Women in a Bubble: Three Theoretical Perspectives on Japanese OLs' Experience at Work

Gregory A. Laurence

University of Michigan, Michigan

When I was teaching Jr. and Sr. High School English in Japan in the 1990s, one of the more surprising lessons to teach, in terms of lack of conversation generated, revolved around having students talk about their dreams or plans for the future (the "What do you want to be when you grow up?" conversation). I was surprised at first at the reluctance students showed to talking about their dreams and then later somewhat disillusioned at the degree of consistency in those they chose to talk about. Boys, it seemed, were often unable to articulate career goals beyond expressing a desire to go to some university that had admissions requirements that were within their grasp and later working for a company in some capacity. Girls generally expressed interest in becoming flight attendants, beauticians, or, from time to time, teachers. Those who did not profess to want to follow one of these three career paths generally, like boys, seemed to have an inability to accurately express what they wanted to do. Part of my education in Japan was in learning about how the Japanese education and employment systems were related to this experience in the classroom. I became familiar early on with the term "Office Lady," or OL, that is used to describe women who work on the clerical (as opposed to managerial) track in Japanese companies ("Office Lady" and OL are English words of Japanese origin and are listed in Japanese dictionaries as honorific expressions referring to female office workers. The terms were coined in 1963 by a popular magazine that invited suggestions for replacement of the then popular term "Business Girl," or BG).[1] It is these women whose circumstances I will concern myself with in this paper.

My goal in this paper is to consider the conditions of working women in Japan using feminist and post-modernist frameworks and a view of the female work experience as a rite of

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[1] Y. Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men: Power, Gender, and Work in Japanese Companies.* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998), 23.

passage[2] that will allow us to see the ways in which women's (and men's) roles are constrained by a sex/gender system[3] and by mechanisms of labor force control.[4] I would also like to consider the ways in which women do or do not have, and do or do not exercise power in the Japanese workplace given the sex/gender system and mechanisms of labor control and the implications that these behaviors have on possible future adjustments in these systems and mechanisms. Considering the ways in which the work experience for women in Japan resembles a rite of passage in terms of the ways that women are symbolically separated from their childhoods, with the company acting as a paternal influence for a period of preparation for marriage, will provide an interesting extension of these viewpoints.

Gayle Rubin defines a sex/gender system as a "set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity"[5]; she further discusses a "systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products."[6] In Japan, this apparatus and set of arrangements are clearly reflected in linguistic conventions and other areas not necessarily directly connected with the workplace, and also in corporate attitudes towards working women, popular portrayals of working women, and finally in the attitudes of many women themselves. While Japan has any number of legal apparatus designed to promote equality, the sex/gender system that is in place often prevents women from deriving the full intended benefit of these programs, pointing to the power of the sex/gender system to socialize the young and provide "ultimate propositions about the nature of human beings themselves"[7] in a focal society.

An interesting example of this might be seen in a

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[2] V.W. Turner, *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

[3] G. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political-Economy of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R. R. Reiter (Ed.) (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

[4] D. Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: An enquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

[5] G. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political-Economy of Sex," 159.

[6] G. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 158.

[7] G. Rubin, 203-204.

photograph of former Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's final cabinet at its formal introduction in October of 2005 (see Appendix 1). One positive aspect of the photo is apparent in that two of the 19 members of that cabinet were women. Looking a little more closely, however, we note that Ms. Inoguchi Kuniko, Minister of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs, appears in the photo in a bright blue cocktail dress. It seems reasonable to ask ourselves: what does her decision to wear this dress as opposed to a formal suit or even the more subdued attire of the other woman in the photo say about her own concept of her place in the culture's sex/gender system? Will she be an effective champion of equal rights and equal treatment, or is she content to perpetuate dominant, traditionally accepted attitudes toward masculinity/femininity? This serves as a visible example of the type of struggles going on under the surface within Japan's sex/gender system. It is interesting to note that from 2006 the portfolio of Gender Equality and Social Affairs was combined with a number of other responsibilities into the office of Minister of State for Okinawa and Northern Territories Affairs, Science and Technology Policy, Innovation, Gender Equality, Social Affairs and Food Safety. The signal that this sends concerning the government of Japan's concern with improving gender equity in the country and the way that the government itself interacts with the sex/gender system in the country seems clear.

