

Disaster volunteers and two types of interest

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Paper Presented at the 7th International Conference of
the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR),
Bangkok, Thailand. July 9-12, 2006.

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Abstract

The present study investigated two types of volunteer interests. Yamaguchi, et al. (2003) described that recent university students learn by “circumstantial interest,” instead of “structural interest.” “Structural interest” is based on narratives with coherent logic, whereas circumstantial interest is not. According to Yamaguchi’s discussion, promotion of activity such as volunteering must be focused on the students with “circumstantial interests.”

On October 23, 2004, the Mid Niigata prefecture Earthquake caused severe damage and killed more than 50 people in the northern part of Japan. Many residents in the disaster area had to leave their own home and evacuate to shelters, such as school gymnasiums. After several weeks, they moved from the shelters to temporary housing.

A Japanese disaster nonprofit organization, NVNAD (Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster) promoted its disaster relief activity immediately after the earthquake. The second author was dispatched to the disaster area as a board member of the organization the next day. After a few weeks, NVNAD and another nonprofit organization formed a consortium for the disaster relief, “Support Group from KOBE” and opened an operating base near a group of temporary housing complexes in the disaster area.

The students of Osaka university joined the activities of the “Support Group from KOBE,” and they very competently managed the creation of space for the residents of the provisional houses. The space was arranged to provide comfort and relief and to be free from tension and anxiety. Most of these students also had “circumstantial interest,” instead of “structural interest” as Yamaguchi et al. stated.

Nonprofit organizations are “not for profit, but for mission” organizations. Therefore, the relationship between all of the action of nonprofit organizations and their mission must be accountable. In other words, nonprofit organizations must have “structural interest.” However, nonprofit organizations are required to act in a flexible and impromptu manner for disaster relief. In such a situation, “structural interest,” which is fixed and static interest, is not always effective, and “circumstantial interest” fits with the flux context in disaster. While nonprofit organizations maintained “structural interest,” the students exemplified the significance of volunteers working with “circumstantial interest” in a disaster.

Introduction

The present study investigated two types of volunteer interest, “circumstantial interest” and “structural interest” in the context of disaster volunteer activity in Japan, and discussed the relationship between disaster volunteer and disaster nonprofit organizations.

One of the reasons that we focus on disaster² is that Japan is a disaster-prone country, particularly to earthquakes. For instance, the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 killed over 100,000 people. After the Second World War, the Fukui Earthquake in 1948 killed over 3,700 people. In January 17, 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (Kobe Earthquake) killed more than 6,400 people in and around Kobe. Disaster prevention, disaster mitigation, disaster relief, and post-disaster reconstruction are always critical issues in Japan.

In addition, many people participated in volunteer activity following the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. One theory claims that over 1 million people joined the activities in terms of man-days. The appearance of so many volunteers was unprecedented in Japanese history, although most were not trained for disaster relief and were so-called spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers.

The impact of the disaster volunteers was so strong that volunteering became normal in Japanese society after the quake. Volunteering was a rare and praiseworthy deed before the quake, but the word “Borantia”, the phoneticized version of the English term “volunteer,” also became popular in Japanese society. The quake also sent shock waves through a third sector in Japan. In particular, several tens of disaster nonprofit organizations were established, some of which launched two nationwide networks of disaster nonprofit organizations.

On October 23, 2004, the Mid Niigata prefecture Earthquake caused severe damage and killed more than 50 people in the northern part of Japan. Many residents in the disaster area had to leave their own homes and evacuate to shelters, such as school gymnasiums. After several weeks, they moved from the shelters to temporary housing. We focus on the activity of university students, who collaborated with a consortium of disaster nonprofit organizations following this disaster.

Studies on disaster volunteers

Studies on disaster volunteers are mainly promoted in the United States. Quarantelli & Dynes (1970) edited a special edition on disaster in a journal, *American Behavioral Scientist*, and there are also some articles about nonprofit organizations, such as the American Red Cross and

² In this article, we focus only on natural disasters because man-made emergencies (e.g. plane/railway accidents or mass terrorism) are clearly distinguished from disaster in the Japanese context.

the Salvation Army. However, according to Wolensky (1979), research on disaster volunteers was rare at the end of the 1970s, although there was some research in the 1950s. Zakour et al. (1991) summarized details of voluntary organizations active in disaster in the United States. According to the research, disaster nonprofit organizations are especially active just after disasters, when they work for rescue and provide communication and coordination functions for police agencies, government and private companies donating goods.

