

Deadly Obsessions: Cultural Influences Behind Karoshi

By Jesus Alberto Rios

Jesus Alberto Rios was born in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1996. At the age of 7, Jesus and his direct family moved to Panama City in the Republic of Panama due to growing concerns over the Bolivarian Revolution's rise to power. Having moved to a different country at such a young age, Jesus wanted to better understand other people. After graduating high school, Jesus enrolled at Florida State University through its campus in Panama, majoring in psychology with a minor in international affairs. He spent the first 2 years studying in Panama and the last two at the Tallahassee campus. Among the courses taken for his minor, some worth mentioning were "Japanese Ghosts and Monsters" and "Samurai and Japanese War" with Ph.D. Kristina Buhrman. This paper was originally written as an assignment for Ph.D. Tanu Kholi in the Global Citizenship Certificate program. Jesus graduated in Fall 2019 with Magna Cum Laude from Florida State University. After returning to Panama, his aim is to become a clinical psychologist, with the added understanding that cultural background is a decisive factor that mental health professionals must try to understand before one can begin treating a patient's mental condition.

Introduction

The term karoshi was coined by Tetsunojo Uehata back in 1978. It is the medico-social phenomenon observed in Japan that is comprised of people having intense health deterioration or dying due to overwork. It may come as either brain damage or cardiovascular complications. This phenomenon was first reported by Migawa Hosokawa in 1969 and has been acknowledged by the Japanese government over the years.¹ Listing its official kill count in the thousands by the early 2000s, this is a situation that defies logic in our modern world. Karojisatsu, a related phenomenon, is when one commits suicide due to overwork. These deaths are entirely preventable, as they do not come with any intrinsic risks from the jobs being conducted; one must wonder how it is that it is allowed to endure.

¹ Morioka, Koji. "Work till You Drop." *New Labor Forum* 13, no.1 (Spring 2004): 81

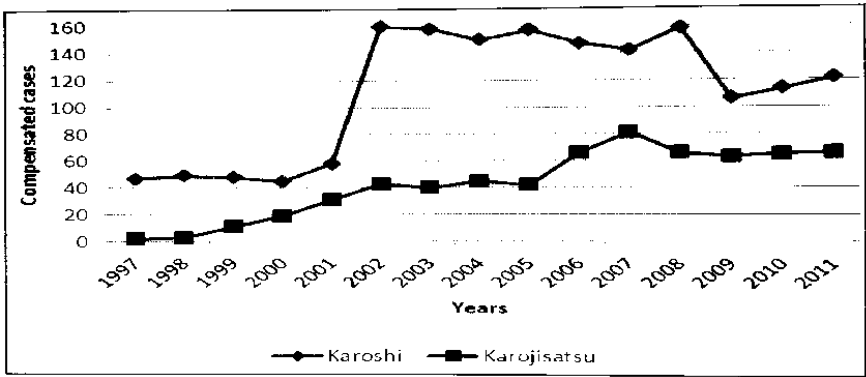


Figure 1. Number of compensated cases (Karoshi and Karojisatsu).
Source: Ministry of Labor <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/>

Figure 1 Government recognized cases of karoshi and karojisatsu (karoshi driven suicide) (Asgari, Pickar & Garay 2016) Oct 2nd 2019.

After WWII, the Japanese economy had to galvanize with the help of the United States in order to become a competitive player in the international trade arena. This effort did not come without a cost. In order to pull this off, lots of people had to work long hours in order to push the country forward. This track remained constant all the way up to the early 1990s when their economy took a blow. It is only after the 1990s that we begin to see a decline in the percentage of workers that have less than 60 hours/week schedules, yet the karoshi phenomenon remains.² While long workweeks may be a predicting factor for karoshi, it is an issue more complex than that. Figure 1 shows the trend of reported karoshi cases in the post-1990 era. In these cases, toxic business practices, idealization of self-sacrifice, and corporate pressure were only some of the factors driving this phenomenon,³ in spite of the government's efforts back in 2002 to reduce the number of overtime hours.⁴ Why is it that in spite of the acknowledgment and participation of the government the instances of karoshi continue to rise? The hypothesis that drives this study proposes that karoshi's prevalence must derive from the Japanese work ethics stemming from a socio-cultural system that glorifies self-sacrifice and loyalty at the expense of the individual's quality of life, thus making it at its root a cultural problem. Given that the phenomenon originated in Japan, I use secondary sources as I currently lack the means to evaluate the phenomenon in person. To better understand the issue, sources are broadly categorized into three groups: those

² K. Iwasaki, et al., "Health problems due to long working hours in Japan: working hours, workers' compensation (Karoshi), and preventive measures." *Industrial health*, 44, no. 4 (July 2006): 538.

³ Scott North, "Deadly virtues: Inner-worldly asceticism and karôshi in Japan." *Current Sociology*, 59, no.2 (2011): 149-151.

⁴ K. Iwasaki, et al., "Health problems due to long working hours in Japan," 539.

explaining the development of the phenomenon, those contrasting the phenomenon with other cultural contexts, and those explaining the human element of the phenomenon.

