

# Friendship, Rivalry or Indifference?: Understanding the Attitudes of Japanese Workers Toward Technical Intern Trainees

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This paper reports on findings from a study of the sentiment of Japanese seafood processing workers toward their foreign technical intern trainee colleagues in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture. The study aims to address the need for qualitative, micro-level research on Japanese attitudes toward foreign workers in Japan. As a relatively new immigration nation, there has been little public debate in Japan on either immigration policy or the social integration of migrants. As a result, public opinion on these topics is largely unknown, even as the government opens up the country to larger numbers of foreign workers as a response to Japan's demographic challenges. Against the backdrop of a global rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and hate crimes, this paper argues that the time is ripe to investigate how unskilled foreign workers – in particular, technical intern trainees - are being received, and what kind of expectations Japanese workers have toward their foreign co-workers. Preliminary findings from this study indicate that attitudes differ according to life domain, that tension is felt regarding relations between trainees and community members, and that Japanese in-group/out-group cultural norms may be behind the family-like ties that seem to be developing between the trainees and their Japanese co-workers.

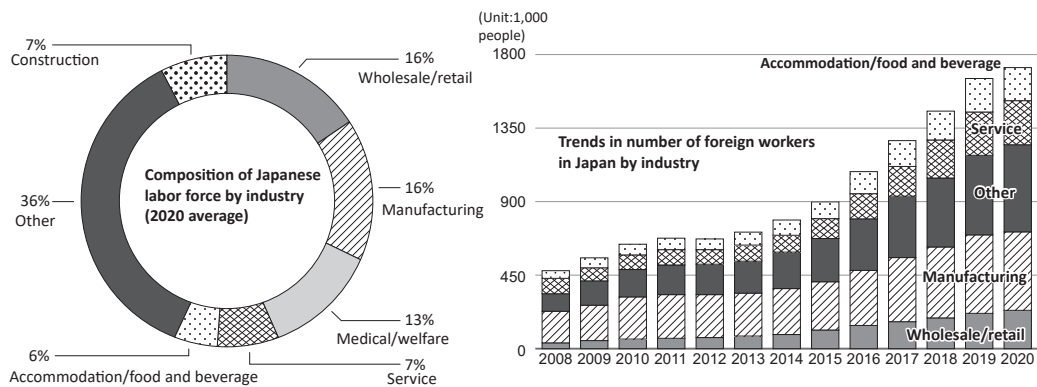
## 1. Introduction

How can people of different cultural backgrounds live and work together? This is the question facing national and local governments amidst increasing reports of race-based conflict. Unprecedented rises in human movement around the globe are forcing governments to confront and address issues related to growing cultural diversity, and Japan is no exception. The challenges of a declining birthrate and shrinking working age population have exacerbated labor shortages in Japan, leading to an ever-increasing dependence on foreign labor. The Revised Immigration Act of 2019 marked the open recognition by the government of the need to import foreign unskilled labor

to address Japan's demographic challenges. As a result, the unskilled foreign labor force that was previously not officially recognized has become openly accepted, and more visible. In addition to customer-facing service industry and care industry workers, unskilled workers in labor-scarce fields such as seafood processing, construction and manufacturing are also becoming a more prominent presence in local communities.

The Japanese government has historically been highly sensitive to public opinion on immigration. Politicians have traditionally avoided the topic in public discourse, even while *de facto* immigration policies exist (Koido & Kamibayashi, 2018; Komine, 2014; Roberts, 2018). However, the recent severity of labor shortages in key industries have ultimately pushed the government to officially open up the country's borders to unskilled workers, despite what the public may think. But what exactly does the Japanese public think? As discussed in greater detail below, research on Japanese public attitudes toward foreign residents has mainly been comprised of national public opinion surveys that include one or two questions on increases in immigrant numbers ("Joint Usage/Research Center for Japan General Social Surveys," n.d.) and other large-scale quantitative surveys (Nagata, 2013; Nakata, 2017; Nukaga, 2006). Such data offers important insights into general tendencies in attitudes among the Japanese public. However, by their very nature, such surveys do not necessarily shed light on the reasons for respondents' opinions, nor their thinking on the related issues.

