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Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic

The challenges and merits of fieldwork during COVID-19

When teaching fieldwork and qualitative research methods that require a significant amount of independent data gathering, it is essential to provide training for students so that they can gain first-hand experience and learn how to deal with unfamiliar situations such as interviewing respondents (Manzenreiter 2020, 115). In some cases, training is closely linked with a current research project, thus providing students with insights into the research practice of their peers and professors. “Field schools”, for example, allow participants to experience the place of research, practise their qualitative methods on site and become integrated into a larger research project (see e.g. Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). Even in pre-COVID times, such endeavours were often time consuming and financially burdensome. Although part of the costs is often covered by various funding programmes, the additional expenses borne by students can be significant, especially when the research site is in another country.

The difficulties associated with on-site teaching of fieldwork practices have been further aggravated by COVID-19. In our field of Japanese studies, travelling to Japan was practically impossible during most of 2020 and 2021, thus raising the question of how to effectively teach qualitative methods without the students having the chance to actually *use* these methods for their research on Japan. Although the COVID pandemic exposed the vulnerability of our teaching practices, it also served to highlight the need to be flexible and adapt our methods to changing circumstances. In this volume, we demonstrate different approaches in uncertain times that enabled students to gain first-hand experience for their studies.

By collecting the experiences from three projects undertaken at different universities (Sophia University in Japan, the University of Vienna and Freie Universität Berlin), this volume reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of

digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016), the challenges of switching a project to “remote fieldwork” (Ugoretz 2021), ways of dealing with delays to an entire project and people’s responses to face-to-face-situations after a long period of social distancing. All three projects were affected by the pandemic to varying degrees and each developed its own strategies for tackling the difficulties. The projects involved students at different stages in their academic lives: undergraduate students at Sophia University, a mixed class of undergraduate and graduate students at Vienna and PhD students at Freie Universität Berlin. Even though students at Sophia University were based in Japan, they nevertheless had to conduct interviews online. Their eventual return to face-to-face interviews did not go as smoothly as expected but it provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on the important topic of interview situations. The “Aso Winter Field School” at the University of Vienna was based entirely on remote fieldwork, which was successful in many ways, although participants were aware of a certain lack of spontaneity and the “feeling of being there” (Ugoretz 2021, 62). The Berlin-based study group on urban-to-rural migration faced the difficult task of building a team during the time of COVID-19 but discovered that the challenges they encountered enabled numerous new experiences that might eventually serve to broaden the methodological horizons of those involved.

One of our aims is to show that research on Japan is possible during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and we hope that these accounts might be of help to others struggling with similar situations in the future. While all of us have had to make various adjustments to our teaching and research practices, we are convinced that including students in research projects is an enriching experience for all parties involved, regardless of the pandemic. From the student articles in this volume, we can see that their involvement in research has led them to reflect not only on their respective research topics but also on their positionality and what it means to interview other people. For the project advisors, the planning, conducting and evaluation of an entire project during these challenging times has caused them to rethink established research practices and learn new approaches, as most were not familiar with the various online and remote methods.

However, there is another important reason for choosing to publish these accounts of three different research projects. Although students might sometimes take part in research projects, their efforts are rarely reflected or acknowledged in the final outcomes. They might usually receive a mark for their academic involvement and their attitude and commitment to the pro-

ject, but they are rarely involved in the further analysis of the data, let alone playing a part in the published article. From a pedagogical viewpoint, we believe it makes sense to include students not only in the data-gathering stage but throughout the entire research process, including the writing up of the results. It is through experiencing all the stages involved in the current-day production of knowledge that they can understand the strengths and limits of academia. Also from an ethical perspective, we believe it is only fair and just to give students an equal voice in the publication process. The reflection sections of the students' papers demonstrate the strength of their involvement and commitment during the various phases of their projects, and including different perspectives on the research topic enables a broader understanding of the research process, thus making research more transparent.

Certainly, this is not a book about how to conduct fieldwork in general or how to hold an effective interview, as these subjects have already been covered in great detail (e.g. Bestor / Steinhoff / Lyon-Bestor 2003, Gmeinbauer / Polak-Rottmann / Purkarthofer 2020, Kottmann / Reiher 2020). Instead, we suggest this volume may be of interest to three different audiences: First, we hope to provide scholars with three creative examples of including students in research projects and of finding solutions for challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the articles have been peer reviewed and treated equally by the editors, so our hope is that their findings and insights might be of use to others researching their respective topics (e.g. urban-to-rural migration, the changing face of rural Japan, refugees in Japan). Third, we would encourage other students to read about the experiences of their peers in Japan, Austria and Germany in the hope that they too will be encouraged to see themselves not only as "receivers" of knowledge but also as potential contributors to a bigger research project, through which they can experience firsthand the collaborative production of knowledge.

Three arguments for including students in research

This volume shows how research methods are taught and practiced at three different institutions and describes the opportunities given to students to contribute to research and become researchers themselves. It is divided into three sections, each focusing on a particular project. Each begins with a paper by the advisor(s) outlining the aim, methodology and challenges of the project and is followed by separate student papers describing their individual research as well as their reflections on their role within the larger research project and the challenges this entailed.

