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Understanding vulnerabilities virtually: Oral narrative research on a Syrian refugee amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Research for and with support

Growing up as *nikkei* in the Philippines, I was surrounded by many other people of Japanese descent. But to me, being a fractional Japanese was merely something that added to my identity as a Filipino. My first name is Japanese, I have family in Japan and would often come to visit them, but I admittedly did not spend as much time pondering my relationship with the country itself. I was firmly rooted in my Filipino identity and seeing first-hand the struggles faced by my fellow Filipinos, I spent more time organising with my classmates to try and support underprivileged populations in our city, Davao, in our capacity as students. At the same time, I saw how my mother frequently went on interview trips around the country to gather information on persons of Japanese descent who were left by their Japanese parents in the Philippines after the Second World War and were at risk of statelessness because they were neither Filipinos nor recognized Japanese—the population covered in the 2021 *UNHCR Philippines' Report on Populations at Risk of Statelessness*[1]. When I came to university in Tōkyō, this experience sparked my interest in statelessness and forced migration in Japan.

Upon entering Sophia University, I became part of Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG[2]), the support arm of Refugee Voices Japan[3]. Established in 2017, students who took this research course realised that collecting oral narratives is just the beginning—the refugees that they were interviewing were not only sources of data but were individuals who needed much support but were given little to none in Japan. I quickly learned that most asylum seekers stay here in Japan under what is called "provisional release", a precarious status that leaves them without insurance or the ability to work (Tamura 2020; see Footnote 3). My *senpai* or "senior students" established the student organisation not only to raise awareness about the plight of refugees in Japan

through social media[4], seminars and presentations at high schools, but also to provide support and friendship to refugees. SRSG hosts cafes where the refugees come to our university monthly to chat and have fun together, co-ordinates detention centre visits, accompanies refugees to their visa renewals at the immigration centre and hospital check-ups, teaches Japanese, translates asylum application documents to Japanese and researches background information for asylum applications.

During my second year, I took over leadership for SRSG just as COVID-19 hit—when the vulnerability of our refugee friends intensified. As Parajuli and Horey (2021) note, the nature of a refugee's vulnerability is constantly changing and dependent on political policy that often dictates societal structures. There is no singular experience of being a refugee: they are affected by varying issues at varying stages of their journeys that could intensify, abate or shift their chronic vulnerability. In a high-income country like Japan, this "vulnerability" is defined by Mendola, Parroco and Li Donni (2020) as the "multidimensional risk of experiencing negative outcomes" characterised by social isolation, lack of access to healthcare, and financial difficulties that refugees are subjected to as they start a new life in the asylum country. Lacking reliable and up-to-date data publicly available data, we collect our own data to more accurately target support, especially given the lack of state-led assistance to asylum seekers. Leading the support arm of the refugee project gave me a level of understanding of the relationship between research and support and the importance of bridging these two together.

I joined the research arm of the project during my third year as part of a team of four undergraduates and worked on the narrative of Yasser[5], a Syrian refugee in Tōkyō. Having had experience interacting with refugees prior to participating in the research was immensely helpful for me, as I had some degree of understanding of their vulnerabilities. This research was an enriching experience that opened my eyes to the true severity and complexity of the experiences of those forced to flee, and it fuelled my efforts to explore and understand what I can do in my position as a student, acting as both scholar and supporter for vulnerable populations.

Yasser: adapting to new roles

Born and raised in Syria as the eldest son of a father who worked as a professional chef in Qatar and a mother who was an executive in the media industry, Yasser lived a comfortable life growing up. He was a devout Muslim who was

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4   https://www.instagram.com/sophia.srsg/?hl=en
5   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/

free to exercise his faith while acquiring a top-level education, studying English literature at Damascus University. He was also a national-level soccer player.