In both Japan and elsewhere, immigration is perceived as a politically sensitive issue, with potential electoral implications. However, beyond politicians' self-interest, studies and circumstances in traditional immigration nations indicate that there are several other reasons why it is important for Japan's leaders to understand the deeper sentiment and reasoning behind more general public attitudes toward foreign residents. Firstly, it has been widely acknowledged that attitudes toward migrants and level of tolerance of non-native customs and practices can greatly impact both social cohesion (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007) as well as migrant health and wellbeing (IOM, 2018; also reported in Japan by Miller, Ong, Choi, Shibayama, & Jimba, 2020; Takenoshita, 2015). Secondly, feelings about migrants have the potential to materialize as the ultranationalist, xenophobic and racist sentiment currently causing social disruption in other countries and regions; there is no guarantee that it will not do the same in Japan. Thirdly, social integration is commonly defined as a two-way process, determined by the behavior and attitudes of both the immigrant and host community groups (OECD & EU, 2018). Lack of attention toward the thinking and behavior of the majority toward migrants runs the risk of leading to a type of 'assimilative social integration' (Morita, 2014) that places the onus for adaptation solely on the shoulders of the minority, rather than encouraging understanding and acceptance of difference by both sides.



**Fig. 1: Comparison of Japanese and foreign working populations by industry.**

(Source: created by the author using data from *Gaikokujin Koyo Jokyo no Todokede Jokyo Matome (Summary of registration of foreign nationals employment status)*, Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2020; and *Sangyo-betsu shugyoshasu (Number of persons employed by industry, 2020 average)*, Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training.

This paper aims to make a preliminary contribution to a more in-depth understanding of Japanese thinking toward foreign residents. I report on an exploratory study conducted in Miyagi Prefecture, aiming to understand the feelings of Japanese workers toward their foreign colleagues. To more succinctly define the scope of this work, this research focuses on the opinions of Japanese seafood processing industry employees who work with foreign technical intern trainees (*gino jishusei*) at unskilled work sites. There is a persuasive argument for exploring the viewpoint of unskilled Japanese workers - a seemingly small section of the Japanese public. Fig.1 above provides a comparison of the current composition of the labor force in Japan (on the left) with the trends in the number of foreign workers in each industry (on the right). The top six industries in terms of native working population are wholesale/retail, manufacturing, medical/welfare, construction, service industries, and accommodation/food services, industries that include many unskilled job types. The industries with the highest numbers and continuous growth in foreign workers largely coincide with the industries with the highest numbers of native workers: manufacturing, service industries, wholesale/retail and accommodation/food services. These four industries account for 45% of the Japanese workforce, a considerable number. The relative lack of contact to date between native and foreign residents in Japan has been flagged as a factor in negative attitudes toward migrants, including seeing migrants as a drain on the economy, a threat to Japan's culture and heritage, and a reason for increased crime (ILO, 2019). It is for this reason that this research examines unskilled work sites, as they clearly constitute an important location of increasing contact between Japanese and non-Japanese workers, including technical intern trainees.

It is also necessary to note that literature in Japan and elsewhere has indicated that a lower

education level and unskilled work have been associated with negative attitudes toward migrants (Facchini, Margalit, & Nakata, 2016; Mazumi, 2016; Nagata, 2013; OECD & EU, 2018). Recent findings suggest that labor market competition (LMC) may be a heightened threat among native unskilled workers, both toward migrants employed in the native's own occupation, and toward unskilled migrants overall (Mellon, 2019). Given the changing composition of Japan's unskilled workforce noted above and lack of studies on this section of the population to date, unskilled work sites in Japan are proposed here as a potential source of rich and useful data on the feelings of Japanese employees toward foreign workers.

The paper begins with an overview of recent social change in Japan related to population composition. Against this backdrop, I review the literature to date on the attitudes of the Japanese public toward immigration and migrant workers. I then report on findings from the research project underway in Miyagi Prefecture, and discuss how the findings answer the question: what kind of sentiment do Japanese workers have toward their technical intern trainee colleagues? While studies in mature immigration nations are shifting focus toward methods of influencing public sentiment on immigrants and reducing prejudice (Facchini et al., 2016; Paluck & Green, 2009), in Japan it is first necessary to illuminate and define the sentiment itself. This is the overarching objective of the current research.

