

UNDERSTANDING FAMILIAL CONFLICT ISSUES OF WORKING FROM HOME ON JAPANESE WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS IN CENTRAL TOKYO

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Abstract

The Japanese living situation in urban areas such as central Tokyo, is a relatively unfamiliar condition for many people in the West to understand. And, the impact that working from home has had on them has been high not just in terms of convenience, or lack of it, but also as a fundamental change to occupational health and wellbeing. With depopulation and ageing society being critical causes of labour shortage in Japan, it is important to determine how remote working has affected its workers. This study utilizes data gathered from focus groups of white-collar workers in Japanese companies and investigates causes of familial conflict impacted by working from home since 2019. This article explores the shifting effects of working from home for Japanese workers in terms of familial conflict, and the burden of cost from a social perspective.

Keywords: *Wellbeing, work from home, remote work, family conflict, labour productivity*

JEL Classification: I12, O15, M14

1. Introduction

This study examines the connection between habitable space in standard Tokyo residences, family relationships and work-family conflict in Tokyo Japan caused by working from home by white-collar workers since 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst to changes in work-style in Japanese organizations especially for the Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) of which according to the OECD (2021) the SMEs employed 60% of all employees in the business economy in Japan.

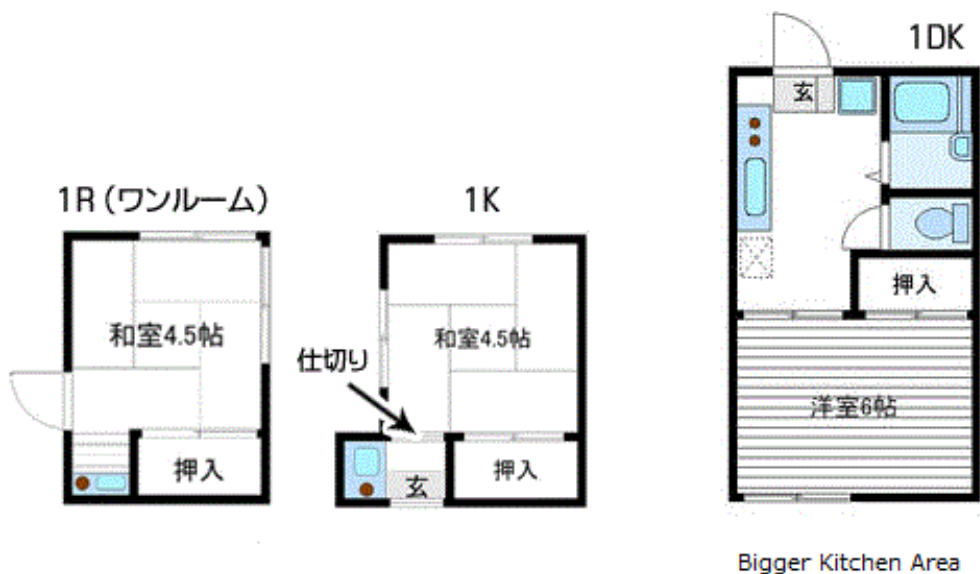
As of 2020, Japan's population census showed 55.7 million households excluding institutional households such as dormitories, of which 38.1% were single-person households and 54.2% were nuclear-family households (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022). In Tokyo, the population in 2020 was reported to be a little over 14 million with a population density of 6,410 persons per square kilometer (Tokyo

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Metropolitan Government, 2022). According to Savills in-house surveys (2022), there were approximately 2.5 million households in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, of which 2.1 million were rented. Based on the House and Land Survey of Japan, approximately 70% of the renters were single households and 20% were two-person households. (Aveline-Dubach, 2020) supports this standpoint stating that Tokyo is a densely populated city with the larger majority of rented domiciles comprising mainly of small apartments targeted at unmarried adults.

To put things into context, in Japan, apartments are categorized by the number of rooms they have. For example, the smallest might be a 1R which represents a generic room which could serve as a bedroom, living room, dining room and have a typically very small adjoining kitchen as shown in figure 1. Virtually all residences have a bathroom and separate toilet. Although a 1R could be compared to a Western studio, according to Real Estate Japan (2022), the average size of a 1R in Tokyo is between 13 and 20 sqm. Urban Renaissance (UR), an independent administrative corporation formed by the Japanese national government demonstrates typical layouts and sizes of apartments for the configurations of 1R, 1K and 1DK in Tokyo as shown in figure 1. 4.5 denotes 4.5 tatami mats and is the standard method identifying size. A tatami mat is approximately 1.6 sqm (UR Housing, 2023).

Figure 1. Typical layout of a Japanese 1R, 1K and 1DK apartment.



