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Japanese Salarymen in a Dilemma

Finding Balance Between Private and Professional Spheres

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 The Topic

Japanese men are often stereotyped as overly committed to their job, resisting all desire to rest and sleep. Taking time to enjoy oneself or to entertain the family is not something that Japanese men are famous for either. While exaggerated, stereotypes like these often bear a certain truth to them. In the case of the Japanese *sararīman*[1] ('salaryman' from here on) however, recent data suggest that young salarymen are making different choices than their elders, in favour of their families and, personal time and space. However, while younger salarymen might wish to increase time with their family, large companies are not likely to adjust their successful post-WWII business model to young salarymen's changing values. While under social pressure of both company and older colleagues, salarymen are still spending more leisure and family time, according to the data (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2008b). In regard to this, I would like to propose the following research question: How do contemporary Japanese salarymen allocate personal and family time in light of (social) workplace obligations? I think that answering this question through use of qualitative data, can shed light on changing attitudes and dilemmas that young salarymen are facing in a corporate world that is not open to change.

1.2 Methodology

This thesis will consist of four chapters, including this one. In the second chapter I will be introducing and discussing a number of academic works that make claims about salarymen and their relationship to leisure and family. I will explore older works published in the 60's and put them in

1 The Japanese term for male white collar labourers or businessmen.

contrast with more recent works, which will set a background for the change that has happened over the past few decades. The third chapter will contain the main objective of this thesis. I will be answering the research question by using both large scale statistics, and data from interviews that I conducted during my time in Japan Note that the goal of this thesis is not to prove the accuracy of large scale quantitative data, but rather to provide a qualitative approach to the problem. I wish to paint a picture of thought processes and opinions of individuals that deal with this problem on a daily basis. I hope such a picture can provide a better understanding of processes that lead to the results in quantitative data. The last chapter of the thesis will contain some concluding remarks.

In an attempt to gather my own data about the choices that salarymen make, I decided to hold a small number of qualitative interviews with young salarymen with an age varying between 26 and 38. I chose to use this type of interviewing, because it allows for gathering more detailed information resulting in a better understanding and analysis of the interviewees and their answers to the questions. It provides an opportunity to create a framework of the interviewer in which given answers can be placed. This is particularly useful when introducing topics that deal with personal information, because an interviewee might be reluctant to give straight answers. Additionally, through providing anonymity and taking the time to have in depth conversations, rather than bullet-point style interviews, I am convinced that interviewees are more likely to voice their true opinions. Another factor that could increase the likelihood of receiving honest answers, is a high level of being acquainted to the interviewee. During my time in Japan I put effort into getting acquainted to several people and I conducted my interviews in the last few weeks before leaving the country.

I was able to execute a small-scale interview project in which I posed questions to a total of seven men. These men included two bar owners who were in close contact with salarymen on a daily basis. While the barmen could not provide me with direct information about life as a salaryman, they were able to provide me with insights gained through the many conversations they had had with customers over the years.

The interviews were generally conducted at the interviewee's home and sometimes in public spaces like cafes. The former was preferred but in some cases it was simply not possible to not meet elsewhere. I met some of the men through connections I had in Osaka and other men I met in *izakaya's*[2] around Kyoto. I asked these men questions ranging from topics like workplace atmosphere to bonding with friends and family. Answers to the questions usually resulted in long conversations from which I extracted my data. The interviews generally lasted around 40 minutes, but I often spent time with the interviewees before and after the interviews. In some cases they would make comments about the topics that I mentioned in the interviews at a later time, I tried to take notes whenever that happened. For the main part of the interviews I used audio recording to document the conversations. I would take notes when the conversations allowed me to not focus on the interviewee for a moment.

With the data that I gathered, I will draw a comparison to older literature and the way the salaryman is portrayed. The following chapters will hopefully shed light on how the contemporary salaryman deals with finding a balance between work, free time and family.

2 A type of informal Japanese gastropub.

Chapter 2 – Japanese Salarymen in Literature

This chapter will summarise and discuss arguments from a variety of studies about Japanese salarymen. By picking books and articles that look at the salaryman from different perspectives, I wish to find out what arguments exist that can help me in answering my research question. I will be discussing both dated and recent works about the issues that salarymen face and by doing so I aim to set a contextual background for the interviews that I conducted and for the conclusions that I will draw at the end of the thesis.

The literature that I will be reviewing in this chapter will be divided according to a set of themes. To further clarify the points that I am trying to make for some of the themes, I will pose corresponding sub-questions. Answers to these sub-questions, in combination with my data in the third chapter, will hopefully lead to an answer to the main research question of this thesis. The themes I will be touching on are 'commitment', '*ikigai*', 'leisure' and 'family' respectively.

In the first sub-chapter I will be introducing some of the older works about salarymen. I will show a series of arguments that try to explain the nature of the 1960's salaryman and are at the basis of many existing stereotypes. In the second sub-chapter I will show what the literature has to say about salarymen and the commitment that they have for their company. It will also discuss general attitudes towards labour. In the next sub-chapter I will examine some more recent literature about what drives people in life, what it is that keeps them motivated. In the remaining sub-chapters I will look for arguments n the literature that touch upon salarymen and their relationship to leisure and their families.

2.1 The Mid-20th Century Salaryman

In a great deal of the more dated literature, there seems to be a trend in generalisations about

Japanese salarymen. Although the authors of these works made observations and analysed data, the source of their data appears to be limited. Despite the fact that data originated from a small area or a small group of people, the observed characteristics were attributed to a much larger group of men across the country. In the interest of comparing my findings to the generalisations that exist about allocation of personal and family time by Japanese salarymen, the first question I will try to answer in one of the upcoming sub-chapter is: How has dated literature characterised Japanese salarymen?

