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Into the Bullring: The Significance of “Empathy” after the Earthquake

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Abstract: In 2004, one of my long-term field sites was struck by a major earthquake. Following this event numerous researchers and experts arrived at the region and began executing various recovery projects centered around traditional culture. However, their activities were not purely intended to help the survivors but, rather, cleverly designed for their own benefit. I began to feel very uncomfortable about such efforts and worked to conduct my own activities from a folkloristic perspective based on “empathy,” an approach qualitatively distinct from those of many other researchers. Generally speaking, researchers and experts have sought to be as “objective” as possible and have undervalued empathy, which they have perceived as belonging to the realm of emotion. However, in order to support survivors’ strategies for independently regaining livelihoods in the disaster recovery process, it is essential that researchers have empathy for the survivors and sufficiently understand their experiences and values. In this paper, based on my experiences in the disaster-affected area, I discuss both the utility of empathy as a means of understanding survivors as well as the subtle risks associated with such an approach.

Zusammenfassung: Eine der Gegenden, in der ich seit langem Feldforschung betreibe, wurde 2004 von einem schweren Erdbeben erschüttert. In der Zeit danach trafen dort zahlreiche Forscher und Forscherinnen ein, um eine Reihe von Hilfsprojekten im Bereich sogenannter traditioneller Kultur durchzuführen. Jene Forschungsaktivitäten waren jedoch nicht primär darauf ausgerichtet, der betroffenen Bevölkerung zu helfen. Vielmehr waren sie so geplant, dass vor allem die auswärtigen Forscher und Forscherinnen von ihnen profitieren sollten. Diese unethischen Projekte waren mir anfangs schlicht unangenehm; sie bestärkten mich aber auch darin, meine eigene volkskundliche Perspektive zu überdenken und einen deutlichen Schwerpunkt auf Forschungspraxen zu setzen, die durch Empathie geprägt sind. Mitgefühl wurde von diesen Forschergruppen als nicht objektive Forschung gesehen, Empathie als emotionale Barriere zu wertungsfreier Wissenschaft. Mein Ansatz ist jedoch, dass Mitgefühl eine Voraussetzung ist, um Betroffene bei der Bewältigung von Katastrophen zu unterstützen und ihre

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Initiative zu stärken. Es ist überaus wichtig, dass Forscherinnen und Forscher die Bedürfnisse und Emotionen der Überlebenden tatsächlich verstehen und nachvollziehen können. Im folgenden Aufsatz diskutiere ich anhand meines eigenen Projektes im Katastrophengebiet die Vorteile eines durch Empathie und Verstehen geprägten Ansatzes sowie die damit einhergehenden und nicht immer offensichtlichen Risiken.

On March 11, 2011, a tragedy – the Great East Japan Earthquake – struck the coast of Japan’s Tohoku region. A massive earthquake occurred off the Pacific coast and caused an enormous tsunami on an unimaginable scale, taking over 18,000 lives and erasing entire communities from the ground. Following the disaster, the Japanese government launched a large-scale recovery project, scheduled to last five years and expected to cost a massive 250 billion US dollar. Engaged in the public works resulting from this recovery effort are not only swarms of construction and other private companies but, also, vast numbers of researchers and experts involved in “recovery planning” and so-called “survey” activities supporting such planning.

My goal is not simply to criticize the researchers and experts who flocked to and may still be active in the disaster-affected region as a result of the earthquake for continuing to selfishly profit from the sweet nectar that comes with disaster. In fact, the majority of researchers and experts were, or are, probably engaged in survey and research activities related to recovery efforts intended to help the survivors. Furthermore, the arrival of researchers and experts in the disaster-affected region certainly was seen as encouraging and actually saved struggling communities and survivors. That said, there were also undoubtedly researchers and experts who, mixed in with research and projects aimed at helping survivors, exploited those affected by disaster under the guise of the recovery and themselves profited from the recovery effort. It is also possible that even research and activities *intended* to help survivors, upon closer inspection, did not end up helping the survivors.¹

1 On March 10, 2012, one year after the Great East Japan Earthquake, a graduate student in sociology posted some critical comments on her personal blog regarding the damage being caused in disaster-affected areas by so-called research activities. In response to the earthquake disaster, she had decided to take a leave of absence from her graduate studies in Tokyo and return home to Miyagi Prefecture (which had been deeply impacted by the earthquake disaster) for the purpose of supporting recovery efforts and to conduct field research. It was then that she courageously sounded the alarm about the selfish surveys and activities of scholars and outside professionals who did not understand the of the survivors (Yamauchi 2012).

