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# Ritual, Resistance, Rebellion? Disaster Volunteer Experiences in Northeastern Japan

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## Abstract

Contemporary Japanese society is undergoing a gradual shift of values and modes of work and life. Deriving small-scale temporary happiness from activities that make sense to individuals has replaced stability secured by lifetime employment. Disaster volunteer narratives and lifestyles illustrate this change. Drawing on ethnographic data from fieldwork in Miyagi and Iwate Prefecture, this study explores the broad range of meanings that doing pro-social work in the area devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 holds for those engaging in it. I contend that volunteers are caught between the rigid rules pervading daily volunteer routine and their aspiration to break out from mainstream society. Drawing on Bell's definition of ritual practice as self-interested appropriation which affords its participants some flexibility in negotiating the terms of their involvement (1992), this ethnography exposes the inherent difficulties volunteers face in making the tropes of "being good", "doing good" and "feeling good" compatible. Furthermore, the study documents the ambiguous position volunteers find themselves in by applying the theory of liminoid states, i.e. the concept developed by Turner to describe the playful experiences sought by members of postindustrial societies as an escape from the constraints of daily routine (1979).

"I realize how great it is to live  
even if the scar in my heart hurts.  
What was I born for?  
What will I do in my life?  
I don't like not being able to answer these questions.  
By living the present our heart burns.  
That's why you go with a smile on your face."

(Anpanman's March)

18 July 2012, 9 am, downtown Ishinomaki. We are lined up in squads of four wearing the neat blue uniform jackets that bear the logo of the volunteer organization we have chosen to work for a limited period of time. Everyone is wearing plastic trousers on top of jeans and heavy boots to protect clothing and feet. The sun is already burning down on our heads and the temperature is close to 30 degrees — pearls of sweat are running down my face and I feel relieved that having a towel around the neck seems to be an accepted part of the uniform volunteer look. One of the volunteer leaders is standing in front of us with a wooden board that carries the text of the Anpanman's March cited at the beginning of this paper. One of the morning rituals at the volunteer center is to sing this song together before departing for work. It feels like being back at school, singing along with the others, rather reluctantly and somewhat timid at first. Although this is a children's song, Anpanman (literally: Bean Bun Boy) being a popular and one of the most commercially successful comic

characters, the text is intriguing since it refers to philosophical issues of purpose in life, contribution to justice, self-fulfillment, altruism, (temporary) happiness, staging happiness and the pressures that result from the ubiquitous atmosphere of doing good and feeling good. These are essentially the key issues that volunteers refer to when asked to describe their backgrounds, motives and experiences. Evidently, coupled with physical exercise, this morning practice serves to enforce group solidarity, facilitate the performance of feeling good and confident and promote *ganbaru seishin* (the spirit of endurance and persistence). Such construction of community through rigidly orchestrated rituals resembles the practices aimed at promoting 'disciplined selves' as described by Kondo (1990). I argue that such ritualized patterns of behavior pinpoint the gap between the wish of shaping the world positively and the reality that numerous volunteers feel rather lost in their life courses and have no clear idea what they would like to do with their lives. Quite a few of the volun-

teers I interviewed who seemed exceedingly engaging, cheerful and amicable conceded that they have a past of social introversion. On the one hand, rituals serve to reaffirm social relations in a group and to enforce Durkheimian-style collective identity. In doing so, rituals are perceived as reassuring and stabilizing (Douglas 1996 [1970]) and affirmative of communal unity in contrast to the frictions, constraints, and competitiveness of social life and organization (Turner 1966). The pressure that results from this collectivity, however, and the lack of individual discretion may be considered as a constraint by some volunteers, as will be later described. Ultimately, the moments of tension that feature in volunteer experiences result from the inherent difficulty of making the two poles of “doing good” and “feeling good” compatible. Although many volunteers elaborate on the deep satisfaction they derive from seeing the fruits of their efforts to help others, some also broach on their difficulties of blending into the volunteer routine at a personal level. “Doing good”, with its ethic of self-sacrificing altruism and “feeling good”, with its notion of carefree, spur-of-the-moment hedonism, are in some cases opposite ends of the scale. Both, however, seem to form pivotal parts of the volunteer lifestyle, regardless of the variety of individual experiences. Generally, extended participant observation suggests that in accordance with Bell’s claim that “ritual is never simply or solely a matter of routine, habit or ‘the dead weight of tradition’ (1992:92), volunteers engage in rituals as a practical way of dealing with their respective circumstances (Bell 1992 cited in Klien and Wulf 2013:13). Furthermore, this study will apply the theory of liminoid states (Turner 1974), examining disaster volunteering as liminoid genres that are “recognizable as distinct and autonomous forms of expression or entertainment, existing independently and without any necessary references to one another, expressing the individual effort and diversity of their creators” (Rowe 2008: 134).

