

Research Note

Hypocrisy or Naïve Insularity? Cultural Implication on the Legitimacy of the Policy Implementation Process in Institutionalized Japanese Organizations

Fukuoka University, Faculty of Commerce, Associate Professor

Yoko OKA

< Abstract >

This paper asks why Japanese people are not acknowledging their insularity despite being famously described as an inward-looking and homogeneous nation. I examine the reasons for Japanese people being so confident in their broad-mindedness despite the obviously discriminatory organizational settings. To uncover how Japanese people have come to believe their self-righteous tolerance, it scrutinizes the limitations of policy implementation in institutions and shows how an institutional theory can go beyond its premises when considering culture. It suggests that the main reason for Japanese people not noticing their intolerance is Japan's form-supremacy culture. Since making the form perfect has been praised and valued in traditional Japanese art culture, not surprisingly, the daily procedures of organizations also value making processes perfect at the cost of the outcome. Without understanding the influence of the form-supremacy culture, merely emulating global trends and diversity-friendly policies will not bring about the desired outcomes in Japanese organizations.

< Keywords >

Policy Implementation Process, Japanese Organization, Diversity, Institutionalism, Form-supremacy, Cultural Virtues

Introduction

Since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States in 2020, hate crimes based on various forms of bigotry have been an important subject worldwide, including in Japan. In particular, the Japanese people's attention was captured when the professional tennis player Naomi Osaka, who has a Japanese mother and Haitian father, won the final of the 2020 US Open. During the tournament, she wore masks bearing the names of seven Black Americans who had been killed as a result of some form of police action. Discussion on this issue seemed to be welcomed by many Japanese people (Asahi Shinbun, 2020); however, problems emerged when it became apparent that Japanese people seemed to welcome the discussion only when the act of intolerance was someone else's, and not theirs.

During this global debate on racism, Nike Japan released a new advertisement featuring the message "The future isn't waiting; you can't stop us." It showed three high school girls displaying their passion for sports by overcoming their various backgrounds, which were portrayed as being discriminated against in Japan. The message was impressive, and it appeared to encourage Japanese youth to not shy away from any predicament in which they found themselves in life. Nevertheless, the main discussion on the Internet following the release of the advertisement has been about whether or not discrimination exists in Japan. Newspaper headlines included: "Nike's diversity advert causing a backlash in Japan" – BBC News (Harper, 2 December, 2020); "Nike ad addresses bullying and racism in Japan; riles up debate online" – Japan Today (SoraNews 24, 3 December, 2020); "Nike's Anti-Racism Campaign Is Making Japan Very Uncomfortable" – Bloomberg Businessweek (Takezawa, 10 December, 2020); and "Nike shrugs off Japan boycott after controversial ad" – Nikkei Asia (Regalado & Shibata, 11 December, 2020).

Attracting 25 million views and 80,000 shares according to the BBC News report above, the video received 18,000 dislikes, and Japan Today published viewer comments such as: "Is Japan really such a country full of discrimination?" "It feels like you're creating a false impression of Japan," "You're crossing the line and making Japanese people look foolish," "I feel this depicts Japanese as being extremely inhumane," "There's no bullying in Japan!" and "I won't buy Nike ever again!" (SoraNews 24, 2020).

Despite the comments, the evidence shows that Japan is far from being an inclusive society. For example, underrepresentation of women in many organizations, a negative immigra-

tion policy, employee intolerance, and low levels of sociocultural variety are notorious Japanese characteristics (METI, (Japan Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) 2016; Tokyo Shoko Research, 2019; Saitova & Mauro, 2020; OECD, (Organizational Economic Co-operation and Development) 2021).

The question then arises, what drives Japanese people to think that they are tolerant despite all the evidence to the contrary? Numerous studies on the underlying intolerance in Japanese organizations have identified the Japanese cultural propensity toward intolerance, such as valuing one's role in a group instead of following the doctrine of individualism (Lal, 1998), a patriarchal "company-as-family" idiom (Kondo, 1990), a high level of uncertainty avoidance leading to xenophobic tendencies (Hofstede et al., 2010), and "inward-looking exceptionalism" (Turpin & Takatsu, 2012). Few studies have investigated the reasons why Japanese people do not acknowledge their noticeably intolerant environment.