Japan's Sex/Gender System as Reflected in Resistance in the Workplace

Japanese women have been shown to use more polite forms of speech than men when talking to people of the same politeness level[8] and it has been shown that what we know as Japanese women's language is the result of a Meiji period "program for women's education based on the samurai women's ethic…[that] reflect[ed] a way of speaking that samurai men prescribed for women (and which they enforced)."[9] This is an indication that the Japanese sex/gender system is a product of the country's pre-modern, feudal era, but that the use of the Japanese language within this system follows a general trend toward male/female speech communities differing as a way of

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[8] S. Ide et al., "Sex Difference in Politeness in Japanese," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 58 (1986): 25-36.

[9] N. Adachi, "Negotiation of Speech Style in Japanese Women's Language: Vantage Theory as Cognitive Sociolinguistics," *Language Sciences*, 24 (2002): 577.

promoting solidarity with the opposite sex.[10] In a sense, this is indicative of the concept of gender as "the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established." [11] Interestingly, research has also indicated that "the linguistic realities that Japanese women inhabit are simultaneously their own creations and those of others,"[12] which shows what we might consider to be Japanese women's implicit participation in the sex/gender system.

How is the sex/gender system reflected in women's actual speech patterns at work? Ogasawara Yuko, in her ethnography "Office Ladies and Salaried Men" describes several examples of language and its use in denoting office hierarchies. In the public sphere, women are shown to use standard suffixes for the names of their female co-workers (i.e., "family name + ~san"), depending on each referent's position relative to their own. As expected, they are also shown to use more polite grammatical forms when talking with other females of greater seniority.[13] Interestingly, however, adherence to these formal rules of speech breaks down when female workers in the Japanese office talk among themselves in more private conversations. Ogasawara points out that young OLs in the office in which she worked referred, in conversations amongst themselves, to an older manager for whom they had less respect using the diminutive "nickname + ~kun" construction that would generally be used to refer to an inferior male.[14] Thus, women's speech patterns, in more public moments in the Japanese office adheres strictly to those delineated by linguistic rules as they exist in the sex/gender system and that provide solidarity with the opposite sex. In more private moments, though, they abandon these constructs for more free flowing speech, creating separate reference levels. In a sense, then, "Japanese women select their speech style depending on their own social positions rather than on the relationship between speaker and

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[10] P. Trudgill, "The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich," in *Sociolinguistics: A reader*, eds. N. Coupland and A. Jaworski (MacMillan: 1997 [1974]), 182-183.

[11] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

[12] N. Adachi, "Negotiation of Speech Style in Japanese Women's Language: Vantage Theory as Cognitive Sociolinguistics," *Language Sciences* 24 (2002): 577.

[13] Y. Ogasawara, *Office Ladies and Salaried Men.*

[14] Y. Ogasawara, *Office*

listener (emphasis in original)," [15] resulting, at times in a very interesting gap between the way in which women are expected to speak and the ways in which they actually do speak. Use of particular linguistic forms in different situations represents only one of the methods of resistance Japanese women access in their working lives and examination of others will provide further understanding of the layout of the sex/gender system in the country and the ways it impacts the female work context.

As noted, Japanese society is one that is clearly stratified by gender; the language reinforces this stratification through clear rules regarding male and female speech. In the Japanese workplace we see, as represented by different patterns of hiring, work flows, and promotion opportunities, that there are "social-structural arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside."[16] As a result of this, women can be seen to resist their secondary status in various ways, including reference to male supervisors by diminutive nicknames as noted above.

There are several other routes through which women in the Japanese workplace show resistance. For example, it is customary for women from a male manager's former office to send flowers to him at his new office following a transfer. Ogasawara shows how these flowers serve as a message from the senders to the female workers at the new office through the size of the bouquet, the type of flowers included, and the apparent cost of the bouquet.[17] This practice serves as a way for OLs to communicate with each other across spatial divides as to the relative popularity of a particular male manager. Chocolates given to male workers on Valentines Day also serve this purpose to some degree, though men are shown to be bashful about the number of chocolates they receive, so the message sent through this device may be somewhat muted.[18]

Another method OLs have of resisting is through actual refusal to work. Since OLs do not have the same promotion prospects as men do, they have very little incentive to work overtime.