Yasser grew up under the Assad regime[6] and in 2013 was forced to flee when the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, with some 16,000 people killed within a year (BBC 2012). His family situation was threatened due to his mother's job in the media sector and her open dissent against the regime. Yasser's house was destroyed in a bombing raid, leaving them with no choice but to flee Syria, first seeking safety in neighbouring Egypt and Lebanon, where life was unsustainable. Afterwards, they applied to seek asylum in European countries but were rejected. Yasser had family in Japan and found seeking asylum here to be their last resort, affirming what Van Hear (2014, 5) noted: that social networks are some of the most important resources for refugees. With his father still working in Qatar, Yasser, his mother and his younger sister arrived in Japan in October 2013. After months of interviews and document submissions and two years of waiting for a decision, they were among the mere 27 who were recognised among the 7,586 people who applied for refugee recognition in Japan in 2015 (Reuters 2016). Yasser had to put aside his personal ambitions of becoming a soccer player, and his university education was put on hold. At 21, he was working multiple jobs and became his family's sole breadwinner in this new country.

Under the guidance of our project supervisor and the support of our *senpai* researchers, our group conducted research by analysing pre-existing interviews, coded the transcripts into thematic sections and began our interviews. (Our final work can be found here: Yasser's Main Page[7]. My two sections focused on Yasser's journey[8] from Syria to being recognised as a refugee in Japan and his reformed perspective[9] on "home".)

Interviewing vulnerable populations

Research that involves vulnerable populations is ethically challenging and practically complex (Parajuli / Horey 2021) and this is only compounded by the oral narrative format that relies on the narrator's willingness to share deeply personal lived experiences on video. With this in mind, we prepared for our interviews with Yasser anticipating two vulnerabilities: his refugee experiences fleeing Syria and his struggles in seeking asylum in Japan. As Parajuli and Horey (2021) note, "refugee populations are often deemed to be vulnerable, because of their difficult and/or traumatic life experiences". Hence,

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6   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/growing-up-under-assads-regime/
7   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/
8   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/forced-to-a-new-life/
9   https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/honne-on-home/

it was crucial that we student researchers understood the ways in which Yasser was vulnerable to ensure his safety and aptly respond to potential issues with him personally and even politically (Loue / Loff 2019).

In this project, we only interview those who have a strong desire to tell their story—and this was certainly the case with Yasser—but we also have to remember that this desire does not negate and sometimes even compounds their vulnerable condition. Wanting to talk and being able to talk is not always the same thing. In prior interviews, we noticed that when talking about certain difficult topics, usually related to the war, he became subdued when bringing up certain topics, sometimes displaying a composure that approached impassiveness. We did not know how to properly react to his deadpan responses. He would bring up these topics but then seemed uncomfortable talking about them. For example, to quote from the interview transcript:

> I saw my friend die in front of my eyes. They sniped him. We faced this tear gas. He was being held on someone's shoulder and he was the main one who was shouting and people were shouting after him and stuff and he, he just got sniped, you know (Interview Yasser).

While this data painted a strong picture of his experiences and his choice to flee, it also felt incomplete: for us to write this without fuller explanation and context would probably bring up more questions for readers less familiar with the larger political situation in Syria. From a researcher's point of view, we thought that we needed to follow up on statements made by the narrators not only to tell a complete story but to also show Yasser that we listened and appreciated the significance of what he had chosen to share. On the other hand, we did not want to push Yasser to tell more of his story than he felt comfortable expressing.

We reminded ourselves of his vulnerability and the line, and sometimes conflict, between getting "good" data and unintentionally reinforcing trauma. Yasser has undoubtedly been through a lot, and when working with vulnerable populations we know that it is imperative to avoid sensitive and "potentially re-traumatising" topics (Clark-Kazak 2017, 13) so we decided to not ask follow-up questions on this particular story.

At the beginning of our interviews, we found that Yasser was a bit more hesitant to speak on some topics, even including those he talked freely about before. Initially, we attributed this to different macro-level conditions: his vulnerability related to the challenges he survived in seeking asylum in Japan, particularly during his first six months in the country which he labelled

as "the worst period in my life[10]." (For someone who had just escaped war-torn Syria, this was arguably quite a claim.) Now that he was among the very few recognised refugees in Japan, it may have crossed his mind to refrain from criticising the government's asylum policies at the risk of potentially tainting his name to the Japanese readers. (Yasser is now pursuing a career in acting and we wholly understood why he would want a favourable reputation for himself.)