To identify the reasons for Japanese organizations' self-righteousness, in this study, I begin by scrutinizing institutional theory to see how institutions can easily render their existence ceremonial, thereby sacrificing the opportunity to achieve optimal outcomes. Then, based on the institutional risks in relation to the theory, I show how institutions can do far worse than just behaving ceremonially. The key factor for counteracting the theory is a specific aspect of Japanese culture. Because Japanese culture tends to seek perfection in forms, the diligent efforts of organizations to optimize the procedural form appears legitimate to Japanese people, regardless of the consequences. By working hard to make their organizations more diverse by producing positive advertisements, introducing new slogans and logos, and creating new divisions within the organization, their efforts have been perceived as authentic. Achieving perfection in form and the rituals is the ultimate cultural virtue and aim, and reaching the actual goal matters little.

Psychological studies have found that Japan's unyielding homogeneous surroundings can easily make people biased. Therefore, the cultural background must be considered when policies are imported, and a policy framework on its own cannot guarantee the creation of diverse organizations. If the government and organizations are serious about making organizations more diverse, the influence of culture should be carefully analyzed and the potential outcomes from an imported policy considered for its possible consequences.

The Problem of Institutionalization: The Gap between Formal Organizational Structure and Policy Implementation

Sociologists John M. Meyer and Brian Rowan outlined how the legitimized formal structures of organizations had become irreversible entities in the modern world. Many functions such as “professions, policies, and programs” require the institutionalized context to be rational (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The authors pointed out that the emergence of centralized states and the market economy had enabled formal structures to proliferate in modern society. Rationality drives organizations to “increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects” by becoming highly institutionalized (Meyer & Rowan, 340). Nevertheless, pursuing an organizational structure in response to external pressure does not align with pursuing efficiency through practical actions. If an organization seeks legitimacy through its formal structure, it is often forced to sacrifice efficiency as a consequence.

Even when an organization recognizes the inefficiency resulting from a formal structure, it continues to incorporate the formality, because it reduces uncertainty and insecurity, especially when the structure is legitimized by society, including the government. Organizations that do not pursue this legitimacy can be seen as “negligent, irrational or unnecessary,” with the possibility that they will “incur real costs” (Meyer & Rowan, 350). Inevitably, pressure is exerted to create a formal, institutionalized structure and the myth of institutionalization as the required organizational setting is perpetuated.

This myth includes a ceremonial aspect to induce smaller, less complex organizations to comply, regardless of their structure’s inefficiency in relation to operations. In other words, organizations can claim they are legitimate as long as the ceremonial aspect of their operations meets the criteria. As a result, assessments of outcomes become merely perfunctory. To fill this gap, Meyer and Rowan suggest that organizations need to support the myths by decoupling the structure from actual practice to avoid ruining the organizations’ purpose for existing. The authors highlight the potentially negative consequences of adopting a ceremonial formal structure that perpetuates the myth of institutionalization.

Studies of organizations with an institutional approach provide a warning to organizations to always maintain some distance between institutionalization and practical arrangements to maintain organizational efficiency. Nevertheless, organizations tend to retain their ceremonial practices as it is easier to maintain their formal structure by adhering to traditional guide-

lines. To make matters worse, work that merely complies with the formal structure becomes an end in itself, while the real organizational aims are ignored (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006). Sociologists Howard E. Aldrich and Martin Ruef warned of the danger of losing sight of the real purpose of the organization by focusing too much on the process and treating it as a ceremony. But what happens if an organization's ultimate goal becomes to hold a ceremony without acknowledging it as such?