## **2. Background: Immigration and Social Change**

Demographic challenges are driving Japan's growing dependence on foreign workers. Population aging and decline are leading to increasingly serious labor shortages: the total population is forecast to drop from 127 million in 2015 to 88 million by 2065, with the working-age population also set to fall from 60% in 2015 to around 50% of the total population in 2065 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2017). Following the current baseline of labor participation by female and elderly Japanese residents, the government forecasts that an average of over 300,000 foreign workers need to be added every year to support Japan's current economic level (Ministry of Land Infrastructure Transport and Tourism, 2019). By the end of 2020, the number of foreign residents in Japan exceeded 2.8 million people, of which the number of foreign workers is now at a record high, reaching 1.72 million people as of October 2020. Of this number, technical intern trainees are the fastest-growing group, rising from 1.7% of foreign workers in 2010 to 23.3% in 2020. They are the second-largest group of foreign nationals by status of residence (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2021a). The industries most in need of foreign workers include nursing, manufacturing, construction, agriculture and the hospitality industries (Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2018). Not coincidentally, these match the industries being targeted by the Technical Intern Trainee Program (Organization for Technical

Intern Training, 2020).

The Technical Intern Trainee Program (TITP), initially launched in 1993, has both grown in significance and also become a target of criticism both domestically and overseas over the nearly three decades that it has been in operation. The program was originally established for the purpose of skills transfer to developing nations (Immigration Bureau, Ministry of Justice Human Resources Development Bureau, & Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, 2017). It is now recognized that the TITP has been widely used and abused as a source of relatively cheap labor by small and medium size businesses suffering from serious labor shortages (Koido & Kamibayashi, 2018). While the amendment of the Immigration Act in 2009 was an attempt to address the gap between intent and reality of the TITP and confer workers' rights to the trainees (Kamibayashi, 2018), legal, systemic and human rights-related issues are still frequent targets of criticism (Ibusuki, 2020; Komine, 2018). The government's recognition of this situation was behind the Revised Immigration Act in 2019 and launch of the new Specified Skill Worker visa, which offers potential permanent residency for workers in selected industries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2019).

It may seem that there is limited value in understanding Japanese worker sentiment toward technical intern trainees, as they are currently not permanent residents in Japan and not necessarily be viewed as 'immigrants' as the term is commonly understood in traditional immigration nations (for example IOM, 2020). However, there are several reasons why the technical intern trainees are an important target for research on feelings toward migrants. Firstly, the establishment of the Specified Skill Worker status in 2019 means that a growing number of technical intern trainees may potentially transfer to the new status and ultimately apply for permanent residency in Japan. Importantly, the Japanese government is currently considering a revision of this status, to expand the number of industries where permanent residency is an option ("Japan mulls more areas of skilled foreign workers", 2021). Secondly, even while the trainees remain temporary residents, the serious labor shortages in many industries have led to a situation where the presence of the trainees as a group is becoming a long-term phenomenon in many communities. Individual trainees may leave, but the presence of trainees as a group is constant. Thirdly, regional competition over itinerant workers such as the technical intern trainees is becoming increasingly fierce. There is thus a need to ensure that Japan is seen as an attractive destination for workers who may have the option to select neighboring countries instead. In addition to the urgent improvements in the trainees' working conditions so often reported, it is also crucial to investigate the way that the trainees are being received by fellow workers.

In summary, the number of foreign nationals employed in unskilled work is steadily increasing and forecast to continue to grow as a response to Japan's labor shortages. The technical intern

trainees (and by extension, Specified Skill Worker status holders) are the core target group in the government's moves to openly accept more unskilled labor. Japan is dependent on such labor to support the economy, social security system, and depopulation of rural areas. For these reasons the Japanese government faces an urgent need to develop sound infrastructure and an environment that is attractive to itinerant workers. As has been seen in research in traditional immigration nations (Ager & Strang, 2008; Spoonley & Tolley, 2012), host community sentiment toward migrants is an important factor for facilitating social integration and creating an attractive immigration destination.

