

Shortfall of Disaster Health Information for Foreign Residents in Japan

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Abstract

“Information Shortfall” risks people in vulnerable positions, such as foreign residents, in times of disaster. Considerable gap always exists between those with access to the latest and detailed information and those without. Especially, this gap is exacerbated by unequal possession of social, cultural, and financial capital. What needs to be done is to identify the initial points of information dissemination and visualize emergency and vital information for all. Furthermore, releasing disaster related and other helpful information for everyday life through existing channels would be the step towards the goal of achieving risk free information flow in society.

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Introduction

Foreign resident are considered to be vulnerable people in times of disaster due to the difficulty, arising from their cultural differences and language problems, with obtaining information on how to react in an emergency situation. “Digital Divide” in disaster settings has been identified as the one of biggest issues, in that there is a considerable gap between those who have access to newest and detailed information in disaster affected area and those who do not. Within this divide, foreign residents are assumed to be in the category of the information “not-haves.” In addition, the digital divide literature and the model of information shortfall on disaster show contingency upon linguistic literacy level of information recipients. However, linguistic and cultural competency of foreign residents in Japan vary greatly depending on their background and length of residency. Therefore, we must take care when we lump all foreign residents together into the category of “the vulnerable people.” It is important to better identify who are truly at risk people rather than putting all foreign residents into one category.

So, this paper aims to start a conversation about establishing better communication channels for people in vulnerable positions in times of disaster including countermeasures for improving

disaster risk reduction literacy, especially for those foreign residents called “newcomers” who are assumed to be high risk groups. Newcomers are those who came to Japan since the mid-1980s, and their linguistic and cultural competency vary greatly. As various these groups of foreign residents are, identifying the risks in communication foreign residents face today can be just as complex. The paper delineates the foreign residents by legal categories and illustrates the proximity of each group to the source of information measured in Japanese linguistic competency. By doing so, the paper attempts to initiate much needed discussion on how to truly assist non-Japanese residents in times of disaster with these differences and complexity in mind.

New comers in japan

Foreign residents in Japan are often categorized into two groups: old-comers and newcomers. “Old-comers” are special permanent residents who are descendants of immigrants from the Japanese colonial period, and “new comers” are migrants who came to Japan after the 1980s [1]. While the old-comers are familiar with Japanese society due to their lineage and tend to form a large ethnic community and possess good command in language, the newcomers lack such support and linguistic competency. From this perspective, the newcomers are more at high risk

and vulnerable in times of disaster in Japan due to difficulties they face with obtaining crucial information. Despite Japanese government's efforts to globalize its nation, Japan essentially remains an ethnically homogeneous nation and its systems are not yet ready to meet the needs of foreign residents, such as providing an equal access to education, employment, medical services, and other public services [2,3]. Most vulnerable are those migrants who are at risk during an emergency situation [4]. Language and cultural differences become barriers for obtaining essential information, which is provided through public media and organizations in mainly Japanese language.

According to the 2014 census, a total of 2,476,103 foreign residents resided in Japan. This shows there were 638,000 (40.5%) more foreign residents in Japan in 2014 than in 1999 (from 1,556,113). The special permanent residents (old comers) were 399,106 while the new comers numbered 1,689,397. Those from China, Brazil, Philippines, Korea and Peru made up 77.6% of all new comers [5]. There also has been an increase in the number of foreign residents from countries such as Vietnam, India, Nepal and Thailand, and it indicates that the number of new comers in Japan is growing rapidly.

Many of the new comers have come to Japan in order to work or to start a family (marriage), and therefore many are relatively young. Accordingly, types of residency, life style, and backgrounds of immigrants also differ from one another, and problems they face while living in Japan greatly vary.

Case study

To get a better understanding at the difficulties with access to information among foreign residents, semi-structured interviews were conducted between September and November 2011 in Himeji City in Japan in simple English with a total of 39 foreign residents who were Japanese language learners. The city is a major urban area located in western Japan with a population of 536,502 [6,7]. The coastal areas of the city are industrial areas and hold a port. The center is a mixture of commercial, residential and industrial areas, and the northwest and the northeast areas are residential and farming areas. Large-scaled high-tech plants have been built around Sea with a view to the global market, and the area has become a hub of international industries. Foreign nationals in the Osaka area make up for 2% of the city population. The increase in Chinese nationals has been noticeable in recent years. Among the foreign residents, 16% are from Vietnam, which is higher than the national average. The reason for this is because of the refugee settlement foster center established in 1979 that received refugees from Vietnam. The center is now closed; however, many Vietnamese still live in the area. Of all the foreign laborers in the city, 23.7% are engaged in temporary employment and contract work. Approximately a quarter of the foreign workers are employed in manufacturing on a non-permanent basis. Many Indo-Chinese Refugees live in H city. The first generation of Indo-Chinese refugees arrived in Japan about 30 years ago. While the globalization presents benefits in economy, a change in life-styles and improved accessibility, epidemics of diseases can spread rapidly. Especially in times of disaster, there is a strong possibility that foreign people would be vulnerable since they do not have an easy access to evacuation information.