Relevance of research

The purpose behind this study is to further develop the search for the influencing factors in Japanese society that may result in *karoshi*. Many sources were looked at on the topic of *karoshi*, mostly from the early 2000s, but only two looked at *karoshi* as a socio-culturally generated problem. Most studies on this topic focus on either tracking the progression of the phenomenon or looking at its symptoms; however, there is a need to look for possible causes. This study aims to locate possible cultural elements intrinsic to Japan that fuels this type of destructive behavior, and in doing so, there are two possible benefits. The first one is the possible reduction of casualties in the future. By narrowing down the conditioned behaviors, Japanese society can adapt or replace those behaviors with healthier alternatives. The second benefit lies in increasing the body of knowledge around this issue by distinguishing it as only a Japanese phenomenon. Many studies looked at *karoshi* in terms of the total number of working hours per week being a deciding factor. On the other hand, a database by the OECD (2019) reveals a number of Latin-American countries that surpass Japan in terms of total work hours per year, yet it is not a region known for such behavior.⁵ Once the behavior is identified as being Japanese, we can see what makes them approach work ethics differently and possibly prevent such behavior from spreading to other cultures or finding what behaviors displayed in other countries can serve as potential solutions.

Data and Methods

The sources used in this study were selected from the Florida State University library database, Science Direct database, Google Scholar, YouTube, and Google (the Costa Rican newspaper and the OECD data). All of this data is secondary as none of it was acquired personally for this paper. The final pool of sources for this paper was chosen because together they provided a narrative of the *karoshi*/*karojisatsu* phenomenon in Japan from different perspectives. Together they allowed for the chronological observation of the phenomenon, its demographic distribution, its toll on the individual prior to death, its relation with Japanese work culture, and potential relationship outside the work environment. Given that this paper aimed to find whether *karoshi* was a Japanese cultural phenomenon or not, it needed to be compared with data from other regions of the world.

⁵ OECD data. "Hours worked." Accessed Oct. 26, 2019.
<https://data.oecd.org/emp/hours-worked.htm>.

Literature Review

Status report

K IWASAKI *et al.*

The first step needed for this study is to grasp the situation and how it has progressed over the years. Iwasaki, Takahashi, and Nakata (2006) conduct a meta-analysis on the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) and the Japan

Statistics Bureau's data on the total number of workers on overtime and reports of karoshi incidents over the

years.⁶ They track the increase of average workweek from 1967 to 2004 as seen in Figure 2 and notice that, with the exception of the three years following the market crash of 1991, the number has been on a constant rise. They found that by 2004 European nations had less than 5% of their workers work over 50 hours a week, while Japan had 28% of its workforce putting in those hours.⁷ This

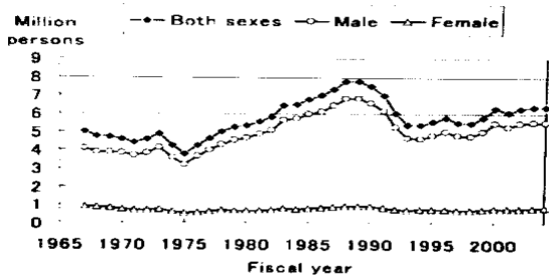


Fig. 2. Trend in the number of non-agricultural employees working 60 h or more per week in Japan (Japan Statistics Bureau, Annual Report on the Labour Force Survey 1967-2004).

Figure 2 Number of Japanese Workers with over 60-hour schedules over the years. (Iwasaki, Takahashi & Nakata 2006). Oct 2nd 2019.

Fig. 2. Trend in the number of non-agricultural employees working 60 h or more per week in Japan (Japan Statistics Bureau, Annual Report on the Labour Force Survey 1967-2004).

Table 1. Standards for the limits on the overtime hours set in labour-management agreements

Unit period for overtime	Maximum overtime hours
1 wk	15 h
2 wk	27 h
4 wk	43 h
1 month	45 h
2 months	81 h
3 months	120 h
1 yr	360 h

Table 1 Extra hours agreed with labor unions per week. (Iwasaki, Takahashi & Nakata 2006). Oct 2nd 2019.

study clarifies that while the government passed legislation in 1987 limiting the workweek to 40 hours, companies can exceed this limit if they make agreements with the worker unions, as shown in Table 1. This practice is common, and while the average overtime limit in those agreements is 15 hours extra per week, there is no cap for how many more hours can be added.⁸

⁶ K. Iwasaki, et al., "Health problems due to long working hours in Japan," 537-540.

⁷ Ibid, 537.

⁸ Ibid, 538.

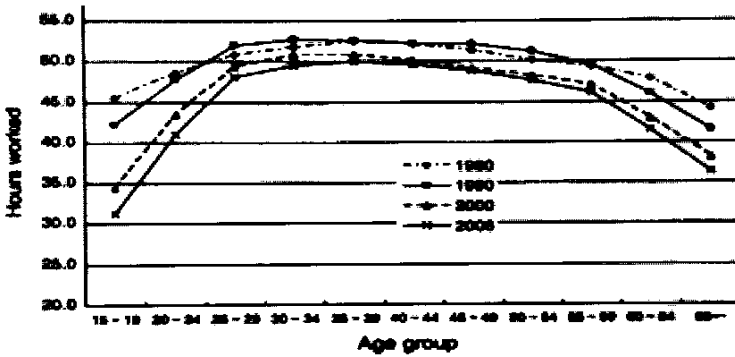


Figure 3. Average weekly hours worked for each age group: Male workers (Cabinet Office, 2002, 2007).

