

Return Migration to Japan: Experiences of Japanese Brazilians

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Abstract

In the emerging literature, research on migration and acculturation has focused on investigating return migration (i.e., migration to one's ethnic homeland). Since the 2008 economic crisis, the Japanese Brazilian population substantially dropped in Japan. This led to a decrease in the study of Japanese Brazilian return migrants (i.e., returnees). This study aims to fill this gap in the current literature by exploring Japanese Brazilian migrants' return migration experiences. The purpose of this study is twofold: first, to gain an in-depth understanding of Japanese Brazilian migrants' decisions to return to Japan, and second, to gain a better understanding of migrants' experiences acculturating to Japanese culture. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, and a total of eight participants (ages 17-69) took part in the study. Thematic analysis was employed as a research method, and the results suggested that motivation to return migrate is multi-faceted. Based on the analysis, study results identified four key themes, which are distinguished as 1) motivation to return migrate, 2) reflections on identity, 3) acculturative experiences, and 4) motivation for settlement. It was observed that besides ethnic identification and acculturative experiences, socioeconomic factors had an influence on their return migration experiences and motivation for settlement in Japan.

Keywords: Japanese Brazilians, Return Migration, Identity, Acculturation, Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

In 1980s Japan, there were concerns about declining of working-age population. Due to the overheated bubble economy, the situation changed remarkably in the late 1980s when labor shortages became apparent. There was a need for low-skilled workers, and the illegal employment of migrants became a problem. To address this problem, the Immigration Law was amended to create a new status of residence called “long term residents” and to accept the descendants of Japanese who emigrated to Brazil, Peru, Chile, and other countries from the beginning of the 1900s to the 1970s. The 1990 reform of the Immigration Control and Refugee Act brought about a remarkable change with the establishment of long-term resident status for Japanese descendants up to the third generation. Non-Japanese people married to second-and third-generation Japanese were also eligible for this status (Abella, 2009; Yamauchi, 2019; Watanabe, 2010).

Offered the status of “long-term resident,” which permitted them to live and work in Japan for up to three years, Japanese emigrants and their descendants from South American countries came to Japan in large numbers in search of employment opportunities. From a mere 3,500 in 1988, the number of Japanese descendants from South America who took the opportunity of the offer rose to 153,000 in 1991, 312,000 in 2000. Brazil, home to the world’s largest Japanese descendant community, has also seen a considerable number of Japanese Brazilians emigrate to Japan on the basis of “long-term resident” status (Abella, 2009; Hamada, 2016). The comparatively high salaries in Japan attracted many Japanese Brazilians (Tsuji, Miyasaka, Otsuka, Honda, Kato & Abe, 2001). In the early 1990s, most Japanese descendant migrants were temporary workers who intended to stay for a few years and return to their countries with substantial savings earned in Japan. However, they began to stay for more extended periods and settled in Japan with their families by obtaining permanent residency (Goto, 2007). The Japanese Brazilian population in Japan is 211,178 as of June 2020, and they constitute the fifth largest migrant population in Japan (The Portal Site of Official Statistics of Japan, 2020).

Acculturation and Return Migration

The study of acculturation and its effects on migrants living in Japan is an important endeavor, given that Japan has begun to rely on immigration for its socio-economic growth, and immigration is perhaps the most concrete context within which acculturation takes place (Costa, 2014). When individuals who are raised in one cultural context start to live in a new cultural context, they develop a complex pattern of continuity and change in how they undertake their lives in the new society (Berry, 1997). When people with different cultural backgrounds encounter each other, they may (or may not) take up each other’s behaviors, languages, beliefs, values, and social institutions. The issues stemming from how and how well groups and individuals handle the change when they come into contact with another cultural group have collectively been referred to as acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2010). Acculturation is described as “the process of cultural and psychological change that results from following meetings between cultures” (Sam & Berry, 2010, p. 472), while the concepts of psychological acculturation and adaptation refer to the psychological changes and final outcomes that emerge as a result of individuals going through acculturation (Berry, 1997).

Migrants generally acquire a completely different ethnic status when they move to a new society. Those who were formerly members of the majority society in their home country find themselves an immigrant minority in the host country. Even for people who were already

ethnic minorities in their home countries, migration results in a major shift in ethnic status from one minority to another. Even ethnic return migrants are affected. Because of their foreign roots, they are regarded as ethnic minorities in the nations where they live, and when they travel “back” to their original homelands, they are seldom socially integrated into the majority host community. Despite the lack of racial distinctions with the host population, they develop into a new form of an ethnic minority as a result of the cultural differences they have acquired during generations of living abroad (Tsuda, 2003). In spite of their presumably privileged status compared to other immigrants, returnees have frequently encountered the same problems as other immigrants (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, Horenczyk & Schmitz, 2003).

Acculturation, which results in various psychological experiences and changes, eventually leads to a person’s adaptation. The relatively stable changes that occur in an individual or group in response to environmental demands are referred to as adaptation (Berry, 1997). Since all acculturating groups are thought to go through the same adaptation process, and acculturation strategies have been shown to have substantial relationships with positive adaptation (Berry, 1997), it is crucial to explore what acculturation experiences Japanese Brazilian migrants have had contribute to positive adaptation.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purposes of this study are first to provide a more in-depth understanding of Japanese Brazilian migrants’ decisions to return migrate to Japan, and secondly, to provide a more in-depth understanding of migrants’ experiences in acculturating to Japanese culture. Therefore, to explain the Japanese Brazilians’ experiences in return migration, the following research questions are proposed: 1) “What were the main issues when Japanese Brazilian migrants decided to return migrate to Japan?”, 2) “What are the features of ethnic identification of Japanese Brazilian migrants?”, and 3) “What are Japanese Brazilian migrants’ experiences of acculturation to Japanese culture?”