Because of their cultural focus on form, the propensity of Japanese people to make the form perfect adds a slight twist to Meyer and Rowan's (1977) institutional theory. The cultural tendency in Japan is to prioritize the creation of the perfect ceremony over the primary aims of the institution. Thus, when the organization decides to produce a perfect ceremony, no-one doubts its significance and performing the perfect ceremony becomes the ultimate goal of all parties. In practice, institutional theory reminds organizations of the danger of making it ceremonial. Nevertheless, once a goal is set by those with authority and detailed measures are introduced, making the steps flawless becomes the main aim, and no-one notices whether or not they are marching toward an inappropriate goal. Observations of Japanese organizations' ongoing homogeneous structure, despite the introduction of numerous policies and strategies aimed at increasing diversity, suggest that this cultural propensity provides the most likely explanation for their current condition.

Culture Matters

Although no consensus has been reached regarding whether people's behavior is determined by culture or social structure, it is difficult to consider variations in economic development, political dialogue, and social behaviors without reflecting on people's cultural backgrounds (Dore, 1973; Landes, 2000; Rubinstein, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010; Christakis, 2019). Similarly, culture can explain many unique aspects of Japanese organizational behavior, especially in the field of human resource management (Suda, 2010). For example, to explain the persistence of the Japanese system, studies have revealed many culturally based corporate traditions. Scholars have identified Japanese corporations' paternalistic settings (Dore, 1973) and the human resource department's authoritative position (Yachi, 2016) as the leading causes for the persistence of the traditional system. A community-first mentality (Anchordoguy, 2005; Abegglen, 2006) and a significant preference for homogeneity over diversity (Ya-

mada, 2020) have helped to perpetuate the system. The Japanese cultural background and traits like the tendency to avoid uncertainty (Hodfstead et al., 2010) might lead organizations to avoid introducing diversity as homogeneity is seen as helping organizations remain stable (Landes, 2000). Nevertheless, when government policies and laws are enacted to eliminate discrimination and encourage greater diversity within organizations, little dissent is given (Owan, 2017, Yamashita & Hagiwara, 2018). Japanese organizations understand the importance of following this trend (Sato, 2018). As a result, such laws and regulations have been passed relatively quickly and organizations accept them because, once again, culture works in their favor (Ishiguro & Kameda, 2010).

Despite Japan's efforts toward reform through issuing policies and guidelines, the current organizational settings are a long way from achieving diversity. In the next section, I introduce an aspect of Japanese culture known as *keishiki-shugi* (form supremacy), which not only makes institutionalized organizations inefficient, but it also changes the original goal.

The Significance of Formality

“If the path be beautiful, let us not ask where it leads.” Anatole France

Poet Anatole France, who won the Nobel Prize in 1921, encourages us not to be scared of the outcome, but rather we should appreciate the process involved in striving toward a goal. As inspiring as this sounds, what if only aspiring to appreciate the path becomes the holy grail? In Japan, formality that features perfect conditions (form supremacy) is one of the most important organizational goals, even when it ignores the primary goal of the organization.

The significance of formality can be observed in traditional Japanese pursuits like martial arts, tea ceremonies, and flower arranging (Bittmann, 2004), and some artifacts have forms that students must learn from their masters. Each form has a specific meaning, and if the smallest of steps is overlooked, the sequence will be ruined. In the case of karate, which was due to make its debut at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, judging includes an assessment of how perfectly each movement is executed. The Tokyo 2020 website states that karate (*kata*) involves “demonstrations of forms consisting of a series of offensive and defensive movements targeting a virtual opponent” (Tokyo 2020 Organizing Committee). Rafolt

described Japanese martial arts as the “ritual-like and pattern-like formalism of the Japanese modern and traditional budo legacy” (Rafolt, 2014, 183). Seeking beauty in form can be witnessed in everyday practices in Japan, but problems emerge when seeking the beauty of form becomes the ultimate goal for organizations.

How It Works

A notorious but important part of rituals is the process of rubber-stamping. In his book *Conflict and Change*, the business scholar George Olcott (2009), who was a board member on many Japanese corporations, describes how even board members are nothing but symbols who ritually apply a rubber stamp to agenda papers that must be perfectly written and neatly stamped. As mere symbols who only keep an eye on the organization’s forms, a change in board members does not affect the firm’s performance or financial policies (Olcott, 2009).

