Japanese norms in Japanese workplaces [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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Abstract

Japan is known for its exclusionary tendencies and clearly delineated Japanese way of doing things. Seeing as its immigration law was amended in April 2019 to allow more migrant workers into the country, there is some urgency in studying these ethnocentric practices, which often lead to inequalities between Japanese and foreign employees at the workplace. The objective of this opinion piece is to help the reader understand the sociocultural context and rationale behind Japanese norms in blue- and white-collar workplaces, as well as foreign employees' reactions and points of view. Such understanding will hopefully increase both Japanese and foreign employees' willingness to accommodate each other, and reduce friction and conflict at the workplace.

Keywords

Japan, workplace, migrant workers, immigration

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Author roles: Morita L: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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How to cite this article: Morita L. Japanese norms in Japanese workplaces [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review] F1000Research 2022, 11:1210 https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.126855.1

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that migrant workers are essential to economies around the world, although acknowledgement of this fact and respect for them are lacking (Cremers, 2022). Recent research on migrant workers in blue-collar workplaces in Europe has revealed inequalities between migrant workers and local workers (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Kraft, 2019a, 2019b; Lonsmann and Kraft, 2018). These inequalities include migrant workers being perceived as incompetent in spite of evidence that they perform their jobs well. The inequalities are mostly due to local co-workers and employers’ insistence on doing things their way. In Kraft’s work on a Norwegian construction site, for example, Polish workers’ abilities are often underestimated because they do not speak Norwegian and they work in ways that differ from Norwegian norms. These negative attitudes are exacerbated by racialised assumptions about migrant workers from lower-income countries being limited in what they can do (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021). A racial hierarchy exists in the minds of many of the stakeholders of cross-border migration, which assigns those who are white and from high-income European countries to the top of the hierarchy, while those of other races and from less wealthy parts of the world are destined for the bottom (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021).

Japan is known for its exclusionary attitudes towards migrant workers (Doudou, 2006; Morita, 2015; Park, 2017), so it is reasonable to ask if Japanese co-workers and employers are also ethnocentric in the way they run the workplace. Since the Japanese immigration law was changed in April 2019 to accept more migrant workers, and more will arrive now that the stringent pandemic entry requirements have eased, there is some urgency in pursuing this line of research.

Compared to many countries in Europe and North America, fewer studies of foreign employees in Japanese workplaces have been conducted. There are even fewer of migrant workers in blue-collar workplaces. However, one of the areas which has been relatively well-researched is Japanese-style human resource management (HRM) in white-collar workplaces (such as Maki et al., 2015; Sekiguchi et al., 2016; Froese et al., 2020); as well as foreign fresh graduates (FFGs) in Japanese companies (such as Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2019, 2020). The third area which has been studied is prejudice and discrimination faced by Nikkeijin (Japanese-Brazilians) in blue-collar workplaces (such as Morita, 2016, 2017c; Tsuda, 2009, 2021). Finally, there is a small number of publications on the ‘Japanese language only’ attitude in blue-collar workplaces (Morita, 2021a).

This opinion article will show that in all four types of research mentioned above, Japanese co-workers and employers are ethnocentric and they insist on doing things the Japanese way. Rather than being a theoretical study of Japanese workplace behaviour, the objective of this article to is help the reader understand, in practical ways and on the ground, the sociocultural context and rationale behind such behaviour, as well as foreign employees’ reactions and points of view. The author hopes that such understanding will eventually lead to an increase in both Japanese and foreigner employees’ willingness to accommodate each other, and therefore reduce friction and conflict at the workplace.