In 2005, the southern United States was struck by Hurricane Katrina. Amidst the confusion in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, some extremely predatory economic measures were put into place. Naomi Klein criticized such conditions – in which power is used to change society while citizens are still suffering from an overwhelming sense of insecurity following a social crisis – labeling it the “shock doctrine” (Klein 2007). The term “shock doctrine” refers to the mindset in which the recovery process following a major calamity is seen as an unparalleled market opportunity and to the application of a market fundamentalism to devastating effect under such circumstances. This can alternatively be called a kind of “disaster capitalism” based on exploitation of major disasters (Klein 2007, 6). To certain people with power wishing to implement radical policies, the social instability triggered by shocking events or threats is a propitious opportunity.² While Japan is being attacked in the same manner by disaster capitalism following the Great East Japan Earthquake, it is also threatened by “research” and “activities” that similarly exploit major disasters.

In this paper, I will explore, based on my own experiences, the attitudes and methods that folklorists should take when interacting with survivors in a disaster-affected area. In 2004, seven years prior to the Great East Japan Earthquake, the so-called Tōhoku earthquake of 2011, my long-term field site – the Higashiyama area of Ojiya City in Niigata Prefecture – became a disaster-affected region after being struck by an earthquake, the so-called Chūetsu-Niigata earthquake, transforming my “subjects” into “survivors.” As a result of the disaster, my own survey and research methods, my attitude as a researcher when relating to my subjects, and my feelings towards them, all changed. Immediately following the earthquake, “survivors” in my research field began to employ a cultural tradition, one which they themselves had maintained over the years, as a symbol of the recovery. Numerous researchers and experts besides myself participated in this process, but, as a folklorist, I began to feel uncomfortable with their activities. Instead I decided to find my own way of participating and interacting with the survivors. In this paper, I discuss, based on this experience, the significance and need for folklorists and ethnographers to have “empathy” towards survivors in times of disaster.

² As the government and other influential parties were attempting to cleverly exploit the hurricane damage to their own advantage, a group of folklorists initiated a project to utilize their skills to support the survivors of the hurricane. In 2005, Carl Lindahl and Pat Jasper started a survivor-centered storytelling and documentation project titled “Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston.” Reports of the project (Lindahl 2007, 2012) were introduced in Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake, greatly influencing the behavior of Japanese folklorists responding to disasters.

A Field Site Impacted by an Earthquake Disaster

Over the past 200 years, the practice of bullfighting has been passed down from generation to generation in the inter-mountainous villages of the Higashiyama area.³ I began fieldwork in this region in 1998, as part of my research on traditional culture. However, on October 23, 2004, a near-field magnitude 6.8 earthquake struck the region. In this region, located directly above the hypocenter of the earthquake, precious lives along with the majority of houses and property were lost. Bulls and the tradition of bullfighting were also damaged.⁴ To the people of this area, the loss of a bull that had been raised as a member of the family caused the same grief as would the death of a family member.

As an ethnographer, prior to the earthquake I conducted “research” based on impartial and objective observation of the culture and inhabitants of the region. I did not have any reservations about perceiving and interacting with the inhabitants as “informants.” My job, after all, was to be objective. However, as a result of the earthquake, I could no longer consider the inhabitants simply to be informants. After the earthquake, I began to develop a relationship in which I thought, experienced, and felt sadness and joy together with the inhabitants. An insensitive researcher might deride me for unabashedly admitting this and criticize me for being naïve and intoxicated with a lukewarm sentimentality. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that it is because of this deep personal relationship that I was able to understand the significance of the loss of both people and bulls to the community. Of course, I did not deepen my relationships for the purpose of gaining such understanding. That just happened as a matter of course.