Figure 3 Average weekly work schedule per age group in 2002 (Kanai 2009). Oct 2nd 2019

The article is complemented by the meta-analysis conducted by Kanai as he too takes a look at the data from the MHLW and contrasts it with

"Karoshi (Work

TABLE I

Changes in the number of employees by weekly hours worked in 1995 and 2001 (Cabinet Office, 2003) (unit: 10,000 person)

	Total employees	Regular employees	Non-regular employees
Total	Δ41	▼129	Δ170
<30 hours	Δ78	▼1	Δ80
30 to <40 hours	▼12	▼40	Δ28
40 to <50 hours	▼82	▼127	Δ45
50 to <60 hours	▼0	▼9	Δ9
60 hours and more	Δ56	Δ49	Δ7

Note. Δ: increased from 1995 to 2001, ▼: decreased from 1995 to 2001.

Table 2 Fluctuation in employment/unemployment of permanent and part-time workers per 10000 workers. (Kanai 2009). Oct 2nd 2019

demographic information from the Japanese Cabinet Office to focus not only on average workweek growth but rather which group of workers makes up this trend in terms of age groups and type of employment.⁹ Comparing their data on the MHLW, we see that during the years 2004 and 2005, the government recognized around 300 cases per year. However, there were almost 900 claims per category (cardiovascular damage and mental disability) submitted each year.¹⁰ Kanai then proceeds to look at the

⁹ Atsuko Kanai, "Karoshi (work to death) in Japan," *Journal of business ethics* 84 vol. 2 (2009), 209-216.

¹⁰ K. Iwasaki, et al., "Health problems due to long working hours in Japan," 539.

alleged decrease in total workweek claims by the MHLW in 2004 and reveals that when adjusting for age demographics, this claim is only true for workers younger than 25 or older than 40.¹¹ This distribution can be seen in Figure 3. Kanai proceeds to look at demographics based on employment type, dividing workers into permanent employees and part-time employees. The Cabinet data points to an overall increase in workers between the years 1995 and 2001. When dissected, this number in reality reflects a decrease in employment among permanent employees while revealing a drastic increase in part-time workers across all work schedules, as depicted in Table 2. The only exception to this rule is permanent workers working over 60 hours a week (490k/1.3M workers), suggesting a pressure to overwork or face unemployment. Kanai explains that being a part-time worker does not mean you have shorter schedules as part-time labor offers on average 50% less pay than the equivalent job under a contract, forcing workers to take longer shifts to make up for the lack of pay.¹²

Impact on the individual

So far, this paper has addressed the historical and demographic trends in employment over the turn of the century, but how does it translate into the issue of *karoshi* and *karojisatsu*? Given that this study seeks to find socio-cultural elements that drive this phenomenon beyond simply long work shifts, the next step is to see what those long hours must feel like for the Japanese people. The case study by Hino, Inoue, Mafune & Hiro looks at the psychological effects of long shifts on Japanese workers.¹³ The study looked to compare the yearly scores of a 922 workers sample on a psychological evaluation over a period of two years. The evaluation in question is called the Brief Job Stress Questionnaire, which is recognized by the Japanese government as a valid measuring tool for depressive symptoms. The questionnaire has a 3-12 grading score across three types of questions: job stressors, psychological/physical stress reactions, and buffering factors like coping mechanisms.¹⁴

The study looked at the group of workers between the years 2013 and 2014, dividing them into five categories: stable short (44 hours>workweek), stable medium (79h>workweek>44h), stable long (workweek>80h), decreasing (workers that either dropped from long to medium or medium to short), and increased (went from either short to medium or medium to long schedules). Throughout this study, the authors accounted for additional factors such as age group (compared scores among workers based on their decade 20s, 30s...50s),

¹¹ Atsuko Kanai, “*Karoshi* (work to death) in Japan,” 210.

¹² *Ibid.*, 211.

¹³ Ayako Hino, et al, “The effect of changes in overtime work hours on depressive symptoms among Japanese white-collar workers: A 2-year follow-up study,” *Journal of occupational health* (Fall 2018): 320-327.