In the early 60's David Plath and Ezra Vogel both researched the Japanese business man and draw conclusions that characterised Japanese salarymen in a certain way. In “The After Hours”, Plath looks at what modernisation has meant for the Japanese in regard to their way of living and 'the meaning of life'. He reached conclusions by studying white collar workers, farmers and merchants and how they deal with free time among other things. The characteristics that Plath attributes to Japanese salarymen are then born from comparisons between these three groups of labourers.

An example of how Plath looks at Japanese salarymen is visible in the comparison that he draws to *samurai*[3]. He writes that the salarymen are basically a reincarnation of samurai save for a few differences. One of the differences being that samurai generally inherited their status, whereas salarymen have to earn their status by earning a degree and passing entrance exams to universities and companies (Plath 1964, 35). He also argues that among the salaryman, the farmer and the merchant, the salaryman is financially most stable, but least independent at the same time. Income fluctuations, both negative and positive are mild, but companies expect high commitment through systems like 'life-time employment'[4], which severely impedes mobility for the salaryman (Ibid., 38). The public sphere and private sphere of a salaryman are largely separated. Whereas a salaryman can take part of his work home, he will not be able to rely on the labour power of his family, like a

3 High ranked warriors of Medieval and Early-Modern Japan.

4 A system in which an employee is hired into a company for life. His salary, promotions, benefits and retirement are decided to a certain degree upon entering the company.

farmer could (Ibid, 38). Nonetheless, the salaryman life is looked up to nationwide and is widely imitated (Ibid., 36).

Plath continues to state that a salaryman is heavily reliant on social relationships. Unlike a merchant and a farmer, a salaryman does not have goods to sell; he needs to sell himself to his peers and seniors (Ibid., 39). Plath explains that this is where the combination of work and leisure time shows its significance. At times a salaryman will need to dedicate his leisure time to the company through working overtime. Conversely, he is sometimes forced to spend his leisure time with co-workers in order to retain his social position (Ibid., 39). Plath argues that for Japanese salarymen social rules dictate that spending personal leisure time is accepted, but should be done moderately, be limited to holidays and take social position into consideration (Ibid., 89). Free time can also be used for personal pursuits, like golf, calligraphy, dancing, etc. Unlike the West, where leisure is often something for the individual, a cultivation of one-self, the Japanese rather tend to pursue selflessness: one seeks "the sort of skill that carries one to "the realm of the non-self" where one acts without being aware that "I" am acting" (Ibid., 91). The characteristics mentioned in this and the previous paragraph are examples of how Plath perceived the salaryman of the 60's. Among the characteristics that he mentions, the ones that relate to company loyalty and leisure time are of importance to this thesis and will be discussed again later.

Another study from the 60's that deals with the salaryman and attributes certain characteristics to them based on observations is Ezra Vogel's work: "Japan's New Middle Class". In this book he examines the post war changes in Japan that caused big companies to thrive and bring forth a new middle class: the white collar worker (salaryman). He gathered his data by observing and interviewing the residents of a small town. Based on his observations he makes numerous claims about Japanese salarymen and their actions. He talks about the social life of the salaryman, for example. He argues that the social life of the salaryman is mostly restricted to his family and work associates (Vogel 1963, 36). Weekends are spent with the family, but after-work week-day

recreation is done with his colleagues. The salaryman can expect to be in the same company until his retirement, so his colleagues are his closest relationships outside his family and "he considers it of utmost importance to keep their friendship" (Ibid., 36). Vogel explains that salarymen keep friendships alive by spending time drinking eating and talking at bars or similar places, where they have conversations about sports, news, work, women etc. They also use this time to complain about the boss, or wife, and to receive consolation from friends and waitresses (Ibid., 104).

Vogel also writes a chapter on the 'basic values' of Mamachi residents (the city where he did his field work) and salarymen. In this chapter he discusses themes like loyalty, beliefs, respect, morality, individualism and group focused behaviour. Vogel explains how loyalty to the group is the most important attribute for a respected person (Vogel 1963, 147). The salaryman is an example in this regard: he does not look out for his own interests. In his company he does not earn a lot, but he is part of a greater collective and does work out of devotion for his company (Ibid., 160). By committing himself to his company, being in service for a long time and receiving the benefits that come with this service, the salaryman "feels loyal and is genuinely interested in the firm's welfare" (Ibid., 161). Western values that promoted individuality did not fit with Japanese morality and consequently did not take root after the War (Ibid., 142).

Works like Plath's and Vogel's were rather influential because they provided in-depth examinations of the post-War Japanese white collar worker during the 60's, which was a rather new phenomenon at that time. Despite the fact that the arguments about 'the Japanese salaryman' were based on data gathered in a small area from a small group of people, much of the stereotyping in society and literature is based on these generalisations. In the following chapters of this thesis I will look whether my data corresponds to these old stereotypes that are present in the dated literature.

2.2 Commitment to the Company

In this part of the first chapter I will be looking at employees' commitment to their jobs and through what practises the companies ensure commitment or loyalty from their employees. I will also try to explain whether there are differences between small and large companies in this regard.

In the late 60's Rohlen was was allowed into the corporate circle of the Uedagin bank, a large white collar enterprise. From within, he studied the interactions between employees, as well as interaction between employees and the company as an organisation. The book that he wrote "For Harmony and Strength" (1974), shows the workings of the bank in great detail. He wrote several passages about how the bank ensured that their employees were committed to the job. It seems that the most effective way to achieve this, was for the bank to be closely involved in the personal life of its employees.