After the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011, a former board member of the Japan Atomic Power Company, Toshio Kitamura, issued a warning at the Japan Energy Conference that one of the key causes of the accident was Japan’s keishiki-shugi, “form-supremacy” attitude. He claimed that the emergency drills, which are vital for facilities such as nuclear plants, were mainly formalistic. Because the manner in which the emergency drills were conducted became the ultimate goal, the significance of the consequences of the emergency drill was forgotten. As a result, all parties involved behaved like observers. This led to shortcuts in terms of the allocation of roles. When people start to value only the form’s beauty, they lose sight of the broader perspective. In this case, the people forgot what the ultimate goal of the drill was (Kitamura, 2019).

Academic expert in accounting, Shinji Hatta (2020) provided another example in his book *Dai Sannsha Iinkai no Gimán*, [Deceit-covered third-party committee], in which he denounced the methods of corporations for dealing with corporate misbehavior. When unethical or immoral behavior by corporations was revealed, they established an independent committee – the third-party committee – to conduct an investigation. According to Hatta (2020), however, the establishment of the committee became the goal, rather than a comprehensive investigation of the misbehavior. Eventually, setting up a third-party committee becomes proof of the corporation’s conscientiousness in the eyes of the public, regardless of who constitutes the committee (Hatta, 2020).

Because the beauty of forms and rituals is rewarded, creating the perfect forms and rituals is crucial for everyone in the organization. Observers concede that as long as the forms are perfect, no-one seems to care about the actual purpose of the activity. To understand the Japanese people's reactions to the Nike advertisement, one must understand how organizations interpret and respond to laws and policies aimed at eliminating discrimination.

Desire for Diversity?

In the business field, form supremacy has been prominent, especially since the emergence of the issue of corporate governance (Nikkei, 2019). In this section, I introduce changes in various laws and policies and how they have affected corporate protocols.

In 1985, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Act was introduced, corporations were prohibited from discriminating against female workers (MHLW (Japan, Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare) 2018). A corporation was required to provide the same opportunities to females as those provided to their male counterparts in relation to recruitment and promotion, and corporations were encouraged to prioritize female workers in an attempt to reduce the gender gap in the workplace (MHLW, 2019). Since then, corporations have proudly announced their inclusiveness policies and developed slogans and reframed their guidelines to encourage diversity (Keidanren, 2016).

Another turning point for Japan occurred in 2000 when the government announced its determination to make Japan a bias-free nation (Nakamura, 2017). Due to Japan's economic downturn in the 1990s, a government-led campaign praised the role of diversity for facilitating greater innovation (METI (Japan, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) 2014). Since then, the government has strongly encouraged corporations to promote diversity, and the subject has received increasing attention in organizations and throughout society. Although diversity had previously been interpreted as being related to gender differences (Ichikoji, 2016, Yajima, 2017), the idea of 'diversity management' began to regularly appear in organizational settings, encompassing not only gender but also nationality, sexuality, sexual orientation, value systems, age, and physical ability (Taniguchi, 2008). Today, a range of inclusive policies are seen as prerequisites for any organization to continue.

Since 2012, the METI has presented annual awards recognizing the efforts of Japanese corporations to achieve diversity, without considering the results of such efforts (METI, 2013).

In 2015, the government launched the Future of Work 2035 campaign to support workers having more autonomous work styles, to be able to “shine more”. The campaign also aimed to develop more inclusive workplaces so that various minority groups could “shine” (MHLW, 2016). In 2017, the METI issued its Diversity 2.0 Action Guideline, which explained the importance of corporations pursuing diversity and how the guideline should be implemented (METI, 2017). In 2019, the Cabinet Office published a white paper explaining the importance of making workplaces more diverse to: 1) increase productivity and 2) overcome labor scarcities (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2019). Thus, year after year, the Japanese government has been investing its efforts to make Japanese corporations more diverse.