I managed somehow to reach the disaster-affected area ten days after the earthquake, at a time when public transportation had not yet been resumed.

3 In the West, the term “bullfighting” generally evokes images of bullfight that pits “man versus bull,” similar to traditions found in Spain. Bullfighting as practiced throughout East Asia, however, is typically bull versus bull, not man versus bull. The uniqueness of Ojiya bullfighting, which is the subject of my own study, lies in the fact that a draw can be called in the middle of the fight. As bulls in this region have traditionally been considered members of the family, they are well-cared for on a daily basis. Furthermore, compared to the bullfighting practiced in other regions, the owners have a higher awareness of protecting their animals (Suga 2013). In 1978, this bullfighting was designated by the Japanese government to be an “important tangible folk culture asset.”

4 As a result of this earthquake, sixty-eight individuals, primarily the elderly and children, lost their lives in Ojiya City, Tokamachi City, Nagaoka City, Mitsuke City, and surrounding areas. Another 4,805 individuals were injured, and, at its peak, approximately 103,000 residents were living as evacuees. Approximately 17,000 houses were destroyed. Of the ninety-seven bulls being raised in the area, twenty were lost due to the collapse of barns, etc.

Upon arrival, I began to look for my friends and acquaintances who had been evacuated. They had taken refuge in a school gymnasium with only the barest necessities. The gymnasium was overflowing with survivors, all of whom were completely exhausted. It was there, despite these dire circumstances, that I witnessed a truly surprising scene: my friends who had survived the disaster were gathered in a corner of the gymnasium and were discussing how to continue the tradition of bullfighting. In the midst of aftershocks, I would have expected my friends, who had just lost their homes, possessions, and jobs, to be focused only on how they would survive from this point forward. Yet remarkably, even in such painful circumstances, they continued to think about bullfighting. Later, they would proactively adopt the cultural tradition of bullfighting as a symbol for the region's recovery from the earthquake disaster and, in fact, use it as a driving force for the recovery. And, as their hometown and bullfighting were restored, many inhabitants returned to the area.

I participated in a part of such efforts to restore the region using cultural traditions. My involvement, however, was not the kind of proactive intervention based on extrinsic values or off-the-shelf methods typically employed by experts or applied researchers. Rather, my involvement was relatively passive and involved staying close by and listening to the survivors, identifying the values that they considered important, and providing my expertise only when asked to do so. It is likely that experts and scholars focused on action and response would find my "activity" to be insufficient. However, I intentionally decided to develop an approach that was qualitatively different from the approach taken by such experts and scholars.

The Onslaught of Outsider Professionals

Prior to the earthquake, I was the only person with the title of "scholar" or "professor" who visited the Higashiyama area. This area did not have any outstanding features and, other than for a few folklorists interested in bullfighting, it did not seem to hold any particular appeal as a field site for scholars or experts in general. However, the region's value as a field site shifted 180 degrees as a result of the earthquake: all kinds of outsider professionals – including scholars and their students, NPOs, governmental consultants, and government officials – flocked to the area and, after identifying bullfighting as a cultural resource, began various recovery projects centered around this tradition. Among such professionals, there were some who claimed to be conducting research to support regional recovery but who, in fact, used the region as a testing ground and exploited the survivors to further their own research objectives. In addition, there were

professionals who attempted to cleverly gain access to funds intended for the recovery by associating themselves with the recovery effort.

In general, experts and individuals working within the public sector have a thorough knowledge of various social systems and institutions and possess nearly-monopolistic skills for their usage. Put simply, knowledge regarding the source of recovery funds, understanding the process for accessing such funds, and the specialized skill required for planning, etc. are in the hands of only a certain group of experts. The lay person does not possess the knowledge and skills required to access necessary resources. For this reason, the lay person has no choice but to rely on experts – or, at least, is made to believe to have no choice but to rely on experts. The recovery projects implemented in the Higashiyama area were typically rife with such structural problems.