¹⁴ Ayako Hino, et al, “The effect of changes in overtime work hours on depressive symptoms among Japanese white-collar workers,” 322.

gender, level of coworker support, supervisor assistance, and depressive scores at baseline. Their results revealed significant shifts in depressive scores among the workers in the decreasing group, achieving scores even lower than those from the stable short group. In contrast, the workers in the increased group showed the highest depression scores, more so than the permanent long group.¹⁵ The only relationships without a statistically significant result were those involving the stable long group. However, the authors hypothesize that it might be due to the small size of the stable long group (2% of the sample) not reaching a large enough size to be representative of said population. They theorize that the shifting groups showed changes in their scores, compared to the stable groups' scores, due to the newfound addition or subtraction to their leisure time. While the stable groups showed higher depression scores as their workweeks grew, workers try to adapt their lifestyle to make these shifts as manageable as possible, thus shifting their score only when that routine is changed.¹⁶

This case study helps solidify the link between depression and increasing one's workweek, but we are yet to see what those workweeks are comprised of. In another case study by North,¹⁷ the author breaks down the activities and expectations in the Japanese work environment that drive workers to death. This case study gives the first glimpse at what elements of Japanese culture promote this unhealthy behavior. It looks at the events surrounding the death of Shuji Kamei, a 26-year-old who died in October 1990 from a karoshi-induced heart attack. Based on the time period, this case arguably took place during the time period where karoshi was at an all-time high, but what is relevant about this case is that Mr. Kamei was his company's poster child for the ideal worker.¹⁸

The author uses an instructional manual published by the company Kamei worked at while he was alive. Named "One Day for Mr. Kamei," it laid out his work schedule, work habits, and practices with the hope to set him as a golden standard for his coworkers. The article revealed a work schedule of 6:50 a.m. to 10 p.m., contrary to the company's official statement of 8:40 a.m. to 5 p.m. The article also revealed that Kamei worked on Saturdays and Sundays. He spent his days calling and writing letters for his clients to keep them updated, to the point the article lists he often had to skip lunch due to lack of time.¹⁹ Looking at the company practices, the author finds they used a quota system in Kamei's sales department; should any member of the department fall short on their requirement, the rest would have to compensate for it. The company made workers compete for higher sales in exchange for bonuses, and this competition was not restricted within each office. Instead, each department competed with its counterpart in another city.²⁰

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 324.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 324-325.

¹⁷ Scott North, "Deadly virtues."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 148-150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 149.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

The article reveals the company ranked its employees based on the hierarchy of sumo wrestling, which carries a deeply spiritual connotation in Japanese society as it stems from the Shinto religion. The author theorizes this served the purpose of both glorifying work and giving it a spiritual reward as strictly monetary motivations are viewed as vulgar.²¹ In Japanese business society, seniority carries more weight than efficiency or productivity. Kamei, as stated by his wife's testimony, expected a ten-year period of work (averaging quotas twice or sometimes even thrice that of his coworkers) before he could get to a position where he could take it easy.

After the Japanese economy crashed, Kamei had to take up even further responsibilities looking after 300 clients since many of his coworkers were laid off. He had to sustain a 75-hour workweek that included obligatory drinking at company meetings after work (nomikai, which is still commonly practiced), irregular meals, and lack of rest or exercise for months.²² The author concludes by listing historical and societal influences that worked to reinforce the behaviors that eventually killed Mr. Kamei. He lists two historic-cultural concepts fueling the worker's devotion: Ascetic Buddhism's teachings on self-sacrifice and its idealization, and the Feudal tradition of the code of the warrior (Bushido) that highlights loyalty to one's lord/clan above all else. As for social influences, he discusses three company practices that punish a lack of commitment: induced fear of disappointing one's superiors, the normalization of said judgment throughout companies, and lastly, the systematization of said judgment through ritualistic practices within companies that force workers to adapt to the company's one size fits all expectation.²³

Cultural influences on karoshi

This category looks at a single source; however, it is perhaps the most relevant as it is the closest in topic to this study. It is a meta-analysis of previous studies on the subject of Japanese work culture and work-shift statistical trends by Asgari, Pickar, & Garay.²⁴ The article's relevance stems from its complementary information on cultural and psychological forces influencing karoshi and karojisatsu and from its proposed solutions to the issue. The author reveals that the Japanese people adapted their preexisting concepts of loyalty to the country from the pre-WWII years into loyalty to one's organization. This second type of loyalty is measured by how much time is spent on one's desk. This fact translates into a "don't leave until the boss leaves" mentality that retains workers at work until 10 or 11 p.m. Inversely, leaving work early is seen as a lack of commitment and lowers one's credibility with their coworkers and supervisors. More often than not, overtime is seen as a requirement for

²¹ Ibid, 152-153.

²² Ibid, 151.

²³ Ibid, 153-154.

²⁴ B. Asgari, et al., "Karoshi and Karou-jisatsu in Japan," 49-72.

promotions along with extracurricular activities (entertaining clients, drinking with coworkers, playing golf with bosses, etc.).²⁵

The author concludes by listing two types of solutions: preventive and restorative. The former involved implementing a comprehensive industrial health service program designed by the president of the MHLW that involved tracking health deterioration along with long schedules and intervening before it reaches critical levels. The latter involved a number of activities that were meant to empower worker unions and hold them accountable for casualties to incentivize them not to make agreements with companies.²⁶