With the government setting the agenda, corporations have made a tremendous effort to make it happen. When the Japan Business Federation (Keidanren), consisting of 1,444 publicly listed companies, introduced a requirement to publish the progress of companies toward achieving diversity (Keidanren, 2017), two actions stood out. One was the inclusion of the phrase ‘Make an effort to create an inclusive workplace’ in the company’s rule book. The second was to develop a new administrative division to remodel and rewrite the company’s policies (Keidanren, 2017).

These token changes attracted admiration, and for example, many private and public research institutes rewarded the organizations that introduced the changes. When examining a corporation’s working environment, the institutions reported on the corporation’s progress toward creating a more diverse environment. In other words, they indicate what the corporation has done in response to the government’s policies (Keizai Doyukai, 2004, Keidanren, 2017, Sato, 2018, Yajima, 2017). Since the diversity discussion has become part of the official agenda of Japanese organizations, almost all of the publicly listed corporations and medium-sized corporations in Japan have amended their policies and slogans to promote diversity in their workplace. The METI’s best practice awards for diversity management seems to favor corporations that have established a section supporting diversity management (METI, 2020) instead of focusing on any objective measurements of diversity.

Going below Tokenism?

If Japanese organizations’ less diverse environment is dishonorable (Kohira, 2020), it might be easier to make the numbers agree to avoid the negative scrutiny (Chang et al.,

2019) and fend off pressure from the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the organizations proudly announce how they have changed their ways and made their environment more diverse. The changes may involve policies, procedures, or company slogans. For example, as noted earlier, a company might allocate resources to establishing a new section to keep the form up-to-date. Some have argued that corporations do this in an attempt to impress shareholders (Westphal & Zajac, 1998). Yet, the consequences are never validated (Owan, 2017) as if the process itself can be rewarded.

If this approach were legitimized, other corporations would quickly follow suit to demonstrate their validity to the government and to society (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983, Ishiguro & Kameda, 2010). If this conduct becomes the norm, people start to legitimize their actions, which reinforces the form as the ultimate goal, and no one asks why this happened in the first place.

In the next section, I introduce the recruitment criteria used by organizations. Again, the idea of form-supremacy works well in the recruitment system, making it easy to see why Japanese corporations have remained homogeneous even though they proudly promote their diversity-friendly policies.

No Connection between a Form and the Outcome

Although Japanese policymakers initially focused on gender diversity, the direction has since expanded to include various other forms of diversity. The importance of diversity among employees for the sake of innovation has long been a subject of debate in organizational research (Cox & Blake, 1991, Fleming, 2007, Bouncken et al., 2016, Mayer et al., 2018). Moreover, because of Japan's serious depopulation problem, corporations need to secure their supply of human resources (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2019). The importance of providing a diversity-friendly working environment is widely acknowledged (Keizai Doyukai (Japan Association of Corporate Executives)), 2004, 2016).

With regards to the need to boost diversity, many scholars have blamed the Japanese recruitment system, in which companies hire new graduates who expect to stay with the company until they retire, because of the lack of mobility in the job market (Vogel, 2006). Less mobility among the corporations means less diversity within individual organizations. To offset this problem, the government has suggested changing the recruitment process

to increase diversity, which may also enhance innovation in Japan (Kokubu, 2020). Since diversity is more likely if corporations hire a variety of employees at the entry level, changes to the recruitment criteria could be a rapid way to achieve this. Once again, however, the main problem is how to achieve this. Corporations are now more involved in the struggle to amend the form of their recruitment practices. A business scholar, Yasuhiro Hattori in his book *Saiyo-Gaku*, [The Study of Recruitment] discusses the corporations' dedicated effort to update their procedures. Many altered the design of their job applications or introduced an online system to speed up the interview process and make it more entertaining. Some extended the length of their internship programs. According to Hattori (2016), these changes are highly innovative and transformative.

The Consequence of Form-Supremacy Practice

Despite the efforts made by corporations to follow government guidelines in relation to diversity management, Japan has never achieved world standards in diversity. For example, the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index revealed that Japan ranked 33rd among 37 OECD nations (followed only by Korea, Greece, Turkey, and Chile) (OECD, 2021). Studies from different perspectives have also concluded that Japanese organizations are far from diverse (Morikawa, 2016, Sato, 2018, Saitova & Mauro, 2020). Japan does not consider ethnicity as part of the people's identity, instead considering nationality (Arudou, 2010). Clearly, Japanese people notice that their society has not achieved its diversity goal (Harper, 2020).