The bank encouraged the male employees to get married before their thirties and management would actively help searching for a partner if the employee stayed single for too long (Ibid., 251). This was because the bank was convinced that men would be able to spend more time at work and do a better job if they had someone at home who would do the laundry and the cooking (Ibid., 251). Although there was a dormitory for single employees, where laundry and cooking was done for them, the bank believed that men in their thirties would be unhappy and therefore less productive if they stayed single (Ibid., 251). If an employee had certain personal problems that caused him to perform badly, or if he had thoughts about quitting the company, the management would send a senior with the task of comforting the employee and getting him motivated again (Ibid., 131). Both Rohlen and Allison (1994) mention that an important part of keeping employees loyal to the company is after-work play. By facilitating drinking parties and creating situations in which salarymen are able to open up and develop closer bonds with their peers, company morale and dedication to the job is improved (Allison 1994, 198)(Rohlen 1974, 126).

The company also held certain ideas of what an ideal employee's family should look like. It heavily encouraged a nuclear family with two children, in which a strict division of labour was present (Rohlen 1974, 242). The father of the family served as provider and as a link between the family and the bank, and the wife would take care of the house and children (Ibid., 242). Because of the life-time employment system that was in effect at Uedagin, the employees would earn a predetermined amount of money over the course of their banking career (Ibid., 246). This in combination with the small company housing that the bank provided, made it almost impossible for employees to have more than two children (Ibid., 246). In this way the bank shaped its employees to be perfect workers and loyal to the company.

In contrast to the large white collar corporation that Rohlen studied, Roberson made a small blue collar company named Shintani Metals his object of research. While Roberson discusses blue- rather than white collar workers, I think his study can provide insights about the differences between small and large company employee commitment and entertainment services. Roberson refers to Rohlen quite often and even explains how some of Rohlen's arguments are also applicable to the blue collar company and its employees. Because the data from my interviews is partly based on accounts of men working in smaller companies, I will briefly discuss Roberson's work and compare it to Rohlen's observations.

Roberson argues that there is a problem that is common among leaders of smaller companies. The boss of a small company needs to take the lead and judge to the performance of his employees if a company is to succeed (Roberson 1998, 80). At the same time, he also needs to listen to his employees feelings and become acquainted to them at a certain level (Ibid., 80). This contradiction between acquaintedness and authority is more rare in large companies because building personal relationships is often left as a task for managers to fulfil (Ibid., 80). In this context, it is often harder for small companies to deal with personal problems of employees than it is for large companies like Rohlen's Uedagin, for example.

Another contrast between Roberson's Shintani Metals and Rohlen's Uedagin is the frequency of *nomikai*[5]. Although one would think that a company like Shintani Metals organised less *nomikai* for financial reasons, Roberson argues that employees of small blue collar companies are more likely to meet face-to-face on a daily basis and are therefore less interested in social gatherings (Roberson, 1998, 147). Financial limits are visible in different areas however. Smaller companies have fewer recreational facilities like gyms and karaoke rooms than their bigger competitors and thus smaller companies attract less employees (Ibid., 144). Apart from the absence of recreational facilities, lack of finances also means that less money is available to sponsor leisure events, this sometimes leads to dissatisfaction (Ibid., 145).

Vogel also briefly talks about strategies that companies applied to attract employees and to keep them committed to the job. He explains how large companies that appeared after the Second World War gained popularity quickly because of the benefits that they provided for their employees. Airline companies let their employees enjoy free flights, electric appliance companies offered discounts on products for family and friends. Some companies owned hotels and gave out discounts or free stay coupons, and other companies made entertainment funds available for their employees. In this sense, large companies took care of their employees and could be considered paternalistic in a sense (Vogel 1963, 36). Vogel argues that in the post-War large companies, working conditions and salary are far more ordered and pre-determined. As Rohlen stated in an earlier paragraph as well, a new employee knew fairly accurately how much he would earn during his time in the company and when his promotions would be (Ibid., 73). This allowed for long term planning of expenses and investments. This was interesting to many of the Japanese families that lived through the war and experienced depressions, acute shortages and spiralling inflation (Ibid., 73).

A more recent work by Gordon Mathews (2004) shows that younger generations of university graduates and white collar workers are showing decreasing levels of commitment. The

5 Gatherings involving people drinking and socializing.

lifetime employment system that arose after the Second World War and was designed to attract committing employees, worked well when the Japanese economy was growing, but ever since the economic slump of the 90s, the success of the life time employment system started to deteriorate (Mathews 2004, 123). Employees distrust their companies, as some companies appear to have laid off employees that were supposed to be life time employed. Young people too seem to have lost faith in the job market, but are trapped in an educational system that forces them to enter the job market on terms of the companies (Ibid., 123). Those who do enter the work force through the standard procedures tend to quit within their first three years of work and transfer to different companies with the skills that they acquired during those early years (Ibid., 125). Although this puts the young employees at financial loss, they seek companies that innovate and provide better working conditions. Young employees do not mind sacrificing a stable income for this goal (Ibid., 126). Some younger people even refuse to join large companies entirely and decide to live off of part-time jobs, despite the lack of future perspective[6].

2.3 Raison d'Être

The discussion in the last paragraph about future perspective then brings me to *ikigai*[7]. By exploring literature about Japanese men's *ikigai* I wish to provide a background for the reasoning behind certain actions that some Japanese men might take. It could help me explain why certain men choose to spend more or less time with family and friends, for example. With this idea in mind I want to answer the following question: What does the literature say about Japanese men's goals in life?