### **3. Literature Review: Public sentiment toward foreign workers in Japan**

#### **3-1. Attitudes toward migrants in general**

Micro-level studies on the attitudes of the Japanese public toward migrants in general are rare. Based on national public opinion surveys conducted for the past two decades, the Japanese public is typically thought to have a negative stance toward increases in the foreign population (Japan Cabinet Office, 2004; NHK, 2019). Such negative attitudes also seem to be corroborated by surveys of foreign residents that indicate significant levels of perceived discrimination (Center for Human Rights Education and Training, 2017). Japan General Social Survey (JGSS) data has been used by researchers to examine levels of acceptance of increased immigration and determinants of Japanese attitudes toward immigrants. It has been found, on average, that around sixty percent of the Japanese public opposes increases in immigrant levels. Age, education level, English conversation ability and contact with foreign nationals have been found as possible contributing factors in the formation of attitudes toward immigrants (Gentry & Branton, 2019; Green & Kadoya, 2013; Mazumi, 2015, 2016; Nukaga, 2006). Recognizing the impact of public opinion on social cohesion, research has also been conducted on methods that may be adopted to influence public opinion, such as information campaigns (Fachini et al., 2016) and more open discussion of previously taboo topics such as how migrants may contribute to Japanese society (Menju, 2014). However, such studies are still few in number.

Recently, although still not numerous, there have been more nuanced studies on the feelings of the Japanese public toward increases in immigration and foreign residents. In particular, a noticeable dichotomy is emerging between a perception of the economic benefits of immigration and concerns over the socio-cultural impact that higher numbers of foreign residents may bring (for example JTUC-Rengo, 2018). Recent findings in quantitative studies on general attitudes toward migrants suggest that a large section of the Japanese public sees only economic value in immigration and has concerns about the cultural impact that more migrants may bring (Kage, Rosenbluth, & Tanaka, 2021).

### **3-2. Attitudes of Japanese workers**

The sentiment of Japanese workers toward migrants or migration is a largely unexplored research field. Some quantitative studies have suggested a correlation between blue collar workers in Japan and negative attitudes toward increased immigration (Nagayoshi, 2008; Nukaga, 2006); others have examined Japanese employee perceptions of foreign co-workers through the lens of their commitment to the company (Kato, 2010). Large-scale survey data has been used to examine the interplay between competitive threat and contact theories of attitude development, with mixed results. Asada's study of Brazilian workers indicated that the way foreign workers interact with each other in the workplace can lead to misunderstandings and the formation of a negative image of those workers, proposing that the contact theory has limitations in such settings (Asada, 2000). Gentry and Branton produced inconsistent results on whether increased contact leads to support for immigration (Gentry & Branton, 2019). Mazumi also compared the contact theory with competitive threat theory, finding that while workplace contact generally leads to positive attitudes toward immigration, competitive threat theory is supported for unskilled workers, who had more negative attitudes toward migrants (Mazumi, 2016). On the other hand, Nagata failed to find a correlation between lower-paid jobs and xenophobic feelings (Nagata, 2013).

Such findings reflect the complex interplay of factors involved in intercultural contact between co-workers who may also be rivals for jobs. However, there is a lack of qualitative research on the thinking behind responses given to more general public opinion surveys. This research aims to address this gap in knowledge.

## **4. Research Aims and Context**

The aim of the current research project is to answer the question: what kind of attitudes do Japanese workers have toward their foreign technical intern trainee colleagues? Given the lack of micro-level studies in Japan on this subject to date, a particular point of interest of this study is understanding the thought processes behind the welcoming or non-welcoming attitudes of the participants toward their foreign co-workers.

