

# ‘Power Harassment’ and the Workplace Environment in Japan: The Evolution of the Concept Amidst Uncertain Times

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## Foreword<sup>1</sup>

Before I begin this paper, I would like to note why I am submitting a paper on this topic to this special issue of our faculty journal.

I have had the privilege of working together with Professor Hideo Kobayashi ever since GSAPS was established, in 1998. For many years, we co-taught an intensive course, Field Study, wherein we would choose a theme that we could explore out in the real world, supplemented by our own and guest lectures. Most usually the theme would have to do with workplaces, workers and globalization, and we would take students to local factories and local governments that supported manufacturing start-ups, where we would get to ask the owners and managers all sorts of questions about history, work process, succession, recruitment, retention, competition, globalization...and more. It was always eye-opening and I always felt as if I learned just as much from it as did the students. And I learned so much from Professor Kobayashi, who, with his great knowledge of Japan’s industrialization and economic history, and his keen mind full of curiosity, would inevitably pose the perfect question at these workplaces.

Given our mutual interest in the theme of workplaces in Japan, I thought I would use the occasion of Professor Kobayashi’s retirement to introduce a theme in which I took interest in 2004: the phenomenon of “power harassment.” At first glance this theme may seem trivial. What has it got to do with management decisions, with the economy, or history? What does it have to do with the social life of Japan in the new era? The more I think about it, the more I realize it has to do with all of these. Hence I offer this piece as my first attempt to set down on paper the interview study I carried out in Tokyo in the summer of 2004, on ten people who self-identified as having experienced “power harassment.”

Since the term was first coined by social psychologist and entrepreneur Okada Yasuko in 2003, the recognition of this phenomenon has made a significant enough impact on workers and their industries for the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare to become involved and to engage it in policy platforms and educative programs, including an array of publications and nationwide seminars. Some of the reason for this rapid explosion of the everyday use of the term *pawa-hara* from the mid-2000s undoubt-

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edly lies in its being identified and packaged as a new and disturbing social trend, as sexual harassment aka *seku hara* and domestic violence (DV or '*jee-buii*') were so identified in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>. Yet identification and packaging are not reason enough to make this large an impact. The concept also has to resonate with the sentiments of ordinary people. I think this is what Goodman (2012) had in mind when he wrote that taking a contextual approach to social constructivism is what cross-cultural researchers value. As he notes (2012: 9), "We are thus interested in the relationship of discourses of social problems to wider cultural debates and structural changes in society." What structural changes in society occurring in the 2000s brought this phenomenon to public concern? This is what I seek to explore in this paper.

Before I begin this exploration of power harassment, I should define it. According to Okada Yasuko, *pawa-hara* is "the worsening of a worker's environment or making the worker feel insecure about his employment by means of speech and conduct that infringe upon [his] person and dignity, in a continuous manner going beyond the appropriate scope of...original duties, by virtue of one's power." (Okada, 2003:17). Although it does not approach the violence of life in a war zone, we might think of harassment as a kind of what Arthur Kleinman referred to as 'a violence of everyday life.' Kleinman urged us toward an appreciation of "...the violence of everyday life as *multiple*, as *normative* (and normal), as the outcome of the interaction of changing cultural representations, social experience, and individual subjectivity" (Kleinman, 2000: 238). In coming to an understanding of the complexities of *pawaa hara* in the workplace, changing cultural representations, social experience, and individual subjectivities interweave and collide. The causes of *pawaa hara* seem to lie in the evolving environment for businesses in Japan—including globalization and technology changes, a change in the attitudes toward work of the younger staff, as well as changes in the ways they communicate and interact with their managers. The effects of power harassment are multiple and can be quite devastating, for the individuals harassed who sometimes develop mental illness as a result, for their families, their colleagues, and for the company itself. Not coincidentally, phenomenon similar to *pawaa hara* have been identified in other countries: "harcèlement morale" in France (Hirigoyen 2004), mobbing and workplace bullying in Germany, the US, the UK and Australia, at a time when the world economy has become increasingly volatile, flexible forms of work have proliferated, and unionization has decreased, but in this paper I shall confine the discussion to Japan.