Country

The true extent of work

As seen in the previous section through North's case study, work is attributed a lot of weight by the Japanese among the different aspects of their lives.²⁷ It seems logical given the significant percentage of their time they spend working; however, as we have established, the total amount of work hours has declined since the time Mr. Kamei was around. In spite of this, the data as seen in Figures 1 and 2 shows the cases of *karoshi*/*karojisatsu* to be on the rise. If this phenomenon is truly cultural, then its influence could potentially be seen in other aspects of Japanese life. If we were to follow the presumption that the legal work schedule was reduced after that 1987 law, then it should follow that the Japanese should have more time to themselves (ignoring the deals made with the work unions). A study on Japanese leisure time length between 1976 and 2006 by Kuroda looks at how the work and rest portions of the average office worker in Japan has shifted.²⁸ To better understand the different operant definitions from the study, they were listed as follows: "market work" refers to the total number of hours dedicated to one's job, "total work" includes market work plus the time commuting to and from home plus housework (cleaning, looking after kids...). Leisure is subdivided into type A (relaxing activities in the home that provide entertainment), type B (type A plus sleep, eating, and other self-care activities at home), and type C (activities outside of the home).²⁹

The study shows an average increase in total daily work of 4.44 hours for male workers between 1976 and 1986 and has remained unchanged up to 2006. While the total work hasn't changed since the distribution between market and housework has seen a shift of 1 hour from house to market work. Female worker's total work schedules grew 2.38 hours between 1976 and 1986 but have

²⁵Ibid, 49-52.

²⁶ Ibid, 66-70.

²⁷ Scott North, "Deadly virtues," 146-159.

²⁸ Sachiko Kuroda, "Do Japanese Work Shorter Hours than before?: Measuring Trends in Market Work and Leisure Using 1976-2006 Japanese Time-Use Survey," *Hitotsubashi University Repository* no. 419 (2009): 16-17.

²⁹ Sachiko Kuroda, "Do Japanese Work Shorter Hours than before?," 17-19.

decreased 3 hours by 2006. The study points out that this drop hasn't affected female market work.³⁰ As for leisure, the study shows that male worker leisure time hasn't grown since 1986 but has seen a shift in its distribution as leisure A has dropped 1.48 hours, leisure B by 1.83, and leisure C has grown by this same amount (xh+1.83h). Female workers have seen an increase in leisure A of 1.34, leisure B by 1.83, and leisure C by 3 hours. The study goes more in-depth on these shifting patterns in leisure times and found that over the last 30 years, both male and female workers have seen a decrease in sleep (4.14 hours for males and 2.86 for females). The reduction in male sleep mirrors the increase in total work and the redistribution of leisure patterns. However, the author fails to explain what may cause the reduction in female sleep given the increase in all types of leisure and reduced total work.³¹

Japanese workers' time off is not just being restricted in terms of time off the clock. A short broadcast by CNBC (2018) revealed Japanese workers have 20 legal full-pay vacation days per year; however, they tend to use 10 at most.³² While helpful, the coverage is too superficial. A Youtuber named "Kira Sensei" is a Spaniard who's lived in Osaka, Japan, for over a decade and provides Japanese cultural content with commentary from a European perspective. In one of his videos from 2017, he discusses different aspects of the Japanese work environment with a fellow Spaniard friend based on their experiential and anecdotal information.³³ They list three reasons why workers often do not take those days off. First, it begets discord among workers as it is socially reprehensible to be lazy, and to take time off (even if legally allowed to) is seen as slacking off since your coworkers are not taking time off. Second, all the work one should be addressing during their time off will not be taken care of by others, so when the worker comes back, they have to deal with accumulated work on top of their scheduled work. Lastly, while legally allowed to take days off, companies are still allowed to inquire about the nature of your leave and may deny it if it is not viewed as justified. Kira recounts that, as a foreigner, he and others have to resort to lying about traveling back home or having family visits to secure their vacations.³⁴ The Japanese work environment is one that fetishizes overwork and openly discourages time off work.

Work Culture in personal life

With such an overbearing presence in Japanese daily life, with such influence over people's priorities, would it be that weird to see that this work

³⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

³¹ Ibid., 19-20.

³² CNBC (producer). Uptin Saiidi, "Why does Japan work so hard?." March 8, 2018, YouTube video, 5:13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y-YJEtXHeo>.

³³ Kira Sensei, "Cómo es el ambiente laboral en la empresa japonesa." March 16, 2017. YouTube video, 25:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlcH2iL6RRM&t=1s>.

³⁴ Kira Sensei, "Cómo es el ambiente laboral en la empresa japonesa."

mentality could also drive other aspects of Japanese life? In another of his videos, Kira Sensei (2019) lists the ten most desirable traits in Japanese women that aim to marry a Japanese man according to Japanese magazines.³⁵ These traits can be summarized in a traditionally sexist view that women should be modest, elegant, pure/innocent, and know how to clean and cook. Furthermore, they should avoid causing drama, discuss finances, tattoos or be overweight. Kira explains that men in that culture want a wife that will tend to their needs and not bring them additional concerns as they are exhausted from work. This view of an ideal “wife” can be perceived as a weird wife/mother ideal by modern western standards.³⁶ On the flip side, Kira asks his female friends to provide him with insight into the cultural image of Japanese husbands.³⁷ He lets us know that Japanese men tend not to show affection in public, place work above all else (including family at times), and understand showing kindness to their wives as financial support. The latter is partially motivated by their desire for their wives to stay at home rather than work. Lastly, he adds that men tend to explicitly formalize the relationship by some declaration or form of verbal contract; however, this is a female-driven phenomenon as they seem to expect such clarifications almost sounding like a contract.³⁸

