

Surveying Prejudice: Reflections on a Problematic Research Project

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Abstract

This paper reflects on a pilot study survey project in which 76 high school teachers answered questions to evaluate levels of prejudice against three distinct minority groups : Korean people, Brazilian people, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) people. The project reflects a “focus on inclusion” or an approach that essentializes identities and that focuses on gaining rights. Such an approach is problematic from the perspective of a ‘focus on inquiry’ or an open-ended approach that affirms the discursive nature of ethnic, gender, and sexuality, identities. This paper presents the data and discussion points from the original study and then reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches for theory and research. The results of the original survey seem to indicate some degree of prejudice against sexual minority groups and so merit greater attention from those who engage in efforts for “internationalization” in Japan.

Key Words: Internationalization; Prejudice; minority groups; inclusion; inquiry; education.

Introduction

Intercultural communication, along with many other activities such as engaging in qualitative research, requires a journey from mere reflectivity towards reflexivity. When we create a gap between our own habitual schemata and our mode of inquiry, then we stop expecting the *other* to behave according to our preconceptions. Rorty (1999) argues that we should always doubt the validity of our own vocabulary, always remain aware that a different or new vocabulary might be better suited to meeting the needs of various communities depending upon changing circumstances. This paper reflects a tension between contrasting

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vocabularies and a willingness to engage with the complexities of chosen research commitments. Within communities of academic research, a spirit of continuous reflexivity is also valued as helping individual researchers to avoid misrepresenting others and to construct a more adequate representation of “the way things are” in whatever study we undertake. A number of scholars have provided valuable data on attitudes towards stigmatized groups and the implications for social equality.

This survey explored attitudes towards Korean and Brazilian people, two ethnic groups that have experienced varying levels of discrimination in Japan (cf. Roth, 2002, p. 5; Ryang, 2000, p. 10). Roth encapsulates the sense of displacement of young “Nikkeijin” who have moved to Japan from Brazil. In their previous locale they are labeled as Japanese. Here in Japan they are labeled as “gaijin” or “foreigners”. A sense of homelessness is reflected in the statement: “I have no home.” Turning to Koreans in Japan, Ryang points out that she writes of a minority which is little known in western discourse, yet which may provide valuable lessons on activism for social justice. “Koreans in Japan have faced, and continue to face and respond to, diverse forms of discrimination. Their experience in grappling with human rights violation and social injustice ... is relevant to others’ experience in the west and beyond.” Perceptions of national attitudes may have an influence on Japanese state relations with other states in east Asia and in Latin America.

Norton (2000) engages with the lives of low income immigrant women in Canada. She shows that the language learning experiences of these women were shaped very strongly by environmental factors. Masculinist prejudices meant that husbands and brothers would limit the autonomy of those women who wanted to pursue studies outside of the home. Stigmatization processes against non-Canadian nationals meant that it was difficult for these women to find suitable conversation partners on an ongoing basis. Harsh working conditions for Portuguese women in clothing factories severely limited time and money for language learning classes or study. In addition to indicating the ways in which language learning was affected by the lived experiences of learners, Norton directed my attention to the ways in which language teachers were complicit in promoting or perpetuating discursive practices of inequality. If dominant discourses in social sites are masculinist, xenophobic, heterosexist, for example, then it is very easy for instructors to reinforce those ideological elements, very often without full awareness that they are doing so. I felt sure this was true with regard to discursive practices of heterosexism and homophobia, which are often

perpetuated in the classroom. Familiarity with research literature from the United States allowed me to understand and employ a vocabulary of empowerment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) individuals in educational institutions. Nelson (1998) refers to this vocabulary as a “focus on inclusion” and representative research projects include: Harris, 1997; Haynes, 2000; Hidaka, 1998; Massachusetts Department of Education. (1995); Nelson, 1993; Perrotti & Westheimer; Sears, 1995; Woog, 1995. A focus on inclusion assumes that sexual orientation is a stable essence at the core of self and that LGBT people should fight to have their particular identity recognized fully in society. This struggle is similar to that of racial or ethnic groups who fought for their civil rights for long periods in U.S. history. Nelson goes on to elaborate the reasons why this “focus on inclusion” approach is problematic and should be replaced by a ‘focus on inquiry’ whereby classroom pedagogy focuses on open-ended inquiry into issues of gender and sexuality instead of laying out an agenda of grievances and rights to be achieved.