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[15] N. Adachi, "Negotiation of Speech Style in Japanese Women's Language": 575-576.

[16] S.B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture, and Society*, eds. M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 67-87.

[17] Y. Ogasawara, *Office*

[18] Y. Ogasawara

Since they are attached in groups to groups of male employees, there is generally no particular manager whose requests have priority over another's. These two points allow OLs to have some discretion as to what work they do and when they do it. Ogasawara shows how OLs may leave work requested by a manager they do not like until the end of the day, so that they are unable to get to it, forcing the manager to do it himself or wait for the next day. Likewise, an OL may simply tell a manager she is not fond of that she is too busy to do the work he is requesting.[19] Managers' promotion prospects are also partially tied up in their perceived ability to manage people, and OLs are often able to take advantage of this as it forces male managers to work to get along with them. Unburdened by promotion worries themselves, they are released from any requirement to put effort into work relationships.[20]

What is striking about Ogasawara's stories of resistance (gossip, flowers, language choices behind managers' backs, refusal to work, etc.) is the degree to which these methods of resistance seem hollow. In other words, the kind of power that the women are able to use in the Japanese office is often temporary and importantly does not accrue to the women themselves. Thus, even through resistance, Japanese women seem to display the "nearly universal unquestioning acceptance of [their] own devaluation."[21] Through acts of resistance Japanese working women may be beginning the process of using politics to overthrow the sex/gender system as Rubin (1975) calls for but the nature of this political action remains constrained by the strength of the same system.

Working Women in a Post-Modern Japan
Post-modernism presents another interesting lens through which to consider the situation of Japanese women in the workplace. The Japanese labor market in general is reminiscent of the diagram of a fractured, post-modern market presented by Harvey (1990) with a clear core group of professional managers and factory workers expected to be in for the long haul (men) and a growing periphery, or secondary, labor market made up of office workers and contract and temporary workers, dominated by women[22]. While Harvey is likely

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[19] Y. Ogasawara

[20] Y. Ogasawara

[21] S.B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?"

[22] M. Saso, *Women in the Japanese workplace* (London: Hilary Shipman, Ltd., 1990).

pointing to this structure being a relatively recent development in the Western context (though with slightly less pronounced gender stratification), in Japan the labor market has largely been fractured in this way since World War II. In Japan we can also see an example of the ways that new production technologies (like the just-in-time production system described in detail below) "and coordinating forms of organization have permitted the revival of domestic, familial, and paternalistic labour [sic] systems…"[23] The familial, paternalistic nature of Japanese companies toward their employees, and female employees in particular, will also be detailed below. The combination of these characteristics of the Japanese labor markets and organizations allows us to consider Japan as a post-modern context in which women work and live.

One of the interesting strings of post-modernist society that Harvey discusses relates to the structures and mechanisms of post-Fordist capitalism. Moving from Schumpeter's entrepreneurship through creative destruction, Harvey introduces Halal's post-industrial paradigm, Lash and Urry's disorganized capitalism, and, most appropriate for this discussion, Swyngedouw's just-in-time production.[24]

What has come to be known as the just-in-time (JIT) production system came out of Toyota's management and manufacturing techniques, but was quickly adopted by Japanese companies in any number of industries. For example, convenience stores receive multiple deliveries daily. Store point of sale systems give company headquarters real time information about what is purchased in those stores and deliveries can be tailored to the particular needs of each individual store.[25] The principle behind this system is that a facility should only stock enough inventory for whatever needs it has more or less immediately, with restocks arriving "just in time" to replace inventory that is being used. This system is particularly effective in Japan where transportation networks are highly developed, population and facility density is very high, and

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[23] D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 187.

[24] D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*

[25] http://web-japan.org/nipponia/nipponia19/en/feature/feature 05.html Accessed: January 19, 2012

space is very expensive. Interestingly, many of the principles that Swyngedouw points to as being descriptive of this JIT production system can be seen to describe the situation, in terms of system-wide control of the labor force, of Japanese women working in the marketplace where this system originated.