Certain governmental consultants received commissions, paid from the recovery money, for designing recovery projects. In order to increase their commissions, the consultants would expand the scope of their projects, claiming that the expansions were warranted because of “requests from the survivors.” These consultants and cooperating NPOs held a total of twenty workshops and meetings in Higashiyama to hear the requests of the survivors. On the surface, this may appear to be an ideal example of collaboration in which various actors including experts, scholars, NPOs, governmental agencies, and local community members meet frequently to exchange opinions and to establish a division of labor. While it is certain that the voices of the inhabitants were picked up as a result of these meetings, it is also certain that these voices were generated within the fixed dichotomized structure of researcher/researched, professional/non-professional, and supporter/supported. Regardless of how freely the survivors were allowed to speak, it is the consultants who prepared the questions prior to the meeting and who led the discussion. In the formal context of workshops and meetings, the people of Higashiyama struggled to formulate formal-sounding narratives that differed from the content of everyday conversation. The workshops, which were dressed up to seem like a natural way to pick up “survivors’ requests,” were, in fact, unnatural interviews guided to conform to the expectations of the consultants and others. For example, one consultant came up with a plan, which normally would never have been thought feasible, to build a domed bullfighting ring costing several million dollars that could be used during rain. The proposal was based on an offhand comment by a survivor talking about a dream stadium – naturally, the plan was never adopted. Even after this particular plan evaporated, for the next few years consultants continued to propose one new recovery project after the other.

From the perspective of the consultants, the job was to generate revenue, and expanding the scale of the projects was part of this job. In the case of subsidies

and grants, however, the beneficiaries are generally responsible for covering a portion of the project costs; in other words, the expansion of a project meant increasing the proportion for which the local community was responsible. The people of Higashiyama were well aware of this arrangement but had to remain silent because they would not be able to access the funds necessary to restore bullfighting and their lives without being a part of projects managed by outsider professionals.

As the recovery process continued, I began to feel uncomfortable about the attitudes and relationships created by outside professionals. At the same time, I became keenly aware of the need to approach participation in recovery activities from a different standpoint and employ different methods. I had visited the area many times prior to the earthquake and had already developed a rapport with the survivors. Furthermore, as a folklorist, I had a deep understanding of the culture and values of the area. As I continued to visit the area on numerous occasions after the earthquake to listen to the experiences of the survivors, I developed empathy for them and began to feel their agony – which I had not directly experienced myself – as my own agony. It was during this process that I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable about the involvement and methods used by many of the outside professionals. Ultimately, I decided to participate in recovery activities from the standpoint of the survivors.

My Changes, Changes Experienced by the Survivors

The research methods I used in the field changed dramatically after I became involved in the recovery effort. I hardly ever took out my field notebook, IC recorder, and camera, which I had used extensively up to that point, in front of my friends. Whenever survivors would talk about their tragic experiences, it was not as part of an interview but, rather, as a part of normal conversation. In addition, I was allowed to become a member of the organization in charge of bullfighting. That is how I came to stand in the bullfighting ring as a bullfighter and to become the owner of a bull by the name of *Tenjin*. This was not simply a case of participant observation in order to study the finer points of bullfighting culture. Rather, it was a way to partially gain the legitimacy necessary to intervene in the culture by developing a deeper understanding of the survivors' thoughts and feelings and by gaining partial entitlement by becoming a tradition bearer. That said, I did not intentionally plan to become a tradition bearer. It would be better to say that this

was the natural result of the reciprocal interaction between my empathy for the survivors and their acceptance thereof.

After becoming a member of the bullfighting organization, I attempted to “assert” to my bullfighting comrades that the recovery projects underway were being exploited by outside professionals, that such reliance on outside professionals should be stopped, and that they should try to actualize recovery projects on their own. I use the term “assert” here, but these were not opinions expressed in formal settings such as meetings or workshops as would typically be the case for an outsider professional. Rather, they were comments made in informal contexts. For example, if the topic of recovery projects were to come up at a feast after a bullfight, I might express my opinion as one of the “boys.” At first glance, some might consider such a method of communication to be passive and ineffective. However, from my previous interaction with the survivors, I had learned that, in this region, it was important to express opinions through such informal dialogue. Although opinions expressed in informal, everyday conversations do not have any direct or clear impact, they have an indirect and unconscious effect on the survivors’ decision making.