## Between a Rock and a Hard Place? Doing Ethnographic Research into Volunteers

This paper explores narratives of disaster volunteers mostly in their 20s and 30s who chose to do pro-social work in the deeply affected prefectures of Miyagi and Iwate after the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011.

As regards the definition of “volunteer”, the three general characteristics are *jihatsusei* (free will), *kōkyōsei* or *kōekisei* (activities in the interest of the general public) and *mushōsei* (the unpaid nature of activities). Other fea-

tures that are frequently associated with volunteering are *shutaisei* (subjectivity), *senkusei* (progressiveness) and *sōzōsei* (creativity) (Shibata, Harada and Naga 2011:1). However, working side by side with and talking to volunteers in the field has clearly shown that in many cases, these features are not necessarily a given. There can also be “coercion/credit volunteerism” (Rausch 1998:14), i.e. individuals who are persuaded by their peers or seniors to join in volunteering, there are also *yūshō borantia* (paid volunteers) and a number of individuals use volunteering to reintegrate into society rather than pursue activities of public interest. I have argued elsewhere (Klien 2013) that the precise definition of volunteers is extremely difficult and the question of who defines what qualifies as volunteering is still unresolved (in line with Avenell 2012:72 and Nihei 2010:113). Many of the individuals I discuss do volunteering on the side but are also part of other projects and do not understand themselves predominantly as “volunteers”. Empirical data from fieldwork in two disaster prefectures between May 2011 and August 2013 show that volunteers join for various reasons. In many cases, however, the drive to help others is intricately linked with a search for the meaning of their own lives and a fervent desire to improve their existing life qualities. Some seek to abandon the careers they have pursued for the last decade and consider volunteering activities as an opportunity to reshape their lives and establish networks with similarly minded peers. Others yet are determined to opt out of capitalist society and perceive volunteering as a way of living on the love of others and escaping the need to pursue regular work.

For this study, semi-structured interviews with more than thirty volunteers were conducted in Miyagi, Iwate Prefectures and in Tokyo between April 2011 and August 2014. I interviewed individuals from a broad range of social backgrounds while doing participant observation in various volunteer groups, at volunteer fairs and events. The activities I joined for participant observation included manual volunteer work such as digging out earth contaminated by the tsunami salt and replacing it with “clean” earth in the initial stages, cleaning photos stained by the tsunami that had been retrieved by the Japanese Self-Defense Forces, supporting fishermen so that they could restart fishing and painting walls in a space that would soon be opened as an educational facility to provide information on and access to IT to local children. With time, activities that involved emotional support increased, such as entertaining frustrated local children living in temporary accommodation, conversing with senior citizens during *ochakko* (tea breaks) in common temporary facilities or helping prepare and carry out the

local *tanabata* summer festival. Needless to say, all these activities were carried out together with other (mostly non-local) volunteers as well as partly local residents and thus provided abundant opportunities to encounter and relate to potential interviewees. As for accommodation, I stayed in the “Reconstruction Hostel” (Fukkō minpaku) in Ishinomaki during short stays and shared a house with other volunteers and members of the social network “Ishinomaki 2.0” during longer stays. I spent considerable time “hanging out” with network members in their shared office in downtown Ishinomaki since that gave me valuable insights into the fluidity of the network and the relations among network members, many of whom pursued a range of volunteering activities as part of their lifestyle. It also provided me with access to a great number of short-term volunteers who came to Ishinomaki from various parts of Japan. In addition, I spent time both as a guest and a bar tender in the “Reconstruction Bar” (Fukkō bar) operated by Ishinomaki 2.0 since it has been known as a place where volunteers of all sorts like to go in the evening. The challenges of doing fieldwork on and with volunteers were multilayered and kept changing with time: In the initial stages, coping with the sheer manual burden of the work seemed overwhelming. Setting aside time for taking notes after an exhausting day was another issue. The special social milieu of volunteering with its lack of privacy, being confined in limited physical space with a group of virtual strangers for longer periods of time, having no access to flush toilets and the rather rigidly regimented routine did not facilitate fieldwork in many ways. However, the close physical life with informants resulted in abundant opportunities to relate to other volunteers. Still, blending into a group whose majority was in their early 20s, some of them just out of secondary school, as someone over 40 was another issue. It was intriguing to watch a discussion unfold between a female volunteer giving advice to a slightly younger male *ex-hikikomori* volunteer, both in their mid-20s, about how to find an appropriate girlfriend. I was struck by her sobering interpretation of relations between male and females in general. After a few minutes, numerous volunteers who were working near the two joined the animated discussion, neglecting their work. Confident, full of energy and having already decided her professional career as police staff in Osaka, the female went on about all males basically being not trustworthy by their very nature but easy enough to see through. As amusing I felt the lecture and ensuing exchange was, I felt I had little to contribute to this discussion without appearing either pretentious or plainly ‘old’, given our age gap, so I tacitly focused on the work we were supposed to do at the time,