Some cultural views from both sexes as described above are rather concerning in the context of *karoshi*, such as the male concept of kindness being tied to economic support or their expectation of a financially dependent wife rather than economically independent. For females, though understandable to some degree, the perceived need for a formalized relationship akin to a contract seems to also signal a potential economic reliance on men stemming from cultural induction. This relationship model seems to be at great risk of lacking kindness and empathy from a western perspective. Adding to this issue, the male’s lack of desire to establish a dialogue to solve issues as a team could potentially increase discord in the relationship. Kanai’s study also looks at some correlations among work behavior, work-family conflict, and family-related depression. He describes work-family conflict as that which stems from an imbalance between the expectations and duties of the individual as a worker and a family member.³⁹ He found that among male workers whose wives were full-time housewives, there was a weak but significant negative correlation between work business and family depression and a positive weak significant correlation between work-family conflict and family depression. The author clarifies that these correlations point towards a vicious cycle in which workload increases as

³⁵ Kira Sensei, “10 consejos prácticos para ser la mujer ideal de un hombre japonés.” Jan. 11, 2019. YouTube video, 20:02, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-e7TEajfx_0.

³⁶ Kira Sensei, “10 consejos prácticos para ser la mujer ideal de un hombre japonés.”

³⁷ Kira Sensei, “Cómo es el hombre japonés en la pareja.” Sept. 15, 2016, YouTube video, 18:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsujrYFIQJ0>.

³⁸ Kira Sensei, “Cómo es el hombre japonés en la pareja.”

³⁹ Atsuko Kanai, “Karoshi (work to death) in Japan,” 213.

workers aim to provide for their families, but the added responsibilities put more strain on their family dynamics. In order to avoid family-related stress, men retreat further into their work while developing resentment towards their families. As the cycle continues, they begin to lose sight of why they started working in the first place.⁴⁰

This private life issue culminates by closing a cycle with Japan's demographic trends and already established work views. As noted by the CNBC report, Japan's population is poorly distributed as most of its population is getting old, and its birth rate is on a decline to the point that it is expected that in 50 years, its total population will be down 1/3 (2018).⁴¹ This fact can be due to a combination of factors, but cultural presence and intense work practices are bound to be among them. With relationship views as those established by Kira Sensei's videos and Kanai's findings, it is reasonable to argue that the idea of marriage as understood by traditional Japanese views is becoming unappealing for younger generations, contributing to the birth rate decline. As this disparity increases, it is very likely that the work culture as seen in North and Asgari, Pickar, & Garay may further intensify in an attempt to sustain the economy with a smaller working force until a solution can be found.

Karoshi without Japan?

So far, this study has looked at the historical trend of karoshi/karojisatsu, seen its cultural background, its tight relationship with Japan's work ethics, how those work practices affect the Japanese inside and outside the office, and even how they affect their relationships and demographics. A reasonable case has been made regarding the relationship between all these issues; however, if what this study claims to achieve is to point to karoshi's nature being intrinsically cultural, then it is necessary to pin it against other cultures and see if this is truly a Japan driven issue.

When looking for studies and recordings of karoshi outside Japan, there are two studies that were selected, one of which discusses the existence of the phenomenon in China, and the other claims evidence for its presence in the USA and U.K. The first paper collected records of Chinese doctor deaths across the cities of Beijing, Henan, Jiangsu, and Shanghai between the years 2013 and 2015 with cardiovascular diseases under circumstances akin to those correlated to karoshi.⁴² Their study found 46 cases, mostly ages 30-39, of which the majority came from Beijing, and the city with the least instances was Shanghai. They found half of these cases to have been working continuous shifts between

⁴⁰ Ibid., 213.

⁴¹ CNBC (producer). Uptin Saiidi, "Why does Japan work so hard?," March 8, 2018, YouTube video, 5:13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y-YJEtXHeo>.

⁴² H. P. Shan et al., "Overwork is a silent killer of Chinese doctors: a review of Karoshi in China 2013–2015," *Public Health*, 100, no. 147 (2017): 98-100.

8 to 12 hours, and one fourth worked over 24 hours straight.⁴³ They list other studies with larger sample sizes that reveal that from a 7700 doctors' sample, 49.5% worked at least 12 hours per day. They list a Japanese study by Uehata that claims there are five tell signs for karoshi-inducing environments: long working hours, continuous work with little breaks, high-pressure works, extremely physically taxing work, and constant pressure. This reality is worsened by the lack of physicians in the country compared to other developed nations, with a ratio of 1.2 docs/1000 citizens, while the developed nation average is 2.8/1000.⁴⁴