There are multiple layers of power harassment that could be examined, including the individual worker's perspectives and that of their families, the corporation's interests and responses, and governmental initiatives. In 2004, I interviewed ten people who called in to a power harassment hotline, all self-identified victims of power harassment, and all of whom agreed to meet me for a qualitative interview on their experience. Their names in this paper appear as pseudonyms. My analysis of the power harassment issue stems from these interviews, as well as from the extant and burgeoning literature on

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<sup>2</sup> See Numazaki Ichiro (2003) for a discussion of how the concept of sexual harassment came into the Japanese lexicon.

power harassment, and my participation in a "*pawaa hara* study group" organized by Okada Yasuko. In addition, recently I have begun to look into government initiatives on the topic, carrying out one participant-observation of a local government seminar on power harassment (January 9, 2014, in Saitama). This paper consists of two elements: first, I will discuss the background to *pawaa hara* and raise some questions as to its appearance as a social phenomenon. Next, I will introduce three cases from among my informants and discuss their significance. I conclude with some tentative observations about the importance of this phenomenon to the lives of working people in today's increasingly unstable and unpredictable economic environment.

## Background

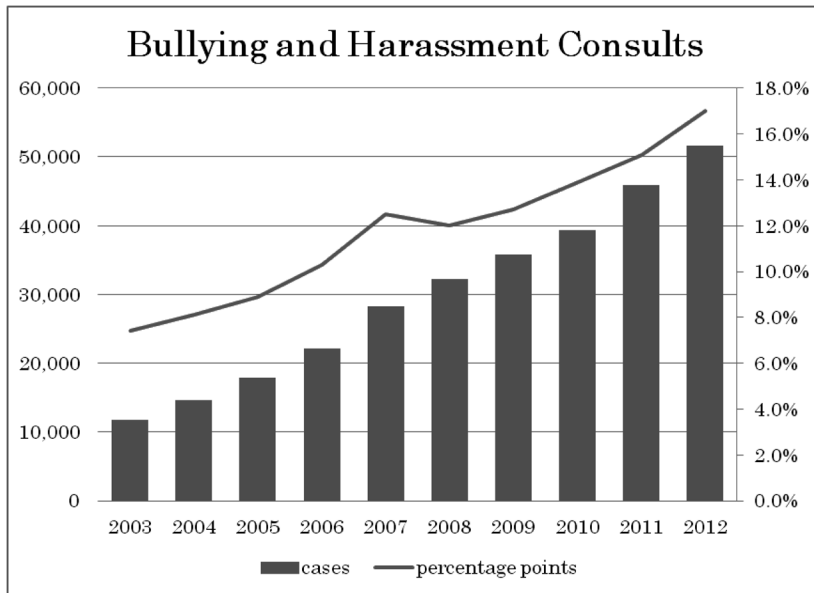
From October 2002 to June 2003, Ms. Okada received 2,000 consultations on the *pawaa hara* hotline she established. She discusses 184 of these cases in her book with Hiroshi Umezu (Okada and Umezu, 2003). People who complain of *pawaa hara* come from myriad personal backgrounds and diverse industries. Okada notes that of cases that have come in to the hotline, those in the service industry take the largest share, but many of the harassed are from among the public sector, schools, and hospitals. The majority are regular status office workers. She hypothesizes that the reasons for this are that regular employees cannot exit from their employment as easily as irregular employees. Moreover, office workers cannot escape; they stay put all day long. Hence, she reasons, *pawaa hara* is likely to take place in relatively enclosed spaces and amongst people in stable relationships. Firm size makes no difference; calls come from the entire spectrum. Those in their 30s formed the most numerous category of callers to the hotline, followed by workers in their 20s, 40s and 50s. Okada feels that younger people's complaints stem from a difference in values between the younger and older generations. Furthermore, those in their 30s often have heavy family responsibilities and cannot easily quit.

## The Larger Social Environment

Japanese workplaces of the immediate post-war period through the years of double-digit economic growth saw their share of labor disputes and unrest, many of them battles for increased wages, benefits, and security (Gordon, 1998). After the Oil Shocks of the 70s, however, high growth ended, and the structure of employment began shifting toward cushioning a core of regular employees with a peripheral buffer of *paato* (Imai, 2011). The days of frequent and violent labor disputes were over. But that certainly does not mean that workplaces have maintained harmonious relations in recent years.

First we have to acknowledge that *pawaa hara* in and of itself violates neither the Civil Code nor the Labor Standards Law in Japan, although the act of power harassment may include acts that constitute such violations (for instance, if a worker sustains an injury as a result of being assaulted by his boss). So, one might wonder, how do we measure power harassment? One way to measure the degree of friction in workplace environments is to look at the statistics that the MHLW compiles on total labor consultations and consultations regarding civil individual labor disputes, defined by the MHLW as "dis-

Chart 1.