Method

Participants and Data Collection

The sample comprised eight Japanese Brazilian migrants (three men, five women), ranging from 17 to 69 years ($M = 47.5$ years, $SD = 15.36$). All were born and grew up in Brazil. Participation in the study was voluntary. The maintenance of confidentiality was ensured through the anonymization of the data. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences and were provided with contact details to request further information. The participants were contacted by applying convenience sampling methods to address concerns about inadequate sample size due to the difficulties in accessing the Japanese Brazilian migrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews and the participants were interviewed online due to the pandemic precautions. All participants were provided information about the aim of the research and were assured of the confidentiality of their participation. Moreover, before starting the interviews, participants were asked for their consent to record them with an audio recorder. The interviews were conducted between June 2021 and October 2021. The average duration of interviews is 59 minutes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study to explore the participants' return migration, acculturation experiences, and ethnic identification. Six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to conduct a thematic analysis. During data collection and analysis, a constant comparative technique was employed to reflect critically on the data, compare findings systematically, adjust the interview questions slightly if necessary, and confirm the validity of the study's conclusions. As a strategy to ensure credibility, peer debriefing and member checks (Anney, 2015) were used. The methodology and procedure were checked by two academic colleagues for accuracy.

Results

The study's findings are organized into four main themes: 1) motivation to return migrate, 2) reflections on identity, 3) acculturative experiences, and 4) motivation for settlement. The thematic map that shows the themes is presented below in Figure 1:

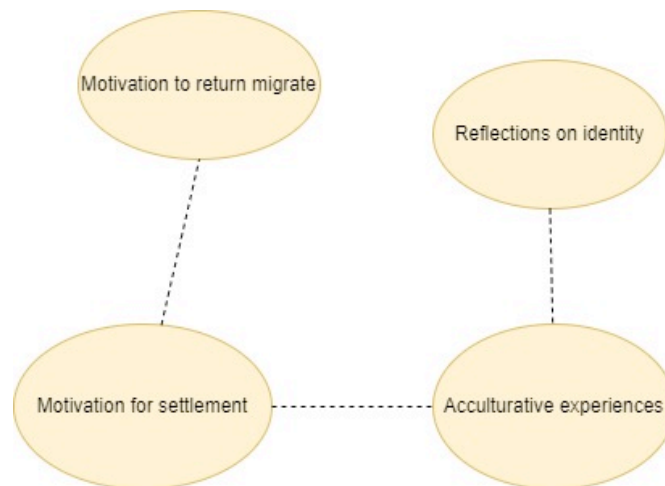


Figure 1: Thematic Map of Japanese Brazilians' Return Migration Experiences.

Motivation to Return Migrate

Most participants considered the change to Japanese immigration law and Japan's granting Japanese Brazilians with long-term visas as a chance. They also mentioned having relatives and acquaintances going back and forth between Brazil and Japan. Moreover, some participants had family members who had already immigrated to Japan, and they were invited to reunite with their families, which encouraged them to immigrate. Their motivations to return migrate to Japan included financial struggles in Brazil and aiming to save money in Japan as the salaries were considerably higher. One of the participants, for instance, who is married to another Japanese Brazilian and has a child, mentioned economic reasons and how the economic instability and devaluing of money in Brazil influenced their decision to immigrate to Japan by comparing the differences in wages.

Reflections on Identity

When participants were asked about their identities—if they consider themselves Japanese, Brazilian, or both—they reflected different opinions on their identities. Several participants indicated they identified with a Brazilian identity rather than a Japanese identity and maintained it even after immigrating to Japan, adjusting to Japanese culture, and permanently

settling in. One participant, for instance, who defined herself as Brazilian before moving to Japan, related her identity with her citizenship. She expresses her belonging to her Brazilian identity and her will to strive with this identity.

Acculturative Experiences

The majority indicated that Japanese nationals have kind and helpful attitudes towards them. However, they noted that their relationships with the Japanese nationals are primarily work-related, and they do not have close relationships as they have with co-nationals. Despite language-related difficulties, all migrants mentioned integrating into social life and maintaining their daily lives without significant problems. Most participants indicated having settled in Japan permanently, and they spoke of their experiences and various strategies for acculturating to Japanese culture. When they were asked how they interacted and communicated with Japanese nationals and how they felt about it, all participants expressed having positive relations with them and feeling accepted by them. Also, the participants mentioned introducing Brazilian culture to their colleagues, conveying basic cultural knowledge, and inviting them to cultural activities.

Motivation for Settlement

Nearly all participants mentioned having higher purchasing power in Japan than in Brazil due to the differences in salaries they had. Almost all participants indicated that they had settled permanently in Japan and had no intention to return to Brazil contrary to their initial plan to go back. While many participants intended to return to Brazil before immigrating to Japan after saving money, they ended up settling in for the reason of changing living standards, such as having a stable and higher income, being able to save money, having access to health services and social security benefits in Japan.

Conclusions

The present study explored the Japanese Brazilian residents' experiences to gain a better understanding of their experiences in Japanese culture. Economic stability and high income acted as reasons and strengthened the decision of Japanese Brazilians to settle in Japan and not to return to Brazil permanently. Having positive relations with Japanese people and speaking Japanese to some degree appeared to facilitate Japanese Brazilians' integration into social life in Japan. Despite having positive relations with Japanese people, most participants reported still feeling attached to national identity, spending more time with co-nationals, and being like a family with the Japanese Brazilian community. Having the same migration background and having the same goals, and speaking the same language appeared to act as a basis to support and help each other in their adjustment to Japanese culture.

Further Research and Limitations

The present study included only eight participants due to COVID-19-related restrictions. Therefore, further research should aim to collect data from more participants to understand the returnees' experiences better.

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