In another work of his, Mathews (2002) asks a small group of men about their *ikigai*. For a

6 These so-called *furītā* bring other problems to economy and society, but this discussion should be left for othe research (See Mathews 2002)

7 A term signifying the thing or things that motivate an individual in life (*raison d'être*)

majority of men, their *ikigai* is either work or family, which are often connected. Especially the older men would say that work is their *ikigai* even more so than their family (Mathews 2002, 111). They felt that working for a company not only served themselves and their families, but also helped to build the country to what it is right now (Ibid., 112). There are those however that say that the growth of the Japanese economy would not have stalled if the salarymen of the economic bubble had not lived for their company, but for their families or anything else (Ibid., 112). Younger employees do not seem to share the opinions of their elders and would call their *ikigai* their family rather than their work (Ibid., 114). However, the long hours and absence from their homes causes their work to gradually become their *ikigai* (Ibid., 114). Some of the men who said their family is their *ikigai*, even expressed that they would want to be a stay-at-home dad and take care of the household, but social constraints dictate such a choice to be not masculine (Ibid., 117). Another group of people would say their *ikigai* is something more personal. They want to live for a passion or a hobby, like music, or entirely for themselves, for freedom (Ibid., 120). Mathews argues that for many, there is no time or opportunity to choose an *ikigai* and for many their *ikigai* will stay an unfulfilled dream (Ibid., 121).

In 'Men of Uncertainty', Gill writes about day labourers. He states that day labourers are symbolised by detachment from two main institutions of modern society, namely the family and the company (Gill 2001, 148). Because day labourers change employers on a regular basis, and spend relatively short periods working for the same company, they are generally unable to form bonds with co-workers (Ibid., 152). This also means that they are positioned outside the hierarchical structures of large Japanese corporations (Ibid., 152). Most of the the day labourers no longer share a relationship with their former family members (Ibid., 148). Some are rejected by their natal and/or marital families, while others are too afraid or ashamed to go back in fear of getting rejected (Ibid., 148). Gill argues that this total detachment from relationships and company hierarchy, implies a form of freedom that is rare in modern industrialised countries (Ibid., 153). He explains that these

men are able to freely choose relationships to other people, for example (Ibid., 155). While several day labourers are alone and choose to be alone, friendship is important to most of them. Some men regard friendship to be bothersome, as it comes with certain social obligations, while most others simply are in need of social attachment (Ibid., 155). Regardless, Gill argues that day labourers are free from forced relationships (Ibid., 155). This suggests that, although financial constraints are present, day labourers have more opportunities to choose and live according to a certain *ikigai*. Therefore, as a part of this background chapter, I think there is significance in exploring how these men relate to their *ikigai* in absence of forced relationships.

Day labourers have the perk of voluntary mobility and Gill argues that they use this for moving around for pleasure, variety and economic advantage (Ibid., 154). Other day labourers prefer to stay in the same area for longer periods (Ibid., 15). This is in sharp contrast to forced mobility of white collar workers, who are often transferred to offices in elsewhere in the country (Ibid., 155). Some day labourers like to see themselves as the opposite of this salaryman and his stereotypical characteristics (the ones Vogel and Plath mention, for example) (Ibid., 156). Most of them lived the salaryman life and highly value the freedom that they gained by (in most cases involuntarily) becoming day labourers (Ibid., 157). Some even romanticise it (Ibid., 156).This suggests that for at least a part of the day labourers, the freedom of mobility and the freedom of relationships can be considered their *ikigai*.

2.4 Literature and Leisure

In order to answer the main research question, it is necessary to look at how Japanese men practice leisure and what their attitudes are towards it. As we will see later in this chapter, Allison (1994) describes a fairly common situation where work and play are intertwined. While the play that she describes might not fall under the definition of leisure, it does show a lot of similarities to

it. If one wants to know why Japanese salarymen choose to spend their leisure time in a certain way, it is important to first explore by what means Japanese salarymen recreate and relax. By exploring several studies about Japanese salarymen and the way they use leisure, I will try to answer the following question: what does the literature say about how Japanese salarymen spend their free time within and outside of the company?

In his introductory chapter to an edited book, Linhart gives a quick summary of the development of leisure activities from pre-industrial Japan to the present. He explains that the purpose of leisure changed during the Second World War, namely relief of physical fatigue and strengthening the patriotic spirit (Linhart 1998, 6). Even in present day, leisure has not changed its purpose as can be seen in the kind of corporate outings that Allison (discussed in a later paragraph) talks about: employees reduce stress and get closer to one another. While these activities organised by companies are often obligatory and therefore not necessarily leisure, Japanese working men do spend time, drinking, gambling at *pachinko* parlours, or going out with their families on Sundays (Linhart 1998, 9).

In his chapter "Golf, Organization and "Body Projects"", Ben-Ari looks at the role of golf in the Japanese corporate world. He argues that although golf is practised during personal time, for the majority of Japanese men golf is a necessity if one wants to climb the corporate ladder (Ben-Ari 1998, 148). Playing golf has become such a successful tool for forging and strengthening business relations, that it is part of what is regarded as the ideal lifestyle (Ibid., 148).

To take a closer look how male bonding is practiced in the corporate world, in her book Nightwork (1994), Allison dives into the after-work life of Tokyo white-collar business men. As part of her field work, she worked at a high end hostess bar in Tokyo to observe and to interview business men who visit hostess bars, clubs and cabarets. These establishments, or *mizu shōbai*[8] as

8 Lit. water trade. According to the *kōjien* it indicates establishments that have greatly fluctuating income, and are heavily reliant on popularity with its customers. However, a quick internet search shows that the term has become a euphemism for the night-time entertainment business.

they are collectively called in Japanese, are part of the service business, but differentiate in the fact that men are their main target customers. As such, they often employ women to cater to the customer's needs[9]. In 2014 Japanese companies spent a total of over 3 trillion yen on the entertainment industry including the *mizu shōbai* (Kokuzeichou 2014). The reason for this lavish expenditure is twofold according to Allison: 1) despite their prestige, the white-collar jobs are often boring and underpaid and outings to entertainment businesses make the jobs look more attractive than they are, and 2) allowing employees to relax makes it easier to bond people to the company, so it can be seen as an investment (1994, 10). Her research is aimed at analysing Japanese corporate culture and masculinity among other things, as it is expressed through corporate entertainment (*settai*).

