

Michelle Fujii

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Qualitative Research Methods

Dean Snyder

(2080 words)

Writing Assignment 3: Using Oral History

A quick search into the New York Times website will reveal many articles about Japan's peace education endeavors and especially the failures of these endeavors. Despite this, popular culture sees Japan as a country of harmony, one where peace is valued and taught from a young age. Similarly, I have also noticed that when Japanese and US Americans talk about anti-nuclear activism, they usually only think about activism by *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors), when in reality there is an urgent push to increase participation by other groups of people, as the average age of *hibakusha* near 80 and less and less of them are with us today. Conversations with young people in Nagasaki challenge and add nuance to these ideas about peace education and anti-nuclear activism in Japan.

For my third cooperative work experience for Antioch College, I traveled to Nagasaki, Japan, to intern as a Foreign Affairs Aide at the Research Center for Nuclear Weapons Abolition (RECNA) at Nagasaki University. I translated documents from Japanese to English and English to Japanese, assisted with conferences and events, and sat in on classes focused on current nuclear weapons issues. I also conducted a mini-qualitative research project, to examine the peace education and youth peace activism in Nagasaki. One of my main sources of information was oral histories I collected through interviewing my co-workers and students at the universities.

Portelli says "Oral sources are generated in a dialogic exchange – an interview – literally a looking at each other, an exchange of gazes" (Portelli). Looking back, I can see that this was true. The interviews I conducted with my peers and co-workers were a way for me to gather stories, but also a conversation, a give and take

of ideas. In this way, oral history exemplifies the dilemma and beauty of qualitative research, where while one is gathering knowledge, one is simultaneously co-producing it as well.

I believe there existed between my interviewees and myself a unique relationship because of our shared roots in Nagasaki, in addition to the fact that I was also fluent in their first language, Japanese. My grandfather went to the medical college at the University of Nagasaki and lived through WWII Japan along with my grandmother. While my grandfather survived the Nagasaki bombing because he was away for summer vacation, my more distant relatives were killed in the Hiroshima bombing.

However, my interviewees and myself also had significant differences, mainly that I was educated in the U.S. while they were not. “It would be a mistake to assume that only similarity allows interviewees to express themselves, that only similarity establishes the ‘trust’ on which dialogue is founded,” says Portelli. “By definition, in fact, an exchange of knowledge has a meaning only if this knowledge is not previously shared – if, that is, between the subjects involved there exists a meaningful difference and one of them is in a learning situation” (Portelli). I believe the differences we had, played a unique role in awakening a desire among my interviewees to share their thoughts and experiences in hopes of reaching a broader audience outside of their communities.

I identified my interviewees based on who I met and who I was introduced to. I was interested in “young people” but kept that definition vague on purpose to I could encounter a variety of experiences. While I interviewed a total of five people, I would like to focus this paper on the interview I had with Ayumi Inagaki, a student at Nagasaki University from Aichi Prefecture, studying anthropology and sociology. I interviewed two other students, one of my co-workers, and my supervisor at RECNA. While I conducted the interview in Japanese, the below quotes have been translated into English for this essay.

Ayumi didn’t “know what ‘peace education’ means exactly” when I asked her, but “of course we learned in middle school and high school the fact that, in history, a nuclear bomb was dropped on us, but not about what kind of damage there was,”

she said. For a school field trip in sixth grade, she had gone to Hiroshima. This was her second trip there, as she had gone before with her family when she was in the third grade. On her second trip with her class, she went to the Nuclear Bomb Dome and heard stories from *hibakusha*. “I only remember that it was scary,” she recalled. She didn’t remember learning anything about the history or issues surrounding it. Many I talked to in Nagasaki echoed this sentiment that peace education was mostly something that they perceived as scary.

However, this changed when Ayumi came to Nagasaki University. She always thought that “as a human being, [nuclear weapons issues] was something I should know about, but that was about it. It wasn’t like I really wanted to study about this, or like thought it was very interesting,” she said. But her first summer in Nagasaki, she went to the Nagasaki Peace park on August 9 and heard a powerful speech by a *hibakusha*.

“They were speaking against [Prime Minister] Abe’s policies,” said Ayumi. Abe goes to the Peace Park every August so he was there to speak in defense of his position. “The amount of applause after the *hibakusha* spoke, and after Mr. Abe spoke, when the *hibakusha* spoke it was huge, but when it was Mr. Abe, it was barely audible. The difference was amazing,” Ayumi continued.

She was surprised by the difference in enthusiasm and realized the *hibakusha* was “really thinking about Japan.” “The opposing point of view was such a breath of fresh air,” she added.

This event picked her interest, and she decided to take a class at Nagasaki University solely focused on current nuclear weapons issues, which furthered her interest in the topic. Nagasaki University students were required to take some classes that were not divisional and among them was the class on current nuclear weapons issues. After that, she just wanted to know more and more, and the subject matter felt exciting, she said.