The ages of participants varied greatly with the youngest person being 25 years old. There were 13 males 26 females. Participants were made up of 15 Vietnamese, 15 Chinese, 2 Bangladeshi, 2 American, 1 Ukrainian, 1 Indonesian, 1 Brazilian, 1 Peruvian, and 1 Malaysian. Five people immigrated through international marriage, 12 came as members of migrant worker family, five were migrant workers, six were trainees, seven were relocated employees of international businesses, two were refugees from the Indochina region, and one was a foreign student.

Interviews with these participants revealed that as the length of stay in Japan increased, foreign spouses' command of Japanese language improved. Foreign spouses had a connection with both Japanese people and other foreigners so they were strong candidates for becoming potential source of information or a leader of support groups (for other foreign residents in the area). Family members of migrant workers with less than 2 years of residency were the most vulnerable in terms of communication since their communicative competency was low and connection with neighbors (social network) was weak.

As for information flow, they still faced a barrier against obtaining information provided via newspapers, television, and other forms of public media, even though many of the foreigners understood simple conversational Japanese for daily survival. Their lack of better command of the Japanese language resulted in lesser communicative interaction with Japanese people. Radio feed in the community was very difficult to understand for foreign residents. This meant that their right to access information was undermined as they did not receive the same amount of information, even though they lived in the same community as other Japanese residents. For some foreign residents, the Internet seemed to be the only source of information. They accessed information about Japan on websites that were provided either in their language or from their country of origin. This meant those who did not have the Internet access had little information available to them.

Now I would like to talk more in detail about different categories of foreign residents and their accessibility to information that is contingent upon the Japanese language competency and physical, social, and cultural proximity to information sources.

International marriage

This group of foreign residents living in Japan with Japanese spouses are mentally prepared to spend a long time in Japan. These foreign spouses tend to make more efforts and have more opportunities to speak Japanese on daily basis. So, the foreign spouses can obtain information through personal inquiries and communication with others. In some cases, however, the foreign spouses rely solely on their spouse or family members for information. In such cases, when their Japanese spouse is at work or absent, it is hard for the foreign spouses to obtain information. However, once they are able to speak Japanese to some extent, they begin to interact with Japanese neighbors in groups, such as the Residents Association, where they can obtain information about life in Japan. Foreign spouses can find people whom they could depend on in times of disasters.

(2) Migrant workers

Migrant workers typically make their progress in language through communication on the job, and as their stay prolongs, their command of the Japanese language improves. They often access information via Internet and TV. Migrant workers have few Japanese friends and not many friends from their home countries. Although some say they have dependable friends, the majority of migrant workers have no meaningful relationship with their neighbors due to lack of engagement or interaction within the community. Also many of them are not familiar with the area in which they live and do not know the location of the shelters or evacuation area for disaster/emergency.

(3) Family members of migrant workers

For most of foreign residents in this group, the length of residency determined the linguistic and cultural competency. On average, two years seemed to be the turning point for this group's ability to communicate and navigate in Japanese. Those who have resided over two years understood elementary Japanese. Some who have lived in Japan for many years adjusted to local life style and participate in local events. This group usually gathered information from TV, participated in locally organized evacuation drills, and knew the shelters and evacuation routes. Their children who have grown up in Japan are fluent in the language and help their parents. However, the most current information on emergency procedures in audio and written materials were too difficult for the children to comprehend, and thus they were unable to relate the information to their parents. On the other hand, those who have lived less than two years in Japan could neither speak nor comprehend Japanese. As a result, they did not gain much information from TV and did not participate in local activities. Also they had very little contact with Japanese people. Instead, they depended on their families or a very few dependable acquaintances for information. Most of them with less than two years of residency could not understand the currently available information due to language barrier, nor did they possess the knowledge about the evacuation sites. They might greet neighbors but were not yet settled in the community.

(4) Trainees

Trainees were mostly in their twenties and thirties. They were also fairly well versed in information technology, so they could access information through TV, the internet, and other electronic devices on the news about their home countries from Japan. Trainees had fairly good opportunities to use Japanese on the job. Their employers provided sufficient support including translation services and interpreters for hospital visits. However, the conversation tended to be limited to work oriented topics and less conversational Japanese. Their daily routes were constricted to their work place and company dormitory. Groups of several to dozens of people from the same country occupy the dormitory; problems they face were dealt with only within this small community. Since they have the weekends off, they could visit the town or participate in local activities if they were informed about them in advance. Although they have access to information, they were not always informed. For example, some of the trainees who were interviewed for this pilot study reported that they did not know about a typhoon which was approaching

them during their working hours; others tried to gather more information about this typhoon but were not successful.

