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Book Review of "Frontiers of Social Research: Japan and Beyond". 351 pages, Trans Pacific Press, 2007, edited by Akira Furukawa

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The title 'Frontiers of Social Research' implies a pioneering spirit, embarking upon unchartered territories. However, the most fascinating and insightful moments of this book are those which explore age-old Japanese research techniques and the potential for new methodologies to look to the old. The key theme of the work is the role of the researcher and the researcher's relationships with research participants, the research audience and with knowledge itself.

The fraught relationship between researcher and research participants is critically exposed throughout the book. Motoji Matsuda's opening chapter is a call to overcome cynicism towards field work and engage in empathetic relationships with research participants that acknowledge, but do not seek to affect, difference. Kokichiro Miura continues to explore the limitations of the relationship between researcher and research participant and the nature of empathy in his discussion on 'structural discrimination'. Miura describes the gap that exists between the experience of the researcher and research subject in many situations. He doesn't advocate for objectivity and doesn't advocate for approaches which seek to pacify the research subject, either through tokenistic empowerment strategies or by feigning understanding. He suggests, instead, that the most important step is to acknowledge that there are certain situations with which people cannot fully empathise. Michihiro Okuda similarly promotes the importance for social researchers to reflect "complexities as they exist" (p.150) in an analysis on transnational migrants living the 'third space' of Japan, that space between city centre and outer suburbs. By acknowledging the creative diversity that exists the paper challenges the perception of such spaces as 'ethnic slums' and paints instead a picture of a global community.

Kyung-soo Chun explores the constitution of an 'ethical' relationship between researcher and research subject, drawing on examples from anthropological studies in the period of colonialism. The work defines an unethical relationship as one that not necessarily causes harm to research subjects, but one which knowingly does so. The example of a Japanese anthropologist giving opium to Chinese subjects as an incentive to provide data, knowing that it had negative physiological effects, is contrasted with the example of an anthropologist who provided tobacco to research subjects during a time when its ill effects were little understood. While acknowledging the challenges for achieving objectivity in social science, as opposed to the natural sciences, objectivity is still posited as the holy grail of methodology and worth striving for, even if unachievable, a view effectively countered by a number of co-authors in this work.

The concept of 'citizen research' and engaging the community as researcher is a recurrent one throughout the book. Beyond the idea of the person as research subject, it looks to an active role for 'laypeople' in research that is about them or their communities. Furukawa's chapter on the 260 year history of a village diary in Chinai Village in rural Japan is the most vivid example of this approach in the book. Furukawa explores the concept of the village as investigator or researcher. The village has been able to use the rich data it has maintained to advocate for support throughout history. As Furukawa claims, this has allowed the village to maintain its very existence and challenge homogenisation and national standardisation through its collective knowledge and ability to translate this knowledge into practice and resources. One of the great examples comes from 1885 when major floods had devastating effects on the village and threatened the ability of the very poor to even survive. The village, utilising its local knowledge about the people and environment, revised the system for catching and allocating fish to provide exclusive fishing rights to the poor to ensure their livelihood. The notion of communal research has been essential for the community to maintain a peaceful existence and to redress issues of excess or shortage. This work moves beyond the opening chapter's discussion about the potential for 'joint research' and assumption that a mutual level of understanding will achieve this, to actually showing the ways in which communities are the keepers of their own knowledge. It shows that research is not the exclusive domain of scholars and professional researchers, but that knowledge is something which can be generated from the ground up.

The citizen as researcher and the personal value of the research process is explored less successfully by Yukiko Kada. The author describes a range of environmental research programs and the ways that communities have become involved and gained personal fulfilment through the process. While the discussion on citizen research, and strategies such as use of photographs to evoke memories which form the basis for data, provide encouraging stories about communities working together, the analysis doesn't take the step of showing how a community project actually translates into new knowledge, beyond simply being an emotionally fulfilling and bonding experience. Miyauchi provides a similarly superficial call for community involvement, claiming that case studies should be undertaken by 'citizens', although it is unclear who these citizens are; they are not necessarily the research subjects themselves. The danger of such calls for layperson involvement in research is that it is seen as a community wellbeing activity, one which makes the community feel stronger, more bonded, more involved (which are all good things by the way), but does not consider the real potential for the actual knowledge production and effective research outcomes. That is, it isn't just something we should do because it's nice, as Kada and Miyauchi imply, but it is something we should do because research subjects have insight and knowledge beyond that of the researcher, that make valuable contributions in more ways than as 'research subjects', which is beautifully conveyed by Furukawa.