The O. district, located in Oshika Peninsula in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture, is predominantly supported by the fishing and seafood processing industries. Ishinomaki City is one of the rural areas in Japan suffering from depopulation, in this case exacerbated by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, and steadily decreasing since then. The ratio of foreign residents has been growing significantly over the past ten years, yet still falls short of the number by which the population is decreasing annually. In other words, the influx of foreign workers is not yet keeping

pace with the rate of population decrease. Oshika Peninsula, the site of the current study, has a notably high concentration of foreign residents: 87 of the 2,149 residents are non-Japanese, or 4% (Ishinomaki City, 2021). Considering that the ratio of foreign residents in the total population of Japan is currently just over 2% (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2021b), this represents a high figure in a very small community. Based on the relatively high concentration of foreign residents and workers, this district was selected for this study as a microcosm of multicultural communities that are likely to increase in rural areas in the future.

## **5. Research Methods and Participants**

### **5-1. Methods**

In keeping with the aim of the study to illuminate the sentiment of individual Japanese employees and explore the subjective perceptions of the research participants, qualitative research methods were employed. Data was collected at four seafood processing companies in the O. district of Oshika Peninsula, Ishinomaki City in June and August 2021. Semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to two hours. They were conducted in Japanese by the researcher, and audio-recorded. Interview protocols are available upon request. A total of twelve Japanese workers have been interviewed to date; for the purposes of this paper, findings from nine participants are reported. The nine participants reported here were selected for this paper to provide a balance of three management members, three female employees and three male employees.

### **5-2. Participants**

The participants in the study were selected using convenience sampling, making use of previously established connections in the O. district. Participants are thus not representative of all Japanese unskilled workers. Brief profiles of the research participants included in this paper are provided in Table 1 below.

### **5-3. Data analysis**

Interview content was transcribed verbatim and coded using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. In keeping with the interpretative, inductive nature of the project, codes were identified through repeated readings of the transcripts during the coding process, based on loosely-defined categories set to ensure responsiveness to the research questions of the project. Given the small number of cases examined in this exploratory study, findings are not generalizable. Rather, the aim of the analysis is to provide a potentially instructive exposition of micro-level sentiment toward foreign residents among a section of society that has received minimal researcher attention to date.



**Table 1. Research participant profiles**

Participant	Gender	Age	No. of trainees at company	Years of employment	Position
S1	M	52	15	38	Owner/manager
S2	M	49	7	30	Owner/manager
S3	M	45	7	26	Owner/manager
F1	F	50	7	4	Office administration
F2	F	56	15	10	Dining hall and dormitory management
F3	F	50s	18	1	Seafood processing work
M1	M	43	2	10	Fishing and seafood processing work
M2	M	41	15	13	Fishing and seafood processing work
M3	M	45	7	3	Fishing and seafood processing work

## 6. Findings

The preliminary findings of the interviews conducted in this study are organized here according to the following three major themes that have emerged from the data. Themes were identified considering how they may contribute to answering the question: what kind of attitudes do Japanese workers have toward their technical intern trainee colleagues?

### 6-1. Familial ties

The sentiment of the Japanese participants toward their technical intern trainee colleagues was strongly infused with a sense of the familial. This was initially evident in the way that the participants referred to the trainees in the interviews, using the Japanese '*ko*', meaning 'child' or someone to whom one expresses affection or affinity. The other term commonly used in reference to the trainees by almost all participants was '*kawaii*', also indicating affection. Interviewees were asked about the reason for using such terms.

When you're with them all the time, you become attached to them. They really become like your own kids [...] There's not something in particular that causes that feeling – attachment just naturally forms. (S1)

It's because they're at the age where they could be my own sons. And on top of that they're living far from their own parents. I think that's why. (F1)

The affection shown toward the trainees was often positioned in an understanding of the

circumstances that had brought them to Japan and their current situation.

They're putting up with a lot, working every day here, and then sending money back home [...] we see them working really hard to fulfill their dreams. (M1)

If they were back home, they wouldn't be experiencing any of the daily life issues they have here. The dormitory that they live in...they share the toilet and the bath, and they have to take turns cooking [...] When we were their age, we didn't have to worry about things like that. They've come here to make a living, so I feel sorry for them. (F3)

The familial ties between Japanese employees and their trainee colleagues was not limited to the language used. In their discussion of the trainees and the way they live in Japan, many of the participants seemed to adopt a 'parental' stance. This was particularly pronounced among the participants who are involved in overseeing the dormitories where the trainees live, and more noticeable among female participants. Grievances were expressed over daily living habits, including garbage disposal and the cleanliness of shared areas in the dormitories.