Source: UR Housing (2023)

On the other hand, a 3LDK would represent a significantly larger apartment consisting of three generic rooms, a living room, dining room and kitchen. According to the Japanese government's Housing and Land survey of 2018, the average size of a 3LDK is 78 sqm (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2019). What is important to note is the contextual fundamental difference in interpretation of functional living space. In the West, many people think of residences in terms of number of bedrooms. However, in

Japan, a room might be a bedroom at night, and the living room by day. Therefore, in many cases for occupants of Japanese apartments, fixed furniture such as a bed is undesirable, and futons which may be put into the closet during the day are preferred.

Ono (2018) identified that pre-COVID, many workers struggled to balance long workdays with leisure and family needs. These long work days in Japanese companies have arguably been the byproduct of traditional workstyles such as respecting seniors, and the appearance of diligent working. Examples of which include, workers who feel that they cannot leave the office until their managers do, or having the desire to be seen as hard working, feel compelled to remain at the office longer than their contractual work hours. Additionally, Ono suggests that these feelings fall under the concepts of self-sacrifice and work devotion which are rooted in the Japanese psyche. Therefore, it might be thought that these traditional mindsets maybe offset by a shift to working from home, and remote working.

Ibrahim and Kumar (2022) suggest that the effects of remote working, or working from home can allow for an increased opportunity for married couples or cohabiting partners to enjoy time together thereby improving the balance between work and family life. Holdsworth (2003) also identified that work activities which decreases time spent in the office enables workers to improve their home and work life balance by being able to deal with various domestic crises, as well as reducing stress caused by commuting. Nonetheless, many adverse issues were reflected in the comments by the focus group participants of this study.

2. Literature Review

The conventional sense and meaning of ‘family’ as an institution in Japan has changed dramatically since the Meiji period (1867-1912). However, many conventional perspectives of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ are still undergoing a gradual evolution in response to ongoing shifts in social, cultural and economic conditions (Nocedo, 2012; Sekiguchi, 2010). Sasagawa, et al. (2016), however suggests that since the 1980s, roles and obligations of husbands and wives have changed little. For example, many Japanese men still perceive household tasks as a wife role and working long hours as a husband’s role.

Social changes in the perceptions for the employment of women have been necessary to adapt to issues such as the shrinking population (Statistics Bureau of Japan, 2022) and decreasing disposable income due to increasing taxes, and low wage inflation (Toyoaki, 2022). Such economic uncertainties for families have promoted an increase in dual-income earners. Additionally recent changes in the law regarding distinctions between ‘regular employee’ and ‘part-time worker’ have enabled previously classified part-time workers to gain the protection of regular employees such as long-term job security and pensions (Ono and Kanamaru, 2022). However, Blau, et al. (1998) suggest that as the number of dual-earning couples increase, the occurrence of work family conflict also increases.

Emphasis can be placed on women as ‘good wives’ or ‘wise mothers’ under the concept of *ryosai kenbo* (家) (Sakamoto, 2014). Good wives are seen as those who pursue efficient, economical running of the home, and promote hygienic lifestyles. On the other hand, wise mothers may be perceived as those who raise obedient and educated children (Yamamoto and Watanabe, 2016; Killen and Sueyoshi, 2010).

Filial piety (*koukou* 孝行) in Japan is derived from Confucianism and encompasses several key areas such as taking care of parents in their seniority and obeying them while they live (Poskaite, 2014; Nichols, 2013). These aspects of family culture remain mainstream in Japan today (Koyano, 1996). Another aspect from *koukou* is the responsibility to have children to carry on the family line. However, perceived duties to prioritise their company's or organization's well-being before personal well-being, has led to a culture of long working hours, reported as well as unreported overtime and irregular work schedules (Yamauchi, et al., 2017; Fursman, 2009). It may be inferred therefore that these factors have contributed to the difficulty for workers to find time to meet and date prospective life partners.

Interestingly, according to the 15th Japanese National Fertility Survey (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2015), the number of men who never intend to marry has continued to increase, representing 4.5% in 1987, 7.7% in 2002 and 12.0% in 2015. Additionally, the number of women never intending to marry also increased from 4.6%, 5% and 8.0% respectively. The survey trend over the last 25 years has been relatively consistent for men and women for perceived merits of marriage. Both men and women in the 2015 survey placed stronger emphasis on marriage for procreation reasons (35.8% men, 49.8% women) and psychological relief (31.1% men, 28.1% women). Additionally, only 13.3% of men and 14.0% of women selected 'living with the person they feel affection for' as a merit of marriage. And 1.6% of men and 0.2% of women selected sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, while 5.9% of the men selected financial stability as a merit of marriage, 20.4% of the women felt that marriage provided financial stability. This suggests that mindsets of marriage during the survey are predominantly focused on childbearing and responsibilities related to raising children.

In terms of work-related family conflict, Netermeyer, et al. (1996), suggests that work family conflict can occur due to perceived stress over issues relating to time issues, such as working long hours. Additionally, Cooklin, et al. (2014) identified that role-conflicts between mothers' responsibilities such as family-functioning and work-roles, can have negative effects on children's social, emotional and cognitive behaviour.