Allison argues that the motivations for men to participate in the company organised outings are varied and can be grouped into five categories, however these categories tend to merge or overlap at times (Ibid., 82). In the case of the hostess bar that she studied, especially the category of sexuality plays a big role. By visiting the *mizu shōbai* the men feel liberated and are able to talk about sexuality more freely than they would be outside (Ibid., 149). The women in these hostess clubs, by virtue of being women, facilitate an environment where the men feel enabled to express themselves and their sexuality. The clubs then function as a space where men are able to drink, talk, sing and flirt. All of this helps the men in the group to open up to one another, which in turn is believed to bring them closer together and improve performance on the work floor (Ibid., 149). In combination with the stress mitigation as a result of drinking together, the performance boost is another category of reasons why men participate in corporate entertainment. Allison explains that the bonding experience in hostess clubs can be seen as a ritual about work and play that revolves around the symbol of manliness; masculinity, that binds the men together (Ibid., 154).

9 Genital sexual interactions are not part of the business (in most cases), since prostitution (both buying and selling) is banned in Japan under the anti-prostitution law (売春防止法) of 1956 (Sōmushō 2014). However, the difficulty of enforcing this law and legislative loopholes have allowed the Japanese sex industry (*fūzoku*) to prosper (Hongo, 2008).

For a large part, a Japanese salaryman's leisure time is spent with the company rather than without. In a later chapter I will explore this more in depth through my interviews and other data.

2.5 Work or Family?

In a similar fashion to the previous few paragraphs about leisure, I am going to discuss what research has stated about Japanese salarymen and the relationship with their families.

Allison makes a detailed analysis of company outings and what benefits the salarymen gain by participating (Allison 1994, 149). She then continues to state that although the benefits sound positive on a superficial level, there is a negative side to it that affects the relationship to their families. Besides improving relations between workers and bonding them to the company, frequent corporate outings also tend to merge their identities (Allison 1994, 198). The men are promised relaxation after their overwork, which creates a situation where working hours are extended and fuse with the play that follows after. Consequently, men spend more time with their colleagues and at their job than they spend at home with their families (Ibid., 199). The men are conditioned to a lifestyle where work, play and sexuality are part of the company life, and going home is just for sleeping. Their women tend to the household and develop to be (non-financially) independent to their man. When a salaryman retires and no longer is a part of the company that catered to all his needs, he becomes helpless and lonely. He becomes estranged to his family as a result of spending too little time with them. His wife has become independent to a level where she does not need his help around the house anymore, but he becomes fully dependent on her, since the company no longer takes care of him (Ibid., 204). Allison argues that although men seem to be getting the better deal, they get trapped in this corporate culture where companies use nighttime entertainment to draw them away from their homes and make them more beneficial employees (Ibid., 200).

Plath too, has several explanations for why he thinks Japanese salarymen take time after

work to do something for themselves, rather than going home right away. He describes the most important reasons as follows: 1) They need more time to socialise and involve themselves with their colleagues in order to keep up their social position. Failing to do so might result in getting socially excluded (Ibid., 184). 2) Many salarymen seek a change of pace through drinking, gambling or simply walking the streets (Ibid., 184). 3) Pressure from his wife and family to come home and spend time with them has a negative effect on a salaryman's willingness to do so (Ibid., 185). 4) There is a strong tradition of entertainment outside of the house. Hostess bars provide opportunities to flirt and talk to women in company of other males. According to Plath, this is a kind of experience that a wife is unlikely to be able to provide (Ibid., 186). Plath argues that these are the reasons why Japanese salarymen do not go home right after work.

2.6 Closing Remarks

In the past few decades a great deal of researchers have addressed the lives of Japanese white collar business men and as we have seen throughout the literature. A common theme that appears in the works is salarymen's exceptionally high commitment to their companies. Especially the older works that dealt with the issue, created an image of the salaryman that portrayed unhealthy commitment to work, and a poor connection to their own families. The dated literature in particular, states that salarymen of the 1950's in particular, regard work as a duty and do not see value in leisure time (1964, 92). For the salaryman of the 1950's lifetime employment and long working hours at a big company meant a stable income and future financial security (Vogel 1963, 9). This was considered to be an ideal trait for getting married (Ibid., 9).

However, as much of the other literature suggests: in recent years things have changed. Young business men choose to spend more time with their families and do not value company life over private life like the older generations of salarymen, for example. The salaryman's loyalty to the

company that Vogel talks about is vanishing (See Mathews 2004). The lifetime employment system that Plath talks about is slowly disappearing: only 8,8 percent of Japanese companies still retain this system (Brasor 2014). Young people are employed under a different contract than their older colleagues, so companies need to find new ways to keep their employees committed to the job. In the upcoming chapter I will analyse the data that I gathered and try to give a more in-depth analysis of Japanese salaryman and their relation to family and leisure.

Chapter 3 – The Interviews

So far, in this thesis I have introduced several topics and questions that were meant to create a framework in which I will try to answer the research question: How do contemporary Japanese salarymen allocate personal and family time in light of (social) workplace obligations? In a similar fashion to the previous chapter, I will approach the topic from different angles and discuss several themes separately. I will be using large scale data and references to the first chapter to set a background. I will then apply my qualitative data and try to paint a picture of how the men that I interviewed deal with personal and family time. To reiterate what was said in the first chapter of this thesis: The goal is not to prove the accuracy of large scale quantitative data, but rather to provide a qualitative approach to the problem. I wish to paint a picture of thought processes and opinions of individuals that deal with this problem on a daily basis. I hope such a picture can provide a better understanding of processes that lead to the results in quantitative data. As such, I will be dividing this chapter into four main themes: leisure, family relations, *ikigai* and attitudes towards work and the workplace.

