

<学会動向>

Living on the Edge 2019 Conference Reflections & Future Directions

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On October 5th, 2019 the first “Living on the Edge” conference was held at Kyoto Sangyo University’s Musubiwasakan. The theme was “*The Joys and Challenges of Being Different in Japan.*” The overwhelming response we received to our call for papers highlighted the need for dialogue around this topic. Although initially planned as a small event, the conference was attended by 120 participants from around Japan. It featured 24 concurrent sessions as well as a youth panel. This paper outlines the motivations behind the inauguration of this event, gives a report of the day, summarizes participant satisfaction and overall feedback and concludes with lessons learnt and the directions that are being taken in preparation for the 2020 conference.

KEYWORDS: diversity, difference, conference, reflection

1. Introduction

“Our initial response to difference is usually to avoid it. Imagine, if you will, a group of our primate ancestors gathered around their fire, gnawing on the day’s catch. Another group of primates come into view, heading toward the fire. I wonder how often the first group looked up and said (in effect), “Ah, cultural diversity, how wonderful.” More likely it was fight or flight, and things have not changed that much since then.” (Bennett, pp. 2)

As interculturalist, Milton Bennett affirms, in any intercultural situation, we begin with walls rather than bridges. However, in a context where one group is vastly outnumbered by the others, remaining invisible in the first place may be an easier option than the “fight or flight” choice outlined above. According to the 2019 census, 98.1% of the population of Japan are Japanese¹⁾ (As a form of comparison, in the 2016 census, only 32.3% of Canadian residents listed their ethnic origin as “Canadian”²⁾) In a 2002 Harvard Institute of Economic Research study measuring ethnic diversity around the world³⁾, Japan and Korea were found to be among the most homogenous countries. In this way, it can be said that Japan is still relatively mono-ethnic and consequently many Japanese still seem to have quite a strong sense of national identity and what it means to be Japanese. In addition to this, Japanese culture tends to be collectivist (Hofstede 2003 & 2010 ; Triandis 1995 & 2018) with the population striving toward “fitting in” with others, as is well illustrated by the famous proverb,

出る釘は打たれる (The nail that sticks out gets hammered down). In such an environment, does the question of fight or flight often come up? How visible is difference and what variety of diversity is actually present in society? Is it easy or difficult (or both) to feel different to those around you? How are people hiding or using their differences in Japan? These are the questions which were the motivation behind “**Living on the Edge: The Joys and Challenges of Being Different in Japan.**”

2. Diversity in Japan

Japan’s ethnic homogeneity originates from its prior isolationist policies. However, Japan is slowly diversifying and acknowledging its minority communities such as the indigenous Ainu (officially recognized by the government in 2019), Ryūkyūans and Zainichi. Immigration policies have been somewhat loosened to compensate for the threat posed by the aging population (by 2050, 40% of the population is projected to be over 65⁴⁾). In fact, in many ways, Japan is not as homogenous as many believe it to be. The term “Hafu” was coined in the 1970s to describe children of mixed parentage and was popularized by “The Hafu Project,” a series of interviews and portraits by Marcia Yumi Lise, who wanted to shed light on the hafu experience both inside and outside of Japan. Inspired by this project, a documentary bearing the same name was co-directed by Japanese-Spanish, Lara Perez Takagi & Japanese-American, Megumi Nishikura. The documentary explores the experience of being

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mixed-race in Japan. This experience is on the increase. In her Kyoto TedX Talk about the documentary, Megumi Nishikura explains that 20,000 hafu children are born every year in Japan. Although mixed race identity is becoming increasingly more common and the past decade has seen some high-profile mixed-race individuals in the spotlight (e.g. Ariana Miyamoto and Priyanka Yoshikawa, both chosen for “Miss Japan” in 2015 and 2016 respectively, and Japan’s top tennis player, Naomi Osaka), the hafu identity is not without struggle. Nishikura mentions that there are three requirements to be seen as Japanese in Japan, “*One must look Japanese, speak Japanese, and abide by all its customs and traditions. And, if someone can’t check off each box, a hundred percent, then he or she is not Japanese.*”⁵⁾ Naomi Osaka, who is not fluent in Japanese, is often asked about her lack of language ability and her “nationality” was of heightened debate when she had to choose to be Japanese or American upon turning 22 (Japan does not allow dual-citizenship). Both Miyamoto and Yoshikawa experienced discrimination from people saying they were not Japanese enough to represent Japan in the Miss Universe contest.