Because of the form supremacy culture, compliance with the required procedures is ceremonial, and ceremony cannot be defective (Vogel, 2006). To perfect the ceremony, every step must be completed (Rear, 2020), and the formal structure must be followed correctly (Rohlen, 1974). Thus, corporations work hard to perfect the form and do not seem to care whether or not diversity is actually achieved. This is precisely the risk that Meyer and Rowan (1977) identified.

Japan's case, however, goes beyond Meyer and Rowan's (1977) argument, to the point where no-one questions what the initial goal might have been. As long as the form is perfect (form supremacy), the employees have a sense of accomplishment that they are in line with the aims of national diversity. For this reason, Japanese people resented being depicted as bigoted, as the Nike advertisement portrayed them.

Discussion and Policy Implications

Before introducing new, diversity-friendly policies, Japanese organizations need to acknowledge that the form-supremacy culture may be eroding their very existence. Moreover, the culture can easily shift the goal posts, without anyone asking if the goal posts were actually there in the first place. The key to the problem is recognizing that the process is not the goal. The desired outcome, measured by objective evidence, should be the goal. As long as the results cannot speak for themselves, the Japanese people need to accept the fact that they are biased.

Historically, Japanese scholars warned that a tendency toward intolerance would lead to bigotry. The tendency, which arises from homogeneity, goes beyond the point of no return when organizations continue to retain their homogeneity for too long. In the absence of a new perspective, this cultural propensity will threaten Japan's future. To avoid the worst-case scenario, policymakers and organizations need to consider the role played by culture when implementing diversity-friendly policies. Even when the form seems perfectly satisfactory, the organization must understand that the form is not the goal – the objective outcome that satisfies the final purpose is the real goal.

Conclusion

In this study, I describe how culture can distort the existing institutional discourse. The Japanese people's long-term rubric of prioritizing forms and rituals over the primary purpose of a policy or strategy (form supremacy) is the main obstacle to achieving diversity within Japanese organizations.

Japanese organizations have worked tirelessly to create the appearance of perfect compliance in response to the introduction of policies related to workplace diversity. Therefore, they believe that the Nike advertisement implying widespread discrimination in Japan is unfair. Because of the cultural settings, however, Japanese organizations need to admit that unwitting biases can easily become ubiquitous. If they reject being labeled as racists, the government and organizations need to make it clear that they are working hard in pursuit of the ultimate goal for policies related to diversity. The homogeneous settings in Japanese organizations continue to persist and employees are satisfied to work toward making the form

perfect, while considering themselves to be non-discriminatory. In the worst-case scenario, Japan may never be able to enjoy the significant benefits from diversity.

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研究ノート

偽善なのか？ 日本型組織における政策運営実施方法の正統性に関する文化的背景の考察

福岡大学商学部 准教授

岡 陽子

<要旨>

既存データからも日本の組織にみられる多様性の低さは国内外問わず周知の事実であろう。しかし、海外からその差別的な可能性を指摘された時の日本人自身の驚く姿は、よもすれば海外では偏狭な国、という印象になってしまいかねない。

本稿では組織の制度化に伴う負の側面が日本文化によって本流になっていく様を、特に日本における形の美しさへの探究が、形式や儀式が組織運営における最も大事な部分、そして最終目標へとになっていく様を、制度理論を用いて論じた。

組織においてあまりにも形式を完璧にしようとするあまり、当初の目標を見失い、形式を完全な形にすることだけが目標になるということは、当事者たちがそれに気づかず形式が完璧に収まったところで結末を迎える、すなわち最終目標は達成していなくても達成したかのような錯覚に陥る危険性を孕んでいる可能性を示唆。そこから多様性のなさを指摘された時の日本人の驚きを説明しようと試みた。

<キーワード>

政策実施過程 日本型組織 多様性 制度論 形式主義 文化