A study by Huffman, et al. (2013) investigated the relationship between fathers whose work hours related to work-family conflict, as well as the number of hours fathers cared for their family. The results of the study indicated that fathers spending time at work or caring for family did not necessarily relate to strain-based work family conflict. Huffman, et al. (2013) suggest that the perception of work hours can be associated positively, such as contributing to the positive concept of being the breadwinner or providing opportunities for his family through increased salary. On the other hand, people who perceive long work hours negatively, are more likely to feel associated stress, and may attribute blame to the family for forcing them to work longer hours.

Various studies have been carried out internationally on the effect of marital disharmony on worker performance. For example, a study by Fellows, et al. (2016), determined a negative relationship between work-family conflict and couple relationship quality. And Falola, et al. (2016) determined that employees who had marital problems had a higher tendency to experience factors of low performance, low morale, a lack of concentration and absenteeism. Additionally, a study by Waite, et al.

(2002) determined that unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were on average no happier than those who had stayed married. Of which, the researchers highlighted that the results were true regardless of race, gender, age or income.

3. Research Objectives

This research aimed to investigate the effects of remote working in Japan on white-collar workers' family lives. To this end, there were 3 primary research questions.

1. Is the home office a suitable work environment for e-work?
2. What types of familial conflicts arose as a consequence to working from home?
3. Is e-work a suitable and sustainable work environment for Japanese white-collar workers?

4. Research Methodology

This study makes use of focus group data from five groups consisting of between 6-8 participants for a total of 36 participants. Volunteers were requested through a shared network from a Japanese University and Business School. The groups were hosted on different days through the Zoom application, and the data collected was not shared between participants. This was to help facilitate triangulation of themes while reducing the risk of contamination of ideas through external influence.

The focus groups were carried out in November of 2022 in Tokyo, Japan. Participant demography were white-collar workers employed in organizations in Japan who could be at either the management or staff level. The male to female ratio was 56% and 44% respectively, and the age range was between 27 and 57. 72% of the participants stated that they were married of which 88% had one or more children. 35% of the married participants reported that their children were over the age of 20, were unmarried, and living with their parents.

Since COVID-19 commenced, 67% of the participants reported that they had had the COVID-19 virus and 100% of the workers had experience of working remotely during the pandemic. Since the end of 2022, approximately 22% of the participants were still fully working remotely, 33% had a hybrid workstyle of e-work and office work and the remainder had returned to the workstyle that they had experienced pre-COVID-19. This workstyle primarily meant office-based work, which included site-to-site travel.

The interviewer had a list of four questions covering four topics to guide the flow of the conversation. While tangents were expected, the interviewer's task was to allow free discussion of the topics, while guiding the conversation back to the main topics under investigation as seen in figure 2. Each focus group was monitored by the same interviewer, and the same topic sheet was used.

Figure 2: Interviewer's Question Topic list

1	How has working from home affected (your) home life?
2	How do you think about combining living space and workspace?
3	Were there any difficulties in performing work tasks from home?
4	How has working from home affected family relationships if at all?

Source: Authors' Own Materials

A time allotment of 30 minutes was given to each question with additional optional extra time slots of 15 minutes per question. Use of the extra time was at the discretion of the interviewer and depended on the participants' level of engagement with the subject. Each focus group's audio was recorded by computer with an external microphone, and the subsequent audio was transcribed to text. The text was then thematically analyzed.

In this article, participants are anonymized and referred to by P-XX, where P denotes 'participant', and XX denotes the initials of their name.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1. *How has working from home affected your home life?*

Several themes emerged from the first question, firstly the discussion of 'home' as an owned residence compared to that of a rented one, and also the types of 'house' versus 'apartment'. The participants also explained that English words such as 'apartment' have a fundamentally different meaning than that of standard English. For example, P-MS a Japanese worker, explained that in Japan, "the term apartment is a cheaper (type), normally the structure is made of wood" and P-AM from the UK and living in Japan stated, "in my country apartments are not separated in definition by construction materials. But, in Japan, the Japanese have mansion apartments and regular apartments and the size is usually dependent on location and price". Participant RI elaborated, "mansion overseas describes a massive home with many bedrooms, tennis courts and swimming pools. In Japan, the word 'mansion' means an apartment located in an apartment complex made from concrete". She further added, "living in a Japanese mansion is not necessarily an indication of size, more (to do with) the quality of the construction, and have simple features such as a front lobby, a nice waiting area, security cameras and so on".

The participants discussed the size of residences especially in relation to a single occupant contrasting with people living with family members. This led to the topic of 'need' such as how much space a single occupant needs compared to families with children? As well as how many rooms each participant had.

