Agency and Environmental Crisis in Japan
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For this project, I interviewed American and Japanese people who resided in Tokyo and Fukushima prefecture about the triplet disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear plant meltdown) on March 11, 2011 (also known as 3.11). This was a sociological study conducted at Temple University’s Japan campus, through the Institute of Contemporary Asian Studies (ICAS). While in Japan, I was under the guidance of Professor Kyle Cleveland, associate professor of sociology and founder of ICAS. I worked as a research assistant for Professor Cleveland and was able to spend my own time collecting data for my research. Luckily, our research greatly overlapped, we were both interested in city, prefectural, and national government discourse surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi Disaster and the social implications of nuclear exposure. Through analysis, I hope to reveal what choices the Japanese people were given and what choices they had to make during 3.11 in order to protect themselves and their family from nuclear radiation exposure.

The bulk of this trip was spent collecting data through in-person, hour-long, interviews with volunteers, evacuees, doctors, and city officials. I took several trips to do this. First, I traveled with two interns to Fukushima prefecture to collect data on behalf of Professor Cleveland. Our research questions included topics regarding evacuation orders, System for Prediction of Environment Emergency Dose Information (aka SPEEDI, a software used for tracking nuclear radiation dispersal), and the psychological effects of radiation exposure. Upon returning to Tokyo my Professor, other interns, and I debriefed our trip and worked on transcribing the interviews. We confirmed our data by researching online.

Our second trip was to the Hiroshima. Here, our research team, Professor Cleveland, two other interns and I, visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and interviewed four Hibakusha (a Japanese word for atomic bomb survivor). These stories helped us to contextualize the cultural and social implications of nuclear exposure in Japan. Returning to Tokyo, I took two weeks to conduct my own interviews with volunteers and evacuees living in Tokyo. Through these interviews I was able to get an understanding of how people who were not evacuated due to a threat of radiation exposure responded to 3.11. Finally, our research team returned to Fukushima for another week of interviews. This time we spoke to 5 government officials in the area. We were able to learn about their recovery actions and community support programs following 3.11.

With this interview data I collected I will begin to analyze these questions through a year-long Honors Project: What does it mean to be exposed to radiation? Is there a ‘safe’ level of radiation? What information have the Japanese used to give meaning to ‘nuclear radiation exposure?’ What choices do people make when they are unsure of the potential risks during a nuclear disaster?

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