As we went on with our interviews, however, we realised that the causes could also be more closely linked to the immediate interview context: us. We did not know each other well enough at first, and were unsure as to where to strike the balance between being attentive to his story and being respectful of his larger political concerns. He was also unsure, and at different times, would ask us amid the interview, "Is this what you want?" Eventually, I think the innate curiosity that we bring as students coupled with our sensitivity as people coming from more or less the same generation helped us find a comfortable middle ground—one that was appropriately attentive but still respectful. In the end, Yasser gave us some of the most articulate and critical views on the refugee situation in Japan documented on the website[11]. This was the story he wanted to tell us—it just took some time for us to find the best way to ask the right questions to hear his answers.

Manoeuvring through interviews with vulnerable populations may be more manageable for seasoned researchers because they are often in a "position of dominance" (Grant / Mannay / Morgan 2017) and are able to more easily direct the flow of the interview, steering the interviewee and the conversation towards particular topics on the fly (Karnieli-Miller / Strier / Pessach 2009). This unequal power dynamic between the researcher and the interviewee arguably structures not only the interview but also the research as a whole, either consciously or unconsciously. Grant et al. (2017) argued that this dominant power relation could be problematic, as it could skew the outcome of the research's narrative to fit a preconceived story set by the researcher, making it calculated and formulated as opposed to genuine and expository.

In our case as student researchers, however, the responsibility to understand and deal with their vulnerability is altered by the shifted dynamic between us and the interviewee. With Yasser, we saw the equalisation of power between us, the student research team, and our refugee narrator who was

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10 https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/forced-to-a-new-life/#the-first
11 https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/forced-to-a-new-life/#refugee

close to our age and had recently graduated from a university that was "equal" to ours. (In Japan, people often gauge status among each other by the relative ranking of their institutional affiliation, in this case, their universities.) In our interviews, Yasser usually dominated the discourse, introducing new topics and managing the depth and focus of the interview as a whole. While to some extent, this could be linked to our lack of experience in interviewing, it was also indicative of his comfort level, something he pointed out directly at different times—noting our proximity in age and similarity of position. But it was not just control of the discourse; it was also a question of depth. Yasser felt able to go into more detail about the sensitive incidents he brought up but did not fully explore in previous interviews, including those with our project supervisor. In this case, our status as younger students was clearly an advantage. This is not to say that our student status was the only factor—Yasser was also more familiar with our whole project, had already secured refugee recognition, and was generally in a more stable and comfortable place in his life. But it is still true that in our interviews, Yasser found a way to give the context and personal perspective he seemed to want, deeper and more intimate than what he shared in previous interviews.

Interviewing amid a pandemic

This research project was done against the background of the pandemic so all of our interviews with Yasser were conducted through Zoom. We needed to improvise to establish an atmosphere that is usually easier to establish face-to-face. We started our interviews with small talk, asking him about his work on social media, and his TikTok For You page. Again, I think it is an advantage of students as researchers: as we are closer in age to some respondents than senior researchers, we have the ability to easily reference pop culture.

Another key aspect that challenged us in digital interviewing was understanding paralinguistic cues through the screen. In conducting research, it is paramount that the interviewer(s) and interviewee could accurately and immediately read nonverbal cues to ensure effective communication (Ganguly 2018). This goes alongside the concept of *kūki o yomu* that is prevalent in Japanese culture. (Literally "reading the air" is a Japanese expression used to indicate an understanding of the dynamics of a situation without any verbal and explicit explanation.) With a screen between us, our group had to work together to read Yasser's body language: when he wanted to continue talking, when he wished for us to stop pursuing a topic, or even when he was noticeably speeding through his responses thinking we were in a rush. While there

are ample examples in COVID literature that talk about the difficulty of doing online interviews (e.g., Sah / Singh / Sah 2020), every college student in Japan is arguably quite comfortable in screened communication, even more so after two years of COVID-imposed isolation, and we were able to adapt relatively easily. In fact, in some ways, it was easier for us, and for Yasser, to do the interviews online, at times allowing him a bit of distance that proved productive, especially in the discussion of sensitive topics.