The JIT production system (Dell computer's business model of "mass-customization" is a good illustration: When a customer presses "order" to purchase a computer, the production line goes to work to make the exact machine ordered, a batch of one; the customer having ordered that machine also triggers action along the supply chain, with components ordered to replace those being used to build the machine just ordered) is designed to run on small batch, flexible production of goods and to be demand driven. The labor force is shown to be one that has the flexibility to handle multiple tasks, one in which job demarcation has been eliminated, and in which there is a highly valued core group of employees with high levels of job security opposed to a periphery group of employees with relatively low levels of security.[26] Ogasawara's description of the work flow for female office workers in Japan bears a strong resemblance to this as women are shown to work in response to requests almost on a single batch basis.[27] Women are expected to be able to handle a wide variety of tasks that range in complexity, with high levels of on-the-job training (relative to levels of more formal training). In a typical office, the female clerical workers wear uniforms that do not designate rank or seniority and since, as Ogasawara points out, there is little opportunity for advancement for these workers, they work in a horizontal structure in which job descriptions are general and identical across the work group.[28] The high rate of turnover for female workers,[29] institutionalized by some of the paternalistic ways in which the firm orients itself toward its employees that will be discussed in detail below, also resembles the actual high rates of turnover of inventory and production resources that form the basis of the JIT system. Harvey points out that, "the perpetual problem of habituating the worker to such routinized,

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[26] D. Harvey

[27] Y. Ogasawara

[28] Y. Ogasawara

[29] J. Lo, *Office Ladies/Factory Women: Life and Work at a Japanese Company* (Armonk, London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990)

de-skilled, and degraded systems of work [as assembly line, or other repetitive, mundane work]…can never be completely overcome."[30] Japanese companies may have found a way of partially overcoming this problem among their female employees by encouraging these high rates of turnover. One final way in which the experience of female (and in this case male) office workers in Japan is representative of this post-modern JIT production system is in the common layout of the office itself, which can best be described using Swyngedouw's term, spatial clustering and agglomeration. Here, work groups are generally seated at groups of desks that form "islands" that face each other (Appendix 2), with little if any privacy, and with a clear indication of hierarchy.[31]

As mentioned briefly above, one of the symptoms of the post-modern condition that Harvey alludes to is reliance on familial and paternalistic labor systems. Bhappu (2000) has proposed that the Japanese family itself represents an institutional logic upon which Japanese organizations are based and that this structure has its origins in the traditional Japanese family of the Edo (1603-1868) and Meiji (1868-1911) eras. Several structures in the relationship between Japanese companies and their female employees point to this paternalistic institutional logic, with various parental roles being assumed by the company.

First, many single female workers opt to live in a company owned and managed dormitory rather than in an apartment. These dormitories are much less expensive than private apartments and rent includes breakfast and lunch, allowing female workers to save money for marriage; in fact, preparation for marriage is one of the parental functions taken up by the company and the dormitory.[32] While living in the dormitory, female workers are subject to relatively strict rules designed to keep them from getting into trouble and to protect their chastity.[33] Dormitories are also cramped and somewhat uncomfortable, with firms forcing women to live with roommates even when enough dormitory rooms stand empty that each woman could have a room of her own. It has been suggested that these tactics encourage female workers to find marriage partners quickly as

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[30] D. Harvey, 134.

[31] Y. Ogasawara

[32] J. Lo, *Office Ladies/Factory Women: Life and Work at a Japanese Company.*

[33] J. Lo

a way of getting away from the dormitory life.[34] Women who live in the dormitories are able to take classes in flower arranging, sewing, tea ceremony, and cooking as part of a "finishing school" type curriculum that ideally ends with a woman reaching her "goal in" (another English expression of Japanese origin that refers to the act of reaching one's goal) of marriage, often to a man from the same company.[35] Marriage to someone from the same company is shown to be preferred by the firm as it means that the woman will already have been socialized to the expectations of the company and will be understanding of the demands (long hours, late night socializing with clients, transfers to various cities, etc.) that the firm will place on her husband.[36]