Survey: Methods

The focus of the pilot study was to gain some understanding of levels of social prejudice among teachers in high schools. This was assessed by means of a survey, which also investigated levels of harassment against gender non-conforming students. The focus on gender non-conforming young people is relevant not only as a possible source of bullying in the school environment, but also because many of these young people are likely to identify themselves as homosexual in later life (cf. Friedman and Stern (1980), Green (1987), Isay (1989).

This study was conducted among Japanese nationals who were teachers at public junior and senior high schools. Copies of a survey questionnaire were voluntarily distributed to and collected from the schoolteachers by Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) who are non-Japanese participants on the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. The ALT handed these questionnaires to teachers whom they knew well, usually those with whom they team-teach. 118 questionnaires were distributed and 76 questionnaires were completed and returned. 68 of these respondents were teachers of English and the survey itself was printed in English. The questionnaire contained ten Yes/No questions, written in Japanese, with space provided for writing comments for each question. One also provided a space at the end of the questionnaire for the respondents to write overall comments about the questionnaire or the research itself.

Questions regarding personal information were excluded, but each ALT did mark if the respondent is an English teacher or not on the questionnaire when they collected it from the respondent. Each Yes/No answer was quantitatively analyzed by counting and calculating frequency; the results are shown in the next section. The comments given in response to each question were not used directly for the analysis of the results, but are qualitatively analyzed and examined for a further interpretation of teacher attitudes toward heterosexism in the discussion section.

Results from study

This section considers the results of the 76 questionnaires that were collected from the high school teachers. Key results include the following: For the question: "*Would you feel concerned if your new neighbors were Korean?*", 17% said "yes", "*Would you feel concerned if your new neighbors were Brazilians?*", 25% said "yes", and "*Would you feel concerned if your new neighbors were LGBT people?*" 43% said "yes." Living at close quarters, many Japanese people are very concerned that neighbors do not inconvenience those around them and may have particularly high criteria in this regard. However, unhelpful stereotypes may account for high figures, especially the result of 43% for LGBT people.

Question number two concerned workplace relations and asked: *Would you feel uneasy if new work colleagues were Korean?* 0% answered "yes"; *Would you feel uneasy if new work colleagues were Brazilian?* 0% answered "yes"; *Would you feel uneasy if new work colleagues were LGBT people?* 27% answered "yes." This item indicates difficulties for secondary school educators who identify as LGBT as one in four colleagues may be unhappy about working with them. One wonders, if this survey were conducted today, would a change be indicated, or are LGBT people still expected to confine themselves to a limited number of (non-professional) careers?

Question number three asked, "*Do you believe that Korean people should be required to use a Japanese name if they live in Japan?*" 94.7% of people answered that Korean people in Japan should maintain their identity by using their Korean names, rather than a Japanese name. Perhaps this is evidence that prejudice towards Korean people is diminishing in the Japanese social context. There was only one respondent that answered that they should use a Japanese name. However, this respondent provided the reason that by doing so, they may avoid

unnecessary discrimination and thus, it may be easier for them to live in Japanese society.

The next question, “*Are these groups causing social problems in Japan?*” was only answered by ten respondents, perhaps indicating discomfort about revealing attitudes on a sensitive social topic. Among these 10 respondents who answered “yes,” five people commented that they marked “yes” in the sense that the minority groups are causing problems as much as everybody else is in Japanese society. Thus, it is not necessarily a prejudice against them. Since Brazilians are not a major minority group in the area where the survey was conducted, it is not particularly surprising that 13 people did not answer the question and 11 respondents commented that they had no idea on this issue.

Regarding teachers' awareness of gender non-conforming students, nine gender non-conforming students had been observed by six respondents in their teaching career. However, none of these had observed the students bullied because of their behavior. This finding resonates with Ó'Móchain (2010) and the data provided by Rika regarding a gender atypical student in her high school who enjoyed high levels of acceptance among his peers. However, the same study provided data from a high-school teacher, Kaito, who experienced high levels of stigmatization in elementary and junior high school specifically because he was labeled as effeminate or unmanly. Extensive empirical research is required to establish the strength of possible links between school bullying and gender atypical behavior. Writing about biracial children in Japanese elementary schools, Daulton and Akinori (2000) state that bullied children are “often ignored by their classmates and sometimes by teachers for extended periods... many half-Japanese children attempt to hide their non-Japanese physical traits; for example children with curly or fair hair often try to alter it to be more accepted by classmates.” (p. 32). Murphy and McNeill's newspaper article (2000), about high levels of bullying in Japanese schools, reports that more than 5,000 Japanese schoolchildren committed suicide over the previous twenty-five years. Such a large number must be of concern to all who work with young people in education. Research needs to be conducted to establish what proportions of these cases were related to schoolplace bullying and/or systematic stigmatization. Links might also be established with homophobic attitudes. Itoh (1998) gave questionnaires to junior and high school students at over twenty schools in Japan to assess the image they hold of homosexuals. “Students who have been influenced by the mass media often provide descriptions such as *revolting, scary, dangerous, filthy, creepy, bad, disgusting, not normal, strange, and people to stay away from*” (Summerhawk