Secondly, the participants grappled with defining and clarifying the meaning of "home life" compared to "work life", as some had experience with working from home, while others had not. Additionally, some participants had traditional Japanese rooms, while others had more Western layouts. For example, the use of a Japanese tatami room with floor cushions, legless chairs and low tables (*kotatsu*), as well as general purpose rooms that used *futon* (floor mattress) at night which could be put away during the day to allow for living room and dining space. On the other hand, more Western style residences had hard floors, more typical Western style beds, dining tables and chairs. Therefore, the data showed that workers who lived more traditional Japanese life-styles tended to have smaller apartments, and it was suggested that the need to have larger space was low, since money could be saved from the purchase or rent cost.

P-MM commented on the theme of work-life separation, "I think e-work can cause people to work too much. Work is rarely straight-forward and even when one work task is completed, another replaces it immediately. At least when we worked at the office, we knew we had to work, and when we arrived home, we could switch off.

With remote working”. P-DT on the other hand stated, “I agree with P-MM, for me, my work is my life, and my life is work. I enjoy working, the sense of responsibility and being depended on. And I enjoy the recognition for my efforts. When I’m at the office, I work. When I come home, I sleep. With working from home, I can work throughout the day and night if I want, and sometimes I do”. On the other hand, P-SO commented, “As a new worker, I sometimes have no idea what I’m supposed to be doing. It can be demotivating when I can’t get support, and I end up doing nothing”.

5.2. Definitions of ‘Home’

Many participants had different ideas of what “home” was, for example, “a place to sleep and rest”, “somewhere to keep (one’s) property”, “a place to communicate and interact with family members”. Single worker P-KT explained that before the pandemic, she “spent little time in the apartment except to sleep, shower, and change clothes”. This was because during the week, she “would leave home at 6am, arrive at work by 8:30am and work until 9pm or later”.

P-SI, a single male worker agreed with P-KT and further mentioned that he rented an apartment in central Tokyo. He had chosen that location because of its close proximity to his office. However, the price of Tokyo residences is much higher than that of less central locations. As a result, the size of the apartment was less important. “I only need a single room that doubles as a bedroom during the night, and living space during the day. I think many single people feel the same way”. P-SI’s further explained that his apartment had a shower room, separate toilet and closet space for his clothing. He commented that “apart from my work computer which is a laptop, I had no other PC before being ordered to work from home”. Instead, “I use my smart phone and iPad for non-work email and web browsing”. Additionally, he commented, “I don’t have a dining table or desk, and of course no chairs except *zabuton*, because they take up a lot of space and are damaging to tatami floors”. Comments such as those given by P-SI and P-KT describe their homes as functional and practical spaces, and due to space constraints, meant that smaller apartments tended to have less furniture and equipment. For many single workers, it was suggested that they prioritized proximity to the office for shorter commute times, and smaller apartments to offset the significantly higher rent cost in central locations such as in central Tokyo.

P-TS, a married male worker stated, “When I was in my 20s and early 30s, home was also mainly a place to sleep. I couldn’t leave the office until my manager did, so I usually didn’t get home until late even though I lived quite close to the office. When I got married it was more important to have space and I had to compromise on the commute from my home to the office, and my wife’s commute to her office”. P-SH, another married male worker agreed saying, “This is very common, but one advantage is that larger residences can be rented at a much cheaper rent cost”. P-TS further commented, “When the children came along, home became a place where they could play in safety, and a place where we could interact as a family. Suddenly it became important to have a dining table, high chairs, a big TV with a sound bar, and so on”. P-MI a married female worker contributed, “Young children see the home as their kingdom. They are the kings, and parents are the servants. When I started to work from home, they had no concept that I would refuse their requests, or that at certain times in the day, they must not make noise or cause interruptions. Married female worker

P-MM added, “When children enter junior-high or high school, home-life changes again, I think. It’s important to make more money to pay for *juku* (private tuition) and save for future university cost. So, parents need to work more, or get higher paid salaries through promotions. This means that parents spend even less time at home”. P-MM further related, “Children spend more time studying even late into the night, which means they need a desk, chair, lamp, book shelves and so on in their rooms, and silence to concentrate”. P-SH commented, “When parents work from home, it must be an annoyance for the children. Video conferencing can get quite heated, especially when we have different opinions, or we are excited about a new idea”. Therefore, until COVID-19 forced people to work from home, many Japanese children perceived home as a quiet place to study and do homework, after which they had to share their space with parents whose work activities were noisy and distracting.