Kobayashi & Middlemiss's complementary paper (2009) focuses on the legal basis for work-related injuries, deaths, and disabilities that stem from overwork-related stress.⁴⁵ They claim that previous studies have found 1/5 American workers attend work despite illness, medical appointments, or fail to take their vacations. Data from the Bureau of Labor shows that in 2004 17% of managerial workers had 60 hours/week schedules. They found that in the U.K., the practice established in the E.U. by the Working Time Regulations that stipulates that workers shouldn't have shifts longer than 48 hours per week is often breached. Moreover, data from the British Trade Union Congress revealing that by 2003 roughly 100 people commit suicide due to work-related causes, and they are not reported as workplace-related deaths.⁴⁶

While clearly similar to the behaviors and circumstances related to karoshi in Japan, these studies reveal the presence of the phenomenon on a significantly smaller scale. These findings suggest that karoshi is not a phenomenon born exclusively from Japanese culture; all it takes are enough cases within each nation. At the same time, the disparity between reported cases presents Japanese culture as having a role in its prevalence amongst the working population and their unwillingness to reduce its impact. As a counter-argument to the hypothesis that karoshi may be a universal phenomenon, now these behaviors will be contrasted against a different culture: Latin American. The reason behind this selection is twofold. First, it aims to contest the belief that long working hours translates to karoshi. Secondly, to present a case in which cultural values may diminish the impact of karoshi risk factors. The standard of selection for the countries that will represent this cultural environment is based upon a list of average working hours per year by the OECD as shown in Table 3:

⁴³ H. P. Shan et al., "Overwork is a silent killer of Chinese doctors: a review of Karoshi in China 2013–2015."

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ T. Kobayashi and S. Middlemiss, "Employers' liability for occupational stress and death from overwork in the United States and the United Kingdom," *Common Law World Review*, 38, no.2 (2009): 137-169.

⁴⁶ T. Kobayashi and S. Middlemiss, "Employers' liability for occupational stress and death from overwork in the United States and the United Kingdom," 137-169.

Country	Work hours/year (2013)
Japan	1734
China	2408
USA	1781
U.K.	1541
Costa Rica	2141
Mexico	2136

Table 3: List of worked hours per year on average across countries based on OECD data (2019).

Mexico and Costa Rica were selected due to their similar work schedule to that of China to offer a closer comparison. Additionally, if we were to follow the assumption that longer work hours translate to *karoshi*, there should be more instances in the USA compared to Japan. Alternatively, assuming the trend continued and was not counted, the overwork 360 hours/year from Iwasaki, Takahashi, and Nakata would still place Japan within the same ballpark as the Latin countries. A statistical study on work safety conducted by the Costa Rican Ministry of Work and Social Safety (2016) reveals the most common causes of injury and death related to work in the country.⁴⁷ The list reveals that in 2015 there were no recorded deaths related to cardiovascular complications or work-related suicide. They list the most common causes for work-related deaths: vehicle accidents, violent crime, falls and natural accidents. While the study does match the target demographic (male workers ages 20 to 40), making up 60% of total work-related deaths, the study shows that 55% of deaths were machinery-related, 14% due to excessive physical labor, 3% due to disease or infection and 28% is left as unidentified.⁴⁸ Should *karoshi* take place, it would have to be a subset of that 28%, but no further clarification is given.

A newspaper article by the local newspaper “La Nacion” (2017) shows that the total number of cardiovascular and stroke-related deaths has been steadily declining, dropping 58% since the 1970s.⁴⁹ It is worth mentioning that the article recognizes that the demographic at the highest risk for cardiovascular disease and stroke are 25- to 44-year-old. The Costa Rican study also took a look at data from a 2011 survey that looked at what psychosocial factors weigh heavier over workers when it came to work-related stress.⁵⁰ They looked at

⁴⁷ Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, *Occupational Health Statistics, 2016*, Costa Rica. Oct. 26 2019.

https://www.cso.go.cr/documentos_relevantes/consultas/Estadisticas%20CSO%202016.pdf.

⁴⁸ Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social.

⁴⁹ Irene Rodriguez, “Stroke related mortality drops by half over the last 40 years,” *La Nacion*, March 2017. Web. Oct. 26 2019.

⁵⁰ Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social.

social expectations, perceived control over their work, and social support (family, friends, & loved ones). They found individual's social support to be the stronger factor of the three with an average value of 33% influence compared to the averaged 20% each of the other categories. These findings seem to suggest that Latin American culture's focus on family seems to outweigh the perceived relevance of social expectations related to work.

When looking at suicide rate in Mexico based on historical records dating from 1970 to 2007, it has seen a 275% increase rate in mortality.⁵¹ There was 4:1 male to female suicides back in 1970, and by 2007 it was close to 5:1. The largest increase was seen in the 15 to 34 age range; older groups show a homogenous rate. 14-19 y/o, make up 10.6% of total cases, 20-24 y/o are 15.4%, and 25-29 y/o are 13.7%. Though they overlap with Japan's *karojisatsu* demographic, the same study found in 2008 a shift in suicide patterns among three age groups (12 to 17), (18 to 29), and (30 to 65). The pattern reveals that idealization and probability of attempting suicide drop with age, meaning it is most prevalent in the younger groups. This same study found that among the suicide victims, 85.4% of teens showed mental disorders prior to death, as did 75.4% of adult victims (mostly substance abuse and anxiety disorders).⁵² This evidence suggests that while prevalent in Mexican society, suicide affects primarily younger individuals whose cognition has been altered prior to the time of death by reasons not necessarily work related. Contrasting this evidence, Asgari, Pickar, & Garay found work-related suicide made up 45% of the total suicide pool among males age 29 or younger in Japan during 2014.⁵³