i.e. lining up shells on a rope. In retrospect, doing manual work and later engaging in various forms of emotional support during fieldwork held both considerable advantages as well as demerits: On the one hand, these activities helped me spend considerable time at various sites in the field and gain important insights. However, physical and mental exhaustion, difficulties of integration into an age group and generation different from mine and fitting important aspects of participant observation into a tightly regulated daily regime could certainly be seen as major drawbacks.

### Selected Volunteer Narratives: Between Vision and Void

In 2011, Furuichi Noritoshi, a graduate student at the prestigious Tokyo University, penned a work called “Happy Youth in a Desperate Country”. Furuichi contends that today, jobs may be less secure but Japanese youth are living in the moment. “Now they are working for themselves, making their own decisions, taking their own responsibilities and reaping their own results. That’s a major shift.” (Furuichi in Pilling 2012). The generation of millennials that make up a large part of disaster volunteers essentially put high priority on self-realization. Contemporary youth seek to combine making money with engaging in activities that make sense to them personally, give them a sense of fulfillment (Beck 2000) and constitute a contribution to society in one way or another. Thus, numerous volunteers, especially mid and long term volunteers, could be categorized as ‘quiet mavericks’ (Toivonen et al 2011), i.e. determined individuals who find ‘creative and integrative ways by negotiating conformist pressures tactfully’ with the ultimate aim of ‘engaging with society on their own terms’, but also ‘actively shaping social change’ (Toivonen, Norasakkunkit, Uchida 2011: 1–9). They do so by opting out of conventional life courses and by creating their own enterprises, non-governmental organizations, networks etc. Such visionary people constitute one side of the coin. There are also others who chose to volunteer out of a feeling of societal marginality, perceiving themselves as *makeinu* (loser dogs). Such individuals describe themselves as NEET (not in education, employment or training), *freeter* (part-time workers) or *hikikomori* (social introverts). For them, volunteering constitutes a first step back into society, but many of them are not sure what they want to do in the long term. Many of them have served as volunteers for relatively long, are familiar with the rules, are recognized in the volunteer group and enjoy the status they have earned as a result of their activities.

They are attracted to volunteering since they derive a sense of security from being embedded in a family-like network. Many of them still lack confidence but manage to function as team leaders and speak out in front of a group, if with difficulties in some cases. For example, I worked side by side with a male volunteer from Shimane Prefecture several times. In his late 20s, F has a degree in environmental science from a technical college under his belt, but never looked for a job after graduation. Tacit, introvert and reluctant to make eye contact when we talk, F has been volunteering with the same NGO for more than a year. He says he enjoys being a volunteer but points out that this is just temporary and he has no idea what to do next. He expresses his gratitude for being accepted as a long-term volunteer with the group in Ishinomaki, also adding that he is not confident that his contribution is really worth his presence.