As an example of the degree of pervasiveness of the post-modern attitude toward female workers as reflected in the JIT, high turnover labor force management system described above and the parental view toward female workers among Japanese companies, it might be interesting to turn to an example from a post-modern Japanese novel. In The Wind-up Bird Chronicle, a female character named Kasahara May, describes living in a company dormitory in a rural town where "girls all go to work at the factory and save their pay and get married when they're old enough and quit their jobs and have a couple of kids…Of course, there are a few who go on working here after they get married, but most of them quit."[37] Just like the dormitory described by Lo (1990) above, Kasahara May's dormitory offers classes in flower arranging and tea ceremony for women who wish to take them.[38] Also, like the companies described by Ogasawara (1998) and Lo (1990) that encourage their female employees to marry and to "retire early" (i.e., get married and quit), the company Kasahara May works for seems "to prefer to have the girls work just a few years and quit when they get married…It's a lot better for them to have a constant turnover in workers rather than to have to worry about salaries and benefits and unions and stuff like

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[34] J. Lo

[35] J. Lo

[36] J. Lo

[37] Ha Murakami, *The wind-up bird chronicle*. Jay Rubin (Trans.) (New York: Vintage International, 1997 [1994, 1995]), 416.

[38] Ha Murakami, *The wind-up bird chronicle*, 416.

that."[39] While a fictional account, the post-modern approaches described in the novel indicate a popular understanding in Japan that the approaches preferred by Japanese companies are accepted as normal by society.

One final point where the post-modern perspective might present an interesting view of the treatment of women in the Japanese workforce is in terms of education. While the job description of female clerical workers has not changed over time in most Japanese companies, we have seen that the average level of education completed by these workers has increased, with companies having stopped recruiting workers who have not studied beyond high school.[40] While it would seem that a higher average level of education among female workers would lead to over-qualification and increased boredom, it can be seen that education is valued as a trait in a prospective wife in Japan as a woman with a higher level of education is considered more likely to be concerned with and actively engaged in the education of her children. In a sense, this makes women with degrees from prestigious universities desirable for a company from the point of view of having a more impressive pool of potential marriage partners for its male employees, if not in terms of the women being high potential prospective employees themselves.

Work in Japan for Women as a Rite of Passage

A third interesting approach to viewing the experience of Japanese women and work in the context of the life cycle uses the frame of Victor Turner's (1969) concepts of liminality and communitas. Given that, as we have seen, Japanese women generally have less in the way of promotion potential within companies and that they often work for only a short time before getting married and having children, it seems that work, bounded by company initiation and retirement ceremonies, might be considered a right of passage for many Japanese women. We can examine the experiences of women noted above and see the stages of separation, margin, and aggregation[41] that are described as marking these rites of passage.

For many Japanese women, the experience of starting work and moving into a company dormitory, or even a private apartment, likely represents the first experience of living alone and this can be seen clearly as a separation from the family and childhood. Entry into

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[39] Ha Murakami, 448.

[40] Y. Ogasawara

[41] V.W. Turner, *The ritual process*

the company (dormitory) becomes a symbolic joining of a new family where the company takes responsibility for preparing the women for marriage. Many of the characteristics of liminality that Turner points out seem to be present in the discussion above on this phase of women's lives. That the company assumes a paternal role can be seen as a suspension of kinship rights where the traditional family is concerned. There is a degree of equality among all women in this state as represented by the lack of titular stratification among OLs and by the requirement to wear a uniform. The uniform's lack of symbols of rank and seniority is indicative of absence of status and uniformity of clothing. The strictness of dormitory rules, the curfew, and the difficulty women have in being able to spend a night away from the dormitory[42] are indicative of the company's determination to protect its female employees' chastity, or as Turner (1969) puts it, to encourage or force a period of sexual continence. Female employees are trained in flower arranging and tea ceremony, skills that have little practical value, but which are considered culturally "sacred." There is an austerity or simplicity to life in the dormitory and women must accept a level of discomfort in living there as the spaces are cramped and facilities are often older. Finally, both life in the dormitory and the repetitive nature of the work of an OL force women to give up a certain level of autonomy. All of these are issues pointed to as indicative of the state of liminality.[43]