Having established how these Latin-American countries resembled China and Japan in terms of work distribution, and we've seen how their side effects differ, yet the question of why remains. One possible explanation is that of indulgence as defined in Hofstede's dimensions. In it, a country's indulgence index expresses how likely it is for a population to control their impulses and desires. When the grade is high, as is the case in Mexico with 97 out of 100, that country's population is more likely to pursue their individual desires and leisure over other duties.⁵⁴ People in these societies tend to be more optimistic and frivolous with their spending, while in contrast, countries like Japan (42) and China (24) are labeled as restraint due to their low scores. People in these societies are more concerned with social norms and duties; they are also described to be more cynical and pessimistic.⁵⁵ The source did not possess Costa

⁵¹ G. Borges, et al., "Suicidio y conductas suicidas en México: retrospectiva y situación actual," *Salud pública de México* 52, no.4 (2010): 292-304.

⁵² G. Borges, et al., "Suicidio y conductas suicidas en México: retrospectiva y situación actual," 292-304.

⁵³ Asgari, B., Pickar, P., & Garay, V. "Karoshi and Karou-jisatsu in Japan: causes, statistics and prevention mechanisms." *Asia Pac Bus Econ Perspect*, 4 (Winter 2016): 52-53.

⁵⁴ Hofstede Insights, "Country comparison: China, Costa Rica, Japan, & Mexico." (2019). Web. Nov 22 2019.

⁵⁵ Hofstede Insights, "Country comparison."

Rica's score, but I anticipate it to be similar to Colombia's 83.⁵⁶ This estimation stems from being Panamanian (the Republic of Panama is located between both countries), having visited both places in the past, and knowing people from both countries with similar work ethics. Countries that are overindulgent have their own set of issues, but they present a cultural context in which *karoshi* and *karojisatsu* are less likely to manifest since people would rather forego social duties than sacrifice their personal satisfaction.

Discussion

This study has looked at *karoshi* and *karojisatsu*'s definitions, their historical trends, target demographics, and their influence inside and outside the office. Thus, proving it is more than just long shifts; it could look differently based on personal lifestyle, and could manifest in places other than Japan. Even when accounting for the counter-argument sources, the hypothesis behind this paper seems supported to the extent that *karoshi* and *karojisatsu* are not as predominant in other nations when compared to Japan. This hints at a possible dependence on its cultural setting. One interesting aspect of this study is the dichotomy in *karoshi*/*karojisatsu* manifestation between indulgent and restraint countries. While I cannot speak about China nor Japan, I have visited both Mexico and Costa Rica. My limited anecdotal experience places Panama between the two regarding indulgence. To provide some examples that may help define indulgence in a more operant context. In Panama, lack of punctuality is rather customary. Many types of scheduled appointments run on their own time. This practice ranges from social gatherings such as parties to medical appointments or legal meetings. In casual contexts, all parties are aware that while the event may start at a given time, it will not "actually" start for up to an hour later. In more formal circumstances, the party with less influence must be there on time, but the party in power often arrives late as though nothing happened. This sort of behavior, regardless of ethics, does make it harder for *Karoshi*-like incidents to happen since people are out for their own benefit and would rarely overexert themselves and risk their health for some "duty."

Overwork can happen anywhere, but how we as individuals and societies respond to it that can be dictated by our culture. My suggestions for future studies in this field would focus on collecting first-hand data from a number of Latin American countries and Japan regarding their social practices involving restraint vs. indulgence. Hopefully, case studies arrive at a solid middle ground in which workers will be protected without sacrificing work efficiency. Costa Rica is a promising case study despite the limited data. Once obtained, in order to integrate those practices into Japanese society, historical and cultural examples could be used for syncretic merging. Referring back to the Costa Rican study, these could be oriented towards social support like family dynamics, social expectations, and perceived control within the workforce. The latter could rely on any number of stories about *yokai* or *kami* causing mischief,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

emphasizing that at times work will not go according to plan due to external forces out of our control. The ultimate goal being to shift what is known in psychology as “internal locus of control” mindset, in which one attributes oneself as the source of either success or failure, into a more external locus of control where the result can be attributed to external sources to reduce anxiety.

Conclusion

Overwork is a universal phenomenon; any business can try to extend their workers’ shifts within legal limits to increase profit. To some degree, this opens the door to cases of *karoshi* and *karojisatsu*, but it is our cultural background that either fertilizes or scourges the soil upon which it will take root. This paper does not suggest that excessive indulgence shouldn’t be reprehended; rather, it seeks to point out that overzealous dedication to one’s livelihood is not a good alternative either. As in many other things in life, the key lies in moderation and a healthy lifestyle. Governments, their people, and businesses must all work together to balance out how much work should be encouraged or reprehended. If there is one thing we can take away from this research, it is that more hours in our punch cards do not translate to better business.

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