Keeping their room clean, that's the only problem. [...] No matter how many times we tell them. [...] It's not that they don't do it at all. They say 'Ok, ok'. But the office people have to keep telling them off about it. (S2)

I tell them – *you* might be okay with this, but you need to think about keeping it clean for the trainees coming after you. I say this, but I end up cleaning up after them anyway. (M1)

At the same time, participants also seem to be adopting a 'protective parent' role toward the trainees. This was observed in three streams of conversation during the interviews. The first was in reference to recent media reports of crimes committed by technical intern trainees elsewhere in Japan. Participants demonstrated an understanding of the background factors that may have led to such crimes, and expressed frustration at what they viewed as unfair reporting in the media on matters related to the trainees.

I think there must be people who get a negative view (of the trainees) just because of (what they see on the news). (M3)

When people on television make a big deal about something to do (with the trainees), older people who see that believe it. [...] The media needs to report on the background first, before

they talk about some trainee running away. Otherwise it just seems like the trainees are always in the wrong. (F1)

The sense of protectiveness toward the trainees was also shown in comments related to reports of poor and inhumane treatment of trainees elsewhere. Participants expressed disbelief at such treatment and empathy toward the trainees involved.

I think it's natural to develop affection for the trainees. So I cannot understand how those people (in media reports) could act like that. I just don't get it. (S1)

The third area where participants seemed to take on the role of protective parent was in relation to what was expressed as antagonistic attitudes toward the trainees by members of the wider community. There was an evident willingness by some participants to come to the defense of the trainees in the face of seemingly unwarranted opposition to their presence in the community.

Around two years ago, someone came and told us that they (the trainees) had been trampling on their garden. So I said to them, if that happens again, please take a photo of the shoe print. Then I'll check to see if it matches with our trainees' shoes. They never contacted me again. (F1)

There's really only a small number of trainees who actually do anything wrong. Other than that, I feel like there are a lot of cases where the Japanese side are misunderstanding the situation. (M1)

In this way, there was evident tension in conversations about how the trainees are viewed and treated by community members, with participants taking on a protective tone yet at times also expressing concern about trainees' behavior. This is explored in the discussion of the findings.

## **6-2. High expectations as labor**

As may be expected given the labor shortages being experienced in the industries concerned, the three owner/managers who were interviewed expressed their appreciation for the technical intern trainees as labor. The need to secure labor was the primary reason given for hiring the trainees. This was also recognized by other participants not in management positions, with all expressing overwhelming satisfaction with the trainees as high-quality labor. Participants frequently commented that the trainees worked quickly and intelligently, and performed work duties that Japanese employees would not. This was also evidenced in comments by almost all participants that the

trainees are ‘better’ than Japanese employees.

(Before hiring trainees) We just couldn’t find people. Young people just don’t come here. Older people might come, but there’s a limit to what they can do, compared to young workers. (S2)

Japanese employees have to take days off for various reasons. They might have to look after elderly parents or attend some family event. Or they might suddenly fall ill themselves. But the trainees are basically here to work. So personally that’s been really helpful [...] Before, there weren’t enough people to cover for me. (F3)

If you teach them, they’ll do any job [...] They’re better workers than the Japanese. Seriously. The smart ones are really smart. (S3)

Some participants also referred to the contribution that the trainees are making to the local economy, articulating an understanding that the trainees are needed not only for their labor but also to help revitalize the depopulating region.

I really don’t think anyone doesn’t want the trainees here. They liven up the town. (F3)

Japan doesn’t have enough workers, and it’s convenient in that way because the trainees pay taxes so they help the economy. (M3)

There were also some more nuanced views about the hiring of the trainees. Those participants involved in administration and company management spoke of the burdensome paperwork required for the hiring, reporting and management of trainee-related matters. The financial outlay required to hire the trainees - in other words, the question of whether or not they could be regarded as ‘cheap’ labor - was a subject of divided opinions. It was evident that employees who are not involved or aware of company management assume that the trainees are cheaper to employ than Japanese workers; this was contradicted by company managers who maintain that total costs are almost the same. One participant expressed the concern that trainees may be prioritized over Japanese employees in the future, expressing a fear of competitive threat.

