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Positionality in student research with an African refugee: Negotiating successful interviewing through student mentoring as *senpai*

Having been born in Japan, raised by Japanese parents, and attended local Japanese schools, I grew up in a homogeneous environment. When I started understanding English and consuming Western media around the age of 13, I was astonished by the difference in media representation. Seeing a positive portrayal of various socially sensitive issues that I was used to seeing portrayed in a negative light in Japanese media, I learned to be critical of the norms presented in media discourse. I came to wish to study society and culture to find out why the same issues can be perceived so differently across the world and what influences the dynamics of social relations for the population.

In March of 2021, the death of a Sri Lankan woman in an immigration-detention centre hit the headlines in the country. The subsequent investigation revealed that the detainee, who was ordered to be deported after overstaying, died in her cell after being denied proper medical care (Jozuka 2021). The incident sparked the public's interest in the national immigration system and the inhumane treatment of those detained. I began to learn that the acceptance rate of refugees is significantly lower in Japan than in other nations of the Global North, leading to a large and increasing collection of detainees who could not return to their home country for fear of persecution. However, there was a sheer lack of representation of the voices of those concerned in the media; when their stories were told at all, they were predominantly told by somebody else.

Around the same time, in my last year at Sophia University, I came across a student-led digital oral narrative project supervised by David Slater that aims at joining the voice of a population that is not always depicted accurately in the media. It was a perfect opportunity for me to apply the theoretical knowledge and other research skills I had acquired during my years as an undergraduate student in the field that I came to see as a gap that needed to be filled. Without much further understanding of the legal framework and the reality of refugees and asylum seekers or developed methodological skills in interviewing, I decided to join the research.

The student-led research project revolves around a group of students working with an informant over the course of a semester, trying to find the best way to help the refugee narrator tell their story in their own words. By the end of the semester, we curate the collected data in writing and interview clips for the presentation on the project's website[1]. In the spring semester of 2021, when I first took part in the oral-narrative research, we had the opportunity to narrate the stories of two refugees: Yasser from Syria and Nahed from Tunisia. I was in the group of four undergraduate students interviewing Yasser and joined him in voicing his story of growing up under Assad's regime[2].

Research dynamics, Japanese style

Shortly after the semester ended, I was offered the position of teaching assistant by David Slater for the following autumn semester of 2021. Wishing to resume my research with refugees and asylum seekers in Japan, I jumped at the opportunity to return to the project, this time with responsibility as a *senpai* (senior) student overseeing the progress of the *kōhai* (junior) students. This resembled the *zemi* (seminar) style common in Japan, where the seniors guide their juniors as they also participate in the project themselves. It is a structurally inherent part of the way students relate to each other all over Japan, with the expectation of mentoring from the top and willingness to receive support from below. Although in the English-speaking Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University, the age hierarchy is less taken into account and *san* is seldom used to address an older student, the students recognized me as a *senpai* by calling me Ayano-*san* from the first day, even when communicating in English. Such a *senpai-kōhai* relationship created a sense of closeness and it was developed through in-class mentoring and out-of-class meetings, which often started with code-switching from casually chatting in Japanese to working on the project in English. Closeness, intimacy and trust established in the positionality of *senpai* and *kōhai* were highly beneficial parts of the student experience as researchers.

In an international program such as ours and a highly multicultural research team, co-operation is not something we could take for granted. One might expect that such differences among members could result in friction. However, a study conducted on culturally diverse work groups found that multicultural teams have higher team satisfaction than monocultural teams (Stahl et al. 2009, 702–3). The same study also revealed that groups with cul-

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1   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/
2   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/growing-up-under-assads-regime/

tural diversity in personalities, values and attitudes showed more effectiveness in communication than groups with diversity in gender or age (Harrison / Prince / Bell 1998, 98; Stahl et al. 2009, 703). While this sort of diversity might be taken for granted at programs in the US or Europe, in Japan this is an unusual situation, but in our case, diversity was surely our strength. The different experiences and dispositions each student brought fused into one goal of joining the voice of the narrator through extensive and rather intense communication. In the end, many students commented that the project was the most rewarding experience in their undergraduate years.

Preliminary research—the refugee situation in Japan

The first challenge for each semester was to address the fact that the participating students did not have prior experience in conducting research in refugee studies or awareness of the actual global or domestic refugee situation in Japan. The lack of knowledge among the students is partially attributed to the low level of refugee recognition and the small population of African asylum seekers in Japan. Out of 6,150 applications processed in 2021, only 65 people were recognized as refugees by the Japanese government, the majority of which were from Myanmar, China and Afghanistan (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2022). Thus, it was a task for the *senpai* researchers to facilitate students' understanding of the narrator's complex story of persecution and forced displacement while guiding them in the methods of ethnographic interviewing.

The narrator, who shall remain nameless in this article to respect her wish for privacy, was born in a major African country. Coming from a relatively wealthy background, she and her siblings received a good education and had jobs such as government officials, teachers and engineers. The narrator herself obtained a degree in business and was working as an accountant until she was forced to leave the country after experiencing discrimination at work due to her political support for the democratic movement. She came to Japan through a contact in the early 2010s and has stayed since then under a non-permanent visa called Designated Activities (*tokutei katsudō*), which is valid for up to five years and renewable upon screening. She applied for refugee recognition a few years after arriving and still awaits hearing the result to this day.