McMahill, & McDonald, 1998 p.89). It seems likely, then, that gender non-conforming young people will experience a stressful pressure to conform to their peers in school and avoid being associated with such a highly stigmatized category. Perhaps Itoh's (1998) reflections on his own life experience are relevant to many LGBT identified Japanese students and teachers: "I used all my strength to always put on the act of being really masculine, a feat that was very draining... psychologically I had to be on guard twenty-four hours a day seven days a week" (pp. 84-85).

Prejudice toward LGBT people is evident in some of the comments made by several respondents:

"I think about the negative effect of homosexuals on students."

"Their existence seems totally foreign to me."

"I don't know how to interact with them."

"I can't really think of why, but I do have a prejudice against homosexual people".

"I know I have to be nice to any people, but when I actually have to deal with homosexual people who are different from us, I'm not sure if I can."

The fact that over 43% of respondents said they would be worried if their new neighbor was a homosexual and that over 27% would be worried if their new work colleague was a homosexual is, perhaps, the most worrying aspect of this survey's results. At the same time, one can also discern a certain degree of encouragement and awareness among other respondents in the survey, perhaps a result of greater media attention to gay issues in society (e.g., Sasamoto, 1998). Indeed, these comments indicate that the survey may have fulfilled a "consciousness-raising" purpose by making individuals reflect on their own behaviors:

"I may have unthinkingly mentioned something about homosexual people."

"I have said things like, "That person seems like a homo" – not intentionally discriminating. I am heterosexual but I want to understand the feelings of female-loving females and male-loving males";

"I think homosexuals are targeted for teasing/joking on T.V. and movies."

"As a joke, I have used words like "Homo (i.e., homosexual)" or "Rezu (lez, i.e., lesbian)". I understand them now, so I never use those words anymore."

Limitations and discussion

An obvious limitation of the present study is the small sample of just 73 participants. However, the study might promote interest in more large-scale empirical research. If the study had been carried out by an institution familiar to

and respected by participants, it is likely that participation rates would have been considerably higher. Some respondents may also have worried about the security of the anonymity process when the survey questionnaire was being collected by work colleagues who were only temporary placements in the institution. Such limitations, though, are not overwhelming in nature, at least for a pilot study.

Many questions remain for future research. For example, in what way do experiences of stigmatization differ for Korean and Brazilian individuals? What are the consequences regarding access to symbolic and material resources? Regarding gender and sexual identity issues, one can ask: "Is homophobia or stigmatization of gender non-conforming behavior part of the reason for high rates of bullying in Japanese schools? At present, how do teachers respond to homophobic comments, jokes, written pieces and so on in the classroom? If Japanese teachers find that homophobic bullying is taking place in their schools, are they prepared to tackle the problem? What factors might prevent them from doing so? Harris (1997) cites three factors that do so: parental disapproval, lack of experienced staff, and lack of a policy. Would these factors be central or peripheral in the Japanese context? Can LGBT teachers expect support or prejudice from other stakeholders in education, such as parents' groups, Education Ministry officials, Principals' Associations, Students' Groups and, most importantly, perhaps, the very trade unions which represent them. Regarding those responsible for relationships and sexuality education in middle and high schools, are they open to the inclusion of issues of sexual difference in their teaching program? A major study could find credible answers to these questions by working with a larger sample in a longitudinal study that would employ triangulation. It seems unlikely that we will see LGBT issues entering into mainstream education here in Japan as they have done in the United States and elsewhere. Certainly, it is not simply a matter of imposing a paradigm of liberation that developed in other cultural contexts and may need considerable adaptation here. Kubota (1999) alerts us to the dangers of creating a cultural dichotomy between East and West. However few can doubt that LGBT teachers and students in Japan need support within the educational system, and they themselves are expressing that need more and more. Perhaps other teachers such as Itoh (1998) will help to create groupings to meet the needs of LGBT Japanese people in educational institutions. In Japan, though, as elsewhere, this will not be an easy task. Yet, the study may have sufficient validity to be taken as an approximate indicator of attitudes among high school teachers in this city and, perhaps, in other parts of Japan. It would be helpful if similar surveys were conducted by authoritative institutions

such as the Ministry of Education so as to provide more reliable results.