Source: MHLW, “Heisei 24 Nendo Kobetsu Roudou Funsou Kaiketsu Seido Shikou Jokyuu” p. 4, “Minjijou no Kobetsu Roudou Funsou Soudan no Naiyaku” p. 4 (Results from the system for resolving individual labor disputes in 2012, breakdown of the consultations on civil individual labor disputes).”

putes between individual workers and employers in regard to labor conditions or other labor relations issues (excepting violations of the Labor Standards Law)(MHLW, 2013: 2). Since 2002, the number of civil individual labor dispute consultations has more than doubled from 103,194 cases to a high of 256,343 cases in 2011, with a slight dip to 254,719 cases in 2012. The Ministry notes that consultations on bullying and harassment (*ijime, iyagarase*) are on the rise, composing the largest share of causes (17%) for civil individual labor dispute cases in 2012, second only to dismissal (16.9%), representing a tripling of its share of consultation causes since 2002. There were 51,670 bullying and harassment consultations in 2012. Chart #1 illustrates this trend in rising numbers of bullying and harassment consultations.

How many of the above MHLW consultations actually fit Okada’s definition of *Pawaa Hara* cannot be determined from the information at hand. However, the MHLW in its *Handbook on Policies re Power Harassment in the Workplace* (2013b: 4) notes, “Recent years have seen an increase in lawsuits regarding bullying and harassment, or so-called power harassment, and even in court decisions, there are cases where the term power harassment (*pawa-harasumento*) has been used.” Hence one could argue that the term has come into the common lexicon, probably since the mid-2000s, and is now well established and legitimated by judicial language and Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) programs, including large-scale nationwide surveys on harassment in the workplace, power harassment seminars sponsored by local governments, and websites devoted to this topic.

Harassment at work and schools itself is not new; there have long been cases reported where work-

ers were sidelined (*madogiwazoku*) or bullied (*ijime, ibiri, iyagarase*) or trained severely (*shigoki*) (Okada and Umezu: 86). I heard of such cases in the lingerie factory I studied in 1983 (Roberts, 1994 and 2014). All these acts certainly fall within the current definition of *pawaa hara*. Ogasawara (1998) vividly depicts cases from the early 1990s of what Okada would now refer to as 'reverse power harassment' or *gyaku pawa hara*, where subordinates get their revenge on their superiors. Recent works on depression in Japan (Kitanaka, 2012) and mental illness and disability in Japan (Nakamura 2013) contain gripping accounts of victims of power harassment in the workplace. As Umezu Hiroshi noted in our study group, thirty years ago, bullying used to be part of the process of the development of a new staff member (Study group 5/21/04). It was accepted as part of climbing the ropes in the organization. Bosses were expected to bully from time to time in order to toughen up their subordinates so as to shape them into good workers. So why have incidents of harassment risen dramatically in the past decade? Umezu (5/21/04 and in Umezu and Okada, 2003) divides the reasons into four categories:

1. The **prolonged recession** of the 1990s caused managers to adopt a consciousness of being under siege, causing them to lash out in power harassment.
2. **Global competition** puts pressure on managers to squeeze more work out of fewer core employees. Many firms began restructuring in 1995, and managers were prevailed upon to increase productivity and raise profits. Along with this came a trend toward more achievement-based than age-based rewards. The notion of life-time employment was also increasingly questioned as firms cut workers through various means (solicited early retirement, hiring freezes, increases in part-time and dispatch employees, etc).
3. With the **IT revolution**, increasingly, managers' authority is usurped by younger employees whose knowledge is greater. It is difficult to manage a work process that one only vaguely understands. One could say managers suffer from "Techno stress." Kleinman (2000: 238) noted that hierarchy and inequality normalize violence. Perhaps younger generations of Japanese, with their IT knowledge, are destabilizing the traditional hierarchies and questioning the violence that was considered "normal" in the past.
4. **Generation Gap**: There is a gap in perceptions of work between those in their 40s and 50s, who were able to build their careers in the 70s and 80s, and those in their 20s and 30s who began working during the Bubble period of the mid-eighties, experienced the heady peak of the Bubble, and were then hit with the long recession, which has been characterized by stagnant or in some cases, declining wages. In addition to experiencing different business cycles, the younger generation also has different outlooks on life. Umezu and Okada note that younger employees have a stronger rights consciousness, so they complain to external organizations if they feel their rights have been

violated. Part of this stems from the fact that since a Sexual Harassment provision was amended to the EEOL in 1997 (Yamakawa 1998–99), society has become sensitized to harassment issues. In my own interviews with self-identified victims, most people mentioned that the sexual harassment law had raised firms' awareness of unacceptable workplace behaviors. They felt a law should be passed to control power harassment as well.

