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journal or publication title	Comparative culture, the journal of Miyazaki International College
volume	9
page range	78-86
year	2003
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1106/00000421/

Young Japanese People's Views On Civic (Dis)Engagement

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本稿は社会参加に関する意識調査を目的とする記述式アンケートに回答した日本の青年151名の意見を報告し、その社会参加に消極的な理由を解明すると共に、状況是正への提言をも行うものである。

In this article, we report on opinions held by 151 Japanese youth who responded to open-ended questions about civic engagement. The study sheds light on some reasons for Japanese youths' civic disengagement and concludes with suggestions to remedy the situation.¹

INTRODUCTION

A couple of years ago, the Eco-Action club at Miyazaki International College had to be discontinued because of lack of student participation. The club had two primary activities: outdoor adventures (such as hiking trips and beach barbecues) and paper recycling. Many students joined the outdoor adventure activities, but more often than not no one showed up to do the paper recycling work.

The closing of the Eco-Action club provided the initial impetus for this study. We wanted to know whether Japanese youth were indeed indifferent toward their social and environmental surroundings and felt no personal responsibility to take an active role in creating change. In other words, we wanted to find out more about the nature of this civic disengagement of Japanese youth today. To address this issue, we conducted the study with the assistance of two student clubs, the Miyazaki International College Activists (MICA) and the Peace Studies Group.

Before going further, let us first define the terms we use in this study. Spiezio (2002) defines civic engagement as (having the) "knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to participate actively in the political process" (paragraph 4). From a communitarian perspective, the ultimate purpose of civic engagement is to facilitate young people's development of "a heightened sense of personal responsibility, empathy, and, of course, respect for others" (*ibid.*, paragraph 15). The Institute of Politics at Harvard University (2000) divides civic engagement into two categories: community volunteerism and political engagement. The primary difference between these two concepts is that community volunteerism is apolitical while political engagement is obviously political in nature. These two parts of civic engagement are consistent with our interest in the study. Because the study is sponsored by the above mentioned student clubs, MICA (which is concerned about community volunteerism) and the Peace Studies (which is primarily concerned about political engagement), we asked our respondents to express their views on

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2nd Annual Peace as a Global Language Conference in Tokyo, Japan on September 27, 2003.

either of these topics and report their views under the umbrella of civic (dis)engagement.

METHOD

Our respondents consisted of 151 Japanese people, aged 16 to 26. A total of 164 questionnaires were distributed in Miyazaki International College classes and among acquaintances in the community (not a random sample). Ninety two percent completed the four open-ended questions. The data was collected between June and August of 2003 in Kyushu, mostly in Miyazaki Prefecture. After we received the responses, we sorted them to generate categories of ideas. We worked in pairs to reach consensus on categorization of responses. Because of time limitations, we only did this coding process once. Because we asked open-ended questions, many respondents gave more than one answer to each question. When more than one response was given, we coded each response separately. Then we tabulated the responses to generate percentages. These percentages do not reflect the number of people giving such responses, but rather the number of responses given in each category.

RESULTS

Part 1: Students' Peace Studies and Volunteering Activities

As shown in Table 1 below, most of our respondents (93%) are either interested in or are currently involved in community volunteerism and/or peace studies activities. Seven percent of the respondents left the question blank, which we inferred as stating their lack of interest in such activities.

The most commonly mentioned activity (19 %) was giving donations. They mentioned that they would like to donate things like clothes, money and food. Almost the same number of respondents (17%) were interested in and/or have done volunteer work in majority world nations (developing countries) to do agricultural work, establish a school, etc. It is interesting to note that engaging in such an ambitious activity was given as the second most frequent response. The third largest category of responses (15%) is visits to institutions such as kindergartens and nursing homes. Most of the activities mentioned are in the realm of apolitical community volunteerism. Only 7% of the respondents mentioned peace studies.

Part 2: Reasons given for civic engagement

In this part of the study, we asked respondents to state their reasons for engaging in peace studies and/or volunteering activities. Table 2 illustrates the percentages of reasons given by our respondents.