I tell young people that if they keep working like they have been then they’ll lose their jobs. I’m not sure if it gets through to them though [...] If you have one Japanese worker and one Vietnamese worker who are both in their first year, I think, probably, (the Vietnamese) are

young and they work hard. In the case of Japanese workers, once working hours are over they just go home. [...] So when you compare them, I think the company owner would think that the Vietnamese are better. Because they're cheaper too. (M3)

This concern was contradicted by the following comment by one of the owners of the same company.

Just because the Vietnamese trainees are better workers than the Japanese, doesn't mean we can just fire someone, it's just not the way we do things in this company. [...] When I think about labor costs, it's true, there are probably some workers that we don't need. But we're not the kind of company to say to someone "You're not a good worker so you're fired". [S3]

It seemed that M3 quoted above had given some thought to the presence of the trainees and what that presence may mean for the Japanese workers. It became clear that the remaining participants, on the other hand, had not yet formulated thoughts on this topic.

### **6-3. Hesitant acceptance as community members**

In contrast with the glowing praise of the trainees as workers, participants were decidedly more hesitant to express approval of the trainees' life outside of work. This was indicated firstly in overtly disapproving descriptions of the trainees' lifestyle in the company dormitories (described above). Further discussion revealed concern by some participants about the way the trainees socialize or conduct themselves outside of work, including walking around in groups, and playing loud music.

When there are holidays, they play this Indonesian music really loudly, from speakers. I wonder if that's not going to cause problems. (M2)

I think they need to follow the road rules. They're not elementary school students, but they need to be told that around here you need to walk in single file, or that in some places you're not supposed to ride your bicycle. There will be lots of different people living here in the future so I think someone needs to tell them these things, because if someone hits them with their car it's going to be the driver's fault. (F3)

Even though we're in the pandemic, they go out without masks. I tell them when I see them, but I think other people must hate that. [...] People who don't know them at all. People must hate to see them walking around in a group with no masks on. And the trainees we have now don't do this, but the trainees we had before would walk right in front of people's houses, off

the road. People used to complain about that a lot. (F2)

It should be noted that this was most commonly expressed as concern at how such conduct would be received by the wider community. Most participants were eager to emphasize that they themselves accept and understand the way the trainees live and spend their time outside of work, but are worried about how it is viewed by other residents. Nonetheless, female participants in particular voiced their own personal concerns about trainees living close by, seeming to express a general sense of unease that was not necessarily grounded in any actual incidents. For example, F2 stated that she had joined other community residents in opposing the construction of a new dormitory for trainees in her residential area. F3 also related an anecdote portraying trainees as community members who did not fit in and were the subject of rumors and discussion among Japanese community members. Crime and safety were not explicitly raised as concerns at the present time, but participants referred to trainee-related incidents in the past when trying to explain why they feel a sense of unease, indicating that their concerns are based on fears that the presence of the trainees will adversely impact community safety.

## **7. Discussion**

The findings reported here are preliminary and will be explored in depth to identify potential social integration policy recommendations and implications for local community cohesion. In response to the topic of this paper - an investigation of the sentiment of Japanese employees toward their technical trainee co-workers – the following tentative observations may be made.

### **7-1. In-group, out-group dichotomy**

The parental stance taken toward the trainees by many of their Japanese co-workers was attributed by some participants to the fact that the trainees are the same age as their own children. There was evidence of an emotional connection made through imagining how they would themselves feel if their own child was in the same position as the trainees. Another interpretation of the protectiveness that the participants expressed toward the trainees may be that they identify the trainees as members of their own group (in this case, the company), and thus feel a strong affinity and sense of responsibility toward the trainees working at their company in relation to other companies or the community at large.

