



Social Research

— For Those Who Like to Answer Their Own Questions

I owe what I am today to Ishida Seminar

Over 60 years have passed since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Just what sort of death and what sort of life did the bomb leave in its wake? At the Hitotsubashi University Social Research Laboratory, we have been working continuously from 1965 right up to the present to reconstruct a “complete picture of the A-bomb experience” by a survey of the survivors, including a compilation of their life histories and mental histories. This sociological A-bomb survivor survey was initiated by Professor Tadashi Ishida, and I was able to participate in it from the beginning as a student in Ishida Seminar. Speaking personally, I can say that had I not enrolled in Ishida Seminar, gone to Nagasaki, and gotten to know A-bomb survivors as human beings, I would probably never have embarked on a career as a researcher. Since Professor Ishida’s retirement, the students of Hamatani Seminar have been carrying on his work.

Only continuous contact can reveal the link between past and present

The Hitotsubashi University “A-Bomb Survival Interview Survey” is unique in that we use our own survey forms, follow up on the same subjects on an ongoing basis, and conduct multiple interviews. There are two reasons for this approach. The first is that it is almost impossible to gain access to a person’s true experiences and innermost feelings in the course of one or two interviews. This is due both to the interviewer’s uncertainty as to how far he or she can probe and to the hesitancy of the interviewee, who may be unsure of how much to say to a complete stranger or may be reluctant to talk at all. Studies that involve an individual’s inner life, as life history surveys do, can only be carried out effectively if the interviewer and the interviewee establish a rapport.

Another purpose of this approach is to sort out and clarify the perceptions of the A-bomb that have accumulated over the postwar era. Our interviews of the members of the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb youth and young girl association (*Nagasaki Genbaku Seinen Otome no Kai*), beginning in 1980, include testimonies from a wide range of victims, from those who were exposed to the bomb in utero to others who were already adults at the



time of the bombing. People who were young children or adolescents at the time have since reached adulthood, married, raised children, and are now in middle or old age. Using a style of survey-based research in which the histories of individuals are superimposed on the history of the group, we are able to determine differences in people's perceptions depending on their age at the time of the event and shed light on the connection between then - "that day" - and now.

Emotional scars finally acknowledged more than 30 years later

The damage inflicted by the A-bomb was not limited to "that day," and it penetrated to the very depths of the victims' psyche, but it took many years for this to come to light. The year 1977, when nongovernmental organizations held an international symposium on A-bomb survivors' issues, was also the traditional Buddhist 33rd death anniversary of the victims of the atomic bomb, and was a turning point for our survey of A-bomb survivors. It was then that some of our subjects were finally able to open up and articulate the agony they had kept bottled up inside - "I abandoned my child and ran for my life." "Someone begged me for water, but I turned my back on him." "I feel so guilty that I survived instead of them." - and made those of us carrying out the survey realize for the first time the importance of these kinds of emotional scars. Broadly speaking, the personal damage people sustained as A-bomb victims relate broadly to emotional injury, physical injury, and malaise. Yet much remains to be done in terms of understanding the experience from the standpoint of emotional injury and malaise.

Because of the horror of the survivors' experience, people are apt to think of them as depressed individuals who carry a heavy load around with them. In fact, however, A-bomb survivors are just like your next-door neighbors, and most of them reveal remarkable optimism and strength, too. In fact, this is the strength, the optimism, of people who have struggled and survived. In an ongoing duel with their A-bomb experience, and experience that is pure misery, they have found meaning in life through opposition to nuclear weapons. This is the understanding that they have brought home to us.

Each new understanding becomes a point of departure

The survey of A-bomb victims that the Laboratory for Social Research has been conducting for four decades now

began as a qualitative case study, but evolved into a large-scale quantitative survey and documentary analysis. Through this field work, centered on the survey of A-bomb survivors, I have come to focus on the importance of the research process. In social research, the process can be divided into the three phases of preparation, implementation, and analysis. During the preparatory phase, one starts with a document-based investigation of the topic, identifies issues, and specifies the topics to be researched, and from there draws up the survey forms. Next, one carries out the survey onsite, and finally sorts out and analyzes the results. The important thing at this point is not to suppose that the study is finished at this point. The understandings and realizations that come out of analysis of the first survey become a new starting point, and the process begins all over again. Being a social researcher means making a life out of this process through ongoing interaction with others.

The accuracy and overall slant of the responses one receives to a questionnaire survey depend to a large degree on the way one formulates the questions, as I'm sure many researchers can verify from their own experience. The reason there is so much social research of dubious value nowadays is that the people carrying out the surveys adopt whatever questions and response options occur to them solely on the basis of what they feel they "would like to know," without taking the trouble to understand what the real issues are. The dangers of such an approach are self-evident. It was in hopes of ending such practices and establishing methodology based on a literate approach to social research that the Japan Sociological Society, Japan Society of Educational Sociology, and Behaviormetric Society of Japan jointly instituted the Japanese Certification Board for Social Researcher in November 2003. The Hitotsubashi University Faculty of Social Sciences has put in place coursework leading to certification, and in the Graduate School of Social Sciences we have instituted courses leading to the more advanced certificate of Certified Social Researcher (CSR).

As I see it, social research is for people who want to ask and answer their own questions. Asking one's own questions means finding questions for oneself in other people's problems and discovering within those questions the issues of our time. And precisely because social research seeks to shed light on such issues, those who wish to conduct it need to have a high level of knowledge and skills, as well as true commitment and passion.



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