As outlined above, Japan is diversifying in terms of ethnicity and race. With outside influences contributing to the slow dilution of national and ethnic homogeneity, also comes a greater exposure to other forms of difference. Minority groups, not only related to nationality, such as hafu (both), but also those who are differently-abled, LGBT, of different religions, etc. are slowly becoming more visible, yet not without challenges. To take one of these examples, according to a “Spotlight on LGBT” published by OECD in 2019, “*Japanese citizens are only halfway to full social acceptance of homosexuality, scoring about five on a 1-to-10 acceptance scale. Moreover, only a minority of Japanese respondents (45%) would accept that a child dresses and expresses herself/himself as a child of the other gender.*”⁶⁾ A 2013 Ipsos international online survey which revealed that although 46% of participants worldwide said they had an LGBT friend, relative or colleague, stated that only 5% of Japanese participants (2nd lowest among the 16 countries) said the same. There is no reason to believe that Japanese are less likely to be homosexual than any other nationality so it is safe to assume this result is connected to low visibility or dialogue around this issue. According to Tamagawa (2017), a 2005 health report on 5,731 gay and bisexual men in Japan (REACH Online 2005) reveals that over

half had come out to fewer than five people which may be why so few people know someone who is openly LGBT. That said, although public awareness of LGBT issue is low, it is still growing compared to the past.

3. Conference Report

To that end, the inaugural “Living on the Edge” conference had the stated aim putting difference on display; to share stories and increase visibility of the joys, pitfalls, advantages, and challenges of being different in Japan. It invited speakers to share their experiences, advice, hardships and successes with the goal of raising awareness of the diversity present in society. The conference team received abstracts from a wide spectrum of difference, and we were therefore able to approach the topic from a plethora of interesting angles. October 5th brought together 120 participants in a day of 24 concurrent sessions and one post-lunch youth panel. Presenters discussed topics as various as race, sexual orientation, gender-identity, different mental and physical ability, organic farming, art, immigration, identity and politics of power. With reference to LGBTQIA+ difference, reported highlights included Aichi Prefectural University Professor Andrea Carlson’s moving talk on her daughter’s gender transition in an advice-packed session about how we can all support the LGBTQ+ community better and Margalit Faden’s guidance on how we can teach concepts and terminology related to gender identity and sexual orientation in the English language classroom. Also featured was Sarah Leck’s discussion about the intersectional meaning of being queer in Japan. She asked the questions, “What does it mean to be foreign, to be desirably or undesirably foreign or visibly and invisibly foreign?” and highlighted the different experiences people might have depending on the ways they look. Keio University graduate student, Azusa Doi shared her personal experiences of hiding parts of her identity while working as a midwife and led her audience through a discussion about diversity issues in Japanese education. Much anticipated was a talk from Human Rights activist and Youth Ambassador to the United Nations, Tiger Shigetake, who was due to recount his experiences of attending Japanese schools whilst out as a homosexual male. His talk entitled, “Not So Happy Mr. Gay Japan” would also have described how being a part of the Mr. Gay World competition gave him insight into injustice and a lack of rights in different countries, yet

his talk was unfortunately cancelled due to family issues.

Also discussing how we can explicitly bring the topic of diversity into the classroom, Avril Haye Matsui guided others on how to use the intersectional issues of racial and gender discrimination to encourage active discussion while promoting a change in perception. Gerry Yokota, a professor in the Graduate School of Language and Culture in Osaka university shared her personal stories of working as an interpreter for Nelson Mandela in a session that explored how identities, differences and our own sense of inclusion, exclusion and belonging affect all of our interactions. Associate Professor in the Department of English at Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts, Michi Saki, created a space for participants to share their own stories about identity and diversity in their local communities. Saki guided participants in ways to take action and build diversity-positive communities around them. In another session, photographer Marcio Saiki focused on the phenomenon of existing "between" with an in-depth look at Brazilian immigration to Japan since 1990. His work as the Director of a Brazilian School in Aichi allowed him insight into the issues motivating Brazilian children to choose a school like this over a local school in Japan and he shared them in his interactive session.