The case of Nikkeijin will be used here as an example of the analysis presented in this article. The Nikkeijin are descendants of Japanese emigrants who left Japan for better fortunes in the Americas. Most of them are Japanese-Brazilians who started to return to Japan in the late 1980s due to the economic downturn in Brazil and flourishing Japanese economy. They mostly took up unskilled positions in construction and manufacturing (Tsuda, 2021). Lawmakers created a new visa category, which is said to enable the Nikkeijin to return to the country of their ancestors in order to learn more about their ancestry. In reality, this is a visa which allows the Nikkeijin to live and work in Japan, and therefore alleviate the labour shortage. This is an exception made for the Nikkeijin, since Japan had not accepted unskilled foreign workers until then. The rationale behind this manoeuvre was that since the Nikkeijin were descendants of the Japanese, they should be able to fit into Japanese society without causing any damage to the homogeneity of the Japanese population. This reasoning was flawed, as lawmakers and other Japanese soon found out that the Nikkeijin were culturally Brazilian. Most of them did not speak Japanese, and they behaved fundamentally as Brazilians (Tsuda, 2009, 2021). The Japanese reacted negatively to this, and soon changed their perception of the Nikkeijin from ‘descendants of Japanese’ to ‘unskilled workers from a poor and undeveloped country’. Racist incidents against the Nikkeijin were common (Morita, 2015, 2017c; Tsuda, 2021). The Nikkeijin reacted to this prejudice and discrimination by withdrawing into their own community, avoiding contact with the wider Japanese society as much as they can.

One of the lessons we can learn from the case of the Nikkeijin is that many Japanese are quick to judge migrant workers based on an internalised hierarchy of countries, with the wealthiest at the top and the poorest at the bottom (Tsuda, 2021). They may be prejudiced against people from low-income countries, as they think of these countries as backward and

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1Research on migrant workers is a relatively recent field, and while it is growing steadily, there is not exactly an abundance of studies to pick and choose from at the moment. I hope the reader will excuse me for citing my own work.
unsophisticated. This should alert us to the possibility of similar prejudices against migrant workers from other low-income countries.

The Nikkeijin will be discussed in greater detail in Section 4. The next section (Section 2) will explain the Japanese tendency to clearly delineate the Japanese way of doing things vis-à-vis the rest of the world. This is followed by Section 3, which is on Japanese-style HRM in white-collar workplaces (including FFGs), after which the ‘Japanese language only’ attitude in blue-collar workplaces is discussed in Section 5. The article ends with discussion and concluding remarks in Section 6.

2. The tendency to clearly delineate the Japanese way of doing things

Many people around the world are ethnocentric to some degree, so it is no surprise that the Japanese are ethnocentric. However, the course of events that have shaped Japanese ethnocentricity is unique and interesting. The next few paragraphs will draw on Rivers’ (2018) work, which lays out the key developments of Japanese ethnocentricity, beginning at the Meiji Era.

Since the Meiji Era (1868-1912), Japan has been troubled by a sense of insecurity and anxiety concerning its survival (Rivers, 2018). There has been an undercurrent of collective insecurity and anxiety about the country’s identity, as well as a narrative of the nation, people, and language being under a state of constant threat and danger from contamination or corruption. This insecurity and anxiety can be clearly seen at the end of the Second World War, when Japan was devastated and humiliated by the US army.

The Japanese lived with their national pride at a low ebb until the end of the 1960s, when a type of discourse known as Nihonjinron emerged to provide them with an identity that restored their pride (Rivers, 2018). Nihonjinron writing appeared in books and in articles in magazines, newspapers and elsewhere, emphasising the uniqueness of the Japanese. Japanese people, language, culture, and customs were said to be extremely unique, and a line was drawn between what was Japanese and what was not. This type of writing also stressed the strong connection between the Japanese and the land they occupy.

Pride in being Japanese swelled during the bubble economy years of the 1980s (Rivers, 2018). When the bubble burst in the 1990s, morale was once again low. In April 1999, right-wing politician Ishihara Shintaro was elected as Governor of Tokyo, and until he resigned in October 2012, he boosted national pride. One of Ishihara’s main campaign promises was to restore Japanese pride and confidence. He clearly distinguished what was Japanese from what was not, as well as established a belief in a strong and capable Japan. Ishihara brazenly labelled all migrant workers as criminals, as well as claimed that Japan was ethnically and culturally homogeneous, and would self-destruct if not consciously preserved.

This legacy of Nihonjinron and Ishihara has clearly delineated who and what is Japanese, versus who and what is not. In the present-day, everyday life, this has translated into the Japanese way of doing things versus the foreign (Morita, 2015, 2018). The following three examples (the first two from Nagy, 2012 and the third from Morita, 2015) illustrate this point.