Okada also mentions communication problems between young employees and their bosses, with the young more quick to talk back, less willing to go along unquestioningly with the bosses' orders, and wanting to have their own way.

Here I would like to introduce three cases from the interviews I held in July 2004: one of a female office worker being harassed by her boss, one of "reverse power harassment" where subordinates bully a superior out of his job as branch manager, and the last, of a young engineer in a non-profit foundation whose boss's intimidation led his workmate to falsify data.

### **Case #1: Typical Power Harassment**

Ms. Hisae Hashimoto, age 36, comes from Tokyo and lives by herself. She is a 1988 graduate of a two-year college in Tokyo. She changed jobs twice before gaining employment at her current firm, where she has eight years' service. She is in her third position in the firm, where she performed general office work, sales assistant work, and now, for the past several months, assistant editorial work for an in-house publication. She had no previous training in editorial work. This company has 100 employees. There is no union and no personnel department.

### **The Incidents**

Ms. Hashimoto was harassed by the chief editor of the magazine (also age 36). It began in the autumn of 2003. He started yelling at her when she disagreed with him. Also, he did not like it if she pointed out mistakes he had made or asked him about his mistakes. He yelled at her, "We don't need people like you." He threw things, such as keys, at her. There are three people in this department, including the Chief. The other person is a man of age 30 who did not want to get involved. The person above the Chief is the Publisher.

Ms. Hashimoto put up with being yelled at for six months, but went to the Publisher when the Chief started throwing things at her. The Publisher told her not to argue with the Chief, but to get along with him ("*Umaku yatte kureyo*"). He told her he would always take the side of the editor if there were trouble.

After her complaint to the Publisher, the Chief did stop yelling at her. But then, from March, he started ignoring her. Even if she asked for instructions or guidance, he would say "Think for yourself!" and "Just do it!" (*jibun de kangaenasai/katteni yatte kudasai!*). At the end of April, he suddenly gave her a one-page evaluation that, she said, was full of slander about her, and asked her to quit or move to a different department. So she brought this document to the Publisher because she knew the editor

himself did not have the authority to take personnel action.

In June, the editor called her out of the office and told her he no longer needed her. He said he had the permission of the Publisher. She told him she needed more time to reply.

She then went to the Tokyo Women's Union, which she knew of because other women who had trouble with personnel matters in the past had gone there. The union told her to wait until she got an official notice of dismissal or transfer from the company.

Then she was called in by the Publisher, who asked her what she was intending to do. He offered to help her find a place in another company. She refused. Ms. Hashimoto noted that the Publisher wanted to make it seem as if she was the one who wanted to leave, and she didn't want to let that happen. The Publisher said he would talk to the company president.

After several days, the Publisher asked her to be a sales assistant in the same department as she was currently, as there were no other positions in the company for her to take. Basically, she noted, they were offering to demote her. She again went to the union, who told her they must give her a written document stipulating salary and other conditions, work content, line of command, and a response to the former comments on the evaluation document.

The Publisher then called her in again the next day, and said, "Rather than sales assistant, how about if you work in the Custom Publishing Department?" It would be a different manager, and place, but the same salary. It would start in October. He asked her to decide immediately. She agreed to do it. In the meantime, though, she has to do telephone marketing for the magazine until the new job begins.

### **Effects on her health:**

Ms. H. could not sleep at night when things escalated, and she felt that everyone was disparaging her.

### **Future plan**

Ms. H. no longer feels she can work at this firm for her entire working career. She is worried that she can't trust this company and is thinking about changing firms. This salary is good, though, and she may lose some salary if she moves. She has not told her elderly parents about this incident, in order not to worry them.

Looking back, she says if she hadn't talked back to her boss, she might have been able to escape harassment.

She notes the company should have lowered the evaluation of that boss. They should have a personnel system. He was given no penalty. Ms. Hashimoto also noted that if there were a law against power harassment, it would be easier to get justice.