Other presenters gave conference attendees insight into less common or less discussed practices in Japan. One such talk was the much-anticipated session given by Dr. Melodie Cook from the University of Niigata Prefecture who outlined the joys and challenges of raising adopted and foster children in Japan. Dr. Cook used a mix of personal experience and research to elucidate why foster and adopted children may have issues with schooling in Japan. She also shared her own practical suggestions for adapting common class activities in order to better suit their needs. Another popular talk was "Growing Against the Norm" which was given by Chuck Kayser, Founder of Midori Farm and Co-founder of Seeds of Sustainability Kyoto. In a lively and passionate session, Kayser discussed how living more sustainably challenges the social norm and gave personal accounts of "sticking out" due to various sustainable lifestyle habits he and his family have adopted. This session promoted a lot of interactive discussion with participants eager to find their own ways of incorporating more sustainable lifestyles. In a roundtable discussion, Lu Deting focused on the not-often-spoken-about men's anti-dv support in Japan and led a group through a discussion of two main

therapy treatments. Toward the end of the day, poet and spoken-word artist, Phil Norton, brought his guitar to accompany his talk on inspiration as a poet and writer in Japan. In a highly enjoyable session in which he interactively invited his audience to participate in some of his work, he outlined the challenges of reframing his version of self and process of writing to create within his situation in Japan.

Yet others chose to heighten visibility and awareness surrounding issues of different learning and / or physical abilities. Professor Fiona Creaser from the University of Kitakyushu artfully combined honesty, grit and humor to informally highlight both (in her words) "the fun side of life as well as the not so fun side to having one hand." Sharing empowering and humorous stories, Professor Creaser also brought in a couple of artificial arms and appliances for the audience to become familiar with. One of Creaser's key messages was to show how easy it can be to break down barriers and take control in embracing your own difference. In another session, Sandra Healy kicked off her session by effectively simulating the feeling of being dyslexic for the participants in the room. This led into her talk which gave a parent's perspective on raising a child with dyslexia in Japan. She outlined the strengths of people with dyslexia and shared what she had learnt about what support is necessary in schools. Professor Suzanna Kamata of Naruta University of Education, author of several books related to disability, used her session to highlight how the representations of disability in children and young adult's books often remain problematic. In her information session, she asked the questions, "When do stories about disability become 'inspirational porn'?" "What kind of language should we use when discussing disability?" and "Who has the right to tell these stories?"

Other presenters took a microscope to the meaning of the "Edge" as a place of residence. Ian Roth gave an interesting talk entitled, "Sticking Out, Seeing Farther: The Power of Peculiarity in Contemporary Japan" which referenced the proverb, 出る釘は打たれる and argued that there is a "*necessary role to be played by non-native elements in maintaining the dynamic equilibrium of socio-cultural systems.*" In somewhat a similar vein, Eline Delmarcelle examined the phenomenon of long-term residents who choose to naturalize and become citizens of Japan. Delmarcelle's research introduced a variety of interpretations on what "being Japanese" and "Japaneseness" mean, and concluded that across the spectrum, those who had

chosen to become citizens still felt alienated from “real” Japanese. Somewhat connected in theme, Elisabeth

Morinaga Williams gave an interactive workshop on bi and multilingual identities in Japan. Her workshop questioned language ownership, asking “Who is an ‘authentic’ speaker of Japanese?” and how that perception of ownership affects the identities of minorities in Japan.

Two other presenters highlighted certain aspects of Japanese society that felt “different” to them in order to discuss them in more depth with their audience. Homeira Fatthi from Nagoya University of Foreign Studies focused on her experience of the visibility (or invisibility) of how love and affection is shown in Japan and Tara Cheney from Osaka International School of Kwansai Gakuin led a discussion on the phenomenon of the acceptance or rejection of Family Mart porn and its implications for behavior and values in society.