In the context of interviewing Japanese respondents on whether to introduce multilingual services for foreign residents in Tokyo, a respondent pointed out that migrant workers should conduct their lives the Japanese way since they have come to Japan, and not expect the Japanese to accommodate them:

‘It is natural that foreigners who come to Japan should do things the Japanese way. It’s strange that we provide special services for them. We should not give them any special treatment.’ (Nagy, 2012: 133)

In a different interview, the managing director of an organisation for cultural and international exchange in Tokyo emphasised to Nagy (2012: 132) that foreign residents must adapt to the Japanese way of life and not expect the Japanese to bend to their ways. Migrant workers must also minimise disruptions and disturbances to Japanese lives:

‘Multicultural coexistence practices are not about creating a municipality that minorities want to come to; rather, it is about maintaining the integrity of the Japanese community, ensuring that the foreigners that do settle temporarily or for the long term don’t disrupt the traditional patterns of life. Multicultural coexistence programs provide foreign residents with knowledge about Japanese customs and manners so they can avoid causing problems with Japanese residents.’

‘Multicultural coexistence’ refers to a government programme which helps foreign residents settle into their lives in Japan, mostly through the provision of multilingual services and Japanese language classes.
In the final example, a British resident who responded to Morita’s (2015: 18) questionnaire in her study of discrimination against foreign residents encountered confrontational behaviour when he did not conform to Japanese ways:

‘I know that, in Nagoya, when I transgress a system even when that system is simply advisory like the date to pick up at the dry cleaners … they have been very confrontational. I assume this is based on the fact that I am foreign and must comply with Japanese rules to the very letter, but the exact rationale isn’t clear to me as I find it hard to see their point of view on this.’

What the dry cleaners had failed to explain was that there was an unwritten rule requiring customers to pick up their dry cleaning as soon as it is ready, the reason being limited storage space in the shop. The British respondent had been accustomed to collecting his suits at his leisure and convenience, and was unaware of the Japanese norm.

Sections 3, 4 and 5 will show how this emphasis on Japanese norms manifests itself in both blue- and white-collar workplaces.

3. Japanese-style human resource management in white-collar workplaces

Sekiguchi and his colleagues’ (Maki et al., 2015; Sekiguchi et al., 2016; Froese et al., 2020) comprehensive study of Japanese-style human resource management (HRM), together with Conrad and Meyer-Ohle’s (2019, 2020) focus on foreign fresh university graduates (FFGs) in Japanese companies, offer us an avenue to understanding the experiences of these employees are expected to conform.

Several characteristics of Japanese workplaces will be discussed in this section, beginning with seniority-based pay and promotion, and life-long employment, which are regarded as pillars of Japanese HRM (Froese et al., 2020). Japanese MNCs have tried to replace seniority-based earnings with Western-style performance- or merit-based criteria, but the changes have not been significant (Froese et al., 2020). Many foreign employees have not made plans to work in Japan for long periods of time, so salary increments and promotion calculated according to long-term employment are unattractive to them (Morita, 2018). For the same reason, starting salaries and the speed of career development can appear to be lower and slower when compared to other high-income countries. Long-term employment is the norm for core employees, the vast majority of whom are Japanese. Having said that, in order to reduce costs, companies have been hiring more fixed-term, contract-based Japanese employees. Its numbers have been increasing steadily (Froese et al., 2020).

A common dissatisfaction with working in Japanese companies is that employees have little say in whereabouts they work in the company, both when they first enter the company and subsequently when they are moved to other departments (Conrad and Meyer-Ohler, 2019). Japanese companies usually hire their employees at entry level when they are fresh graduates, and from their point of view, gradually develop them by rotating them through different departments and positions in the company (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). New employees first participate in an orientation programme that introduces the company and teaches business manners and behaviour. After that, these employees are assigned their first positions, but continue to take part in regular centralised training programmes (Conrad and Meyer-Ohler, 2019). Human resource departments emphasise that companies have the freedom to place new employees wherever they want to, since they are not hired for specific positions. Many new employees are first posted to domestic sales, which companies claim is the best place for them to get to know the business (Conrad and Meyer-Ohler, 2019). After two to three years, these employees are usually rotated to a different department.

