

“You Are Contagious”: When Talk of Radiation Fears Overwrites the Truth

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Japanese media coverage since March 11th 2011 suggests that people from Fukushima Prefecture have faced discrimination based on people's fears of radiation, despite the fact that they pose no genuine threat. This discrimination is compared to that faced by survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima during World War II. Survivors from Hiroshima express hopes that people from Tohoku will not face the same fear and discrimination they did.

2011年3月以降に伝達されたメディアでは、福島県の人々が放射能に対する人々の恐怖から、実際にはその恐れが確認されていないにもかかわらず、差別を受けていることが分かる。この差別は、第二次世界大戦中に広島に落とされた原子爆弾の生存者に対するものと類似する。広島の生存者は、東北の人々が同じような差別を受けてほしくないと希望している。

The massive earthquake and tsunami that hit eastern Japan on March 11th 2011 has caused all manner of disruption. This includes very serious damage to the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant and the evacuation of residents from the area around the plant. Shortly after the disaster, two brothers who evacuated from Fukushima experienced bullying at their new school in Chiba.

(福島県からの)兄弟は3月中旬、市内の公園で遊んでいると、方言を耳にした地元の子供たちから「どこから来たの?」と聞かれた。兄弟が「福島から」と答えると、みな「放射線がうつる」「わー」と叫び、逃げていった。兄弟は泣きながら親類宅に戻(った)。(Mainichi Shimbun, April 13, 2011)

Hearing brothers speaking in a different dialect at a park in Chiba city in mid-March, the local children asked them, “Where are you from?” “From Fukushima,” the brothers answered. As soon as they heard the answer, the local children ran away from them screaming, “No!” “You’re contagious!” Crying, the brothers returned to their relatives’ house.

Compare the brothers’ story with one told eight years before the disasters of March 11th, 2011. Ms. Yamada, a woman in Hiroshima whose face, neck, and hands had been severely disfigured by the atomic bombing in 1945, told a group of 6th graders at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum how people treated her when they saw her after the war.

全身やけどをした山田さんをみた人々は、「お前、原爆じゃろう。」
「うつる。」「伝染病じゃ。」(と言った。)これ、いじめだったんだよ。(山田さんは)「うつる、伝染病」と言われました。(Cantrell 2006, pp. 136-137)

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People who saw Ms. Yamada's (my) burned body (said), “You (experienced the) A-bomb, didn't you?”, “You're contagious”, [or] “(You're) infectious”. This was bullying. I was told that I was contagious and infectious.

It is striking to see how similar these stories are to one another, including the words being used (i.e., うつる [utsuru] ‘contagious, infectious’) and the fact that in each case bullying was born of fear stemming from people's ignorance about radiation.

Among the challenges arising from the disasters of March 11th, the spread of rumors is at once problematic and potentially easy to ignore. Compared to loss of life, destruction of homes, and on-going threats to health and well-being, rumors are just stories. Stories, however, are essential to how we live as human beings and how we make sense of the world. Since Aristotle scholars have noted that our abilities to live in communities and to tell one another about our experiences of the past and our hopes for the future are defining characteristics of human life, an understanding that has only been strengthened in recent years. It is by telling stories and listening to the stories of others that we make sense of our lives and find our place in the world (Linde 1993, 2009; Hymes 1996; De Fina 2003 inter alia).

It is in some sense a double tragedy when the fact that one experienced the bombing cuts one off from society, and then stories about that experience become a basis for additional stigma. Mrs. Kato, a storyteller at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum who describes her own experiences of the nuclear bombing of that city during the war, told one of the authors (Cantrell) that she had hidden the fact that she was exposed to the radiation in Hiroshima for many years.

最初ね、原爆にあったことを隠してました。それは、原爆にあったら、子どもがまずできない。結婚するのにね、条件が悪いんですよ。原爆にあった（という）ことは、結婚しても、あの、子どもができないし、奇形児ができる。(Cantrell 2006, p. 141)

At the beginning, (I) kept it secret that I had experienced the bombing. Because if (you) experienced the bomb, (you) cannot have a child. That is a disadvantage for marriage. Even if (a person) who experienced the bomb marries, (she) cannot have a child, or if (she) has a child, (she will) have a child with birth defects.

Mrs. Kato suffered in two ways because of the bombing. She was faced with the fear that she would not be able to marry or have a healthy child. In addition, her identity as a survivor of the bombing amid widespread fears forced her to keep the experience a secret and not to seek support from other people.

Survivors of the atomic bombing were stigmatized by harmful rumors after the war. It was said that female survivors would bear retarded children, and that false belief excluded many A-bomb survivors from marriage. Although exposure to radiation from the bombing did cause one type of handicap, microcephaly, the effect was only reported among women who were pregnant at the time they were exposed to the bombing (Hiroshima Peace Media Center, April 18, 2010).¹ Nevertheless, the rumor that all survivors were more likely to bear children with birth defects was so powerful that it was treated as if it had been true.

