewer babies per woman than Japan. With a fertility rate of 1.41, compared to 1.71 on average in the OECD, Japan was among the “lowest-low” fertility countries. There has been a small rebound since 2005, but nevertheless the population has started to decline again (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD).

The long hours at work are putting a major toll on the Japanese people, directly, indirectly, individually, and to the country as a whole. A survey conducted by the government showed that 90% of workers didn’t understand the concept of work-life balance. Four out of five said they would cancel any dates or plans if their boss asked them to work overtime. Change is much needed in the Japanese work-life. A balance is in need to be found.
The more people work, the less time they have to spend on other activities, such as time with others or leisure. The amount and quality of leisure time is important for people’s overall well-being, and can bring additional physical and mental health benefits. The long hour’s culture should be shortened so that workplaces become appealing to both fathers and mothers and facilitate a more gender equal balance in paid and unpaid work. Workplace cultures that are less overbearing and are encouraging to the reconciliation of work and family life of both parents will help address the looming labor shortages (OECD).

Thankfully, change is happening. A law aimed at preventing karōshi took effect on November 1, 2014. As the first legislative action of its kind, for this huge step to result in eliminating health-related deaths and suicides of overworked company workers depend on further efforts by officials, lawmakers and employers. However, as the economic recession results in an increasing number of companies laying off workers, more people in Japan are starting to realize the futility of not having a private life. The term “Work-Life Balance” (WLB) has become a trendy expression in the world’s second largest economy.

“The economic downturn is an ideal opportunity for Japanese companies to focus on WLB since it gives everyone a chance to reconsider their traditional working style. Men and women can no longer divide their working lives and private lives without creating some sort of balance,” says Yoshie Komuro, CEO of Work Life Balance Co Ltd in Tokyo. Since being launched in 2006, the company has been offering consultation services to companies on how to achieve WLB for their employees. It also provides a computer system called “armo” to support employees’ return to the workplace after maternity, child-care, and sick leave.
A report in 2014 by Deloitte found that adding more technology such as smartphones, tablets and laptops in the workplace could give the Japanese economy a boost of around $15 billion. Nevertheless, while 75% of Japanese between 18 and 49 owned a smartphone, only 9% used it for work. Workers say large amounts of paper make it harder to take their work on the go, even if they have a laptop. However, Japanese workplaces have been slow to adopt the technology that have made flexible hours and telecommuting commonplace in the U.S., largely because of a workplace culture that expects employees to stay late as well as concerns about hacking. The Japanese government is encouraging the change by rewarding companies trying to create a more worker-friendly culture with subsidies. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s administration has vowed to raise the number of people who work at least one day a week from home to more than 10% of all workers by 2020 from about 4% now.

Examples of some of Japan’s companies leading the new change include beverage-maker Suntory Holdings Ltd. Up until 2010, the company’s telecommuting was limited, and only a few dozen employees used the system. Then the company loosened its rules so more employees could work outside the office several days a week and choose flexible hours, and now more than 3,000 do so. The company says that the system can help employees with family commitments, but also expects it improves productivity. As well, Nissan Motor Co. and software and computer systems provider Nihon Unisys Ltd. are other companies in Japan expanding work-on-the-go offerings. In September, Unisys quoted that it would allow every single one it’s employees, 8,000, to access company files and email from their own smartphones and tablets. “We
wanted to give employees more options about how to work” and attract a more
diverse set of employees, said spokeswoman Junko Kitani.

Finding the right balance between work and life is a challenge for all
workers, especially working parents. The ability to successfully combine work,
family commitments and personal life is important for the well-being of all
members in a household. The government should address the issue by
encouraging supportive and flexible working practices, making it easier for
parents to find a better balance between the life at work and the life at home.
Overworking yourself in Japan is not uncommon. And no one takes the issue of
Karōshi more seriously than Japan. Hopefully, one-day Japan will eliminate the
word “karoushi” from their vocabulary, and instead replace it with a new term for
WLB “Work-Life Balance”.

Resources


30 Nov. 2015.


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