From foreign employees’ point of view, their job descriptions are too broad and general (Conrad and Meyer-Ohler, 2019). Employers stress that they have the right to assign employees to wherever they see fit, and from their experience, those who have been rotated around the various departments of the company learn most and turn out to be the best employees.

Another characteristic of Japanese companies is having a collectivist culture which emphasises teamwork, consensus-building, and harmony. Companies also have a tendency to follow Confucian traditions, especially the hierarchy in which older people are respected (Froese et al., 2020; Sekiguchi et al., 2016). There is a tendency to form groups, and members make a distinction between who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, resulting in clearly delineated in-groups and out-groups. Only a small minority of Japanese multinational corporations (MNCs) use English as their working language (Yamao and Sekiguchi, 2015), and this reinforces in-groups consisting of Japanese-language speakers and out-groups made up of those who do not speak the language, inevitably, the migrant workers. This situation is compounded by the fact that company-specific knowledge and unwritten rules are encoded in Japanese, thereby exacerbating the disadvantage of foreign employees (Froese et al., 2020).
Teamwork and consensus-building, while usually associated with positive effects, can work against foreign employees. In Hof and Tseng’s (2021) study, foreign employees were told that in every situation, they must report to, communicate with, and discuss matters with their teams. Unilateral decision-making is strongly discouraged. From the point of view of foreign employees, Japanese ideas of ‘teamwork’ and ‘consensus-building’ prolong and delay decision-making and decrease efficiency (Hof and Tseng, 2021). Foreign employees who flout the rules risk being reprimanded by their superiors, as seen in the case of a foreign employee in a construction firm. The employee thought her supervisor had given her clear instructions to address some issues in the morning meeting, and proceeded to do so unilaterally, only to be reprimanded afterwards. She was told she should have communicated with her team members and addressed the issues together before acting (Hof and Tseng, 2021).

There are a few more characteristics of Japanese workplaces which foreign employees are unaccustomed to, such as long working hours. In many cases, this is due to required socialising with clients or co-workers after business hours (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2020). Spending time with co-workers is thought of as building camaraderie. Superiors and subordinates are also expected to socialise in order to build strong bonds between them (Froese et al., 2020). Foreign employees also have to adjust to very low levels of diversity in the workplace and company-specific practices, which they have to learn from scratch and may not be useful in other places of employment (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2020).

In general, Japanese MNCs have not been successful in internationalising their management, and many still adopt an ethnocentric style (Sekiguchi et al., 2016). Although some companies, especially newer ones, are aggressively internationalising their HRM practices, many MNCs (such as large manufacturers) are hesitant or only doing so slowly. We can see how slowly internationalisation is proceeding from the experiences of FFGs. While many companies have made the initial job application easier by allowing online applications in English, the subsequent selection, socialisation, and training processes are very much the same as those for Japanese employees (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2019).

Instead of trying to accommodate foreign employees or work towards a compromise, Japanese employers have responded to their dissatisfaction by tightening their selection criteria. They show a preference for those who are most likely to accept Japanese-style HRM and are good cultural fits (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2019, 2020; Maki et al., 2015). This defeats the very purpose of hiring foreign employees, which is to internationalise the company. Selecting only those who are like minded does very little towards representing the diversity found in the international markets for the firm’s products and services.

4. Prejudice and discrimination against Nikkeijin (Japanese-Brazilians) in blue-collar workplaces

Who the Nikkeijin are

In the 1950s and 1960s, many Japanese left Japan for Latin America to seek better economic fortunes. The return migrants who started arriving in Japan in the late 1980s are descendants of these Japanese emigrants. The largest group among them are the Japanese-Brazilians, who mostly take up jobs as unskilled factory workers due to the economic crisis in Brazil and severe labour shortage in Japan (Tsuda, 2021).