3.1 Leisure

Let us first consider leisure time: what does it mean to the people that I talked to and how does this relate to existing theories and data? To get a broader perspective of leisure time spending, I would like to take a look at what kind of activities Japanese men partake in, during their hours of free time. The Japanese government statistics bureau shows in accordance with Ben-Ari's (1998) observations, that golf is a past time many Japanese men partake in (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2008a). With 15.8% participation rate, among sports only bowling surpasses it with a small margin. Other popular ways to spend free time include reading (36.2), watching movies (32.3%), studying

business (21.3%), karaoke (33.1%) and travelling (56.3%) (Ibid.). Although hobbies and interests seem varied, participation rates do not tell us how often they are practised. Different data from the same statistics bureau shows us a weekly average of time spent per day on certain activities. Disregarding primary and secondary activities[10], the data shows that since the 80's, men spent an increasing amount of time reading and watching television, reaching close to three hours in 2006 (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2008b). The amount of time that men spend on hobbies, sports and other personal activities has roughly doubled since the 70's (Ibid.). Interestingly, the data also shows that in the same period, time spent on sleeping and working has decreased. However, the time men spend on social interactions has seen no significant change. This suggests that Japanese men are taking more time for themselves and choose to spend less time sleeping and working. Or it could mean that they increasingly choose lifestyles that leave more room for free time. Such an observation does not agree with old theories about the salaryman, present in Vogel (1963), Plath (1964) and Allison (1994), for example.

The men that I interviewed expressed a remarkable variety of hobbies and interests. Two interviewees in particular mentioned having at least six different hobbies that they actively practised. This was in contrast with other interviewees who took a long time thinking of their hobbies, only to conclude that they did not have any. What both parties seemed to have in common however, is that they felt that they did not have enough free time. A man working at one of the largest housing companies in Japan, told me that he did not have any hobbies, because he spent the little free time available to him by taking care of his daughter. He also told me that he would take the time to develop interests if only he were not as occupied with his job. One of the men (referred to as Seiya from here on) with a great number of hobbies, who is a designer at a big video game developing company explained to me what a regular weekday looks like in regard to his free time:

10 “Primary activities” refers to activities dealing with the the most basic needs, like sleeping, eating and other personal care. “Secondary activities” are activities related to 'succeeding' in society, like work and family care, for example.

> In general I am done working at 10 p.m., after which it takes me about 30 minutes to an hour to get home. I will then take 30 minutes to an hour to eat something, take a bath and then I spend the night watching television, listening to the radio and such. I will go to bed quite late; at 1:30 am. In the morning I wake up around 7 am to get ready for work again. … I use my spare time (during the week) to practice magic tricks and other hobbies.

Seiya also told me that he attends several sports clubs belonging to the company he is working for. He said that his badminton club has training sessions on Thursdays at 7 p.m. and in the above passage he mentioned that he gets home from work at 10 p.m.. This leads me to believe that even though his work at the workplace was finished, he still felt that going to this sports club (which was something he enjoyed) was in a sense complimentary to his work. According to statistics, Japanese men sleep between seven and a half to eight hours on an average day (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2008b), so this man would be quite far below the average. Most men whom I interviewed would go to bed before midnight, but Seiya appears to be sacrificing his sleeping hours for his many hobbies.

The second man (referred to as Jun from here on) with a great deal of interests whom I mentioned earlier did complain about his lack of free time, but he found no particular way around it, other than not participating in workplace *nomikai*:

> In my free time I like to watch television, read books, browse the Internet and do martial arts[11]. ... Sometimes I go out for drinks with my colleagues, but not that often. I go once or twice a month, but there are people that go more often. There are times when the drinking parties are fun, but there are also times when I think of the parties as an extension of my work. Occasionally I decide to go home instead of participating, because

11 The reason I mentioned him as a man with many hobbies and interests is based on a moment further into the interview, where (on top of the interests mentioned in this passage) he mentions his passion for magic tricks, Western movies and some other activities.

> I want to do something else on that day. … practising hobbies for example.

A common trend among the men that I interviewed is that they want more free time to either spend on themselves or on their families (discussed in the next sub-chapter). For the majority of my interviewees however, it was not within their capabilities to create more free time.

3.2 Family

To follow up the analysis of leisure, I want to take a look at Japanese salarymen and their relationship to their families. How do the men I interviewed cope with balancing time at work and time with the family? While quantitative data does not show how Japanese men relate to their families and what they think about being at home as opposed to being at work, the data does show that men increasingly spend time helping out their wives with housework and child rearing (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku 2008b). Since the 70's Japanese men's participation in household tasks and child care has almost quadrupled (Ibid.). The numbers do not necessarily imply that Japanese men spend more time at home, but they do suggest that among Japanese men, attitudes towards the household and children have changed significantly over the years. With this in mind, the image that Allison pictured of the salaryman as "estranged to their families" (1994, 204), does seem less and less applicable to Japanese men in this decade.

An example of a contemporary salaryman who dedicates a relatively large amount of time to chores around the house and supporting his wife, is the earlier mentioned Seiya. His tone of voice was quite serious when he brought up his belief in division of labour around the house:

> I believe than men and women should support each other. A man should do the things he can to support his wife and the other way around. ... I do all kinds of house work tasks. I clean the bathroom, do the laundry and I cook, but in general my wife does the groceries.

> I get home quite late and by then the stores have closed, so it's something that I can't really do. Other than that I think we divide the time spent on household tasks quite evenly.

When asked, all of my interviewees responded that they help out around the house with minor tasks, but Seiya was the only one who explicitly and passionately told me about the importance of assisting his wife.