Representing younger people’s perspective on lived difference, four unique individuals from Nagoya International School, representing a collective identifying as the “Nagoya Action Heroes” gave a session exploring the interconnectedness of power, privilege, visibility and sense of dependence within their social contexts in Japan.

Finally, the very well-received and articulate youth panel (referred to by some as the “highlight” of the conference) brought together a student from Osaka International School, a student from Canadian Academy, a graduate student from Osaka University and representative from the Association of Families and Friends of LGBT (an NPO) to candidly answer questions about difference, belonging, joys, struggles and policy with reference to the intersectional differences of sexual orientation, gender, and multicultural, multiracial and multilingual identities that they shared.

4. Conference Feedback

As this was the inaugural conference, honest feedback from presenters and participants was imperative. In order to gauge overall satisfaction, a six-question survey was created and distributed for voluntary submission. The conference committee received 30 fully filled out surveys and some of the main results included the following.

First, when it came to overall satisfaction for the conference the responses were given numerically on a scale of 1 - 5, with 5 being the highest score. 25 people scored overall satisfaction as a “5,” 4 people circled, “4” and 1 circled “3.” In a similar vein, the results of how points b - f were ranked can be seen in the below table 1.

In addition, some common themes became apparent when reading through the comments. First, we were pleased to read that the overwhelming response was positive:

“For the first time since coming to conference I have nothing to say apart from thank you for a fantastic day.”

“Amazing for an inaugural conference. This is an important topic for me and it’s nice to be in the company of so many open, inclusive people. The deep discussion and enriching and stimulating conversations were awesome.”

Second, several comments expressed a wish for the conference to either be longer or continue in future years:

“I loved this conference. I would like to have it longer.”

“I really enjoyed this conference. I met many

Table 1. Conference Satisfaction Survey Results

	5	4	3	2	1	N/A
b. Panel discussions & sessions	22 (panel discussion + 0.5)	6 (session + 0.5)	1	0	0	
c. Venue (location, access, etc.)	20	9	1	0	0	
d. Rooms & facilities	27	3	0	0	0	
e. Lunch	13	3	1	0	0	13
f. Refreshments	20	4	4	0	0	2

wonderful people and listened to many moving and eye-opening discussions and lectures. I hope to see this conference grow.”

“I appreciated the chance to tell my story here, and found the whole conference really valuable.”

“I hope this becomes a regular thing.”

“Do it again!”

“Everything was perfect. Looking forward to next year”

The sentiment that this conference should repeat in subsequent years, not only echoed in these comments but also gave feedback to us in person and in post-conference emails, is what spurred our decision to follow up a year later. Second, the idea that the conference could be longer has prompted the conference committee to reserve two-days for the 2020 conference, in order to respond appropriately and build a fuller schedule if the response to the CoP is just as great as it was in 2019.

5. Limitations and next steps

As increasing the visibility of diversity was a stated aim of the conference, we made efforts to make the venue accessible and comfortable for all speakers and attendees. Our code of conduct included our statement on discriminatory behavior as well as our environmental policy, support for breastfeeding mothers and a description of where gender-neutral toilets could be found. These efforts were certainly recognized, and we were pleased to receive positive feedback in these areas. However, as conference organizers, we also noticed several areas in need of immediate improvement, all of which are connected to attracting and supporting diversity to a greater extent.

5.1. Language support

First, in the opening session when attendees were asked who required interpreting support (sessions given in Japanese were all simultaneously interpreted to English but only selected sessions in English were interpreted into Japanese), the number of people who raised their hands was just handful. For that reason,

interpreters were able to give focused attention to the participants who most needed support. However, by the time the panel was held after lunch, it became apparent that there were attendees in the room who had not been present in the opening session who required interpreting assistance. At this point, interpreting needs should have been reassessed and redistributed. Failing to do so meant we failed to provide adequate language support to some of our participants, which is simply unacceptable. One of the comments we received read:

“It was such an interesting conference. I wish Japanese normal schools would have this kind of teaching or sharing experiences about life. I hope you’ll continue to do this so it will bring more attention to “being different” to Japanese people too.”