The Japanese were initially enthusiastic about welcoming these Nikkeijin back to Japan, expecting them to be fluent in Japanese and well-versed in Japanese culture (Tsuda, 2009). When it transpired that they were culturally Brazilian and spoke little Japanese, the Japanese were disappointed and distanced themselves. The Nikkeijin were at first regarded as Japanese because of their descent, but were downgraded to part-Japanese after direct contact. As the Japanese saw more of them, their attitudes became negative (Morita, 2015).

The Nikkeijin suffer from discrimination and social class prejudice in their everyday life as well as at work (Morita, 2017c; Tsuda, 2009). The Japanese see Latin America countries as poor, low-status, backward and crime-ridden. In addition, the Nikkeijin are thought of as descendants of poor and uneducated Japanese of low social status who could not survive economically in Japan, and now it appears that these descendants could not make it in Latin American either (Tsuda, 2009).

There is considerable prejudice against the Nikkeijin based on negative evaluations of their Latin American behaviour (Tsuda, 2009). Their language and cultural differences are a stigma because they have failed to live up to Japanese expectations. Many Japanese measure migrant workers, or part-Japanese, against the highest standards in Japanese language and culture (Hein, 2012). In practice, few can live up to these standards. Migrant workers are expected to embrace Japanese language and culture without being accepted or treated as equals (Hein, 2012). This shows that many Japanese dictate the terms of what they think is appropriate language and cultural standards, with little consideration for migrant workers.
Japanese-Americans are positioned much higher than the Americans of Japanese descent, or Japanese-Americans. In the system of hierarchical class stratification in Japan, taken up again and discussed further in Section 6.

Since the migrant workers who are most likely to come to Japan are from low-income countries in Asia and therefore rank low in the class hierarchy, they are likely to experience similar discrimination and social class prejudice. This will be little opportunity for pay increments or full-time employment at dispatch agencies (Ogawa, 2011). However, this has come at a personal cost to them, because they are kept in their precarious positions where there is precarious positions (Takenoshita, 2013). This may sound legitimate and unproblematic, but it reveals much more upon further examination.

If it is in fact Japanese credentials and language skills which are necessary for highly skilled positions, why is it that the Japanese-Americans are mostly successful in securing highly-skilled positions (Tsuda, 2021)? Most Japanese-Americans attend university in the US, and do not have a strong command of Japanese. The criteria used to define unskilled and highly-skilled migrants are not as objective and unproblematic as they may seem. A range of stakeholders, including national and local governments, employers, migration entrepreneurs and brokers, professional associations, media, and non-governmental organisations, shape and decide who highly-skilled migrants are (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021). Global inequalities as well as power relations between countries have an impact too, resulting in racialised assumptions playing a role instead of the criteria being objective measurements of migrants’ abilities. In South-to-North labour migration, it is usually taken for granted that immigrants from the South are unskilled migrants (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021). Many Japanese think of Brazil as poor and backward, while the US is wealthy and advanced. Labelling the Nikkeijin as unskilled migrants has more to do with Japanese perceptions of Brazil than what they are able or unable to do as workers.

Most Nikkeijin are well-educated and come from a middle-class background (Tsuda, 2009). They work as professionals or were business owners before coming to Japan. The most commonly offered reason as to why they have ended up in unskilled jobs in Japan is that they lack the Japanese credentials and language skills necessary for professional positions (Takenoshita, 2013). This may sound legitimate and unproblematic, but it reveals much more upon further examination.

The Nikkeijin’s employment

Cremers (2022) referred to Central and Eastern European workers in the Dutch labour market as being part of the ‘flexible layer’, which performs unattractive, temporary, and routine work under poor conditions. Recruitment for these jobs exploit legislative loopholes and do not uphold the principle of equal pay for equal work. The same can be said of the Nikkeijin. They are part of the flexible layer in the sense that they are hired when there is a surge in demand for manufacturers’ products, and let go when demand eases (Chiavacci, 2014). They are also the most flexible workers who can be employed at short notice. Although some Nikkeijin are employed directly by manufacturers, many are hired by dispatch agencies, which means their earnings are reduced due to agencies’ commissions. They have become indispensable to core sectors of the economy, as they are structurally embedded in key export industries such as automobiles and electronics (Chiavacci, 2014). However, this has come at a personal cost to them, because they are kept in their precarious positions where there is

At the workplace

Tsuda’s (2009) Japanese respondents thought little of their Nikkei co-workers’ work ethic and ability, and saw them as lazy, irresponsible and careless at work. A Brazilian respondent in Oda’s (2010: 785) study confirmed this:

‘At the company [where I work] we had to assemble a piece and some guy said we should do it this way. But when I look at the drawings, I could see he got it wrong. But he just took the drawings from my hands and ignored me. Why? Because I’m Brazilian! … Because I’m from the third world!’