I asked Ms. H. if the fact that she was a woman had anything to do with her being targeted. She said it would have been different had she been a man: "He was targeting me as a woman—the weakest target." I then asked her if their difference in educational status entered in. She replied that it might. But

she also said that the economy is not good, American individualism is increasingly entering the company, and there is a lot of pressure on individual staff members. "People need a safety valve to let off [steam]. It would not have been this bad in the past."

While Ms. H. enjoys editing, she does not think she is suited to publishing culture, where editors have so much power. "It's hell if you don't get along with them," she remarks.

Although Ms. H. hopes to leave the firm for a place with a good personnel system, she is not content to let things rest at the current firm. She wants to make them repay her for all the humiliation she went through. She wants to make a claim for all her hours of uncompensated overtime, for which she has kept records. She is also thinking of filing a civil suit, to claim against violent treatment. The company knew, yet did nothing. She said she could get compensated for having things thrown at her. She remarked, "In all my career, I had never been treated like this. It was a shock. It was so painful." Her boss blames Ms. H. for all the trouble. He got no demerit for his actions, and she remarked, he has not done *hansei* (self-reflection [on his poor comportment]).

### **Analysis**

The recession economy figures in the background at this firm, increasing the pressure on individual employees. The harasser is the person in authority who uses ad hominem verbal attacks as well as physical violence against her. He also gives Ms. H. a poor evaluation which she feels is undeserved. Finally, he totally ignores Ms. H. in order to express his displeasure and force her out.

Ms. Hashimoto utilized a variety of means to fight back against this treatment. She gained advice from former employees and sought the support of the Tokyo Women's Union several times. Here we see the importance of the community union, as Ms. Hashimoto's firm, like most small-medium sized firms in Japan, lacks an enterprise union. Her consultation with the community union was quite effective, so that ultimately she was able to move to a different post in the firm without being forced to quit. She has a strong awarenessness of her rights, and desires to make legal claims against the company for mistreating her. While she was angry about the situation, she appears to have been in control of it, and she had a plan for the future. Another interesting aspect is that while she appealed to her boss's superior, that man did nothing to help and immediately sided with the editor. Only when the union assisted her did the Publisher start to comply with the law. According to Ms. Okada and confirmed in my interviews, it seems quite frequently the case that firms deal with power harassment incidents by asking employees to get along with the boss, or by transferring the employee, neither of which solves the underlying problem of the violent manager.

Furthermore, Ms. Hashimoto's comment on increasing pressures on individual workers in the firm and their corresponding lack of solidarity seems to speak to the pressures of globalization that pit workers in greater competition against each other to keep costs down. The publishing industry is also increasingly time-pressured due to technological changes. Finally, this all took place in a continuing economic recession. All of these may have figured into this case of power harassment.



### **Case #2: “Gyaku Pawaa Hara” or “Reverse Power Harassment”: Mr. Tanuma.**

Mr. Seiji Tanuma is a college graduate who has been working in the insurance industry ever since he graduated from an elite public university in the mid-eighties. He began his narrative with a description of the insurance industry in 2001, a few years before he actually became the target of reverse power harassment. He had just been given an early promotion to section chief, and he described himself as “*dai ichi senbatsu*,” or, among the first selected. Yet shortly thereafter, the work environment became unstable. Mr. Tanuma was given quite a shock when his immediate boss, age 61, committed suicide in 2001. Mr. T. noted that there had been rumors that life insurance companies would go bankrupt. Many contracts were cancelled as a result. This atmosphere must have affected his boss, he surmised.

After that, Mr. T's department was restructured. He was sent to a branch office in another part of Tokyo in April 2002, where he did office work for one year, and then acted as secretary to the office head, and person in charge of the sales staff, for one year. In April 2004 he was named Branch Head of a sales office in the Tokyo suburbs, with 14 female sales staff, one office staff, and one *paato*. To be a branch head at this point in his career was the natural progression for a core male employee in the firm. The ages of his staff ranged from 73 to 28. Some of them had worked ten, fifteen, or even thirty years. This branch itself had a thirteen-year history.

### **The Incident**

From his first day on the job, one of the staff, a fifty-two year old woman with fifteen years' experience, resisted everything Mr. Tanuma did. This woman, Ms. Y, had a perfect sales record. She was a group leader of eight sales people, and she convinced another woman in this group to support her against Mr. Tanuma.

When Mr. Tanuma first went to meet the new staff, Ms. Y. asked him, “What did you come here for, anyway?” “Did you come in order to move up in the firm?” She told him, “I won't recognize you as my boss.” She also accused him of being a carbon copy of the previous boss, under whose regime the staff levels were cut severely.