Around this time she saw a brochure for a competitive program called the Nagasaki Youth Delegation and decided to apply. While she was interested in the mission of the Youth Delegation, which includes advocacy for nuclear weapons abolition, it was also a plus for her that the Youth Delegation program included

going to the U.N. “I thought it was such a great opportunity that I could get involved with activities directly relating to something I was studying,” she said.

The Nagasaki Youth Delegation is a program that was started at the same time as the RECNA in 2012. It is unique in that Nagasaki Prefecture, Nagasaki City, and Nagasaki University fund it. Anyone who lives in Nagasaki and is between the ages of 18 and 25 can participate. There had been four iterations by the same I was in Nagasaki. The first two sessions went to the preparation meeting for the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) conference, the third to the UN headquarters in NYC for the actual NPT conference, and then the fourth stayed in Asia and designed and executed a “Peace Caravan” program that toured South Korea, Mongolia, and China, and then brought back WWII experiences and stories that most Japanese are not familiar with.

Through the Youth Delegation, Ayumi attended the NPT conference at the UN headquarters in NYC. She was surprised that “the conference didn’t move along at all.”

“When I was learning about these issues I didn’t think nuclear weapons were going to disappear right away, and it’s not like I was really expecting anything, but when I was actually at the UN conference, it was such a cold feeling. And how do I say this, I didn’t understand how international conferences proceeded. And everyone had already prepared what they were going to say. And rather than a conference, it was just a place to say what you had already come prepared with,” she said. “And I thought, hey, is this really a discussion? ... Does it even matter that everyone is gathered?”

She also thought “the gap between the countries who have [nuclear weapons] and who don’t have [nuclear weapons] was very great.” However, the biggest sock for her was, “how weak Japan is.”

“Japan had the nuclear bomb dropped on it, and I thought was in a position to take a leadership role, but in reality, at the conference... Japan wouldn’t say anything definitive and wouldn’t even say anything like ‘let’s get rid of nuclear weapons,’” she said.

“Japan, at the end, at least said it wanted each country’s representatives to come to Nagasaki or Hiroshima and see the damage of the nuclear bomb and what kind of people live there now, and this sort of thing. They proposed this. But China got really angry regarding this,” she said, “and in the end this was taken out [of the report created at the end of the conference that outlines what should be accomplished during the next five years until the next NPT conference].

“And the reason why China got upset was because in it’s historical relationship with Japan, Japan did horrendous things to China... and Japan hasn’t formally apologized or anything... so they are still stuck on it... And we don’t teach about this in school... we skip what Japan did and go straight to ‘the bomb was dropped on Japan,’ and stuff. So they are also angry about this... It’s not written about in textbooks, and wording is changed so it sounds not so bad. That fact that Japan invaded isn’t written... So China thinks it’s unforgivable that Japan appeals to the world as a victim,” she said.

“And of course China is utilizing this for political reasons... But that is a separate discussion,” she continued. “I was shocked by this... and I realized even if Japan said something, there is a country that will fight against it ... you have to look at it from both sides, what was done to Japan and also what Japan did,” she concluded.

This realization led to her forming the “Peace Caravan” program with her Youth Delegation peers that aimed to bring this holistic view of WWII to Japanese middle and high school students. They visited seven schools and spoke to a few hundred students. Their goal was to get Japanese students to think critically about current nuclear weapons issues.

She said there were many challenges in creating this program, among them, trying to fit all they wanted to say in just 50 minutes, and adjusting the program content depending on age, if the school was private or public, what the students were studying, and whether or not the school was in a city that had experienced a nuclear bomb or not. The most shocking for me, was when Ayumi told me that knowledge surrounding the bombings varied greatly, to the point where some

students didn't know about them at all. Some students didn't know what nuclear weapons were or asked if nuclear weapons were bombs.

The "Peace Caravan" didn't want to push an opinion, but instead have the students gain the information to argue their own point of view. Ayumi said this was hard, as students weren't used to forming their own opinions and wanted them to tell them what they were supposed to think about all of this. Especially in Hiroshima, she told me teachers were disappointed that the group didn't push an anti-nuclear weapon agenda.

It was eye opening and inspiring for me to converse with and work with so many young people who were engaged with nuclear weapons issues and passionate about changing the current state of the world. It also made me realize what a valuable tool oral history was. Not only was I able to learn so much from the interviews I was able to collect, I believe there are so many more stories that need to be heard. Portelli says oral sources "help us question the boundary between what is of concern to history and what is not" (Portelli). I believe oral sources, when collected ethically and archived properly, can be an invaluable resource for educating the next generation about war and massive destruction. Nuclear bombs, especially, are considered an ancient, historical issue not relevant to today, and this can be changed significantly by hearing stories directly from the source.

*The quotes from my interview with Ayumi have been translated from the original Japanese.

Works Cited

Portelli, A. "A dialogical relationship. An approach to oral history"

RECNA website: <<http://www.recna.nagasaki-u.ac.jp/recna/>>