5.3. How do you think about combining living space and work space?

Many participants felt that working from home drastically altered their living space. People who lived in small compact apartments did not originally have much in terms of furniture or equipment. For example, P-SI explained, “when space is small, there’s no desire to fill space with unnecessary clutter. If remote work means working at home, then we must have desks and chairs, monitors, speakers, printers and so on”. P-KT added, “I miss not being able to have conversations with coworkers in the hallways. If I need to know something, it is convenient to simply get up and walk to the relevant colleague’s desk and ask my question, also if I need some paperwork, I could walk to the cabinet and retrieve it”. P-SH elaborated stating, “Although digitizing paperwork is something everyone is talking about, many companies have not completed the process of making all paper available digitally”. P-KT further commented, “On the other hand, I sometimes feel the need to print out my data and spread it on the floor so that I can see it more clearly. In the office I could perform this function by using multiple displays. This has a few problems. Firstly, the massive amount of paper and ink that I have to buy and use. Then, my apartment becomes cluttered with piles of paper sitting in various places. And finally, when I’m done, I have to shred it all because of security reasons”. None of the participants commented positively about combining work space and living space and each participant mentioned that having a home-office meant the purchasing of many items which their companies did not reimburse. In some cases, this meant large items such as tables, chairs and printers. In other cases, they referred to office supplies such as paper and ink toner.

Some participants expressed that remote working in Japan should not limit them to working from home since companies were renting shared spaces on an hourly basis or allowing workers to use them for free. P-MH commented, “My colleagues and I sometimes go to Yahoo Lodge in Nagatacho, it has meeting spaces, with desks, whiteboards and free wi-fi. There’s a shared kitchen space with microwave and water kettle. There are also rest spaces with hammocks and pillows. Sometimes it can be very busy and noisy, and other days it will be completely empty”. On the question of company security, P-MH added, “The space is relatively open plan, so some care needs to be taken about security”. Other participants such as P-RM argued, “If I had a choice between working at a public shared space and my office, I would rather work at my office for convenience reasons, and if I wanted to take a rest, I’d rather do so at my home”.

Another issue was the question of what to do with their home office once they returned to on-site, office-based work. Several participants stated that after the lock down had ended, they had sold items to second hand shops for less than 20% of the original purchase price.

5.4. Were there any difficulties in performing work tasks from home?

Participants reported that there were many initial difficulties with working from home such as lack of furniture and lack of equipment as explained earlier. Noise levels either from family members, or outdoor noise was also widely commented upon. P-DI explained, “at the office, there is a general background noise but at home, there are many sounds that are distracting such as children and outdoor traffic”. And, P-SI commented, “unexpected noises are more annoying for me, and interrupts my train of thought. It hinders the amount of work that I can ordinarily do”.

New workers commented on the difficulty to get adequate direction from management. For example, P-YM said, “As a new worker in my company, I have low confidence in self-directing my workload. Working from home, and remote working is time wasting because I cannot immediately connect to supervisors and colleagues to instruct me on what I should be doing”. Other comments from new workers included the feeling of being socially isolated. P-RW explained, “I envisioned working in a company to be very team oriented with a lot of dialogue between team members. But during the COVID-19 lockdown, I felt both disconnected and isolated”. P-SH suggested, “I think it was because managers were not experienced with remote-working styles either so there was a lack of established protocol for supporting new workers using web-based platforms”. Hence, limited experience in digital platforms for supervisors to adequately manage new workers working from home created inefficiency in work productivity, as well as contributed to a perception of social isolation among new workers.

5.5. How has working from home affected family relationships?

Married couples raised issues of young children’s needs, children intruding on work space, and demanding time from working mothers. For example, young children associated parents at home, to family time. They had had no experience of parents at home working. During the COVID-19 pandemic, nurseries and kindergartens closed meaning that children spent more time at home.

Increased conflict arose due to husbands not pulling their weight with house chores, increased burden on working wives to provide meals, as well as doing other chores. Although many men stated that they had increased the number of chores they normally did.

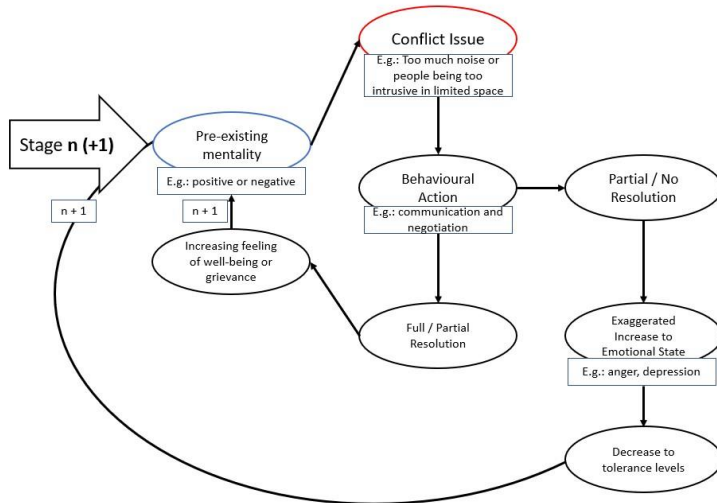
Work conflicts arose due to noise levels caused by having video conferences at the same time, or slow network when having conferences at the same time. Causes of concern included the need to have high security due to their partner working at a competitor. Designated work spaces such as using the bathroom, or bedroom as an office, while the partner worked in the living room, and interruptions when needing to use those facilities by the other partner.