On the other hand, studies on Japanese disaster volunteers emerged just after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. Some research concerning volunteers working to support evacuees in shelters has been promoted (e.g., Sugiman, Atsumi, Nagata and Watanabe, 1995; Yamori, 1997; Shimizu, Y., Mizuta, K., Akiyama, M., Ura, M., Takemura, K., Nishikawa, M., Matsui, Y. and Miyato, M., 1997). Hashimoto (2000) mentioned the relationship between local government and disaster volunteers when describing local government activity following the quake.

After the quake, the disaster area and the field of disaster volunteers are subject to certain changes. For example, rehabilitation and the process of revitalizing the disaster area are discussed. Shaw and Goda (2004) describe the social change in the disaster area from the viewpoint of creating a sustainable civil society. Disaster nonprofit organizations were launched after the quake, some of which formed a nationwide network of disaster nonprofit organizations (e.g. Atsumi and Suzuki, 2003). In addition, many students participated in volunteer activity. According to Suzuki, Suga, Atsumi (2003), there are some reports which claimed that 40-60% of all of volunteers in the disaster area were students³ in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.

Student volunteers and two types of interest

One of the most popular issue on the investigation of volunteering is motivation or interest. Clary et al. (1998) investigated the 6 factors of the motivation of volunteering through functional approach. They also developed their Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI). In their view, volunteering provides people 6 types of benefits as follows: (a) "Volunteerism provides for individuals to express values related to altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others" (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1517) (*values*); (b) volunteering provides new opportunity for learning and experience (*understanding*); (c) volunteering contributes to crating social ties with others (*social*); (d) volunteering benefit people to engage better carrier (*carrier*); (e) volunteering, "in the case of

³ Historically, we have seen student volunteers following disasters such as the Mino-Owari earthquake (Nobi earthquake) in 1891 (Hirose, 2004). Suzuki, Suga, Atsumi (2003) report that there were student volunteers in Japanese disasters such as the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923) and Fukui Earthquake (1948). However, these activities were not recognized in Japanese society as students' normal activity because volunteering itself was not popular in Japan.

⁵ NVNAD has its roots in the activity of Nishinomiya Volunteer Network (NVN) in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (1995), and was renamed NVNAD in 1996. NVNAD is one of the promoters of J-NET, a nationwide network of disaster nonprofit organizations.

volunteerism, may serve to reduce guilt over being more fortunate than others and to address one's own personal problems.” (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1518) (*protective*); (f) enhancement function of volunteering “involves a motivational process that centers on the ego's growth and development and involves positive strivings of the ego” (Clary et al., 1998, p. 1518) (*enhancement*).

However, Clary et al.'s approach based on the mind-in-body perspective of traditional psychology. Gergen (1994) makes an objection to the legacy mind-in-body view of psychology through his narrative approach to “self.” In his view, which is typical perspective of social constructionism, “self” is not exist statically in their body, but manifest through narrative about their selves. Atsumi (2005) also pointed out the importance of narrative approach to the investigation of disaster volunteer. Therefore, we should focus on the narratives based on the Gergen's view toward the investigation of disaster volunteering, although Clary et al. used the survey data,

Yamaguchi, Masuda, Seki and Atsumi (2003) discussed students joining in a study tour of an environmental NGO. They showed that recent university students learn by “circumstantial interest,” instead of “structural interest.” “Structural interest” is based on narratives with coherent logic, whereas circumstantial interest. In other words, “structural interest” is expressed as a rational explanation of their interest, while “circumstantial interest” is related without rationality. For instance, some students say that they joined the activity because they wanted to do something they were only able to do as students. However, Yamaguchi et. al. shows that their statements are groundless and illogical because there are so many kinds of activities that can only be done when one is a student. Such an interest with such groundless and illogical statements, is actually a “circumstantial interest”. In their discussion, the promotion of activities such as volunteering must be focused on students with “circumstantial interests.”

According to Yamaguchi et. al, structural interest is not always effective for students' learning in environmental education, because students with structural interest tend to be swayed by preconceived ideas. On-site activity in environmental education turns to be merely a means of confirming prior leaning for such students, and they do not learn from the on-site activity.

On the other hand, circumstantial interest sometimes disturbs the learning about the environment during the study trip. That is because activity based on circumstantial interest turns into field tasting, and means the students don't learn from their experience on the study trip. Yamaguchi et. al, reports about a student who remarks “I realized that I have so much to be thankful for” in an after-trip report as an example.