Of course, as a member of the organization in charge of bullfighting, I also had entitlement to express my views in formal discussions on recovery activities. Furthermore, I also had the opportunity to influence leaders of the organization with whom I had close relationships. I hesitated, however, to take this direct approach. This was because I feared that my title of “professor,” from which I could not escape, would take on a certain authority in formal settings. If a person such as myself, having the authority of a scholar, were to say something in an official setting, the comments could have excessive influence on the local community’s decision making and prevent people from expressing their true views.⁵ As such, my only choice was to continue to “softly” convince the survivors in informal settings about the problematic aspects of recovery activities that rely so heavily on outside actors.

As time passed, the survivors became increasingly frustrated with the growing financial burden resulting from projects designed by outside professionals and the absurdity of outside professionals sucking up commissions on the

⁵ The people of this region are not used to voicing their opinions or asserting themselves in formal settings. Instead, they frankly and proactively express their views in informal, everyday conversations, and it is through such conversations that consensus is achieved. Negotiation, as traditionally practiced in the local community, does not take place in meetings but, rather, through repeated dialogue in everyday settings. I simply adopted this approach as well. However, such methods for achieving consensus embedded in the local culture were overlooked by the majority of outside researchers and professionals. In fact, such an approach to negotiation would have been considered inconvenient, given their desire to retain control of projects.

backside of such projects. Their dissatisfaction was most aggravated by the fact that the values embedded in the cultural traditions that they had maintained for so long were not respected in the projects designed by the outside professionals. Ultimately this led the community to sever their dependence on outside professionals and to independently develop plans and become the central driver of their recovery activities.

Subsequently, the survivors began negotiating with the government themselves. Officers of the bullfighting organization frequently visited municipal offices, studied the schemes and application processes for accessing recovery funds, gathered information from regional politicians, and collected donations from influential individuals in the local community. Other members of the organization contributed to such activities in whatever way they could. Some members offered their land as sites for cattle barns, while other members utilized their skills to, for example, remove trees that were in the way. Eventually, I too was included in this organically-occurring division of labor. They expected me to utilize my specialist knowledge and skills as a folklorist with the “title” of university professor. As such, I was assigned the task of preparing official documents required for acquiring external funds and of communicating with the mass media about the importance of traditional culture. These were not roles that I had proactively offered to the survivors. They were roles assigned to me as a result of the trust that had developed through our process of enjoying bullfighting together and through community residents getting to know me as I expressed empathy for their experiences. Other survivors were assigned a wide variety of roles. In this context, mine was just one role among many.

Asymptotic Relationship: A Positionality That Precludes Identifying Completely with Subjects

It goes without saying that I am an outsider just the same as other outsider professionals. I am well aware that no matter how deeply or how long I interact with the people of the region, I can never identify completely with them. Furthermore, I also believe that it is better for me not to naively think that I can identify with them. It is an asymptotic relationship in which I can approach but never be the same as them. I believe, however, that, even if it is not possible for ethnographers to identify with their subjects completely, it is important that they try to get closer to them. We need to first recognize that no matter how close we get or how much empathy we have for a certain group, regardless of what group that is, we can never totally identify with its members. And, based on this recognition, we must

continue to get closer to our subjects and, thereby, gain a deeper understanding of their thinking and values. This approach based on empathy constitutes a challenge to share, at least partially, the context in which the subjects find themselves along with their emotions and their perceptions. And it constitutes a challenge to obtain entitlement in this process by understanding, thinking, speaking, and acting from the standpoint of the subjects.

Although, outside professionals and scholars flocked to the disaster-affected region following the Chūetsu-Niigata Earthquake in 2004, their numbers declined over time. Today, more than ten years after the disaster, the outside professionals, consultants, and NPOs that had once swarmed to Higashiyama are nowhere to be found. Their jobs are done. By disappearing, they have avoided being directly exposed to the consequences and the evaluations of their actions by the local community. Having become a participant in bullfighting, however, there is no endpoint for me. My destiny as a bull owner and as a tradition bearer is for my work to continue to be evaluated for the rest of my life.