Part 1 “Giving students something worth researching”—involving undergraduate students in research at Sophia University

We begin with Sophia University in Japan with one paper by the supervisor of the project and three papers by students. As the project mainly involved undergraduate students who had not yet chosen academic life, it focused on showing students the meaning of research along with methodological and ethical practices. While conducting research on refugees in Japan, the students were trained to hold interviews about appropriate topics and to reflect deeply on their experiences. It is apparent that talking to refugees proved to be an extremely thought-provoking experience and one that encouraged them to think about their positionality, the meaning of field research and their responsibility as researchers (e.g., ethical concerns). The project also demonstrates how research can be presented on a website, making the interviewees’ narratives visible to a broader public audience than traditional academic publications.

The first paper, written by David H. Slater, combines the didactic goal of preparing students to conduct research autonomously with reflections on ethical considerations concerning the vulnerability of interviewees. The second paper, written by Ayano Soma, aims to give voice to refugees applying for asylum in Japan. It focuses on her learning process and reflects her thoughts both on the methodological and the ethical concerns of their research project. In the third paper, Thaw Tar focuses on the experiences of Burmese students in Japan against the backdrop of a recent coup in their home country and its impact on their lives in Myanmar and in Japan. Coming from Myanmar himself, Thaw Tar reflects on his own positionality regarding his research topic as well as Japan’s role as a receiving country for refugees. The final paper in this section, by Megumi Faith Mallari, discusses her experiences as a member of the Sophia Refugee Support Group, which aims to support refugees in Japan and raise awareness of their plight through social media. The papers demonstrate how students can be excited at being actively involved in research even during the early stages of their studies.

Part 2 “Experiencing rural Japan through remote fieldwork”—involving undergraduate and graduate students in research at the University of Vienna

The contribution by the University of Vienna comprises two papers by the supervisors and joint papers by four student groups participating in the project. Their project on the Aso region of Japan continues their department’s

long-standing research commitment to the area, which included a research trip with students in 2018 (Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). Wishing to continue this tradition, the supervisors had planned to repeat this experience in 2021 and conduct research on the pandemic's effects on life in the Aso region with the aim of involving students in planning, realisation and analysis of a broader research project, as well as gathering valid data on respective research interests. However, in light of Japan's travel ban announced in autumn 2021, they decided to switch to an online format and conduct remote fieldwork, relying on existing contacts within the Aso region and a colleague living on site acting as a communication link.

The paper by the supervisors Hanno Jentzsch and Sebastian Polak-Rottmann introduces the research topic, as well as didactic considerations during the different phases of the project. It then reflects on the advantages and challenges of virtual research and how they attempted to overcome those as a team. The paper by Wolfram Manzenreiter, the initiator of the idea of a Field School in Aso, illustrates how previous attempts to involve students as researchers have been affected by the pandemic. He shows how the project has been transferred to a site in the Austrian Alps and shares the experiences of the participants. The first student paper of the Aso Winter Field School, written by Katja Palaszewski, Stefan Pöllitzer, Hannah Pilar Egger and Tobias Simek, focuses on the effects of social distancing and other restrictions on people's wellbeing, such as depression and loneliness. In the second student paper, Johanna Mayr, Lenka Miyanojara and Benedikt Schultz examine the effect of the pandemic on the activities of social organisations and traditional events held in the Aso region. The third student paper, authored by Wilhelm Donko, Melanie Steinbrugger and Max Fortin, examines the attitudes and approaches of the tourism sector in the Aso region when dealing with the pandemic compared with responses to natural disasters. Lastly, Rabia Deveci, Kaloyan Ivanov and Juliana Neuninger explore how the local Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (COKT) programme promotes migration to the Aso region in the online sphere and how it portrays the experiences of migrants in Minamiaso along with aspects of the region that are represented as important pull factors. All the students reflect on their experience of being part of a wider research project and of conducting research online. Their project demonstrates how data can be gathered using remote methods and how online interviews are an effective option when interviewing officials and the younger generation.

Part 3 “Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan”— involving PhD students in research at Freie Universität Berlin

The project carried out by the Freie Universität Berlin is introduced in a paper by the advisor and papers by two PhD students who are members of the team. The project aims to prepare aspiring young researchers for their future within academia by providing them with the opportunity to take part in a larger research project while writing their PhD thesis. Their project reflects on the difficulties created by unforeseen circumstances, including having to adapt their research to an online format and rescheduling on-site research. It also shows how research projects may be made accessible to a wider audience using blogs and online meetings with colleagues around the globe.

In the first paper, Cornelia Reiher introduces the overall research project on urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan and discusses the challenges that the pandemic and Japan's travel ban posed for their collective research project and particularly for young scholars working within fixed budgets and timeframes. The second paper, written by Ngo Tu Thanh (Frank Tu), seeks to explicate how Japan's rural revitalisation policies, especially migration-based schemes, are envisioned, formulated, implemented and evaluated from a comparative perspective, while also reflecting on his experiences as a part of a larger research project. In the third paper, Cecilia Luzi reflects on balancing her work as a research assistant, PhD student and young mother while adapting her ethnographic research in light of the challenges posed by the pandemic. In all of their accounts it is apparent that challenging circumstances provided opportunities to try out new ways of research and collaboration.

All the papers in this volume underline the significance of students' contributions to their respective research projects and the academic community, as well as their success in communicating important social issues to the wider general public. We therefore stress the importance and the benefits of joining hands with students and producing academic knowledge together.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to JAWS for generously supporting us with a grant for language editing, and the Institute for East Asian Studies for the opportunity to publish our results. We would also like to thank all those in Japan who agreed to be part of the projects presented in this volume.

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