“...to Japanese people too” is a key point. If one of our stated aims is to increase visibility of diversity in Japanese society, it is particularly important to make sure we encourage as many non-English speaking Japanese people to attend as possible, so it is vital not to alienate them on the basis of language. Improving this is high on our list of priorities for next year’s conference.

Connected with this issue is the fact that although the CfP was sent out in both English and Japanese and the website and later promotional materials were also provided in both languages, the response to the CfP was predominantly in English. We need to find ways to encourage a greater number of Japanese speakers and attendees to the conference. To help fulfill this aim, we have invited another Japanese member to form a committee with us as we plan for next year.

5.2. Diversity: People of Color

In addition, although a great diversity of topics was represented, attendees were predominantly expatriate Caucasian. A comment from an attendee read, *“I expected to see more Black people and People of Color at the conference and we (both) found the event predominantly white.”* We cannot argue against this statement. The same person later said that she believes that if a space is created that feels truly safe for black people and people of color, that they will attend. The conference committee will endeavor to work with the people of color who *did* attend the conference to learn more about how to attract this audience in larger

numbers. This has been made one of the primary aims of the 2020 conference.

5.3. Diversity: Religion

We were unable to provide a prayer room in the venue in 2019. We were dissatisfied with this and are looking into ways we could better serve the needs of our attendees of various religions.

5.4. Video Sharing and Paperless Future

Photographs and videos of sessions were taken throughout the day with the presenters' consent and post-conference, there was a great demand for these to be shared. Photographs were uploaded to the conference website but we felt we hadn't explicitly gone through appropriate consent-giving procedure to enable blanket sharing of videos and therefore it was a laborious process of permission-asking on a case by case basis. We need to find a way to streamline this as well as provide an easier and more accessible platform for the sharing of session videos.

Further, although the conference environmental policy asked attendees to bring their own cups and cutlery / chopsticks if possible, we later reflected on the quantity of paper used for printing brochures and wondered how necessary this was vs. the environmental impact. Next year, we are planning to be explicit in our drive toward paperlessness and will try to adequately balance necessary information dissemination with unnecessary paper usage. It is our sense that if attendees expect that brochures will not be available, they will be ready to rely on the website to guide their schedules.

6. Conclusion

In sum, last year's "Living on the Edge" conference highlighted how present diversity is in our daily lives in Japan. As conference organizers, we were surprised at how great the need seemed to be for the creation of this space for sharing difference. To build upon the success of last year, this year's theme focuses outward towards our communities. In our lived diversity, how do we connect with others? How do we share ourselves in our classrooms, our workplaces, our families and in our wider communities? For that reason, the 2020 Living on the Edge theme will be, "*Stories that Connect Us.*"

Notes

- 1) Statistics Bureau of Japan
<https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/jinsui/tsuki/index.html>
- 2) Statistics Canada
<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/>
- 3) Alesina, Alberto F. and Easterly, William and Devleeschauwer, Arnaud and Kurlat, Sergio and Wacziarg, Romain T., Fractionalization (June 2002). Harvard Institute Research Working Paper No. 1959. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=319762> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.319762>
- 4)
http://www.ipss.go.jp/pp-newest/e/ppfj02/suikai_g_e.html
- 5) Megumi Nishikura, TEDx Kyoto, 2013
- 6)
<https://www.oecd.org/japan/sag2019-japan-en.pdf>
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Living on the Edge 2019 学会の振り返りと将来の展望について

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2019年10月5日に第一回目の Living on the Edge 学会を京都産業大学のむすびわざ館にて開催した。テーマは「日本で異なることの喜びと試練」であった。本学会への発表応募数の多さからも、このトピックを取り上げる必要性を容易に理解することができた。当初は小規模の学会を計画していたが、日本全国から120人の参加者が本学会に出席し、若者のパネルディスカッションを含めた24の同時セッションが行われた。本稿ではこの学会を発足した動機、学会当日の状況報告、参加者の評価と全体のフィードバックをまとめ、最後に今回の経験を2020年度の本学会の準備にどう活かしていくかを考察する。

キーワード: ダイバーシティ、違い、学会、振り返り

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1 京都産業大学 外国語学部