Here we should return to the main point, disaster relief, although the discussion of Yamaguchi et. al focused on the activity of students with environmental NGOs. In this article, we

examine a case whereby student volunteers with circumstantial interest are active in a disaster and discuss the effectiveness of the students' activity as disaster relief. We discuss the relationship between volunteer and nonprofit organization in disaster relief through the examination of the case.

Case

Background

On October 23, 2004, the Mid Niigata Prefecture Earthquake caused severe damage in the northern part of Japan. Over 100,000 people were evacuated from their homes to individual shelters, such as gymnasiums. Official agencies, such as police, the fire department and the Self-Defense Forces worked for the rescue and relief activity and supported the evacuees.

The construction of temporary housing commenced a few days after the quake, and evacuees who were unable to return to their homes were moved there about one month later. In particular, surviving the winter was a critical issue because the Mid Niigata prefecture area is well known for having one of the heaviest snowfalls in the world.

Nonprofit organizations also played an active role in the relief activity. Some started performing their activities in the form of cooperation within nationwide networks of disaster nonprofit organizations. In particular, many volunteer centers were launched in the disaster area with the support of disaster nonprofit organizations. In addition, some of these nonprofit organizations promoted their activity based on mid-and-long term perspectives. That is because many people were unable to return to their own homes immediately and psychosocial problems, such as rehabilitation and revitalization of communities, just did not fade away.

Outline of disaster relief activity of "Support Group from KOBE" and from HUS

A Japanese disaster nonprofit organization, NVNAD (Nippon Volunteer Network Active in Disaster)⁵ in Kobe, near to Osaka, promoted its disaster relief activity immediately after the earthquake. After a few weeks, NVNAD and another nonprofit organization formed a consortium for the disaster relief, entitled "Support Group from KOBE." The group rented a room in an office building and opened an operating base near a group of temporary housing complexes in the disaster area.

Since just after the quake, each of the authors promoted volunteering during times of disaster, based on medium and long term perspectives. The second author has visited the disaster area frequently and the first author launched and managed a mailing list, which is named "fromHUS", and includes faculty and students of Osaka University as its members⁶. The group,

⁶ The group was named after the students' affiliation, School of Human Sciences and Graduate

which consisted of members of the mailing list, was also known as “fromHUS” several weeks after starting up.

The members of fromHUS joined the activities of the “Support Group from KOBE.” Although the Mid Niigata Prefecture area was far from Osaka, the members traveled to the disaster area from over 400km away via night trains. They very competently managed the creation of space for the residents of provisional homes in the operating base of “Support Group from KOBE.” The space was arranged to provide comfort and relief and to relieve tension and anxiety for the residents. Specifically, they opened a tearoom with the support of a coffee company in Kobe. Not only did they provide coffee, they also engaged in various activities to manage the space, such as making signboards, arranging furniture and redecorating the room.

The managed tearoom was promoted, not only for providing drinks, but also as a means of producing an alternative environment and atmosphere for the residents in the temporary housing complex. Therefore, dialogue with visitors from the temporary housing complex over cups of coffee represented one of the most important roles of the members, although it initially appeared to be no more than killing time. The support Group from KOBE and members of fromHUS also promoted other activities, such as visiting each of the temporary homes with sweets, setting up a free take-away corner of cloths and tableware⁷, and inviting them to Kobe. However, all of the activities were inter-connected to introduce them to the space and make them feel attached to it.

NVNAD provided the students with the foundation and showed a course of activity. The organization funded part of the traveling expenses and rent of the operating base of “Support Group from KOBE.” NVNAD also held a briefing session in Kobe and issued a report on the activity of “Support Group from KOBE.” Establishing a space for a tearoom was also proposed by NVNAD.

Results as disaster relief activity

We can see the effect of the activity of Support Group from KOBE and fromHUS, based on the reports of some students in fromHUS. For instance, conversations over coffee were evoked and human ties created. A student reported as follows:

The effect of coffee is great. I said to the visitors “Won't you have some coffee or something?” and more and more people gathered, perhaps because it is simple and easy compared to tea. We had a nice long chat with visitors, including students of the vocational school in front of our base

School of Human Sciences, Osaka University.