Table 1: Please list volunteer/peace studies activities that you are involved in (or would like to do).

あなたが参加しているまたは行ってみたいボランティア活動を表示してください。

Responses 回答	Percent 百分率
Giving donations to help others (e.g. clothes, money, food etc.) 寄付活動	19%
Going to developing countries to do volunteer work. (e.g. agriculture, establish a school) 発展途上国でボランティア活動をしてみたい	17%
Visiting institutions (e.g. Kindergarten, nursing homes) 施設訪問	15%
Cleaning up public spaces (e.g. parks, rivers, streets) 公共施設の清掃活動	11%
Others その他	8%
Studying about peace 平和についてもっと学習したい	7%
Not being involved in any volunteer activities どのボランティア活動にも参加していない	7%
Meeting the needs of physically challenged people 身体障害者の要望に答えた支援活動	6%
Recycling リサイクル活動	4%
Working as staff in community events 公共の場で行われるイベントにスタッフとして参加する	4%
Giving blood and organ donations 献血、臓器移植	2%

Almost the same number of people mentioned that they are interested in civic activities because they want to help people and to learn something through such activities. Each of these reasons accounts for about one third of the responses. It is interesting to note that all of the reasons given are apolitical reasons that are related to community volunteerism and none are given in relation to peace studies or political engagement.

It is also interesting to us that about the same number are related to giving benefits to others (34% wanted to help other people) as to gaining benefits for oneself (30% wanted to learn from volunteering activities and 4% because volunteering is job related).

Table 2: Please explain why you are interested in doing peace studies and/or volunteer activities.

なぜあなたが平和学習やボランティア活動するのに興味を持ったのか説明してください。

Responses 回答	Percent 百分率
To help people 人々を助けたい	34%
To learn something through volunteering ボランティア活動を通じて何かを学びたい	30%
Want to clean the surrounding areas 周りの環境を美化したい	8%
There are many opportunities to do volunteer work ボランティア活動をする機会がたくさんある	7%
I am persuaded by the media to do volunteer work メディアに影響されてボランティア活動に興味を持った	5%
The volunteer activities are job related ボランティア活動が仕事上関係している	4%
Others その他	3%
Blank 無回答	9%

Part 3: Reasons given for being socially inactive

We asked our respondents why many Japanese young people are not engaged in civic activities. Table 3 shows the responses given to this question.

Table 3: In your opinion, why might other Japanese young people NOT be interested in doing activities like the ones you mentioned above?

なぜ、日本の若者は質問2で出たようなボランティア活動に興味がないのですか。

Responses 回答	Percent 百分率
It is too much trouble めんどろである	45%
I have interest, but no knowledge 興味はあるが、知識がない	21%
I am busy with other things 他のことで忙しい	21%
I cannot make money through volunteer work ボランティア活動でお金は稼げない	3%
Japanese people are quiet and tend not to express opinions about issues 日本人は声に出して問題提議をしない	2%
Others その他	8%

The main reason given is they feel that social activism is too troublesome. Almost half of the responses (45%) were of this nature. The second and third reasons given are that they feel that they are too busy (21%) and that they lack knowledge of both the world, especially the majority world (the third world), and of volunteering opportunities (21%). These three reasons account for 87% of the responses. We believe that these three responses are essentially of the same category because "busy with other things" and "do not have enough knowledge" are possibly just polite ways of saying that it is too troublesome to engage in civic activities.

Part 4: Suggested Solutions

In the final part of this study, we asked respondents to give us ideas of ways to involve more Japanese youth in doing volunteer/peace studies activities. Table 4 illustrates their suggestions.

TABLE 4: What are some ways to involve more Japanese youth in doing volunteer/peace studies activities like the ones you mentioned above?