One day, after the majority of outside professionals had left Higashiyama, a member of the local community said to me: “You didn’t bring a single cent to the community but you’re still here.” This was the greatest compliment I could have received. What this says without saying it explicitly is the importance of continuing to share experiences with the community, here and now. Through my involvement in the recovery process following the earthquake disaster, I have become aware of the need for research and intervention methods based on relationships without a set end date, research that is not fixed, normative, standardized, generic, or conducted for a certain purpose or towards a certain *a priori* goal.

Empathetic Scholars

While it is inevitable that an ethnographer’s research and activities will have some impact on their subjects, such impact reflexively returns to the ethnographer themselves. We must be aware that such reflexivity has the potential to dramatically alter the scholar’s positionality and ideology, as well as their methods, objectives, and research content. To exclude such potential from the start creates bias. It is entirely natural for an ethnographer, as a human being, to develop empathy for others. And it is this attitude of *not denying empathy* that is expected of an ethnographer.

It is perhaps necessary here to explore the term “empathy” in greater depth. To do so requires drawing a contrast with the term “sympathy.” The two terms are not always mutually exclusive, but, upon closer inspection, they are quite

different. Sympathy is an act of emotional expression such as compassion or concern that involves emotionally aligning with or agreeing with another person. It can easily lead to feelings of pity toward those weaker or inferior to oneself. In contrast, empathy, while also being an act of emotional expression, involves an active attempt to enter another's inner world and to try to understand them by projecting a part of one's self. The utility of empathy lies in this "understanding."

The term "empathy" is a translation of the German *Einfühlung*, a term which enjoyed widespread usage in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in the disciplines of aesthetics, philosophy, and psychology and was a key concept in the *Phänomenologie* proposed by the Austrian philosopher Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl. The English translation of the term, "empathy," was also widely adopted in English-speaking countries, where it underwent a unique evolution of its own. For example, "empathy" was employed as an important analytical concept and was a keyword in the highly-popular "Self Psychology" proposed by Heinz Kohut.⁶ Kohut defined "empathy" as follows:

The best definition of empathy—the analogue to my terse scientific definition of empathy as "vicarious introspection"—is that it is the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. It is our lifelong ability to experience what another person experiences, though usually, and appropriately, to an attenuated degree (Kohut 1984, 82).

We define it as "vicarious introspection" or, more simply, as one person's (at-tempt to) experience the inner life of another while simultaneously retaining the stance of an objective observer (Kohut 1984, 175).

Although the concept of empathy as defined by Kohut carries with it multifaceted and complicated implications, for the purposes of this paper I suggest a simplified interpretation of empathy as "a method for putting oneself in another's inner life in order to feel, experience, and understand" their world. A notable feature of such a conceptualization is that it avoids overly-simplistic identification with the other. One's experience of the subject's world is "attenuated" to a certain degree – i. e. is less intense than the other person's experience. Furthermore, while one attempts to experience the other's inner life, one does so from one's own positionality. In so far as empathy allows one to understand not only another's negative experiences such as sadness and anger but also positive experiences such as joy and pleasure, its scope is much greater than that of the compassion and pity that are a part of sympathy. Through my bullfighting activities, I was able to share not only the survivors' painful experiences following the earthquake but, also, their everyday joys. Empathy can be thought of as

⁶ The term "empathy" itself is relatively new. It was first proposed by the British psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener as a translation of the German *Einfühlung* (Titchener 1909 a, 1909 b).

method that allows us to cross the boundaries of positionality to more deeply understand the full range of human emotions.⁷

Conclusions

The research and activities of scholars and outside professionals in disaster-affected areas appear to suffer from an “empathy deficit.” For example, many scholars and outside professionals, including folklorists, have conducted interview surveys with survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake – including with many people whose wounds are still open – with the stated goal of using the experiences of this earthquake to improve our response to future earthquake disasters. Among such scholars, there are some who fail to consider the current emotional and psychological state of the survivors. There are also researchers who use their status, authority, or relationship with the government to enter disaster-affected areas, exploiting the areas as testing grounds and using the survivors as guinea pigs to further their own research agendas.⁸ Despite lacking true empathy, such scholars typically act, at least superficially, as if they are motivated by empathy. They often cause survivors, who have already been wounded by natural disaster, to experience secondary (man-made) suffering. In order to avoid causing such secondary suffering and to prevent other scholars from causing such secondary suffering among survivors, ethnographers must maintain close relationships and develop true empathy towards their subjects.