The semester began with preliminary research on the global and national situation that surrounds refugees in preparation for the interviews. The students spend the first couple of weeks annotating and discussing the fundamental refugee sources; in particular, the 1951 Refugee Convention by the United Nations, "The International Law of Refugee Protection" (Goodwin-Gill 2014), "Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced

Migration" (Clark-Kazak 2017) as well as on the legal status of refugee recognition in Japanese law. However, they struggled to identify what needed to be addressed with their own research. For example, when the group decided the first step was to try to untangle the many complicated types and conditions of the different possible visa statuses refugees are eligible for, one enthusiastic student ended up listing all of the types of visas from diplomatic to start-up, almost none of which are relevant to refugees and asylum seekers and thus not of any use to our project. It was evident that most students (in our program and most undergraduates) are well-trained to execute academic tasks when asked, but very few have experience in designing or executing a real project. Through this, the other teaching assistant and I became aware that our role as *senpai* researchers was to lead the students to learn in the sense of gaining a "sense of problem" (*mondai ishiki*) or ability to recognise an issue and generate their own questions before heading off to find the answers.

Another challenge was to teach students to learn to be critical of what is sometimes called *jōshiki* in Japanese ("common sense"), especially when it was supported and propagated by their own governments. For example, they had trouble understanding persecution as the grounds for seeking asylum against a Japanese government discourse that continues to foreground the "fake refugees" (*gisō nanmin*). The word is used to refer to those who apply for refugee recognition for economic advantage despite not facing an imminent threat to life or physical freedom. The Japanese immigration service and politicians have argued for a system that eliminates the so-called *gisō nanmin* to protect genuine refugees (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2003). The problem is that this term is often used to explain and justify the less than 1% recognition rate, dismissing the 99% as somehow "fake refugees" (Japan Association for Refugees 2018). Hence, we allocated more time to discuss the co-existence of economic interest and fear of persecution, and the government's often opportunistic use of the argument that appears to reflect academic research, when in fact, it is more often little more than a political agenda. The negotiation of these many "shades of grey" is a skill that most undergraduates are only starting to learn, but is necessary for their development as they begin their own research.

Interviewing—training, trial and error

The next stage was analysing past interviews to generate a theme that would become a focal point for each student. The advantage of devoting time and effort to watching and analysing past interviews is not limited to developing the

plan for the interview that they are to do by themselves. It also is an opportunity for them to become familiar with the personality and the way of communication of the narrator. The first interview with the narrator, which was conducted about three years prior to this semester, made a relatively bad impression on all of us; there was a sense of awkwardness and the narrator was often visibly uncomfortable and impatient with the interviewers. Noticing the tension and nervousness rising among the students, we called for a discussion on the methodological issues that could have been the cause of this awkwardness. Particularly, we paid attention to the phrase the narrator repeatedly used "as I told you" chiding the previous group of students for their repeated asking of the same questions. But we also saw that it was a way for her to keep control of the interview as well as assert her status within the interview setting. It often seemed that the narrator saw the interview as a place for her to educate the students rather than to share her experience.

For the last two years, interviews were conducted online amid the COVID-19 outbreak to reduce physical contact with the narrators, some of whom do not have access to national-health insurance. Although we had adjusted to the new interview environment, we decided to come back face-to-face this semester given the consistently low number of cases and the sensitive character of the narrator, which we concluded was better accommodated in person. In the face-to-face environment, it was even more important to demonstrate our readiness and meticulous preparation was needed.

Despite the efforts put into the preparation, the first interview did not go too well. There was still that sense of awkwardness we recognised in the interview from three years earlier. We immediately held a "reflection meeting" (*hanseikai*) and exchanged views on what went wrong. Including reflective practice in planning and after completing research is crucial to ensuring the vulnerable participant is protected and their needs are addressed (Parajuli / Horey 2021, 4). From a more logistical perspective, we noted that the interview was started in a rush and thus there was no time for the narrator to unwind or for us all to break the ice. The students then suggested that they take about ten minutes before and during the interview to just have a chat with her with some snacks. We implemented the change in the second interview and instantly felt the difference. Providing chances to try, critique and retry their own practice is hugely important for student researchers.

We are always mindful of the ways respect is shown, an issue that is probably especially important when the interviewers are students. Japanese college students, like college students from around the world, are of-

ten quite casual, and our more international cohort might have been even more casual than those at other Japanese universities. Becoming aware of this, the students had to realise the importance of using polite language, demonstrating the degree of their preparation, as well as showing their seriousness and sincerity, in order to give the narrator the respect she deserves and to have a successful interview. The narrator started to show more smiles as the interviews went on and even asked for a group photo after the last interview; the students felt that they had successfully transformed the relationship.

