

Meeting People



Replacing our series “A Day in the Life,” which featured topics for understanding Japanese culture over a period of six years starting in No. 4 of the *TJF Newsletter*, we introduce a new series: Meeting People.

In this series we will “meet” real-life individuals and consider from various angles the culture they represent. In each issue we will introduce a person or group of people and the events they are part of, as well as provide the necessary information for discussing those events. We hope these stories will prompt students to think about their own situations, discuss the similarities and the differences, and gain a fuller awareness of the multi-layered nature and rich diversity of culture. In this first installment, we meet Kumiko, a third-year high school student in Yokohama, Tokyo’s harbor-centered neighbor city.

Meet Kumiko 久美子

Through my contacts with people I realized what I wanted to do with my future



Profile

年齢：17才（県立高校3年）
 家族：両親、兄2人
 住所：神奈川県横浜市
 クラブ活動：なし
 趣味：キャンドルを集めること

My house is about 10 minutes by train from the main terminal station of Yokohama. Yokohama is a crowded, busy town where young people gather for shopping and recreation, but lately, when I watch the people around me while I’m waiting for a friend, I often wonder how many of them know what they want to do with their lives. Until recently I myself wasn’t sure what I wanted—what I was going to make my **goal in life** (人生の目的). Then, while working part-time in a convenience store in the shopping district near home, I met someone who helped me discover what I wanted to do.

Dream for the future 将来の夢

The person I met was another girl of my own age who said that she wanted to be a nurse. She works as a **volunteer** (ボランティア) at a home for seniors on weekends and is studying and gathering information needed to find a job in **caregiving** (介護) and **social work** (福祉). I hadn’t decided anything about my future. I had no idea why I wanted to go to university. But when I met her, what she said really got me to thinking seriously. I started to focus on what I wanted to do and to reflect more carefully about myself. Even now, whenever we talk, it always gives me new food for thought.

I had always figured that I would work for a while, and then, when I **married** (結婚) and had **children** (子ども), I would quit **work** (仕事). After the children had entered their teens and required less care, I thought I would go back to work. But I only had a vague idea of what kind of work I would do. I just imagined I’d like to do some work to help people in trouble.

Then I began to think about what I wanted to do with my life. I realized that if I wanted to find work in mid-life after my children were grown, I should probably have some kind of formal qualifications. I like talking to people, listening to their stories, and helping others—my friends



Yokohama is the capital of Kanagawa prefecture. Yamashita Park, Chinatown, and the 890-meter-long Bay Bridge are among the popular tourist spots in the harbor area. Another is this cluster of buildings called Minato Mirai 21.

often come to me with their worries and concerns. So, I began to think that I could study for **certification** (資格) as a clinical psychologist and seek work as a **counselor** (カウンセラー) to help people dealing with their problems. That made me decide to study psychology at **university** (大学). I like to observe people and engage them in conversation. Among my co-workers at the convenience store, working at the cash register isn't very popular because you have to deal with people, but I really liked that part of the job.

Thinking back, I probably first got interested in helping other people when I was in junior high school, and from my experiences when I broke my leg and had to be in a

wheel chair for a while. When I was a member of the Social Work Committee, I visited various facilities like a school for children with disabilities. I'll never forget the boy who tried to show me around. Watching him brought out my strong sense of caring for others. I realized that you can make friends with someone even if you can't communicate in words, and that we should not harbor prejudices and preconceptions about people with disabilities. I remember well how it felt to be stared at like a curiosity when I was trying to get around in my wheelchair. I think it was experiences like that which made me want to help people who are having a hard time.



At the fish market: I always like to observe people and talk to them. In my work at the convenience store cash register, too, I like to put myself in the customer's shoes and give them special attention. Like when a woman comes in and buys 10 cans of beer, I divide her purchases into two bags so she can balance the weight in two hands. When a customer buys a *bentō*, I make a point of asking whether they would like disposable chopsticks. It's better not to waste them if they don't need them. I try to give service others don't get around to, like standing ready to warm up the *onigiri* in the microwave for an older man who comes in often, and making sure there is a supply of the cigarettes a young guy always buys.



How does it feel to be old and disabled?: What is it like helping someone in a wheelchair get up on the curb? The Social Work Committee is in charge of various social work-related activities in and outside of school. Here Kumiko and her friends are doing a simulation exercise to get an understanding of what it is like to be old and disabled.

Relating to people ひと 人とのかわり

These days I'm keenly aware that we don't live in isolation; our lives depend on relations with other people. I know that I have acquired this way of thinking from my relationships with all kinds of people. I have been influenced by a lot of people: not just my parents, but my friends, teachers, upperclass students at my school, neighbors and people in the community. If I treasure my relations with everyone, listen to what they say, and absorb the lessons I can learn from them, I hope I can myself become a person who can support and influence others. I'm not sure what that will bring me in the future, but I am pretty sure it will be something I can grow from.

★ The photographs for this article were taken by Kumiko's friend Megumi.