あなたがしたいと思っているボランティア/ピーススタディの活動にもっと日本の若者を参加させる方法をいくつか書いてください。

Responses 回答	Percent 百分率
Give information about world problems and club activities and discuss with students' ideas to solve the problems. 世界の問題などについてもっと詳しい情報を与えたり、話し合いをする	62%
Do peace studies activities and promotion in school, classes and clubs. 学校で募集する(授業、クラブ活動など)	9%
Require people to join the activities once so that they can see the value or importance of the activity. 一回強制参加させて、活動の価値や重要性を実感させる	10%
Tell/show students that it is not expensive or difficult to volunteer. 費用がかからず、難しい活動ではないことを示す	3%
Make a volunteer day ボランティアの日を作る	3%
Give gifts or money for doing volunteer/peace study activities. 賞品(お金)を出す	3%
Sell goods made of recycled materials. リサイクル商品を売る	1%
No idea 意見無し	9%

Most people, 62%, suggest giving information about world problems and club activities and having discussion sessions with other students about these world problems. Many mention the need for more TV programs, posters, and lectures about these topics.

Nine percent of the respondents suggest having peace studies and volunteer activities in school, in classes and in extracurricular clubs. Ten percent recommend that students should be required to attend such activities at least once so that they can experience the value or importance of the activity. In other words, about one fifth of the responses (19%) suggest that civic engagement should be an integral part of the school curriculum.

These two suggestions, giving young people more information and making civic activism an integral part of the school curriculum, are directly related to reasons given for their lack of civic engagement in Part 3 of the results. The main reasons given for civic passivity in Part 3 are lack of knowledge and lack of caring attitude (too troublesome). To remedy the situation, the same percentage of responses indicate the need for more information on how to become more socially active and the need to require civic engagement activities in schools. The respondents suggest that such activities should be included as part of the regular school curriculum, not as a voluntary activity after school.

DISCUSSION

To conclude, it appears that the picture of civic engagement among Japanese youth is quite promising, a majority of them are at least interested in being socially active. However, most responses are related only to apolitical community volunteerism. Few responses are related to interest or involvement in politically engaged activities. This is consistent with views of young Americans surveyed by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University (2000, 2001). Eight hundred American youth participated in the survey in 2000 and 1200 participated in 2001. The results of both surveys indicate that American youth made a clear distinction between community volunteerism and political engagement, with a clear preference for the former.

Another study of American youth conducted by Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA (2000) shows that while "volunteerism had reached an all-time high, the study also reported that the level of political participation among first year students had fallen to an all-time low" (Spiezio, 2002, paragraph 18).

The Japanese youth's preference for apolitical community volunteerism is motivated mostly by interest in helping others and the belief that they could learn from such experiences. Like their American counterparts, it is also possible that they believe that community volunteerism is both easier to do and more effective than political engagement if the goal is to solve community problems.

Despite this preference for community volunteerism, we believe that in actuality, not many Japanese youth are currently engaged in volunteering activities. This is partly because they do not have the necessary knowledge to become socially and politically active and they do not seem to care about others outside their small groups of family and friends.

We think that Japanese young people live inside their own isolated worlds. Thus, they do not have relationships with the community, both inside Japan and outside. As a result, they do not act even if they know that people need their help.

Also, Japanese youth of today have only experienced peaceful times in Japan. Therefore, it is difficult for them to imagine the conditions of war-torn nations like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia.

Finally, many believe that Japan's recent economy has been poor compared to previous decades. As a result, they may think that they can not afford to help others in need. We believe that these reasons are behind the lack of caring attitude and the lack of civic engagement among Japanese youth of today.

As stated above, to solve this problem, the youth themselves suggest two things. First, they want more information about the world and the socially active roles that they could play in global society. Second, they want teachers, parents, and other members of the community to require them to be socially active. This can be done by incorporating peace studies education and social activism into the school's regular curriculum throughout their education system. These ideas are also echoed by the list of curricular and institutional innovations suggested by 80% of the students surveyed by Harvard's Institute of Politics studies of 2000 and 2001. According to these young Americans, the promotion of greater political engagement could be somewhat or very effective:

- If, as part of the required curriculum, public schools spent more time teaching the basics about how to get involved in politics, activism, and the issues of the day.
- If there were an easy-to-find Web site dedicated to providing students with political information, including ways they can get involved.
- If, as part of the curriculum, colleges created partnerships with local and state governments and offered academic credit to students who participated in public service activities.
- If students had direct contact with more elected officials, members of government, political candidates, campaigns, and institutions.
- If there were a student-oriented political action committee or network that focused on organizing student groups, training students for political involvement and helping young people get elected to local, state, and federal offices.
- If students were made more aware of real-life examples of how young people can make a difference politically.
- If the process of registering and voting by absentee ballot were made easier so that students could vote from college. (Spiezio, 2002, paragraph 10)

All of the above suggestions, given both by American and Japanese young people surveyed, point towards their need for more practical knowledge that would give them the skills and confidence to be socially and politically active. Although various possible socio-cultural, historical, and economic reasons were briefly alluded to above, perhaps the primary reason behind civic disengagement has to do more with the lack of practical information and the marginalization of civic engagement objectives in schools' curricula.

POSTSCRIPT

In this final part of the presentation, two students will write in the first person, in their own voices, and elaborate on their perceived lack of the necessary knowledge that would give them the confidence to be socially and politically active. They are going to exercise their right to express their views on issues that affect their lives. In particular, they will talk about their right to be properly and adequately educated. This right is guaranteed to them by the United Nation's

Conventions on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, which states that: "Children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard -- within the family, the school or the community" (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). The statements below, made before educators at the Peace as a Global Conference in Tokyo in September of 2003, are their attempt to participate in civic engagement.

Emi Nagano

In Japanese education, as you know, we have no classes on peace studies or social activism. In my case, I have never participated in peace studies education until I came to Miyazaki International College. I did do some volunteering activities such as recycling, visiting nursing homes and so on before coming to MIC. But we think that not so many people participated in such activities because they do not have enough information.

So, if Japanese schools have peace studies and social activism in the curriculum and require all students to do it, Japanese youth's minds will probably be moved to think beyond our own small world of immediate family and friends and into the local and global communities.

We think that we have the right to be educated. In my case, last November I participated in Asian Youth Forum in Taiwan. At that Forum almost all Japanese students realized that we do not know much about our own country. We know even less about our neighboring countries because we were not taught properly. Probably some teachers tried to teach but we study just to pass exams. We just memorize meaningless facts and after the exam almost all students forget about them. This is true.

And about my experience in China, I did not know about Nanjing massacre. In Japanese history class, we did not learn about it in detail. So in China I was really shocked and ashamed of myself because I did not know about it even though I am Japanese. So we think correct and detailed information is very important. And if we learn much information in school, we may not be ashamed of ourselves. Please don't make us just memorize meaningless facts. To think and to care about all people and their histories around the world, including Japan, is very important.

Masanari Kamada

As I am not only a student but also a human being, I have the right to be educated about the whole human race. I believe any request we make in the name of human rights should be accepted. An education about the whole human race will broaden my perspective and make me realize the infinite possibilities of what I can do as a productive world citizen. According to the United Nation's Convention on the Rights on the Child (1989), "It is essential that children be provided with the necessary information about options that exist and the consequences of such options so that they can make informed and free decisions. Providing information enables children to gain skills, confidence and maturity in expressing views and influencing decision" (Article 12). Therefore, children should be involved in the process of realizing their rights while adults assist children in making their decision by providing all of the time and resources required.

Until recently, I have been totally ignorant and naive about the world outside of Japan. I was not at all concerned about other people. Fortunately, my visits abroad have changed me; especially my stay in Taiwan truly shocked my friends and me.

I was shocked how ignorant I was about Japan even though I am Japanese. Even worse, the other Asian youths at the conference knew about Japan sometimes more than I did, especially about WWI and WWII. Many Japanese like myself have the perspective that we are the victims of the atomic bomb. That's what we learn when we study about WWII. We learn almost nothing about what the Japanese army did in these colonized areas. Even now, there is no mention of comfort women in junior high school textbook of social studies.

As the good book says, " Ask and you shall be given." Unless we, the students, demand, we can not get anything. Also teachers should accept if students demand the education that we deserve.

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