As part of giving students the opportunity to disseminate their research, each semester the class publishes their work on the course website. Of course, few college students can write at the level of peer-reviewed journal articles yet. On the other hand, as students continually reminded David Slater, relatively few people ever read academic journals. As part of recognising the importance of reaching a wider audience with scholarship written in an accessible way, the website gives students a chance to disseminate their work broadly. David Slater and we *senpai* researchers continued to give the students feedback on their working drafts in and out of class, prompting them to polish their writing, develop the structure, improve coherence and make effective use of direct quotations from the interviews. The students eventually completed a piece with which we were all satisfied. However, our feelings of satisfaction were not to be sustained; the final step of getting consent from the narrator to publish her story on our website lay ahead.

Positionality of students and refuges

One of the most significant findings gained out of the experience with the project was how the positionality of the students is shaped by the positionality of the narrator. How the research takes place, and in particular, how the immediate context of the interview takes place, often depends on how the narrator sees themselves, which is not only a function of their personality but also a function of their position in a broader social and political context. The implication of the positionality for the power differential between the researchers and the vulnerable participant must be taken into account, especially when the participants are refugees coming from situations of crisis (Mackenzie / McDowell / Pittaway 2007, 301–302), and currently in situations of marginalisation and legal precariousness. Our task as *senpai* researchers was to alert the students to understand the dynamics and adjust their practice accordingly.

One of the contexts that formed the positionality of the narrator we worked with in the fall semester of 2021 was her loss of social and economic status. Despite the narrator's educational and professional background and a visa that permits her to work, she has faced difficulties in finding employment. Facing rejection in job opportunities as soon as she tells them of her refugee-application status, she has had no choice but to make a living by making beds in a hotel, washing dishes in a restaurant, and sorting packages in a delivery station. She describes, "I feel so bad doing this kind of job because I did not study to do this. [The job is] just for survival". Like many refugees and asylum seekers who had white-collar jobs in their home country, she has experienced rather dramatic downward mobility (Gans 2009, 1659). It should also be noted that being an African female refugee in Japan meant that she was triply marginalised due to her race and gender in addition to her economic status, as commonly seen among female refugees who resettle in developed nations (Goodkind / Deacon 2004, 724). It took some time for the students to recognise the dynamics between the narrator, who is experiencing multiple layers of marginalisation, and themselves, who are a racial and class majority at a private university.

This situation was probably more pronounced for the Japanese students in the class. As the policies and actions of the Japanese immigration system are integral to the project, the Japanese students would at times feel responsible to represent "the Japanese perspective" or be apologetic to the narrator for the negative experience they may have had in Japan. This was also observed the other way around. Not infrequently, during the interview, narrators would also address the Japanese-looking students and apologise before expressing their negative view on something about the country, "I am sorry to say this but the Japanese…," and sometimes even "you Japanese…."Although the sense of guilt created some awkwardness, it became a good opportunity to realise that where the narrator stands in Japanese society affects where the students studying at a Japanese university stand in research.

While the socioeconomic and racial differences contributed to the complexity and difficulty she had in Japan and we had in our own research, our interviews with her revealed that it was the structural and legal sort of precariousness that was the most important factor for her. Our interviews were often focused on exactly these factors in ways that often touched upon sensitive aspects. Due to this material, the narrator began to feel that the narrative she provided was too revealing of her own situation. In the end, after hours

of interviews and weeks of hard work by the students, the narrator made the difficult decision not to have her story published out of her concern over the potential risk the publicity might bring. We tried to remove those more sensitive parts of the narrative but as we did, the narrative as a whole began to fall apart, so integral were these aspects to her story. She still has a refugee application pending and felt that any sort of publication could have negative effects on the review of her case. She expressed regret for this choice, but we all agreed that there was no way to move forward; the safety of narrators must also come before any scholarly goals that might be driving the project. Needless to say, this was unfortunate news to all members of the team who have dedicated so many hours of work to the project. Nevertheless, it was a reminder that in real research, the outcomes are often unpredictable. More importantly, it taught us the vulnerability of refugees, or any vulnerable population, to a possible adverse consequence of participation in academic research.

Moving forward

Even after a year since I first joined the research, I continue to play a part in the project. As the course was not offered in the spring semester of 2022, I have been involved in the behind-the-stage work at the moment; that is to say, the management of the website and the translation of the published results and clips from the interviews. As a Japanese national, I have come to gain a sense of scholarly duty to let the voices of refugees and asylum seekers in Japan be heard in Japanese as well. Although the progress has been slow, we now have the stories of three of our seven narrators available in Japanese, with more on the way.

My aspiration continues to develop. It was the eagerness to fill the gap in the media representation and reality of refugees' lives by documenting the raw voices of the people that motivated me to engage in the project. I found another gap that needs to be filled: the gap between the situation judged by the state and the reality experienced by the individual. I came to the realisation that I needed to study policy to truly understand how such gaps are created in society and how they could be bridged. I was fortunate to have an opportunity to start an MSc programme in international social and public policy of migration at a graduate program in the United Kingdom. I am confident that my experience as a student researcher through this project will be an invaluable asset moving forward.

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