

Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture Research
Unit "Digital Social Science and Oral Narrative Research"
presents



Oral Narrative Research on

New Migrant Flows of Refugees into Japan

Support and research with asylum seekers in Tokyo
("Refugee Voices Japan")

June 8th 13:30-17:30

Sophia University, Yotsuya Campus, Bldg. 10, room 301

In 2018 Japan received 10,493 applications for refugee status; it accepted 42 individuals, an increase from 2017. Who are these refugees; how are they coming to and living in Japan; and how are they navigating the immigration and support systems in Tokyo? We will present a preliminary breakdown of the different streams within this larger flow, and give a first attempt bring together preliminary oral narrative interview data with refugee asylum seekers. Our presentations will focus on refugees from Africa and the Middle East, two groups who are coming to Japan in very different ways than did previous migrants. Using digital video from our on-going project, "Refugee Voices Japan," we will introduce the circuitous path asylum seekers take as they navigate the arcane immigration and support systems, try to find and keep work, endure incarceration in the detention center, and struggle with the vagaries of community connections and political inclusion. The data for these presentations come from the joint efforts of our research project, and the work Sophia Refugee Support Group, a student club at Sophia University.

Program:

- ◇ **David H. Slater** (Sophia University) *Introduction to the Problem and the Project*
- ◇ **Komai Chie** (Milestone Law Firm) *Legal Basis of Refugees in Japan*
- ◇ **Robin O'Day** (University of North Georgia) *Economic Migrants or Refugees?: The Paradox of asylum seekers' working lives in Japan*

Break

- ◇ **Flavia Fulco** (University of Toyama) *'Double Vulnerability' of the Refugee Experience: Gender relationship among asylum seekers in Japan*
- ◇ **Rosa Barbaran** (Sophia University) *Religion among Refugee Detainees at the Japanese Detention Center: Hope, control and sociality*
- ◇ **Noor Albazerbashi** (Independent Scholar) *Emotional Want: Refugees grapple with unaddressed emotional void and its repercussions for the refugee-support provider relationship in Japan*

◇ SRSRG, **Sarah Birkley** and **Gabriela Nakano** (Sophia University): *Using Academic Research in University Support Projects*

Language: English

No registration necessary

Abstracts

David H. Slater (Sophia University)

Introduction to Problem and the Project

This presentation will outline briefly how Japan fits into the larger patterns of refugee recognition across countries and outline the flows of refugees coming into Japan. Based on this situation, we will outline the need for more focused research and how our project is addressing this situation as both a research project and university support group.

Komai Chie (Milestone Law Firm)

Legal Basis of Refugees in Japan

Over the last few years, the issues of refugees and asylum seekers have been in the news in way that was not the case before, in part because of the huge increase in asylum applications. This talk will outline some of the key legal questions that refugees and asylum seekers, but also confront Japan, in the context of the Global Refugee Crisis. These questions include a) the legal status of asylum seekers in Japan; b) how Japan is distinctive to other countries in the laws and legal processing; c) what are the implications of the new set of processing reforms

Robin O'Day (University of North Georgia)

Economic Migrants or Refugees?: The Paradox of Asylum Seekers' Working Lives in Japan

Central to the controversial issues about refugee applicants and asylum seekers in Japan is the issue of work. One of the tacit reasons the Japanese Ministry of Justice has rejected almost 99% of refugee applications, despite a significant increase in applicants since 2010, is because of the suspicion that the vast majority of asylum seekers are, in fact, economic migrants seeking to access Japan's labor market rather than being genuine refugees. However, the discourses of "fake" refugees in Japan obscures a far more complex process as asylum seekers move in and out of the labor market as their refugee applications are processed, usually over several years. Most asylum seekers must work to support themselves since support services from government and civil society organizations alone, are insufficient. Japan too needs the labor supplied by asylum seekers as its working population shrinks, and legal paths to immigration remain strict. This paper, therefore, examines some of the paradoxes of asylum seekers' working lives in Japan as they navigate the refugee system. On the one hand, their labor is desperately needed and readily absorbed. On the other hand, their desire to work can also become a reason to ultimately reject their requests for asylum.