### **The Escalation**

According to Mr. Tanuma, Ms. Y. objected to everything he tried to do. She never complained directly to him, however, but to the compliance window of the main office. He made some mistakes, such as forgetting to put masking tape on clients' documents, and this got reported. She complained that he had purchased a car from a Tokyo dealer and not from the prefecture where the branch was located. She complained when he got a ride to the office with a staff member (he had begun to fear driving as he was getting anxious from work stress).

In May, Mr. Tanuma made a fatal mistake in an interaction with a client, and Ms. Y. was able to nail him on it. A client was taking out an insurance policy on his son's life. This client had insisted that Mr. T. fill out and sign, on behalf of the client's son, the section on an insurance form that is supposed to

be signed by the insured. The client filled out his own information as benefactor in case of the son's death. Mr. Tanuma, knowing that it was against company rules, but anxious to get the contract and please the client, forged the son's signature. Mr. Tanuma was accompanied by one of the sales staff, who spread the word about his deed. Ms. Y. then heard about it, and called for an internal confession. Mr. Tanuma could not sleep for two nights and wanted to die. At this point, he was living apart from his wife as a solo transfer (*tanshinfunin*) and had been working 16 hour days, eating take-out food from the local convenience store when he arrived back at the dormitory late at night. He started having trouble sleeping, and he developed a stress-related rash (according to the dermatologist). He did not divulge any of this to the staff. He began to see a psychiatrist in June and was diagnosed as suffering from depression.

In July, Ms. Y. was pushing hard for Mr. Tanuma to be transferred. Her request was rejected once, but then she threatened to quit if he were not transferred, and to cancel all her insurance contracts.

The upshot was that Mr. Tanuma did transfer in July. His doctor recommended that the transfer be within commuting distance of his home so that he would not have to live by himself. Mr. Tanuma was reprimanded by the company, but was not dismissed. He is sleeping short hours (five per night) but better than previously. He is still under medication.

### **Long term effects:**

Mr. Tanuma noted that the harassment by Ms. Y. is likely to make his evaluation suffer, and he may experience a drop in pay next year. Not only he, but his wife suffered stress from the experience; for her it was manifested in headaches and toothaches.

Mr. Tanuma felt that Ms. Y. should be punished by the company for interfering with company business and defying the company code of ethics by refusing to talk directly to him and refusing to cooperate with him. She lied about him, by saying he was not returning to the dormitory every night, when he was. He noted that she disturbed the order of the branch and obstructed business. Because of Ms. Y., his health suffered a setback. He told me with vehemence that had never before experienced such defamation of his character.

Mr. Tanuma believes that the government, which has created a law against sexual harassment, should do something about moral harassment as well. He noted that until now, Japan has been a society where people put up with things, but now there is the possibility for those without power (that is, with lower formal status, like Ms. Y.) to report things internally. So, he notes, reverse harassment can also happen.

At the end of the interview, Mr. Tanuma consoles himself with the thought that he is feeling better now, sleeping better, and that he will get better. He said, "I won't let this stop me! Because I think somewhere along the line, she'll get her comeuppance."

### **Analysis:**

As in the previous case, the traumas of the flagging economy form the background of this account. Mr. T. had experienced his boss's suicide; Ms. Y had experienced a very large staff downsizing at the branch.

One can only speculate, but Ms., Y., a very capable star performer, may have been unleashing her resentment against younger males who use their time in the branch to leap-frog up the company ranks while branch staff, all female, are left behind, unrewarded and devastated by downsizing. In other words, this particular case of reverse harassment seems to have a large gender component that is framed by structural inequalities in the workplace. Mr. Tanuma did tell me, unabashedly, that women are *never* made branch managers in his firm.

Mr. T. suffered significant health effects from his experience. He became depressed, developed a rash, thought of suicide, and had panic attacks about driving. His spouse also suffered health problems. No doubt living away from his family, working 16-hour days, and eating a poor diet also affected Mr. T's emotional balance and work performance. During the interview, more than once, Mr. Tanuma mentioned that he was the sole supporter of his family. This also seems to have been a heavy burden for him, since a failure at work might jeopardize their financial security.

Mr. Tanuma's experience led him to consider options for his future, including getting into an altogether different line of business, perhaps teaching or managing a kindergarten (he had majored in education as an undergrad). He wants to return to school and re-tool. He seems cautiously optimistic about the future, mentioning that he also hopes to support his daughter on her volleyball team.