Tsuda (2021) analysed the discrimination against the Nikkeijin as racism, or more specifically, co-ethnic racism. Strictly speaking, the Nikkeijin are of Japanese descent and therefore the same race, and the term ‘racism’ should not apply. Racism is defined as unequal treatment of other groups as inferior based on essentialised and apparently immutable differences, which produces systems of inequality and domination. This definition fits what the Nikkeijin suffer in Japan. Because their national differences are essentialised as immutable and inferior, these differences produce socioeconomic inequalities and hierarchies that are difficult to overcome (Tsuda, 2021).

These national differences are caused by entrenched global inequalities between developed and developing countries (Tsuda, 2021). These inequalities result from historical-structural forces acting over extended periods of time. In order to illustrate what he meant by ‘national differences’, Tsuda compared the Nikkeijin with the much smaller numbers of Americans of Japanese descent, or Japanese-Americans. In the system of hierarchical class stratification in Japan, Japanese-Americans are positioned much higher than the Nikkeijin because of the immense difference in international status between the US and Brazil.

Since the migrant workers who are most likely to come to Japan are from low-income countries in Asia and therefore rank low in the class hierarchy, they are likely to experience similar discrimination and social class prejudice. This will be taken up again and discussed further in Section 6.
5. The 'Japanese language only' attitude in blue-collar workplaces

This section focuses on another line of research which will help us understand what blue-collar workplaces are like for migrant workers. Although there is no official policy on working language in blue-collar workplaces, Morita (2021a) found that Japanese co-workers and employers expect Japanese only. Her research drew on Kusunoki’s (2018) study on foreign nurse trainees in Japanese hospitals, in which Japanese co-workers expected Japanese to be used not just with Japanese co-workers, but also among the trainees themselves. They also underrate the trainees’ Japanese skills, assuming that since they are Japanese, they have the right and authority to dictate the rules on language use and form judgements. This attitude of ‘in Japan we speak Japanese’ can be traced back to Nihinjinron writing (see Section 2), which emphasises the strong connection between the Japanese and the land they occupy.

Three accounts of communication at blue-collar workplaces involving migrant workers are presented in Morita (2021a), in which Japanese co-workers also expect the Japanese language to be used. The first account describes a 2020 Tokyo Olympics construction site, where in spite of an acute labour shortage, migrant workers were assigned only menial tasks such as shifting raw materials. Labour Inspectors noted that the transportation of raw materials could have been carried out much more efficiently with forklifts or other equipment. Migrant workers would then be free to help alleviate the labour shortage. As to why migrant workers were told to move raw materials, given that their co-workers said that they did not speak Japanese and communication was a challenge, it was likely that they were labelled as non-Japanese speakers and seen as capable of menial work only (Morita, 2021a). This echoes Kraft’s (2019a, 2019b) findings concerning Polish workers at a Norwegian construction site, who were also perceived as non-Norwegian speakers and therefore had to be limited to simple tasks. Unlike Polish workers, the migrant workers in Japan had received at least several months’ Japanese language training. Their Japanese skills were clearly underrated, as well as their abilities as workers. The new visa for migrant workers which was introduced in April 2019 requires a pass in a Japanese language test. The test itself is, however, flawed due to its focus on Chinese characters (kanji) and grammar and unlikely to improve their communicative skills at the workplace (Morita, 2021b).