⁷ Most of the sufferers' tableware had been broken because of the strong shocks of the earthquake.

and the cleaning company. They also talked to each other about the extent of the damage they had suffered. (a report to NVNAD written by a student)

It is important to note here that this kind of casual conversation gave the members a glimpse of the actual conditions and needs of each sufferer. There were also reports by the students as follows:

A person who lost just a family dog two days ago has come. According to the person, the dog was old, but it was under stress because of the earthquake. ([fromhus] [00396] February 6, 2005)⁸

It was heartbreaking to hear that they lost some of their rice bowls and have used the rest in turns and they have washed disposable wooden chopsticks and used them again and again⁹. ([fromhus][00136]December 21, 2004)

There appears to be no damage to the townscape and the children are lively, but we can still hear things like “I lost mementos of my mother” naturally come up in their conversation. ([fromhus][00422] Feb 12, 2005)

These kinds of voices of sufferers in the report can never be communicated by asking sufferers “Do you have any difficulties as a result of the earthquake?,” because they would not admit their actual needs when asked about such in an outspoken or candid manner.

The significance of the activity was the construction of places. The residents of temporary homes were able to stay there with feelings of comfort and relief and without tension and apprehension. In addition, the place saw a modest relationship – neither too close, nor too distant – established between students and residents. In such a place, with this kind of relationship, the voices of sufferers could be heard.

Students with circumstantial Interests

Most of these students also had “circumstantial interest,” rather than “structural interest”, as stated by Yamaguchi et al. Few students in fromHUS had structural interests. In fact, most students claimed to be interested in or attracted to the activity, but did not say why in the mailing list. Some of the first statements of each of the students were as follows:

⁸ In the fromHUS as a mailing list, the subject of each mail was numbered serially. For example, [fromhus][00422] February 12, 2005 means the 442nd mail, which was sent on February 12, 2005 in the mailing list.

⁹ In a Japanese family, family members normally each have their own (non-disposable) wooden chopsticks, so this was very unusual.

I cannot join the activity in the disaster area because of my schedule, but I was very interested in it when I heard the experience of my friend, who had already joined the volunteering. I want to know what's going on. ([fromhus] [00102] December 18, 2004)

I started wanting to do something after I read about the activity linked to the Mid Niigata Prefecture Earthquake and some reports written by people who had joined the activity. ([fromhus] [00159] December 22, 2004)

It is natural to think that these examples show that students joined the activity with circumstantial interests rather than structural interests and did not discuss them. For instance, in the student's mail on December 18, there was a leap in logic between hearing a friend discuss the activity and having their own interest.

Discussion

The activity of the students, the members of fromHUS, represented effective disaster relief. They managed a space for residents of a temporary housing complex, where people gathered and engaged in animated conversation. We were able to recognize the presence of an alternative environment and atmosphere for the residents, based on the students' reports. A mingling place, like the space in this case, is an effective tool for understanding needs.

Generally speaking, understanding the individual needs of each sufferer is essential, because needs diversify and become latent after a rescue and relief effort in disaster scenes. However, this is usually easier said than done. Despite the difficulties, however, it was relatively smooth in this case, due to the flexibility of students with circumstantial interests.

Atsumi (2001) pointed out that what is appropriate and what is not varies from hour to hour in a disaster scene. He named several groups' behavior in constant mutation the "collective improvisation game." It is not always effective in the collective improvisation game to establish a detailed plan beforehand and promote the same quickly and steadily.

We should focus on the negative aspect of structural interest in the disaster as a "collective improvisation game." That is because structural interest, which is based on narratives with coherent logic, has a static framework and high potential to disturb the handling of each situation as the occasion demands. In short, disaster volunteering must avoid structural interest or eliminate it as a necessary condition. The members of fromHUS are unrestricted by structural interests. They are highly-motivated but their interests are not structured.

On the other hand, disaster nonprofit organizations require volunteers with

circumstantial interest. Nonprofit organizations are “not for profit, but for mission” organizations. Therefore, the relationship between all the actions of nonprofit organizations and their own mission must be accountable as tacit principles. In other words, nonprofit organizations must have a “structural interest.” However, nonprofit organizations must also act in a flexible and impromptu manner for disaster relief. In such a situation, “structural interest,” which is fixed, and static interest, is not always effective, and “circumstantial interest” fits with the flux context in a disaster. While nonprofit organizations maintained “structural interest,” the students exemplified the significance of volunteers working with “circumstantial interest” in a disaster.

Needless to say, disaster volunteers also need nonprofit organizations, which include structural interest as a tacit principle. The role of disaster nonprofit organizations is also indispensable in disaster relief activity. They provided funds and a place and established a course of action. We can say that collaboration between volunteers with circumstantial interest and nonprofit organizations with structural interest is important in disaster relief activity.

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Note

This paper is based on Suwa, Atsumi and Seki (2006) and Suwa and Atsumi (2006) and elaborated for international readers.

Acknowledgements

We appreciate all of the supports for Support Group from Kobe, NVNAD and fromHUS.