Message from Megumi

At school, Kumiko and I don't have much chance to talk about serious things; we just chatter about the television programs we saw or what's going to be on the next test, and such. I often go over to her house to visit, but even then we mostly play video games and mess around. We almost never really talk in depth. Taking the photos for the TJF Photo Contest 2000, I got to know a whole new side of Kumiko, and I was pretty impressed. After photographing Kumiko, I've started to think about a lot of things I never thought of before: like the problems of kids with disabilities and what to do about my future. I like photographing and I hope to get some work related to photography when I get out of school. In this project I have tried to use photographs of one person I know to get people to think about society at large.

Classroom Activities

Questions (for use in Japanese-language class)

1. くみさんはどこに住んでいますか。
2. くみさんは何才ですか。
3. くみさんは、将来、何になりたいと思っていますか。
 ①看護婦 ②カウンセラー ③コンビニエンスストアの店員
4. どうしてですか。
 ①お金がたくさんもらえるから ②自由な仕事だから ③人の話を聞いて相談にのる*ことが好きだから* (相談にのる = to give advice)
5. どうしてくみさんは将来の夢について考えるようになりましたか。
 関係のあるものを①～⑦の中から選びましょう。(いくつでもいいです)
 ①テレビのニュース
 ②将来の夢のために努力している友だち

- ③学校の先生のアドバイス
- ④外国を旅行した経験
- ⑤障害をもつ子どもたちの施設に行った経験
- ⑥車椅子で生活した経験
- ⑦カウンセラーに相談した経験

Discussion points

Compare your own experience to this article and photographs and find something in common or different. Discuss with your friends your dreams for the future. Then think about the reason why Kumiko says she wants to quit working when she has children, and why she thinks it would be valuable to have some credentials when she tries to go back to work. Look up information selected and provided by TJF here. Try also to gather some other materials by yourself.

Notes

■ 1. The Number of Women Working Outside

The number of women working outside the home is increasing annually in Japan. The proportion of full-time housewives is decreasing. According to a survey on ideal life course among unmarried women, an increasing percentage of women think it is the ideal to be able to continue working throughout life, regardless of whether one marries or has children (26 percent in 1992 and 36 percent in 1997).

■ 2. Labor Patterns of Women

Looking at working trends among women, we can observe a clear pattern. The majority work for a few years prior to marriage, then leave their jobs upon marriage or birth of their first child. They stay at home for several years, devoting themselves full-time to parenthood, and once their children have reached their teens, return to the workforce. Referring to data on the proportion of working men and women in Japan and their distribution by age (see Figure 1), we can see that the trend for women forms an M curve, with women aged 30-34 at the bottom center of the M. The largest number of women in the workforce are clustered in the 40-54 years age bracket.

■ 3. Women's Attitudes toward Work and Housework

An attitudinal survey conducted in 1997 on work and housework included the statement "after marriage, a woman ought to put the welfare of her family, her husband and children before herself." Of women respondents 58.1 percent said they favored or mostly favored this idea. Regarding the statement, "women can engage in work, but they should also fully perform the tasks of housekeeping and childrearing," 84.6 percent were either in favor or mostly in favor. Looking at the burden of housework shared by men, the survey shows that on weekdays men perform an average of only 26 minutes of housework per day (1995).

■ 4. Motives for Work

Changes have taken place in the reasons for which women work. Today, in addition to the traditional motives, "to supplement the household budget" and "to maintain a livelihood," more respondents than previously cite "to earn money I can use freely for my own purposes" and "to put my own abilities, skills, and qualifications to use."

■ 5. Reemployment

In recent years, corporations have started to move away from traditional management methods oriented to lifelong employment and promotion by seniority. They are now more open to recruiting people with emphasis on ability and experience. Clearly this shift in management policy is aimed at garnering a high-quality workforce regardless of age and gender. At present, most women who drop out of the workforce to raise families, take part-time jobs when they seek reemployment. They register with temporary employment agencies, work on contract performing specialized jobs, or do volunteer work. However, recent statistics show that the number of women working in the professions and jobs that require national certification—doctors, lawyers, dentists, certified public accountants, and the like—is increasing.

■ 6. Equal Employment Opportunity Law for Men and Women

In 1999, the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was revised. Equal opportunity in recruiting, hiring, assignments, and promotion had previously been desired objectives. The new law stipulates sanctions in the case of violations. The Labor Standards Law has also been revised, abolishing measures for special protection of female workers. Discrimination continues to prevail, however, in some types of jobs, and women still find it difficult to gain promotion and higher rank beyond a certain point. (The proportion of women in administrative positions was 4.5 percent in 1996.)

7. Childcare Leave Law

The increasing number of women in the workforce is thought to be responsible for the trends among women to remain single, marry late, and have fewer children (the average child-birth rate in Japan in 1999 is the lowest in history, 1.34 per woman). (See the population pyramid in Figure 2). In 1992, the Childcare Leave Law was passed, providing that a woman who leaves her job upon childbirth should be reinstated in her job after a year's childcare leave. Despite the law, however, practical problems remain, such as the lack of childcare facilities for small children, and restrictions on the hours children can be looked after.