Let alone assisting with chores, the earlier mentioned man working for a large housing company (referred to as Kenta from here on), told me that he did not even have enough time to properly interact with his family. His daughter seemed particularly dear to him, as he mentioned her several times during the interview. He gave me a detailed explanation as to why he is unable to spend time with his daughter and wife:

> Since my company decided to make Tuesdays and Wednesdays resting days, I can't really spend time with friends and family who are all free on Saturdays and Sundays. ... If I could change my free days I would spend more time with my wife and daughter. We go out only twice a year, which is far too little, of course. … In my third and fourth year with this company I was thinking of quitting my job for this reason, but I got promoted and now I am in a good position... … If I am honest, I feel that people are pressured to prioritise work [over family]. The atmosphere among employees makes it difficult to find a better balance between the two. For example, when I wanted to go to my daughter's graduation ceremony, I told my colleagues that I wouldn't be able to attend one meeting. There were many who disagreed with my actions. I want to spend more time with my family, but this society... or rather, my company makes it difficult to do so. As a company they state that it is good to prioritise your family, but there are many people in the company that don't agree with this. … If I prioritise my family, some people around me will think less of me. Young employees with children usually understand, but others don't.

For men like Kenta, finding the right balance between work and family is made particularly difficult. He has to deal with social pressure, but also with the reality of having to provide proper financial support. Although he initially thought of quitting his job, his promotion ensured a financially stable life for his family, which ostensibly led him to commit to his company. Mathews argues that even if Kenta had quit his job, he would not be guaranteed to find a new, let alone better job (Mathews 2004). Mathews' data suggests that a many salarymen make similar considerations about a work-family balance and a majority tends to make the same decision as Kenta (Mathews 2002).

It is interesting to put Kenta's situation into perspective with Rohlen's observations in the Uedagin bank. Rohlen lists six reasons for why Uedagin employees quit their job. Lack of family interaction time was not one of the reasons mentioned in his book (Rohlen 1974, 84). Both Seiya's and Kenta's accounts suggest that young Japanese salarymen are much more likely to see importance in allocating time for their family, than their older colleagues.

3.3 *Ikigai*

In the last two sub-chapters, we explored how Japanese salarymen look at leisure and family in relation to their work. In this sub-chapter I want go a level deeper and discuss what it is that drives my interviewees in life. What is their *ikigai*?

Because explaining one's *ikigai* generally involves exploring structures of opinions and reasoning, (to my knowledge) there are no quantitative data that I can use as background information. Researchers like Mathews (2002) and Gill (2001) however, have touched on the reasoning behind certain actions. Gill explains that although most day labourers are unable to choose a different life, within their lives as day labourers, they experience certain freedoms that are not otherwise obtainable (Gill 2001, 155). To make use of these freedoms is what drives some of

these day labourers in life (Ibid., 156). Mathews argues that for a majority of men, their *ikigai* is either their family or their work (Mathews 2002, 111). The former being common among younger salarymen and the latter among the older generations (Ibid., 111). Mathews further shows that for some men their hobbies, or more abstract things like freedom can be an *ikigai* too (Ibid., 120).

In my interviews I asked my interviewees rather directly what their *ikigai* was. I expected tangible answers like family or friends,but surprisingly the answers were rather abstract. Two men whom I interviewed said that their reason to keep going in life revolves around their day to day happiness. They told me that being able to laugh and have fun alone or with the people around them is something that they value highly. One of these men, whom I will call Ryuta, told me:

> My *ikigai* is 'smiling'. During everyday life, my work, my hobbies, as long as I can do it for a smile I get motivated to do my best. Even if things are rough, I want to smile, but I want to make other people in this world smile, too. Of course, in life one experiences all kinds of emotions, but I try to end up with a smile at the end of the day.

Jun started to talk about his *ikigai* in a similar way to Ryuta, but then it changed to an equally abstract, but different thing.

> My *ikigai* is my wife's smile. Aside from that I would also say that booking progress is my *ikigai*. When I suddenly can do things that I could not do before with practising hobbies like martial arts, for example. Becoming good at things I used to be bad at is my *ikigai*.

This idea that the Japanese man thinks of rather tangible things like work or family as his *ikigai* (Mathews 2002) does not seem to hold well against the answers that were given in my interviews. While it seems appealing to conclude that motivations in life simply shifted from work

or family to more abstract things like smiling and happiness, it is important to consider the possibility that perhaps motivations in life have become broader rather than abstract. When someone explains that 'smiling' is their *ikigai*, they are no longer limiting themselves to singular things like work, family, hobbies, etc. to define their motivation in life. In this sense *ikigai* can be something that encompasses multiple aspects of life, and enables the individual to find motivation in the aspects of life that are less pleasant to them.

3.4 Attitudes towards the workplace

In the previous chapter we looked at how companies used certain tactics to ensure commitment from their employees. In this sub-chapter the goal is to look at commitment from the other side. What do employees think about their companies and the jobs that they provide? What are their reasons for commitment to a certain company?

In the previous chapter we discussed how Rohlen observed practices where managers would send a *senpai* to console and support employees with personal problems (Rohlen 1974, 131). Rohlen argues that in the case of the bank that he studied, management did this to boost productivity and morale. Another frequently used tactic to boost morale and cooperation is organisation of company outings or *nomikai*. In the Kenta's case, a combination of both was described.

> During after-work *nomikai* we mainly talk about work and personal problems, but it's 90% work. Well, it depends actually... When higher ups are at the table we only talk about work, but when I am around people of a similar or lower position, we talk a lot about our personal problems and our families.