Marriage and the subsequent "early retirement" detailed by both Lo and Ogasawara[44] can then be seen as representative of the aggregation stage as women bring the money saved through working, the education in cooking, sewing, tea ceremony, flower arranging, etc., and their own upbringing and education together to establish a family. Work and the experiences associated with it thus represent a rite of passage for Japanese women between childhood and marriage. It should be noted that things seem to be changing somewhat in Japan as the average age of first marriages continues to rise, reaching 30.5 for men and 28.8 for women in 2010 (compared to the 1995 figures of 28.5 and 26.3 and the 1960 figures of 27.2 and 24.4)[45]. More

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[42] J. Lo

[43] V.W. Turner

[44] J. Lo and Y. Ogasawara

[45] Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Statistics Bureau, Government of Japan http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c02cont.htm#cha2_4 Accessed: January 19, 2012.

women are also returning to work once their children reach a certain age.[46] Changing demographics in Japan and competitive pressure from foreign companies in Japan that are willing to hire Japanese women as managers are forcing Japanese companies to recognize the talents of prospective female employees and to allow a greater percentage of them to take up managerial career tracks.[47] Whether this trend will continue or slow under attempts to reverse Japan's population decline remains to be seen, however.

Conclusion

Overall, the experience of Japanese women in the workplace seems to provide a fertile ground for examining the experience of a group of people through various theoretical lenses. Each of these theoretical viewpoints provides us with valuable insight into the experiences, motivations, and obstacles that Japanese working women face in terms of gaining increased levels of "equality." As Japan's demographic profile changes, it will be interesting to see whether firms react by making up labor shortages in their managerial ranks by tapping the female labor force and how attempts to do so are met by more conservative elements in the political and media spheres. It is troubling, for example, that Japan's Health Minister referred to women as "child-bearing machines" in a speech in January, 2007[48]. It seems that Japan's women have a difficult road [to hoe] ahead in terms of gaining improved levels of acceptance in non-traditional work roles and that the sex/gender, post-modern, and rite of passage systems described in this paper may be very well established in Japan's society.

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[46] J. Lo

[47] Y. Ogasawara

[48] "Yanagisawa calls women child-bearing machines," The Japan Times, January 28, 2007. http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20070128a3.html Accessed: January 19, 2012.
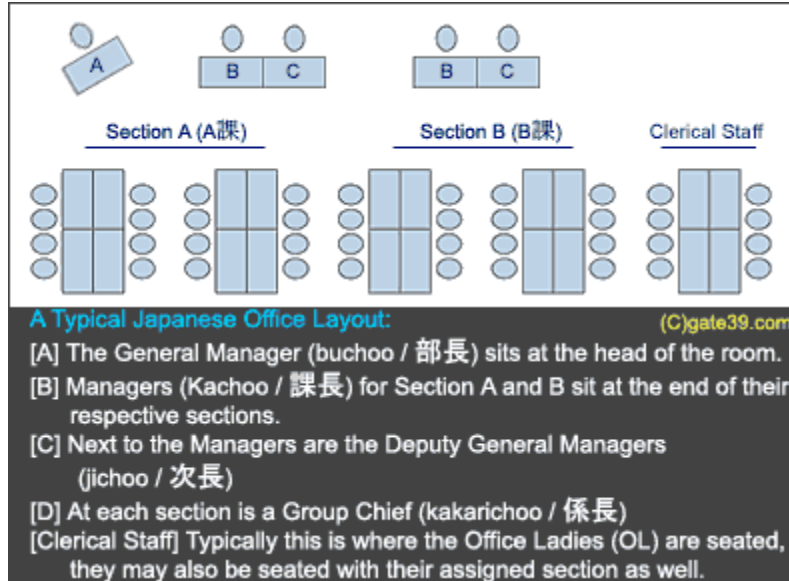
APPENDIX 1

Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's Cabinet, October 2005:

(http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/koizumiphoto/2005/10/31kaizou

_e.html) Accessed: January 19, 2012

APPENDIX 2

Layout of a typical Japanese office:

A Typical Japanese Office Layout: (C)gate39.com

[A] The General Manager (buchoo / 部長) sits at the head of the room.

[B] Managers (Kachoo / 課長) for Section A and B sit at the end of their respective sections.

[C] Next to the Managers are the Deputy General Managers (jichoo / 次長)

[D] At each section is a Group Chief (kakarichoo / 係長)

[Clerical Staff] Typically this is where the Office Ladies (OL) are seated, they may also be seated with their assigned section as well.

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