Some participants introduced comments on the topic of family disharmony. For example, P-KI explained, “I’ve been married for over 25 years. My children are now in

university, and my wife views our marriage more as a financial arrangement. About 15 years ago, my company stationed me in Turkey for 7 years, while my family continued to live in Japan”. P-KI continued, “When I returned to Japan, my office site was over 3 hours from home one way, so I rented an apartment during the week and returned home about twice a month. Nonetheless, the relationship with my wife was strained. When the pandemic occurred, I was ordered to work from home. It became very hard for us to live together, strangers forced to live together in a limited space. It was impossible for us to avoid each other”. He further added, “To make things worse, she considered the apartment as her space, even though I pay for it. I was an intruder, and many times she told me to leave. But of course, we were in lockdown. I had nowhere to go”. Iwao, (1993:119) describes the phenomena as a “divorce within the house”, whereby unhappy couples divorce emotionally while remaining legally married. P-KI was asked by another participant if fighting led to violence, to which he commented, “sometimes we raised our voices into a shouting match. She might throw something sometimes”. Other participants empathized with P-KI, P-AE commented, “I have a similar experience. Japanese couples tend not to divorce when they have children, but rather endure through avoidance. I have my hobbies, she has hers”. And, P-TF commented, “as a mother, I must ensure that my children can live comfortably, go to *juku* (private tuition), go to university and so on. My husband and I work hard, (we) leave for work at different times, come home late. We are polite to each other, but there is no romance in our marriage. We have separate *futons* (beds) but sleep in the same room. After he started to work from home, suddenly I was aware that he was everywhere”. P-KI asked whether her husband might have been having an extramarital affair, to which P-TF mentioned, “it is possible, but I don’t mind, as long as he is civil and takes care of the bills”.

P-AF mentioned, “I’m single so I have no experience of such conflict but I had heard the term ‘corona-divorce’ from television. Apparently, many relationships are being impacted hard by forced proximity to partners who remain married for financial security rather than emotional happiness”. P-SG further added, “I also saw on television that the number of domestic violence has risen. People have a limit to their tolerance. Especially if they are at stress from work, there is nowhere for them to release their stress except at home. It’s like a time bomb. Eventually pent-up stress is released in aggression”. And, P-AG commented, “I really understand this conversation topic. Pre-COVID, I let go of my stress through *nomikai* (drinking parties) and *kabakura* (hostess bars) with my friends and colleagues. I am a heavy smoker but my wife and children hate the smell. So, I have to go outside to enjoy a cigarette even if it is raining. They complain (that) when I come close, I smell of smoke or alcohol. It is painful to hear. After we started working from home, and many drinking establishments temporarily closed, life became very hard for me. I think I became a tyrant at home. Always irritable and short tempered and my wife responded by treating me with disdain”. P-AG represents male workers who experienced a form of intra-family bullying by wife and children, which caused an emotional reaction to respond aggressively. This type of behaviour reflects a cycle of behavioural reaction to conflict issues which is demonstrated in figure 3.

Figure 3. Cycle of Behavioural Reaction to Conflict Issues for Japanese while Working from Home.



Source: Authors' Own Material

The following 3 cases demonstrate the model shown. For example, in each case, white-collar workers in Japan stated that they exhibit a pre-existing mental state either positive or negative leading to an encounter with a conflict issue, such as represented by a negative circumstance. Subsequently, workers react with a behavioural action such as through communication or negotiation. Either the issue is resolved fully, partially or is unresolved. Where the resolution is satisfactory, the worker experiences an increase to positive well-being, however, where the resolution is unsatisfactory, the worker experiences an increase to negative feelings of grievance.

Furthermore, the focus group data suggested that workers who experience unsatisfactory partial or no resolution also experience a decrease to their tolerance levels. Tolerance levels seem to be completely arbitrary depending on each individual. For example, some participants of similar age and job role, had different statements about the impacts of these circumstances on their perceptions of well-being. However, participants who experienced unsatisfactory resolution of conflict issues commented that the next conflict issue they encountered might be the same conflict issue as before. Continuous failure to resolve problems can lead to a cycle of frustration and irritation which compounds into increasing levels of aggression, depression and frustration ultimately resulting in some form of emotional breakdown.

The following cases represent examples given by participants that follow the cycle of behavioural action as shown in figure 2 and contribute to the understanding of Japanese white-collar workers' mindset regarding familial conflict and associated work-stress.