(5) New appointment (relocation)

Company employees who were transferred to Japan have plenty of opportunities to communicate with Japanese people around them. They often were fluent in Japanese language before the time of their arrival. Some even held degrees from Japanese universities and graduate schools. Their work places promoted developing social relationships, and they had a better access to information at work. They have Japanese colleagues who would support them in times of trouble. They attend evacuation drills held at work; however, they hardly participated in community drills or events. Many of them did not have daily contact with their neighbors as they spend most of their time at work.

(6) Indo-chinese refugees

The population of this generation in Japan is aging. Most of them are able to speak conversational Japanese and are able to gather information from TV. They participate in the Residential Association, local festivals, and community events. With fluency in Japanese, Indo-Chinese refugees help newly arrived foreigners when they require interpretation in institutions such as hospitals. Some are running a language class for school teachers who have to teach at a school with many foreign students. Because the community of Indo-Chinese refugees is large, they tend to have relationships only within their community and do not communicate with the society outside. The strength of the first generation refugees is that because they have lived as a group who has shared the common history of refugees, there are close relationships to sustain them. They are fluent in Japanese language and culture and are able to live independently as a community. They also face challenge due to aging: generational gap between the first generation and the younger generation.

(7) International students

International students study Japanese before their arrival and are capable of attending lectures in Japanese. They are young and savvy about information technology. They gather information from TV and friends from school. They have people who support them at school.

Discussion

From these interviews, it has been revealed that foreign residents' problems with information access have not been improved drastically. As their residency in Japan lengthens, the linguistic ability improves and slowly they gain more access to information sources. However, some groups remain in distance from the sources of critical information due to slow improvement in language acquisition and lack of social interaction with Japanese people in the community. The foreign residents who stick to their own community would gather information from each other. The foreign residents desire to obtain local information, yet this may not be easy if the information barriers exist. In some community, not only the discrimination against the foreign people from Japanese people but also the antagonism against their community result in isolation of foreign people in Japanese society, and the

communities of foreign people may progressively separate from the Japanese society, and resulted in difficulty of coexistence, namely down spiral of the relationship between Japanese and foreign people. In such context, how to respond to cultural friction and to integrate these foreign residents are the topic of great current importance not only for the Japanese government but also for Japanese society. The recent trend shows that foreign migrants increasingly opt for residency in Japan after spending a long period of time in Japanese society. Thus migrants should be viewed as part of community rather than transient visitors. Without deeper integration, these groups will remain vulnerable and continue to have hard time getting information in times of disaster.

Currently, Japanese government issued documents are often written in complex Japanese and hard to understand for foreign residents. This forces foreign residents to search for information available in their native language, which is often not available unless their native language is English, Chinese, or Korean, which are available in some cities. In addition, Internet has become the main source of information in Japan. However, information available on the Internet for foreign residents is limited. Hence they tend to depend on the people they are in contact with. Yet the people who have access to and understand the contents of information are usually Japanese, not members of their own foreigner community. As one simple solution for the problem at hand, it would be a good idea to use simpler Japanese (yasashi Nihongo) to shorten the time for information gathering and translation, which would result in more accurate interpretation and understanding. Information for foreign residents can be

provided in places such as schools and stations where they regularly frequent rather than sending out information via mass media or placing them in public administrative buildings. Urbanization all over Japan seems to have weakened the ties among members of the foreign communities in the present. The weakened local community ties results in the weakened community ties in urbanized cities in comparison to traditional villages, in which members of the communities maintain stronger ties and share information with each other as revealed from the interviews, more contacts with Japanese people in local communities where foreign residents reside and simple instructions in Japanese were what the foreign residents desired. The research has limitation due to the fact that participants have different life histories, economic conditions, ages and so on that affect how they react to the communication. These factors are all considered to be limitations against generalization. Since the foreign residents in Japan are more multi-cultured and evolves in accordance with societal changes, it is necessary to make more comprehensive and continuous efforts to clarify its critical issue [8].

Conclusion

Disaster professionals and citizens in Japan who are neighbors to these foreign residents need to raise awareness to and deepen understanding of cultural differences of their neighbors. Exchange of opinions and free discussions among the citizens would also promote understanding of differences in each other's value systems and cultural traditions. Therefore, regional effort is most important in information provision to foreign residents. An integrated society will be realized if both Japanese and foreign residents step towards the goal of achieving risk free information flow in society together.

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