

THE LEGAL FOREIGN WORKERS IN JAPAN

— A study on Nikkeijin working in Soja —

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INTRODUCTION

Japan has faced labor shortages since the expansion of the Japanese economy in the 1970's and foreign workers have been used to cope with the problem, although under the Japanese Immigration Control Act instituted in 1952 and revised in 1981 into the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law, unskilled workers can not obtain employment in Japan.

A remarkable increase in the number of illegal foreign workers led to an amendment of the law in December 1989. The main point of the reform was that only people of Japanese descent up to the third generation or the spouses of such people were permitted to stay in Japan without legal or employment limitations.

Put into effect in June 1990, the new law has led to a significant increase in the employment of people of Japanese descent from South America. The number is estimated at 150,000 of whom 120,000 are Brazilians and 18,000 are Peruvians. Most of them are employed by small and medium-size enterprises (Japan Labor Bulletin, A1, 1990).

Working in a foreign country requires an adjustment to a new environment and reviews of empirical literature (e.g., Blake and Mendenhall, 1990; Shibusawa and Norton, 1987) have found that effective adaptation to new environments is dependent on factors such as fluency in the host country language and understanding the host country culture. Various studies support also the idea that, the more different the host country culture is from the home country, the more difficult the general living and work-adjustment process is likely to be (e.g., Church, 1982; Furnham and Bocher, 1986). This being so, the Japanese government's decision to grant special working visas to Japanese descendants has theoretical support since they might be expected to be familiar with Japanese culture and thus have the required skills which facilitate their adjustment to Japan.

However previous research (e.g., Ishi, 1993; Kaigai Nikkeijin Kyokai, 1991) has shown that Japanese ancestry does not necessarily imply an ability to speak Japanese or any sense of Japanese identity. For example, according to the Kaigai Nikkeijin survey on Nikkeijin working in Japan, only 4 percent of men and 2 percent of women

identified themselves as Japanese.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether the Japanese cultural background is related to the degree of overall job satisfaction in working in Japan.

THE STUDY

Variables

The overall relationship of language and ethnicity has been assessed by extensive research (Berry et al., 1992) and although there are different positions regarding the importance of the weight of language, all scholars agree that it plays a crucial role in maintaining ethnic cultural patterns.

Besides being a culture medium, Japanese ability is also a key variable in adjustment since it determines the degree of interactions with Japanese and gives access to mass-media and other sources of information.

This study attempts to determine the association between proficiency in the Japanese language and job satisfaction by exploring the respondents' command of Japanese language and their level of overall job satisfaction.

Although it has been observed that third generation immigrants often seeks contact with cultural roots (Kiefer, 1974, p.104), studies examining the relationship between the acculturation and intergenerational differences tend to show an erosion of ethnic identity in later generations (e.g., Connor, 1977). Therefore, it was predicted that the third generation would be more acculturated to Latin American culture according to previous research (e.g., Mori, 1991).

A review of research (e.g., Blum and Naylor, 1968; Gentile, McFarlin and Rice, 1991; Judge and Watanabe, 1993) indicates that job satisfaction is usually measured in relation with work facets such as company management, promotion opportunities, supervisors, perception of treatment received, co-workers, work conditions and the nature of the work. This study examines the above mentioned facets of job satisfaction with the exception of promotion opportunities and the nature of the work itself. This because of the Nikkeijin's general status as temporary workers which obviates such categories of enquiry. Because satisfaction with any particular facet is dependent on the importance of this facet for the worker (Gentile, McFarlin and Rice, 1991), an index was constructed in order to assess the overall satisfaction.

Hypothesis

This study will test the hypothesis that there is a positive relationship between Japanese language command and generation and overall job satisfaction. Therefore it was hypothesized that the Nisei score higher in overall job satisfaction than the Sansei and respondents who are more proficient at Japanese language are more satisfied than those who are less proficient.

Measurement and Procedure

Job satisfaction was measured by a nine item scale designed to assess overall

satisfaction with co-workers, supervisors, perception of treatment received, working conditions, the company and company management. Other variables that are not part of the present study were assessed by other segments of the questionnaire.

Respondents indicated their degree of satisfaction by responding to several statements (e.g., "How is your relationship with your supervisor"). As a first step, frequencies and cross tabulations were calculated for all the items assessing job satisfaction. Then a composite scale was calculated by summing up the responses to the nine items according to the extent to which respondents indicated satisfaction. To ensure the validity of the scale, a factor analysis was performed. The nine measures of job satisfaction had significant factor loadings (the average factor loading was .61).

Method

A total of 315 respondents working in factories in Soja completed a fixed-choice questionnaire that examined job satisfaction. The sample was representative in terms of demographics and occupational characteristics.

The following demographics describe the sample. The average age ranged between 25 and 34 years old. Eighty one percent were men. About 60 percent were married and 37 percent were living alone in Japan.

Eighty eight percent were Brazilians, 9 percent Peruvians and 4 percent from Chile and Colombia and, of the total sample, 59 percent were first generation and 39 second. Twenty three percent had attended university and 50 percent high school.

Over half of the respondents had been living in Japan for one or two years and 37 percent were living alone. About forty two had changed job. Fifty two percent were doing day shift. The mean number of working hours was 41.36 (SD 3.44) and 13.92 (SD 5.39) for overtime work.

RESULTS

Findings taken together suggest an overall job satisfaction. Evidence of satisfaction was particularly obvious in the following results.

Nearly 64 percent of the respondents reported that supervisors understood the difficulties of foreign workers and for 91 percent the relationship with the supervisor was good. Regarding the treatment received, about 66 percent of the respondents felt they were treated the same as their Japanese co-workers.

The results indicate a very strong relationship between generation and command of the Japanese language. As predicted, the second generation had a better command of Japanese than the third generation. ($X^2_{80} = 32.4$ $p < .001$) but data suggest no significant generational differences in satisfaction.

No evidence of association between overall job satisfaction and Japanese language proficiency was found. However, a significant relationship between language proficiency and perception of treatment perceived was found ($p < .01$). Twenty percent of those who reported being treated worse than Japanese workers (24 percent) could not understand Japanese.

The Chi-square revealed significant generational differences for previous knowledge about Japan and Japanese culture, shown by the fact that the second generation had more knowledge than the second ($X^2(6) = 16.08$ $p < .01$).

A multiple regression analysis was run using satisfaction as the dependent variable and gender, age, marital and family status, education, as independent variables. According to the results it can be concluded that the variables age, education and marital and family status account for the degree of satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the findings, it may be concluded that majority of the respondents were satisfied with both management and the company. However results do not ascertain the influence of generation, language proficiency and previous knowledge of Japan and Japanese culture on overall job satisfaction.

An intriguing finding of this study was that, although results indicate that the most important problem that respondents had to face in Japan was Japanese language, there was no evidence of association between satisfaction and command of Japanese language. In fact only 3 percent of those who were more satisfied could speak Japanese.

These findings may in part be explained with the answers to the question "How much do you need the Japanese language to work in Japan?". The majority of the respondents (58 percent) reported that they could work without knowing Japanese.

Results provide some insight into 315 of an estimated nation-wide 150,000 of South-Americans of Japanese ancestry working in Japan and has raised some questions too. Further research may overcome some of the limitations of the present study and could ascertain whether the present findings may be generalized to the whole population of South-Americans working in Japan.

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