Case 1: Decreasing Mental State Leads to Ongoing Decline in Mental State Pre-existing Mentality

“I live in a 1DK mansion apartment in Naka Meguro about 3 minutes from the train station by foot. Naka Meguro is about 20 minutes to the center of Tokyo, so it’s super convenient but the rent is about half my monthly salary at 150,000 JPY which I think is quite high. It’s about 40 sqm in total and is a comfortable space for ordinary living. I have a futon not a bed, which I put away each morning and it’s a good way to save space. I have a living-room which doubles as a dining-room. I eat from a low table while sitting on my sofa and watching TV.”

P-NI explained that he was relatively happy living in his apartment despite the high rent cost of 150,000 JPY representing half of his salary. According to the OECD (2022), average rent to salary ratio is typically around 20%. Therefore, such high rent cost may be considered a disproportionate expenditure, contributing to an inability to save. P-NI mentioned his satisfaction in the nearby availability of shops, bars and entertainment. He also expressed that the neighbourhood was both safe and quiet. Therefore, at stage 1 of the cycle of behaviors to conflict, the pre-existing mentality of P-NI is considered to be positive. A positive pre-existing mentality suggests a higher tolerance level, open mindedness and motivation for working (Tenney, et al., 2016; Kirkegaard-Weston, 2005).

Conflict Issue and Behavioural Action

“However, when I was ordered to work remotely, I suddenly had to buy a desk and chair. My living room had a sofa, so the only available space was the bedroom. But because at night I need to put out the futon, I could only buy a folding desk and chair. These were not ideal because the folding desk has limited space and weight load, and the chair has no lumbar support. I also needed to buy a printer with fax machine, because people often sent me faxes, and expected faxes in return. These, I had to pay for from my own salary, there was no budget from the company for personal items.”

The conflict issue relates to a problem which P-NI felt that he must overcome in order to do his regular work activities from home. The issues related were of space availability, functional capability and burden of cost. Partial resolution of space availability was achieved by buying a folding desk and chair, at the detriment to functional capability. Therefore, we can say that P-NI was not satisfied with the furniture that he bought. Additionally, he expressed dissatisfaction at having to carry the burden of cost, and no resolution of this issue was made. Therefore, not only did his emotional state decline with regards to his satisfaction of living and working space, but also toward his company for placing him into the circumstance with a lack of financial support.

Decrease to Tolerance Levels

“One day my manager told me that it was hard to hear me during our video conferencing and said that I should buy an external microphone. I said that I would, but I felt annoyed. I asked him if there was a budget for this, and he told me that there wasn’t because it wasn’t an order from the company, just advice. I thought that it was unreasonable because of course, I can’t say “no”. So, I have to pay for work equipment with my own salary.”

P-NI related his circumstance whereby the act of retelling the story exhibited irritation and annoyance which could be heard from his voice. While he accepted the advice of his manager to buy an external microphone, he was clearly unhappy with the unresolved issue relating to burden of cost. Ongoing demands to buy office equipment had the effect of decreasing his mental state for working from home. This carries over to additional conflict issues and decreases tolerance for further burdens.

Case 2: Decreasing Mental State Leads to Emotional Breakdown **Pre-existing Mentality**

"Before the pandemic, I had been married for more than 15 years, and my son was in junior high school and was preparing for high school entrance exams. He studies a lot in his room from his desk. Except for weekends, I rarely see my husband because we both have long working days, and we now work in different companies. On the weekends, we have our own hobbies and ways to enjoy free time. We own an apartment in Yokohama and before working from home I commuted to Tokyo every day. It takes about an hour door-to-door each way. Every day I arrived at the office feeling tired, and arrived at home at night (feeling) exhausted. I thought that working from home would improve my life but I was wrong."

P-KM's pre-existing mentality pre-COVID-19 may be considered negative due to her long commuting times which caused her to feel exhausted. Additionally, she expressed her marriage in negative terms, such as having reduced communication due to irregular work schedules and less contact due to different free time activities.

Conflict Issue and Behavioural Action

"When we both started working from home, we suddenly had to find places to work from. We needed to find space where we couldn't accidentally see or hear each other's work. Our companies were competitors and it would be inappropriate for us to listen in on video meetings or read sensitive information. My husband was more relaxed about this matter. He said, that it couldn't be helped and was not considerate to my concerns. This meant that I would have to be the one to move my computer to the less desirable space. He thought my concerns were senseless so he ignored my requests."

P-KM related the conflict issue of workplace security and data privacy between husband and wife working at competing companies while working from home. The inability to communicate due to an incompatibility of opinions meant that P-KM felt that she was always compromising in a one-way dialog.

Emotional Breakdown

"Of course, I felt angry when he ignored me, or told me to relax. I thought he was being selfish. I would raise my voice, and we would fight. My son would complain only to me that he couldn't study well because of the noise and emotional distress. So, I tried to internalize my own unhappiness of having to work with my husband at home, and gradually felt that I was going mad. Secretly I wished to end this cycle of depression. Honestly, if we hadn't returned to office work, we would probably have divorced. I was at my limit after just a year of us both working from home."