¹ According to Kalter (2010) approximately 20% of surviving children whose mothers were within 2200 meters of the hypocenter suffered microcephaly. Kalter reports no other birth defects apparent among women exposed to the bombing.

After World War II, being identified as an atomic bombing survivor put one in a highly stigmatized position. For example, it took Toshio Heishi, an 84-year-old atomic bomb survivor, decades to finally tell his wife that he had been exposed to the bombing. It was not until more than 50 years after the war had ended that Heishi told his wife about his experience. He explained why he hid his past: 「被爆者だと口にしたら、結婚できないと思ったからね」 'If I had told that I was an a-bomb survivor, I thought I would not have been able to marry' (Mainichi Shimbun, April 19, 2011).

There is some evidence that people identified with Fukushima are today facing similar stigmatization. J-Cast News (15 April 2011) reported that a woman decided not to marry her fiancé because his mother was concerned about the fact that she was from Fukushima. J-Cast cites a blog, 'Inside stories of a wedding photographer' (Uedhingu kameraman no urabanashi, 15 April 2011), as the source of this story, and that blog provides more details. According to the wedding photographer, the wedding had long been planned and was ready to go ahead when the groom's mother expressed concern about her son marrying a woman from Fukushima. She wondered whether such a woman would be capable bearing a healthy child. In spite of the fact that the woman has lived in Tokyo since she graduated from high school and was not in Fukushima during the earthquake or the explosions at the nuclear plant, her identity as a woman from Fukushima caused such stigma that the wedding was halted.

Besides blogs and weekly magazines, Japan's largest daily newspapers have detailed cases of young evacuees bullied in their new schools, children and adults denied apartments or hospital admission, and companies facing the cancellation of deliveries based on their association with Fukushima prefecture (e.g. Mainichi Shimbun, 29 March 2011, Mainichi Shimbun 13 April 2011; Yomiuri Shimbun 21 April 2011; compare also Asahi Shimbun, 5 June 2011).

Language and story-telling, so necessary to our experience as human beings, becomes harmful when it unreasonably imposes stigma on people. Survivors of the atomic bombings during World War II suffered both physical and psychological injury from the attacks themselves, and then additional emotional injury from being stigmatized by others. Survivors express their hope that the evacuees from Fukushima will not have to face the same hardship that they had after the war. For instance, Seiji Hashimoto, a 68 year-old survivor of the bombing in Hiroshima told the Chugoku Shimbun Online that it is important for people from Hiroshima and from Fukushima to share correct knowledge about radiation with the world so there will be no discrimination against the victims (Chugoku Shimbun Online, April 11, 2011).

It is important to understand the truth about radiation and radioactive materials in order to combat the fear that causes injustice such as bullying and discrimination. Radiation itself is not contagious, though radioactive materials such as those released from the damaged nuclear power plant can cause illness or increase the risk of cancer.² Radioactive materials on the outside of a person's body can be removed by simple washing. Even if a person becomes ill after exposure to radiation, cancer or radiation sickness are not contagious (Fukushima Prefecture 2011; Hoffman 1991). Since radiation sickness or radiation-induced cancers are not passed from one person to another, there is no reason to avoid embracing evacuees from Fukushima and supporting all victims and survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Keiji Nakazawa, the author of 'Barefoot Gen', the well-known *manga* describing his experiences before and after the atomic bombing, says in an interview that he wants the government and scientists to give people accurate information about radiation, mentioning that A-bomb survivors faced discrimination because of rumors about radiation (Mainichi

² Precisely which illnesses are caused by exposure to radiation remains controversial among medical researchers. The nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in 1986 may provide a comparison to the events in Fukushima. See Nagataki 1994 for detailed evaluation of medical, social, and economic effects.

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Shimbun, April 28, 2011). When stories with incorrect information are repeatedly told, they negatively affect survivors. Ignorance cannot discern the truth from rumors. It is knowledge and the desire to acquire it that keep us from discrimination. As one resident in Hokkaido tweeted on April 14th, 2011:

放射能差別をなくそう。福島県民に差別ではなく温かい気持ちを。放射能を誤解している人は、もっと自分から情報をさがす努力をしてください。 (@Tsukasa2808, April 14, 2011)

Let's get rid of the discrimination (related to) radiation. (Give) our kindness to residents in Fukushima, not discrimination. (If you) have inaccurate knowledge about radiation, please look harder for more accurate information.

Comparison of the experiences of Fukushima victims and atomic bomb survivors shows that language can overwrite the truth and when it does, it creates real harm. One can be labeled as contagious without reason. The experiences of survivors in Fukushima and Hiroshima tell us that it is knowledge and the desire for accurate information that can overturn this pattern.

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