As with the other successful papers in the book, Miura's chapter utilises traditional Japanese forms within a social research context. A series of controversial *senryu*, a form of Japanese poem, written by welfare case workers, form the starting point of the analysis. The poems apparently caused outrage for expressing sentiments that were considered derisive to welfare recipients, such as, "Please stay in hospital forever, you alcoholic" (p.258). The *senryu* are an insight into the ways in which Japanese modern social research practices can utilise traditional forms of expression to gain an understanding of the perspective of research subjects.

Bidan is another example of a Japanese form of expression, approximately translated into 'story of good deed'. Yukihiko Shigenobu uses a historical example in which the government commissioned research into *bidan* related to a natural disaster. However, the beauty and nature of the form and process of *bidan* were compromised to a degree, because of the government's requirement for objective and factual data. The chapter hints at the possibilities for qualitative research methodologies to embrace culturally significant approaches to telling a story, while recognising the challenges in reconciling such approaches with a perceived need for fact and empiricism.

Seiyama highlights the potential for quantitative research to engage with and connect with us through such use of narrative. The author is scathing of 'excessive empiricism' and attributes the popularity of qualitative research in part to what he describes as "self-interpretation-presenting" data. That is, the story in qualitative data is there for us to see without interpretation, unlike quantitative data which may initially appear as a series of meaningless numbers. It's a refreshing approach in light of a plethora of work which seeks to consider how qualitative research processes can build rigour by adopting empirical processes. The issue explored here is how quantitative methodology strives to gain currency and to resonate with the reader, while maintaining rigour and not falling into a trap of tying together unrelated statistics to 'tell a story'.

Visual methodologies, the sensory experience of field work and 'seeing' as the means engaging with a research subject are fascinating components of Makito Kawada's paper on the methodology of *Kogengaku*. It is not necessarily a paper advocating for the methods, and indeed analysis of some of the methods questions whether the collation of seemingly trivial data can lead to meaningful knowledge. The article is, instead, a reminder that researchers are armed with a full range of senses, not just a notepad and a digital recorder and that there is potential for research to utilise the senses and to test the contested boundary between art and science. This seems particularly important given that a number of writers within this book raise concern about an overreliance on conventional surveys as the primary tool for social research in Japan. The visual methodology embraces the constructed nature of what is observed and paradoxically, "because of this impossibility of describing what is seen as it is, the visual sense can be used a specific method to observe the subject" (p.59).

There are parts of this book which undermine the work of Kawada, Seiyama and others in eliciting the potential for both qualitative and quantitative research methods to incorporate multi-sensory, culturally relevant and narrative based strategies to tell a more compelling and engaging story. Miyauchi's examination of case study methodology and Kamei's paper on sketching as a tool, present what may actually be useful and effective methods, but do so in ways that fail to capture the real value of the techniques and end up suggesting little more than quaint strategies for building rapport with communities and overcoming technological challenges in remote settings.

I won't dwell too long on Hiroaki Yoshii's analysis of the 1932 film 'Freaks', because it seems so misplaced in this collection that I was left a little perplexed. While it's not a bad textual analysis and debate about the discriminating versus the subversive impact of the film, it doesn't make the connections back to the theme of social research and the role of the social researcher.

The 'frontiers' of social research explored here delve into many rich, often age-old, traditions of knowledge to reposition these practices in a way that can make current social research practice more effective and more accessible. The final chapter moves away from this approach and examines Japanese child welfare systems in an international context, exploring the potential for modern computer based technologies as a means to "realize evidence-based practice" (p.306). The chapter? provides an example of the challenges and practicalities of implementing, not only evidence-informed models of practice, but of turning a principle, such as that of the child's best interest, into practice. The work highlights that signing up to a convention such as the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, is many steps removed from actually implementing practices which reflect the child's best interest. Shibano is critical of the Japanese system, which is accused of being reactive and too prone to discretion of social workers or 'street-level bureaucrats' (SLB). The navigational database is intended to, "suppress any negative influence that the SLB's discretion may have on that worker's decision" (p.298). It hits on a major nerve for the Evidence-based Practice, about whether it is actually beneficial to suppress professional discretion, or whether this discretion is a valuable part of professional wisdom and essential to reacting appropriately to the complex, unique circumstances of an individual case.

As a researcher this book led me to reassess my ideas about tools and strategies, not only for collecting and analysing data, but for disseminating knowledge and putting it into practice. While the work raises questions about the challenging nature of empathy and the inevitable divide between researcher and research subject, it is, overall, an optimistic approach to the issues and suggests that with creativity, sensitivity and a willingness to learn from past and international experiences, there is potential for social research to do better.

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