We always interview in groups—with two to four interviewers. In face-to-face interviews, researchers in our project communicate with each other by tapping each other's legs under the table or making eye contact to signal that it is time to move on to another question. But because we were physically away from one another, we instead utilised a variety of alternative forms of digital communication that included LINE messaging and a real-time shared Google Doc. We multi-tasked and used different communication tools during the interview to stay on track. In this way, we could do real-time reflections on the interviews as they unfolded—more easily prioritising some topics and resituating or skipping others. These were tools that as digital natives we knew well and arguably better than older experienced scholars. Being student researchers amid COVID, while extremely challenging, encouraged us to exercise our creativity and to bring together different tools we were proficient in to make our interview experience smoother.

Amplifying refugee voices

While we wanted to make sure that the language of Yasser's story in the Refugee Voices Japan website was understandable to any audience, we needed to keep in mind that we were neither piecing together fragments of his narrative to make our own story nor were we inserting our own interpretation of his experiences. Our goal was to portray Yasser in the way he wished for his story to be portrayed. Parajuli and Horey (2021) affirm this approach, stating that research "involving vulnerable populations can only be judged successful when it helps to make the voice of vulnerable people heard".

Nevertheless, we also carry the responsibility to be conduits of Yasser's honest narrative, including the duty to protect his safety. As noted by Clark-Kazak (2017, 13), researchers must "avoid collecting potentially incriminating data" as there may be "serious consequences for their safety, well-being, migration status and/or eligibility for services". We experienced this conundrum when Yasser shared a story of his work[12] experience that we thought

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12 https://refugeevoicesjapannet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/first-role-for-many-actors/

painted a clear picture of the inhumane conditions asylum seekers are subjected to in Japan. But upon consultation with our *senpai* researcher, David Slater, and of course Yasser himself, we decided to exclude it in order to avoid any undue risk or conflict. Despite the stability of having refugee status, any potentially incriminating data disclosed could threaten the public perception of other asylum seekers in the country; they could be seen as law offenders.

Future goals

The opportunity to participate in this oral narrative ethnographic research on refugees greatly enriched my studies and helped me clarify my goals for the future. As I go through the final year of my undergraduate degree, I am guided by my experiences in this project that encourage me to re-examine my perception of the research assignments I am tasked to fulfil—to rethink my approach to gathering data and ensure that I come into research projects with a purpose; not merely to produce written work but to contribute to uplifting marginalised populations. I endeavour to partake in ethnographies that not only help understand humans but also address social injustices (Spradley 1979, 16). While it is undoubtedly difficult to do in my position, as student research output is commonly perceived as "derivative and secondary" and contributing "little to nothing that advances the discipline" (Badke 2012, 9). Participating in this research has empowered me that even though I am merely a student, I too can be a "resource" and "producer of knowledge" (Fielding / Bragg 2003, 4).

Furthermore, being part of the refugee-research project along with leading the refugee-support student group has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of what I wish to pursue in the future, proving that involving students as researchers helps them in their professional trajectory (Madan / Teitge 2013). Fuelled by my experiences in this project, I secured an internship at an international organisation dedicated to refugees. With the protracted and emerging humanitarian crises all over the world today, conducting support backed by well-founded research is paramount now more than ever. As I complete my undergraduate degree, I have decided to pursue higher education and gain an advanced understanding of human rights, law, and issues of forced migration in hopes that I someday contribute to the creation of theoretical knowledge to better understand the plight of refugees and to improve the implementation of practical refugee support.

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