One instance where this in-group, out-group dichotomy seemed particularly evident was in the way participants perceive how the trainees are received in the wider community. Comments on this topic indicated that relations between the trainees and members of the wider community were

a cause for concern. Some participants distanced themselves from unwelcoming sentiment in the community, hypothesizing that the antagonism toward the trainees from community members occurs because such people do not have direct relations with the trainees. In-group membership here is defined by belonging to the company and therefore having direct interaction and experience with the trainees. This membership was made complex for some participants (F2, F3, M3) by the fact that they also seemed to be able to personally relate to feelings of unease and disapproval expressed in the wider community. Ongoing research will investigate this delicate balance between protective feelings toward the trainees and tension evidently felt toward the presence of the trainees in residential communities.

### **7-2. Warmly welcomed as guest workers**

From the outset of the interviews, it was clear that the trainees at the companies examined here are warmly welcomed for their greatly-needed labor. They were consistently described in positive terms, the participants expressing their gratitude for the trainees' hard work, sincerity, and resourcefulness at work. At the same time, many of the participants displayed a certain sense of Japanese-style hospitality toward the trainees that is typically accorded to guests. There was a keen awareness of the fact that the trainees are not permanent; one participant (M3) inferred that this non-permanent situation was the most convenient solution for both sides.

There are a number of complex factors that will impact whether or not large numbers of technical intern trainees switch to Specified Skill status and eventually apply for permanent residency, including Japanese government policy, employment conditions in Japan, and unemployment levels in sending countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia. Indeed, as noted above, recent moves by the Japanese government indicate that the possibility of permanent residency and family reunion for technical intern trainees who change to Specified Skill worker status may be expanded. In any case, in light of Japan's current demographic challenges, it seems likely that Japan's foreign population will continue to increase. While the participants did recognize this, it became clear during the course of the interviews that for the most part, the trainees are viewed predominantly as (very welcome) labor, rather than members of the community. There were some exceptions to this. Two of the participants (F3 and M1) spoke at length about the fact that the trainees have lives to lead outside of the company. They both expressed concern that the young trainees may be missing out on opportunities to find life partners, for example. Participants working with Muslim trainees were also respectful of the religious customs that need to be observed during the working day.

However, data gathered to date has indicated that the trainees are seen at this point as guests who return to their countries after a set time, and it seems that little thought is currently given to

their integration needs. Integration into Japanese society seemed to be viewed as something to be addressed by the newcomers. Most of the participants showed little interest in trainees' language, culture or home countries. This speaks to Kage et al's (2021) dichotomy between the economic and cultural value perceived in immigration. Data from this study have corroborated Kage et al's findings that the Japanese public see greater economic value in immigration than cultural. This point will also be examined further in ongoing research.

## 8. Conclusion and future research prospects

The preliminary findings reported here indicate three potential avenues for future research. To date, significant media attention in Japan has focused on problems occurring in diverse communities, in particular concerning infringement of community rules, and crime (Hamada, 2013). Negative media reports on technical intern trainees are leading to the formation of a one-sided image of their situation in Japan. Data collected from Japanese participants interviewed in this case study suggests that there are certain conflicts forming between the negative public view of the trainees reported in the media and the more accommodating attitudes of those in direct contact with trainees. While it is not possible to draw conclusions from this small data set regarding general public attitudes, future research will explore the possible factors behind this apparent disjunct. Second, compared with traditional immigration nations such as the United States, Canada and Australia, immigration has not been used as a pillar of nation-building in Japan to date, and as such, the extent of immigration debate has been limited. This case study has indicated that for Japanese workers and other members of communities, it may be difficult to imagine the extent of social change that large numbers of migrants may bring. Data collected here, while limited, seems to suggest that the integration of the trainees is largely viewed as a one-sided process to be undertaken by the trainees themselves. Further investigation is required to more fully understand the Japanese participants' interpretation of migrant integration and how this may impact behavior in the wider community. The third area for further investigation concerns intercultural relations developing between the trainees and their Japanese co-workers. The warm relationships between the Japanese workers and their technical intern co-workers depicted here are informed by economic benefits and cultural tensions. Ongoing research is required to explore Japanese workers' expectations of the trainees, to illuminate whether they are seen as friends, rivals, or guests. As Japanese society becomes more openly multicultural, it is to be hoped that such research may contribute to the development of positive intercultural relations now and in the future.

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