As long as the higher-ups are not around, Kenta appears to be able to vent his frustrations to

his peers. At a later point during the interview, he also revealed that he did not have many friends outside of his workplace. He told me that he has some friends from his university years, but they see each other only once or twice a year. For Kenta this meant that his company's *nomikai* were the only situation where he could talk about his personal life.

Not all salarymen are lucky enough to have regular *nomikai*, however. Another man whom I interviewed, Hiro, works at a small company that used to have *nomikai* on a monthly basis and annual business trips, but ever since the crisis hit in 2008, frequency of *nomikai* have drastically decreased and are basically limited to a *bounenkai*[12] and a *shinnenkai*[13]. Hiro told me that he regretted the decrease in *nomikai*, but from the tone of his voice I gathered that he was rather indifferent about it. Like Roberson suggests in his book, a decrease in company outings like this seems representative of the problems that small companies face regarding entertainment funds.

While for Kenta the *nomikai* are a way to mitigate stress and to socialise with people who have become his closest friends in recent years, this was not the case for all of my interviewees. Jun explained to me that he rarely enjoyed himself at *nomikai* with his company. He felt that the people at his work did not share similar interests, so he preferred to hang out with friends from his sports clubs.

> ... Spending time with my fellow martial arts club members is way more fun. … My relationship with them is slightly different from a normal friendship. Among training mates it's more like master and pupil...or rather, elder sibling and younger sibling. They are people who enjoy similar things, so spending time with them is a lot of fun. Training with them is fun, but the gatherings after training are also much more enjoyable. … Sometimes we visit each other's places to have dinner. … I also have some friends from my years in university and some friends that me and my wife have in common. I can have

12 A gathering involving drinks and food, usually held in December to celebrate the ending of the year.
13 A gathering involving drinks and food, usually held in January to celebrate the beginning of a new year.

> different conversations with them. When talking to people at work, I feel like I need to consider my social position. When among friends, I don't have to do that at all.

The account of Jun shows us that the efforts of companies to ensure commitment from their employees through drinking parties, do not necessarily affect all of their employees. Clearly, some men have relationships with people that they value over relationships with colleagues. For these men company outings are less likely to be incentives for commitment. Older studies about Japanese salarymen (Plath, Vogel, Allison, Rohlen), do not mention friendships, or even argues against their existence. Among the men whom I interviewed, Jun was not the only one to pursue friendship elsewhere. With this in mind, I think it is safe to say that attitudes towards the company as an organisation have changed to a certain degree. Some Japanese salarymen do not limit their social life to the company that they work for. My observations lead me to conclude that the idea that the company is more like a family to the salaryman than his actual family (which is an idea predominant in the older literature), is not an indication of commitment to the company that can be applied to the contemporary Japanese salaryman.

On the other side are the companies, of which some are showing signs of change in their take on employee commitment. Kenta whom I quoted earlier, gave an example of how his company changed its formal stance on the work-life balance. He said that his company encouraged employees to prioritise their families, rather than their jobs. His company's take on the work-family balance is in sharp contrast with companies described by Allison and Rohlen for example. Despite his company's ideals, Kenta was still unable to prioritise his family due to social pressure. For Seiya however, company ideals did influence his commitment positively.

> ... In our company the superior/subordinate system is somewhat different. When someone makes a suggestion and wants to make something happen, he needs to take charge. When I want to make something happen, I take charge and the others become my subordinates.

> This switches around all the time. The superior is the one who bears responsibility, and the subordinate is there to support him. So, sometimes it happens that a younger person becomes the boss and I need to support him. … Our company is different because the role of superior and subordinate switches around a lot, which is quite enjoyable … Sometimes I invite my subordinates for a drink, but my subordinates treat me to drinks too, so I don't feel as if there are vertical relationships.

This man appears to find pleasure in the way that his company operates. By the way that Seiya expressed himself, it was apparent to me that the changing vertical relations at his office were a factor in his commitment to his company. I think it is fair to say that companies like this one are far from representative of the Japanese corporate world. However, it is exemplary of a minority of companies that is trying to revise the employer-employee relationship.

Chapter 4 – Concluding Remarks

In this Master thesis my goal was to explore the considerations that contemporary Japanese salarymen need to make in finding a balance between spending time with their families and spending time at work. In chapter 2 I introduced and discussed theories about this issue that exist in the literature. In chapter 3 I introduced large scale quantitative data, as well as the qualitative data that I gathered in Japan. By considering multiple angles from which one can look at the issue of personal and family time allocation, I aimed to paint a picture of contemporary salarymen who are dealing with this problem.

The main research question of this thesis "How do contemporary Japanese salarymen allocate personal and family time in light of (social) workplace obligations?" does not have a single answer. There are many factors that influence decision making regarding the allocation of free time. In the previous chapter we have seen that things like commitment to the job and attitudes towards family life are highly influential. The men whom I interviewed all expressed that they value personal time and/or family time very highly. Despite their time-consuming jobs, many of them still found ways to allocate personal and family time. Ignoring social pressure from colleagues or employers appeared to be the most prominent practice.

The next question then becomes, why are young Japanese salarymen ignoring social pressure, while their older colleagues are not? I think the answer lies in a common trend that has been visible throughout both qualitative and quantitative data in this thesis. Attitudes towards work and private life have changed over the years and are possibly still changing. Younger generations of salarymen hold different beliefs than their elders (backed up by Mathews 2002, for example), which causes them to allocate personal and family time differently.

For Japanese corporations, a change in beliefs among employees means that they need to change as well. As we have seen in the previous chapter, some companies changed their ideals or

ways of operating for the satisfaction of their employees. I believe that an increasing amount of people will be changing their attitudes towards personal and family time in the upcoming years. For the sake of Japanese salarymen and the Japanese corporate world, I think it is important that researchers and companies work together to support the changing attitudes.

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