Another attitude which stood out in the analysis is that only the Japanese language can be used, and if the migrant workers do not speak Japanese, communication is not possible. Kraft (2019a, 2019b) has shown that communication is possible even when Polish workers do not speak Norwegian. It can be achieved with words and fragments of Norwegian, drawings, and gestures, provided both parties are willing to make the effort. Practically all Japanese learn English in middle school and high school, and should therefore be able to remember and use some English words and sentence fragments. When combined with Japanese, drawings, and gestures, communication should be possible to some extent, even if it is limited. The unwillingness to make the effort or consider alternative means of communication appear to be a greater barrier than the migrant workers’ lack of Japanese skills.

The second account concerns a Vietnamese worker at a Japanese construction firm who complained about having to perform decontamination work in Fukushima although it was not in his job description (Morita, 2021a). The owner of the business also expected only Japanese to be used, and was inconsistent in his opinion as to whether the Vietnamese worker spoke Japanese. It appeared that his judgement shifted depending on what was convenient for him. When he wanted to justify his decision to send the worker to Fukushima, he claimed that the worker did not speak Japanese, or else an explanation would have been provided. Later in the owner’s story, he described a conversation between himself and the worker, one that presumably took place in Japanese, in which he told the worker to return home to Vietnam if he did not want to perform the decontamination work. This shows that judgements on migrant workers’ Japanese abilities are not necessarily objective and consistent.

The third and final account is about a small Japanese business in which workers resisted the owner’s efforts to internationalise by refusing to use English with foreign co-workers at first, but later relented (Morita, 2021a). At the beginning, Japanese workers spoke Japanese with migrant workers and failed to communicate, resulting in frustration. They threatened to leave their jobs, and at least one of them did. The owner’s insistence on foreign employees being necessary for internationalisation and expansion eventually persuaded the workers to use English. This shows that at least some Japanese workers at the company did have sufficient English language skills to use it at work, despite frequent claims that they were incompetent in English.

6. Discussion and concluding remarks

The presence of migrant workers in Japan should be understood in the context of them meeting the country’s labour needs due to its rapidly aging and declining population. Nihonjinron writing has entrenched the idea that Japan is for the Japanese only (see Section 2). Ishihara Shintaro (see Section 2) has made the idea of migrant workers worse by calling them criminals. While it is true that some migrant workers commit crimes, the media has blown these crimes out of proportion (Morita, 2017a, 2017b). The idea that migrant workers are opportunistic individuals who have come to Japan for the sole
purpose of making money (Morita, 2021a) has also biased the Japanese into forgetting that migrant workers need to make a living and that they are humans.

The studies cited in the section on Japanese-style HRM (Section 3) have observed that when asked to accommodate foreign employees’ needs, human resource departments have flatly refused to do so. While it is true that Japanese-style HRM works well in the Japanese context, human resource employees may be unaware of the contextual differences outside Japan. If they were to develop some awareness and understanding of these differences and the resulting HRM practices, they may be more patient and able to empathise when handling foreign employees’ complaints. The inclusion of materials on foreign HRM practices in their training may be a wise move.

Concerning the tendency to rank countries and their people according to their economic power (see Section 4), leaders and educators could encourage the public to be less materialistic. While the economic differences cannot be disputed, as people all are equal. The effects of prejudice and discrimination on their victims should also be made known. One of them is to cause the Nikkeijin to withdraw from Japanese society and form their own self-sufficient communities (Tsuda, 2009).

Blue-collar Japanese workers could be reminded that migrant workers are in Japan to ease the labour shortage. and that it is to everyone’s advantage if they make an effort to communicate with them. This will hopefully increase Japanese workers’ willingness to make themselves understood and understand migrant workers. Terms such as ‘Cool Japan’ are popular with the Japanese and have become buzzwords. English-speaking business leaders such as Mikitani Hiroshi (of Rakuten) and Maezawa Yusaku (of Zozotown) could lead the way in encouraging the public to use some English, linking it to ‘Cool Japan’. The Emperor and Empress attended the recent funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, and were seen conversing with other foreign dignitaries in photographs and video footage. The fact that they both speak English could be highlighted.

Data availability
No data are associated with this article.

Acknowledgment
The authors would like to state that the previous version of this manuscript was published as a pre-print and available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4066871 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4066871.

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