P-KM's tolerance levels continued to decline as continued dissatisfaction over a lack of conflict resolution persisted. The desire to vent her stress led to verbal arguments with her spouse were also unsatisfied due to her son's needs to study. Therefore, ongoing negative circumstances over the course of a year led to an ever-growing sense of unhappiness and depression which she relates would have eventually led to divorce.

Case 3: Increasing Mental State Leads to Improved Sense of Well-being Pre-existing Mentality

"I work for an overseas company which has a branch office in Tokyo. I was enjoying a hybrid type work-style before (the) Corona(virus pandemic). So, some days I would work remotely, and other days we would have meetings in person at the office. Being able to work from different work environments such as the coffee shop, or at home helps to refresh the mind. There's also more freedom to control our own schedules and work pace. I do agree that the home office requires a lot of initial investment, but I find that my home equipment is more superior to my office's ones. I can multitask with multiple displays, and listen to loud music from stereo speakers."

P-RI expresses remote-working in a positive way, focusing on themes of comfort and convenience. Comfort is related in terms of an emotional sense of well-being, and the ability to control both his work environment, work schedule and work pace. Additionally, while he comments on the cost factor of buying home office equipment, he focuses on the benefits of having superior equipment. At stage 1, his pre-existing mentality before encountering conflict issues is positive.

Conflict Issue and Behavioural Action

"One big issue with full-time e-working is the ability for some workers to hide their status in applications such as Slack. I mean, in app, it says they are busy for long periods of time, and are unresponsive to requests. This can be quite frustrating but it's kind of shoganai (can't be helped). I try to connect to other members of the team, maybe contact a manager to request assistance, or get on with other work. There's usually no shortage of work."

While P-RI expresses annoyance at the inability to receive work or answers to queries, his mentality remains relatively positive adopting a "can't be helped" attitude. Rather than complaining, he decides to pursue other work.

Improved Mental State

"Usually by the next day, I'll receive an apology for the late reply and the data I requested. If not, then I'll send a message to their supervisor, and they'll push from their side. It's more effective to get management to apply pressure, than send angry messages and stir trouble. I want to be seen as a team player, not a trouble maker."

At this stage, P-RI demonstrates an ability to remain objective despite other workers obstructing his work activities. Because his actions lead to full or partial resolutions, subsequently, an increasing sense of well-being can be felt as his actions are justified by increased perceptions of being a team player rather than being a trouble maker by his peers.

6. Conclusion

The data suggests that for white-collar workers in rented and owned apartments located in central Tokyo, the space available is not suitable for working from home for the majority of white-collar workers. For some single occupants, the original issues were the lack of furnishings suitable for long time working, and while may be resolved by purchasing a desk or chair, the limited availability of space meant that often, ideal furniture could not be obtained. This had the consequence of decreasing work productivity, work comfort levels and contributing to physical pain such as repetitive strain disorders. Workers living in apartments outside of Tokyo reported having more available space, as purchase and rent cost is less.

For workers with partners, and adult children living at home, problems with noise levels and lack of space to do work, were large issues. Using all available space at home including the bathroom, bedroom or balcony are not suitable for long-term sustainable working due to noise issues, interruptions and seasonal weather conditions. Some workers chose to work from their cars. But, while alleviating some issues such as family conflict or interruptions such as active noise (people talking) and passive noise (washing machines, plumbing etc.), led in many cases to ongoing physical health problems such as back pain, stiff shoulders and eye pain.

Workers with young children initially struggled to establish a line between “work-time” and “home-time”. However, as time went on, children began to understand when their parents were available or busy, and these disruptions decreased. After COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, child caring services reopened and the related disruptions returned to pre-COVID levels. Therefore, working from home for workers with young children with adequate child care services is feasible.

Working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic increased visibility of many familial troubles stemming from long-standing personal work habits, traditional conflict avoidance mindsets, and pre-existing marital problems. Japanese company workers who had not adhered to fixed schedules before the pandemic, enjoyed flexible living however, it is restricted by the need to be considerate to other people occupying the same or nearby space. For example, the desire to have a video-conference at a time when others wish to relax leads to elevated levels of stress. Stress levels increased while tolerance levels decreased could eventually lead to increased aggression, depression and conflict. The ability to leave the home to avoid conflict is therefore necessary to make remote working viable.

The limitations of this study are the relatively small sample size and the method in which participants were selected from a similar business network. As graduates of a Master’s degree in Business Administration, it suggests that the participants were either in a higher financial bracket, or had financial support from their companies. It is important to note, that white-collar workers in low financial brackets and not supported by their companies might not be represented by this study. The researchers plan to investigate white-collar workers in lower financial brackets to determine a holistic understanding of how working from home has affected white-collar workers in Japan.

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