Flavia Fulco (University of Toyama)

'Double Vulnerability' of the refugee experience: gender relationship among asylum seekers in Japan

This presentation explores the experience of asylum seekers in

Japan from a gender perspective. Drawing on a preliminary analysis of oral narrative interviews, I will focus on the voices of refugee women to explore their positionality within the larger population of asylum seekers in Japan. Exploring the data from a gender perspective helps us identifying some patterns of relationship within their ethnic communities. Migrant women and in particular refugees, seem to suffer from a “double vulnerability”: they have to defend themselves from external threats in their own countries, but at the same time, they also have to negotiate how much trust they can give to men with whom they share the experience of escaping a dangerous country. Gender relationships related to refugees are crucial to understanding some of the social dynamics that led people to flee their countries, but they also make us understand the complexity of the difficulties that asylum seekers face at their arrival in Japan.

Rosa Barbaran (Sophia University)

Religion among Refugee Detainees at the Japanese Detention Center: hope, control and sociality

This presentation will examine the ways in which (primarily Christian) religion functions for (primarily African) refugees while they are incarcerated in detention centers in Japan (Shinagawa and Ibaraki). Many refugees find themselves in the Japanese detention centers while they are waiting for their asylum hearings. People in the detention centers use their encounter with religion to express personal hope and an attempt to combat a loss of control in their lives in a situation of despair. Some also use religious teaching as way to increase spiritual strength and courage as they go through the often incomprehensible immigration process. In a more social perspective, they also use the practice of religion in order to create friendships and alliances, create some personal space, and to establish interpersonal hierarchies among detainees. While many of the functions of religion seen in the detention center are characteristic of other forms of religious conviction, especially of socially marginalized groups, the detention centers, where people with no criminal past are confined and deprived of their rights, represents a particular extreme case.

Noor Albazerbashi (Independent Scholar)

Emotional Want: Refugees grapple with unaddressed emotional void and its repercussions for the refugee-support provider relationship in Japan

Among the challenges refugees face upon resettlement is the emotional void caused by the loss of significant social networks, identity and status. Refugee’s vulnerability due to fragile economic situation and language barrier, but also often the methods used by the Japanese support providers, impede them from establishing adequate rapport with their hosts and supporters. This situation leaves refugees in a desperate state of isolation and in dire need of emotional support. This presentation discusses these patterns of support, and the refugees’ responses, that compromise both parties’ ability in the support effort. Using narrative and fieldwork data, I will unpack the causes of this refugee/support provider relationship imbalance and its negative implications on both parties.

Sarah Birkley and **Gabriela Nakano**, Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG)

Using Research in University Support Projects

Our presentation will outline the student group that supports asylum seekers and refugees, our mission and activities, as well as the importance of having a research-informed effort to maximize the support effort.

Bios:

David H. Slater is a professor of cultural anthropology at Sophia University, Faculty of Liberal Arts. He works on issues of youth and labor, social class and inequality, and disaster and recovery of the 311 disasters. For the past 2 years, he has moved from nuclear refugees from Fukushima to foreign refugees coming into Tokyo, under the project name, “Refugee Voices Japan.”

Komai Chie is an immigration lawyer with Milestone Law firm who works extensively with amnesty cases in Japan. She received her BA and JD from the University of Tokyo and her Masters of Law from University of London (LSE). She is a registered attorney in Yokohama and Tokyo, and a member of the Kanto Bar Association, where she is the chairperson of the Foreign Human Rights Committee.

Robin O’Day is an assistant professor of cultural anthropology at the University of North Georgia. He works on social movements and labor in Japan. Most recently he has been conducting research on refugees and asylum seekers.

Flavia Fulco is an assistant professor at the International Research Institute of Disaster Science at Toyama University. She works on the cultural memory of natural disaster in Japan. She did her post-doc at Sophia University where for the past two years she has been collaborating with the research project on asylum seekers in Japan.

Rosa Barbaran is a Peruvian-Japanese student at Sophia University, working on immigrants and refugees, and one of the founders of Sophia Refugee Support Group.

Noor Albazerbashi is a Syrian national, studied Japanese Studies for two years at Damascus University and moved to Japan in 2011 to graduate from Utsunomiya University. She worked for almost two years for a non-profit organization to support refugee’s employment in Japan. Currently she is a research assistant on “Refugee Voices Japan” project.

Sarah Birkley and **Gabriela Nakano** are both 3rd year students in the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Sophia University, and current leaders of the Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG). The support group started in 2017 from a research project, and currently do monthly Refugee Cafes, teach Japanese and prepare documents for asylum seekers and refugees in the Kanto area. Check us out at Facebook “Sophia Refugee Support Groups.”

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