8. Aging Society

Japan's society today is rapidly aging (the proportion of people in the Japanese population 65 years and older was 16.7 percent in 1999). Although longevity has greatly increased in recent years, just as important in the aging of the population is the declining birthrate. In order to meet these new needs, in 2000 the Social Welfare Law was revised. Persons with disabilities can freely select and directly contract for welfare services designated by prefectural governments, and local governments will supply the necessary funds to the beneficiaries of these services. Under this new system, caregiving that previously was in most cases provided within the home is now being made available by home caregiving services, home helpers, visiting nurses, special nursing homes for the aged and numerous other services drawing on the labor force outside the home. In 1995, through revision of parts of the Childcare Leave Law, some institutional supports were set up to help people balance work with caregiving of elderly family members.

9. National Certification

National certification for welfare caregiving is available for social service workers who serve as counselors, advisors, instructors, helpers, and clinical psychologists at facilities for people with physical or mental disabilities, for the elderly, and at other social services offices.

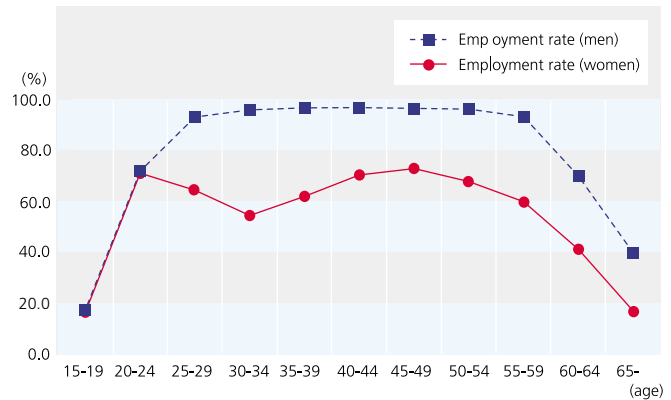
How Kumiko Sees It

Kumiko has always thought that she will be a full-time housewife until her children grow up to about junior high school age. She is concerned about the loneliness small children whose mothers are working full-time must feel when they come home from school to an empty house. Kumiko's mother does not work outside and is at home, so Kumiko doesn't know from personal experience how the children of parents who both work must feel. Observing her friends, however, she notices that those who come from households with some kind of instability suffer from various stresses and problems. Just because both parents work doesn't mean a home is unstable, of course, but Kumiko wants to be a full-time parent and lavish lots of love on her children.

From TJF:

Kumiko's reasoning may be specific to her and not something that can be generalized. The objective here is not to analyze her reasoning as a social phenomenon, but to understand her particular way of thinking. By examining this case, we hope you will become more aware of the various cultural factors (way of thinking, values, systems and institutions, etc.) that shape our decisions.

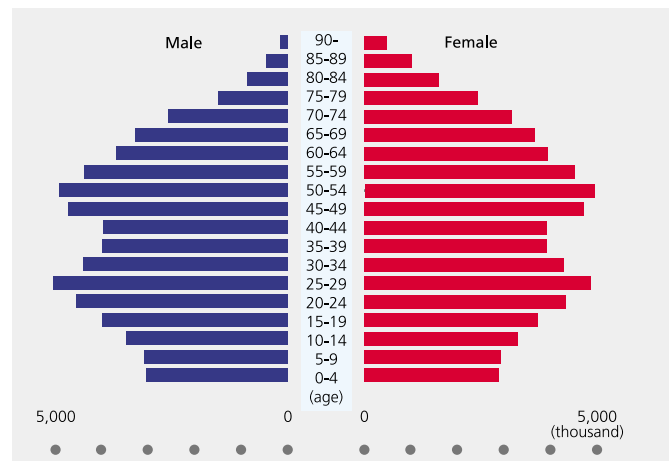
Figure 1: Employment Rate by Gender and Age Bracket



Source: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, *Shūgyō kōzō kihon chōsa* [Basic Survey on Employment Structure] (1997).

Notes: Employment rate by age bracket is obtained by dividing the number of persons employed (by age bracket) by the figure for the population aged 15 or older (by age bracket).

Figure 2: Population Configuration in Japan (as of October 2000)



Source: Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications

* Source for notes 1 through 7: *Heisei 10-nendo Josei rōdō hakusho* [1998 White Paper on Women and Work] (<http://www2.mhlw.go.jp/info/hakusyo/josei/990126/index.htm>), and *Heisei 9-nendo Kokumin seikatsu hakusho* [1997 White Paper on the National Economy] (<http://www5.cao.go.jp/j-j/doc/s9hon-bun-j-j.html>).

Sample expressions

After discussion express what you think in Japanese.

Beginning level

~は~がすき
~ですから

Examples

くみこは子どもがすきです。
家にいたいですから。

Intermediate level

~(だ)から、~
~とおもいます
~より~のほうが~です

Examples

子どもがかわいそうだから、仕事をやめます。
仕事がいそがしいからだと思います。
仕事より家庭のほうが大事です。

Advanced level

~と、~からです
~ではないでしょうか
~ような気がする

Examples

資格があると、お金がたくさんもらえるからです。
保育園が少ないからではないでしょうか。
いろいろな考え方があるような気がします。