Reflections on the original study

Members of the scholarly community must always negotiate tensions between approaches that over-simplify issues but that actually confront the people who inflict distress with their prejudicial attitudes (“focus on inclusion”), and approaches that seem to weaken the sense of unity and purpose of social activists but that do justice to the complexity of human subjectivities and cultures (“focus on inquiry”). This tension is particularly acute if account is taken of postmodern approaches. Postmodern approaches eschew essentialism and any sort of “grand narrative” (cf. Lyotard, 1984) that attempts to explain complex realities in an overly simplified or in a biased way. Said (1978) argued that ‘Orientalism’ functioned as a grand narrative of Western scholarship which engaged in “othering” of individuals and practices of cultures in the Middle East and elsewhere. After making identifications with critical theory, I felt a need to critique my own positionality as a researcher. I could imagine such a critique on the lips of, not only scholars in Japan, but also of LGBT activists here. “Since the Meiji era, Westerners have been coming to Japan telling us what is wrong with our society and how we should change. Well, who says your model of activism, one that works in the U.S., is the one that should be applied here? Your “focus on inclusion” model actually excludes LGBT people who do not come out publicly. Are you sure that making dramatic public avowals are necessary to affirm your “authentic self?” That is a very Western concept! Are you sure that it is better to antagonize many people instead of trying to persuade them gradually? Are you aware that same-sex love among men has been documented in Japanese society for over a thousand years (Watanabe & Iwata, 1987) and all without recourse to the concept of ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’? Many of those relationships were among disciplined Samurai warriors and yet your study reinforces the notion that all LGBT people are gender atypical. How can you justify your study?”

This inner devil’s advocate continued to needle me with such troubling questions. Instead of continuing to work on the paper, I set it aside as I became more and more identified with a “focus on inquiry” and postmodern approaches to language and society. One thinks of Butler’s (1990, 1993) work on heteronormativity. Educators who explore the ways in which cultural norms and discursive practices work to normalize heterosexuality can be said to have identified heteronormativity as “the enemy.” Proponents of all three positions

outlined here share broadly the same goals, such as reducing levels of stigmatization of queer people and improving conditions of existence for queers everywhere. However, the way in which one formulates this problem, whether as one of homophobia, heterosexism, or of heteronormativity, fundamentally affects the type of pedagogy and praxis that will be pursued by concerned educators.

Yes, in spite of all the valid reasons for abandoning my “focus on inclusion” approach, I do not feel absolutely assured that such an approach is worthless here or elsewhere. For example, before the notion of homophobia is rejected in favor of a focus on heterosexism or on heteronormativity, it seems prudent to ascertain what exactly is being rejected. There is a need to examine actual cases of homophobic behavior and speech from educational research to see what more can be learned. Perhaps many of the young people who experience bullying in elementary, junior high, or high schools in Japan are gender atypical individuals. A focus on inclusion approach seems more likely towards helping these young people than the nuanced, “ivory tower” theory of postmodern academics. This theory helps adult individuals, including LGBT individuals, to gain a rich understanding of the complexities of subjectivity, authenticity, identity. However, it has little to offer in terms of initiatives for young people who may never survive until adulthood.

Even from today’s vantage point, I still feel the same tension between the ‘focus on inclusion’ option and the ‘focus on inquiry’ option. The latter remains as intellectually appealing as ever, but the needs of people “on the ground” seem better served by a focus on inclusion. Part of me, then, is glad that the 2001 survey results should be given some attention because they do indicate that homophobic attitudes may exist among some high-school teachers and we should be aware of the problems these attitudes cause for their LGBT students and colleagues. Another part of me dislikes adopting an approach that may be over-simplistic and ‘Orientalist.’ One consolation for researchers committed to continuous reflexivity, perhaps, is that in dealing with these and other tensions our true individuality emerges. Over a decade on, the final conclusion would still appear to be valid: issues of prejudice against minority groups need to be given full consideration within educational contexts in Japan, as elsewhere, and comprehensive research is still lacking in this field.

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