I must mention here that, if scholars and outside professionals develop excessive empathy, this can lead to problems similar to those resulting from a deficit in empathy. Even if outside scholars and professionals become emotionally involved with the survivors, if they do not develop the requisite understanding, there is a risk that they will fall into “self-righteous empathy.” The closer one gets

⁷ Amy Shuman argues that “empathy appropriates the personal with the goal of greater understanding across experiential differences” (Shuman 2006, 149). Empathy is an emotional act that, while potentially developing into self-righteousness, can lead to clearer understanding of others’ experiences, personal values, and thinking.

⁸ In terms of Japanese folkloristics, after the earthquake disaster, the Agency for Cultural Affairs and other governmental agencies have funded salvage folklore projects in which folklorists and cultural anthropologists are mobilized to assess damage to and to protect cultural assets. However, such investigations have not necessarily been implemented with sufficient consideration of the dire circumstances in which survivors currently find themselves. The majority of folklorists are interested in festivals and rites that are at risk of being lost as a result an earthquake disaster. Even as they stand face to face with survivors who are struggling to survive, the folklorists tend to turn a blind eye to the difficulties experienced by the survivors in their daily lives.

to the survivors, the more one feels (perhaps baselessly) and acts as if one identifies with the survivors. There is a chance, however, that the outsider's intentions do not match up with the perceptions/emotions and the goals/methods desired by the survivors themselves. Decisions made by individuals who believe that they are in sync with the survivors may, in fact, have unwanted consequences for the survivors. For example, following the Chūetsu-Niigata (2004) and Great East Japan (2011) earthquakes, massive amounts of supplies were sent from around the country to evacuation shelters where large numbers of evacuees had assembled. A large proportion of such supplies, however, comprised items that the survivors either could not use or did not need and ultimately hindered the delivery of emergency supplies. This was a problem caused by “self-righteous empathy.” As in the case of empathy deficit, such “self-righteous empathy” can further harm the survivors.

Amy Shuman points out the potential problem of empathy as follows:

Empathy offers the possibility of understanding across space and time, but it rarely changes the circumstances of those who suffer. If it provides inspiration, it is more often for those in the privileged position of empathizer rather than empathized (Shuman 2006, 152–153).

This is a prime example of a problem caused by “self-righteous” empathy. Unless one is vigilant, empathy can mutate into self-righteous empathy or something similar to sympathy.

The term “empathy,” whose meaning encompasses the “understanding” of others, appears to be more rational than “sympathy.” Accordingly, scholars who are concerned with empathy as a means of understanding others undoubtedly make an effort to remain calm, collected, and objective. In practice, however, they may not always be able to maintain this calm, objective stance. Although they may attempt to experience the inner world of others to the extent that doing so does not disrupt their own sentiments (emotions), in reality, the closer they are to their subjects, the more their own sentiments are influenced, and the greater the likelihood that they will fall into the kind of sentimental sympathy and self-righteous empathy that should be avoided. Ethnographers who act from the standpoint of survivors must become sensitive to such potential problems associated with empathy and must remain self-reflective. Scholars who empathize run the risk of having their emotions take over and of descending into self-righteousness or narcissism.

That said, the point that I want to emphasize here is that, even if such potential risks exist, there is no need to avoid research and activities based on empathy. For a long time, in the context of research and related activities, we have forced ourselves to try to remain objective and, as much as possible, to “pin down” facts. Scholars and professionals have tended to undervalue empathy as an emotional capacity and an emotional act. In times of crisis following disasters,

however, it is necessary to pay attention to and to take such emotional aspects into consideration. It is also a powerful means by which to counter research and activities that take advantage of disasters. What is important is not simply to “feel” what the survivors feel but, rather, to more accurately and more deeply understand the thinking, values, and wishes of the survivors. By correctly understanding and correctly transmitting the thinking of survivors to the broader society, folklorists capable of empathy can contribute substantially to communities struck by disasters.

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