### **Case Three:**

#### **Case 3: PH of Intimidation in an Engineering Firm: Mr. Sugimoto, a Secondary Target**

Mr. Sugimoto, aged 34 at the time of our interview, was born and raised in Tokyo, married, with an MA in architecture. He had been employed since 1997 in a firm that tests materials used in construction, a non-profit foundation that receives its highest levels of executives from the retired government officials (*amakudari*). The firm tests the concrete for flooring. His major at university was concrete engineering so he wanted to enter this company in order to make use of his skills.

Three months before he came to see me, he had been assigned to a new section of the company. Whereas he had been testing concrete for floors, now, he was testing materials for roads. The testing site for concrete had fifteen people: five full employees, and the rest, *arubaito* (student help) and *shokuin* (retired help). In the past, at least 50% of the employees were regular employees but this ratio had been declining due to cost cutting measures.

### **The Problem:**

His boss in the new section had a reputation for being difficult. Mr. Sugimoto had heard this through the grapevine, though he said it isn't right to judge before you meet someone. The testing site

felt claustrophobic. There were only 15 employees, in two sections. The supervisor indeed was a tyrant. Mr. Sugimoto and one other single regular male employee became this supervisor's target. First, there was violent language. If you made a mistake, he would cuss you out. He also ordered both of them to work all through the night. He was a very tall man, and big. He was quite intimidating. He was in his early 50s. He had transferred to the company when he was thirty, and he did have technical skill. But he was overpowering. Mr. Sugimoto was not the primary target of this man's wrath, but the secondary one. The issue was that the man who was the primary target of the boss's wrath falsified the data of the concrete test results so that he would not incur the wrath of his boss. There had been two men in the past who had quit over this issue. The boss became angry when the materials tests came up with poor results. Although Mr. Sugimoto himself told the company's vice president of the situation in February of 2004, it still was not solved.

### **The Action:**

Mr. Sugimoto first went to his advisor at the university and discussed the problem with him. He told him he wanted to quit. His advisor told him that that wasn't like him. He told him he was not the one who should be quitting. So Mr. Sugimoto decided to blow the whistle on his harassing boss. First he went to the union, and told them what he was planning to do (that is, to go to the top). He was prepared to resign if necessary. There is now an internal group working on the issue. The union also helped.

Mr. Sugimoto's boss is still working but now has no responsibility. He has not been punished. The company is looking into the facts. Mr. Sugimoto has little contact with the co-worker who was the primary target of harassment.

### **Effects on Mr. Sugimoto's lifestyle:**

1. He hated to go to work. He lost sleep. He had a difficult time going to sleep at night. He lost his appetite. He would go home and complain all day long. His wife was really good at listening to him, he noted. (She has her own business).
2. There were no colleagues to whom he could talk. But now, the workplace is more cheerful. And he has stopped complaining for the most part. He has an entirely different life now that he is not under this harassing boss.

Looking back on the situation, Mr. Sugimoto says he should have blown the whistle as soon as he got there and knew the data was being falsified. If there had been a complaints office (*madoguchi*) where he could easily complain, it would have helped.

The government needs to discuss morals for industry, he remarked. This country is feudalistic. It is a hierarchical society. People should be more equal at work. Workplaces should function more horizontally, and have a loose flow in order to go smoothly. I asked Mr. Sugimoto if gender mattered here, and he said it did. A man cannot just up and talk about a problem. Mr. Sugimoto told me, "There is a say-

ing, "It's not seemly for a guy to be weak-willed." (*Otoko no kuse ni konjou nashi*). It's difficult for men to complain of power harassment."

Mr. Sugimoto also had observations about how the times have changed in regard to how harassing behavior is recognized or considered in Japan. He said, "Power harassment is not limited to this day and age. Before, everyone was harassed equally! Now just particular people are harassed. The way we do work has changed. We get more work done now, with computers, and getting more done is expected. Few bosses can keep track of each underling. They can give orders, but they can't keep up with what the employees are actually doing. Supervisors' responsibility is questioned if production targets aren't met. But they don't feel responsible if production does not improve, even if they are not questioned."

Mr. Sugimoto mused that most supervisors with bad reputations have no outside interests other than work. They can only talk about their work. Japanese don't even go on vacation in the summer, he notes. Even on holidays, they go to work! He noted that Japanese need to become more affluent in leisure.

