

Acculturation Experiences of Japanese Brazilian Migrants in Okayama Prefecture: A Thematic Approach

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Introduction

A change to the Japanese immigration law in 1990 and the economic upturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a return migration of Japanese-Brazilians to Japan. The comparatively high salaries in Japan attracted many Japanese Brazilians (Tsuji et al., 2001). In the early 1990s, most of Japanese Brazilians were temporary workers who intended to stay for a few years and to return to Brazil with substantial savings earned in Japan. However, they began to stay for longer periods and to settle in Japan with their families by obtaining permanent residency (Goto, 2007). The population of this ethnic group in Japan is 211,178 as of June 2020 and they constitute the fifth largest migrant population in Japan (the Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan, 2020).

This study explores the acculturation experiences of Japanese Brazilian migrants who have permanently settled in Japan. Acculturation refers to “the process of cultural and psychological change that results following meeting between cultures” (Sam, & Berry, 2010, p. 472). There are four acculturation strategies. Integration strategy incorporates home culture and dominant cultural norms, while assimilation involves adoption of dominant cultural norms and shedding of own culture. Separation involves rejection of dominant culture and preservation of home culture. Marginalization involves both rejection of home culture’s norms and dominant culture’s norms (Berry, 1997). The study of acculturation and its effects for migrants living in Japan is an important endeavor given that Japan has begun to rely on immigration for its socioeconomic growth, and immigration is perhaps the most concrete context within which acculturation takes place (Costa, 2014). Drawing upon qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews in Okayama Prefecture, this study examines return migration experiences of two Japanese Brazilians to analyze if their identities were a consideration in their decision to return migrate and examines their acculturation processes to Japanese culture. The purposes of this study are firstly to provide a more in-depth understanding of Japanese Brazilian migrants’ decisions to return migrate to Japan; and secondly, it is to provide a more in-depth understanding of migrants’ experiences in acculturating to Japanese culture.

Method

To explore acculturation experiences of the participants, a

thematic approach is employed as research method. The recruitment for the qualitative survey were sent out to a wide range of organizations that support foreign residents in Okayama Prefecture. The compensation for a completed interview was ¥1000. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two Japanese Brazilian migrant women.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

	Participant 1	Participant 2
Age	49 years old	56 years old
Marital status	Married	Married
Length of stay in Okayama	26 years	17 years
Number of children	4	2
Employment	Part-time	Full-time

Although there are no specific rules to specify enough number of participants in qualitative research, the current guidelines for thematic analysis suggest a minimum of two individuals as the sample size (Fugard, & Potts, 2014). All interviews were conducted in Japanese as the self-reported Japanese proficiency of both participants is advanced. One-to-one online interviews were conducted due to the COVID-19 pandemic precautions. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. In addition, before starting the interviews, participants were asked for their consent to record them with an audio recorder with the understanding that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

Findings

Based on preliminary analysis done by employing thematic approach, study findings reveal three key themes, which are distinguished as: 1) motivation to return migrate, 2) reflections on identity, and 3) acculturative strategies.

Motivation to return migrate

Although both participants considered the change to Japanese immigration law and Japan’s granting Japanese Brazilians with long-term visa as a chance, their motivations to return migrate to Japan were different. During the interview, the first participant emphasized on having a positive image of Japan and a will to go to Japan since her childhood.

When I was a little girl, I was longing for Japan, and I wanted to go there. I had already decided that I would go after graduation. (...) Well, my father wasn’t so much in favor of it, but I really wanted to go to Japan.

The second participant, however, had a different motivation to migration. Married to another Japanese Brazilian and having had a child, she mostly mentioned about economic reasons for immigration.

At first, my husband said he wanted to go to Japan. (...) At that time, Japanese wages were about \$3.00. At first, it was worth one yen to the dollar, but at that time, our money was worth \$3.00. We were losing. Compared to Japan, the dollar was about ¥110. The value of the dollar was getting stronger, and my relatives and acquaintances were coming and going, so I thought, "If it's worth that much, I might as well go."

Reflections on identity

When Japanese Brazilians were asked about their identities—if they consider themselves Japanese, Brazilian, or both—they reflected different opinions on their identities.

The first participant who was raised in a Japanese enclave in Brazil, she spoke only in Japanese within her family and learned Portuguese in primary school for the first time. She always considered herself as a Japanese while living in Brazil. She, however, realized she has a Brazilian side to her identity after she came to Japan. She expresses how she related language ability to her identity.

(...) At the office, when they used a language that was slightly different from the Japanese we had learned in Brazil, I would ask them to say it in a more understandable way. My Japanese wasn't that fluent, after all. In Brazil, I thought I was Japanese, but when I came to Japan, I realized that I couldn't speak so fluently, so I felt that I was Brazilian.

On the other hand, the second participant defines herself as a Brazilian and relates her identity with her citizenship. She expresses her belonging to her Brazilian identity and her will to strive with this identity.

I think I'm Brazilian. Because my nationality is Brazilian. Some of my friends have received Japanese citizenship, but I have no intention of doing so.

Acculturative strategies

Although both participants have settled in Japan permanently, they talked about different strategies for acculturation to Japanese culture. For example, the first participant stated that she does not speak in Portuguese in her daily life. Additionally, she mentioned she does not have any Brazilian friends in Okayama. When asked about differences between the cultures, and if she experienced any difficulties in Japan, she often expressed she adjusted herself so as to fit in the Japanese culture.

In Brazil, when I meet someone, I give them a big hug or a kiss. But here, I adjusted myself to this country, so I don't really feel that different... well, not really. I don't think so.

The second participant, who learned Japanese after migrating to Japan, expressed somehow different strategies for acculturation to Japanese culture. The participant, who uses both Portuguese and Japanese in her daily life, maintains her ties with other Brazilians in Okayama and regularly meets with them.

(I feel more comfortable with) Brazilians, I guess. So, they're like your friends? Well, the other people in the church... have become like a family. I only see my family once every few years, but I see my church friends all the time. We can celebrate Christmas, Mother's Day, and many other things.

Conclusion

This study contributes to research on the identity and acculturation of returnees through an understanding of the several common themes examined within the returnees' narratives. The narratives reflect how initial motivation for migration and identity have shaped the acculturative

strategies. While the first participant, whose strategy involves the qualities of assimilation, the other participant's strategy shows integration strategy qualities. In spite of differences in acculturative strategies, the returnees' narratives indicate adaptation to Japanese culture. Research shows that acculturation has a substantial and direct effect on cultural adaptation and life satisfaction (Mahmud, & Schölmerich, 2011). Therefore, returnees' acculturation experiences should further be investigated to identify factors that increase returnees' chances of successful adaptation.

Further Research and Limitations

This study has three limitations. First, the sample size is a limitation. Since it is an ongoing project, its aim is to find more participants until theoretical saturation is attained (Charmaz, 2012). Another limitation is the participants' length of stay in Japan. Both participants have lived in Japan for an extended period, which allowed them to adapt to the culture. Therefore, newly arrived returnees should be interviewed to deeply understand their reflections on identity and acculturative strategies. Lastly, since both of the participants have high levels of proficiency, the interviews were conducted in Japanese. The related limitation is that this research uses a translated English transcript. As the language proficiency is a key factor in acculturation (Sam, & Berry, 2010), returnees with lower levels of Japanese proficiency should be interviewed to better understand their experiences.

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