### **Analysis:**

Mr. Sugimoto had noted that two people had already quit over this boss, and he himself would have quit had his university advisor not advised against it. The fact that he went back to consult with his university advisor about this problem illustrates the tight connection between students and their seminar professors in the Japanese education system. He noted that there was no system in his company providing a place where employees could go to safely discuss harassment issues. This is something that many companies are now working on putting in place—compliance systems. The fact that Mr. Sugimoto could go home and talk to his wife about his problems no doubt was a boon for his mental health—he did have someone to talk to on a regular basis, and he said she helped him a lot. From harassment hotline data, Ms. Okada has found that often it is wives who call in on behalf of their husbands to ask what they should do. As Mr. Sugimoto notes, because of the requirements of masculinity in Japan, it is more difficult for a man to openly make complaints at work. Furthermore, he saw the workplace hierarchy as an obstacle to the smooth flow of work and resolution of difficulties. Nowadays more workplaces are implementing more horizontal styles of management, but Ms. Okada has told me that this in itself is a source of stress for older workers who grew up under the hierarchical system. Mr. Sugimoto also has commented on the effects of advancing technology on the situation of management in the workplace. This is another theme that has been identified by Okada Yasuko as a source of tension, when bosses cannot understand the actual work processes that their subordinates are supposed to accomplish. Moreover, Mr. Sugimoto also mentioned the issue of the decreasing number of regular employees, and the increasing number of irregular employees, in the workplace. Although we did not explore this in-depth, it could be that irregular employees cannot be asked to work as many hours (such as all night), and it could also be that irregular employees are more liable to let irresponsible bosses

have their way, figuring that they themselves will not be at that workplace long and have less stake in its functioning well. In other research I have carried out since 2011, I have often heard this kind of assessment of the problems inherent in the increase in irregular employment. Since the deregulatory reforms of employment from the end of the 1990s, and under a continuously stagnating economy, the number of people in irregular employment soared and remains high (Sato and Imai, 2011). In a country like Japan heretofore characterized by 'company citizenship,' the insertion into the system of a panoply of short-term employment forms appears to unsettle workplace relationships a good deal, though more research is necessary in order to be conclusive about the effects.

Although at the time of this interview we did not know how the company would deal with this supervisor, Mr. Sugimoto himself seemed to have recovered from the incident and was anxious that it be made known so that more companies would realize the necessity of setting up compliance mechanisms.

### **What can we make of this phenomenon?**

At the beginning of this paper, I noted that power harassment is somehow related to the state of the economy. As long as there have been workplaces, surely there has also been workplace harassment, but the last decade has seen increasing uncertainty and fluctuation in the economy not only in Japan but worldwide, and it is probably no coincidence that the phenomenon of harassment has risen front and center now. Moreover, I see it as a phenomenon of path dependency: first came globalized notions of the concept of sexual harassment and the rights of the individual worker to a hostility-free working environment (Yamakawa 1998–99). Then the term 'power harassment' itself was conceived to encompass harassment that was not sexual, and scholars and practitioners worked to develop this concept, to demonstrate its importance, and to legitimize it through government ministry recognition and approval. As this was happening, the concept spread through all kinds of media, and resonated with people's everyday experience as they lived under conditions of increasing pressure in the workplace. And younger employees, whose sense of right to self dignity had been acknowledged by the Sexual Harassment Law, developed a heightened awareness regarding the line between guidance and bullying at work, became less tolerant of this kind of everyday violence, and began voicing their discontent through labor consultation mechanisms. Power harassment has even made its way into popular culture, with the phenomenally successful drama *Hanzaki Naoki* and its portrayal of worker exploitation in nasty "Black" companies. That mention of this drama was even made by the lecturer at a recent power harassment seminar (January 9, 2014) in Saitama sponsored by the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Occupations Foundation at the behest of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, speaks to the importance the concept of power harassment has come to assume in contemporary Japan. Has all this attention made any difference in workplace environments today, one might ask. After all, stringent conditions in workplaces remain despite attempts to ameliorate interpersonal tensions by institutionalizing support and compliance systems and instructing managers and staff in the arts of proper business comport-

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ment. Yet the efforts of the past decade have given one more tool to workers: that of voice. Creating the concept has generated awareness and a vocabulary. The recognition of this phenomenon and the institutionalization of mechanisms to remediate it give workers more leverage to manage their everyday working lives. As one female worker whom I met at the above-mentioned government-sponsored seminar put it (and I paraphrase), "Things have improved tremendously because now we can communicate. The workplace is a lot better for it."

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