In between these two groups are representatives of Generation Y who come from relatively affluent backgrounds and have either no regular working experience or did not enjoy their original profession. They resort to volunteering since in their words, it constitutes a socially accepted (by their parents as well as by public opinion) way of refraining from work but still engaging in meaningful activity. They seem outgoing, amicable and active; at the same time, many of them indicate that they are not sure what they wish to do in the long term. All they know for sure is that they do not want to go back to their original jobs or follow the footsteps of their parents by pursuing a conventional career as a cog in the machine of some company. Yet they lack the courage and creativity to come up with a vision or concrete idea how to turn their dissatisfaction with their previous lifestyles into something positive apart from volunteering. A, for example, strikes me as very open, jovial and accessible at first. She says she is from Osaka and has volunteered many times. Studying fashion design at a technical college, she remarks that she never looked for a job in fashion design. Since the earthquake, she has volunteered at various places and visited music festivals across the country between stretches of volunteering. She does not seem keen on looking for permanent employment and seems to perceive volunteering as a convenient ploy to avoid work for the time being, mentioning that her parents approve of her volunteer activities.

In other words, participant observation and interviews have shown that volunteering attracts a group of extremely heterogeneous individuals. Hansen poignantly observes that “Japan is becoming — indeed, has probably always been — an increasingly contradictory, creative, self-questioning, self-aware, and cosmopolitan society of

contingently interconnected individuals, many of whom seek to escape from the meta-socialcentric straightjackets into which they are often channeled.” (2012: 143–144). In a similar vein, interviewees for this study mentioned a broad range of reasons for engaging in volunteer work: some referred to social aspects as a major merit of engaging in pro-bono activities, i.e. the inspiration they gain from meeting people from all walks of life they would otherwise not meet. Additionally, a frequent incentive for volunteering was being part of a process-driven development and the flexibility and adaptability required to function in such an environment. Some individuals also talked about the sense of fulfillment they derive from seeing the fruits of their hard labor with their own eyes and the sense of satisfaction about working in a team.

### Breaking Out of Mainstream or Submitting to Discipline?

At first sight (and in many interviews), volunteer life tends to evoke associations with breaking out of mainstream values, individual freedom, hypocrisy and self-complacency (*jiko manzoku*). However, participant observation in a range of volunteer organization suggests that volunteer experiences also go hand in hand with submission to group discipline, rigid daily routines with detailed rules and regulations and the observation of an abundance of ritualized practices. Whereas there are differences between various volunteer organizations, fieldwork has shown that the larger groups are, the more tightly regulated they tend to be to ensure efficiency and to fulfill safety standards. Volunteers at Peace Boat turned out to be extremely rigidly organized: every minute detail, from the time of getting up to going to sleep (i.e. switching off lights in the communal sleeping room), was externally prescribed; volunteers were only allowed to recharge their mobile phones at designated points; volunteers had to report to their team leaders when they leave the group and get permission to do so. Members were not allowed to drink any alcohol on the premises of the volunteer center during the entire time. In contrast, smaller volunteer groups tended to be more flexible and casual. Nevertheless, just like the Bean Boy March morning ritual, groups commonly practice morning gymnastics with a short speech given by the group leader to encourage members before they set out to start activities. In many groups, subjecting oneself without limitations to collective needs and demands was taken for granted. For example, I was asked to take out the collective dog of some smaller volunteer group for a morning walk at 5 am

before breakfast. I willingly agreed, expecting some more experienced member to come along. This was not the case. When I realized that I was responsible for a dog I hardly knew in a place I had just arrived the day before, the fellow volunteer who had woken me up with the instructions reassured me that the dog was used to being walked by unfamiliar faces and everything would go fine. This sense of *ad hoc* coordination was very common in smaller groups, but unthinkable in larger ones. The constraints of collective life and the pressures of being friendly, easy going, cheerful and cooperative, in short: “being good and doing good”, were perceived as a burden that became too much for some. A female volunteer conceded that she slept in her car occasionally to get some distance from the volunteer center, especially when she felt depressed or had encountered some problems she felt reluctant to discuss with her fellow volunteers. Rituals that involved the entire volunteer group could either serve to boost individuals’ confidence, but also function as sites where less outgoing volunteers faced enormous stress. For example, a very shy volunteer in his mid-20s, who described himself as a social introvert to me, was the leader of our team of five ‘international’ volunteers, i.e. individuals who were either non-Japanese or partly Japanese, but had lived abroad, could not face the stress of presenting our activities to the other teams at the end of the day and had to interrupt his report. On another occasion, I experienced remarkable peer pressure when I was facing the daunting task to remove a mountain of contaminated earth with a group of other volunteers in the humid heat of the summer. It was the very first day of my volunteer fieldwork and after a while of toiling away, I took a break and joined another female volunteer who had sat down in the shadows and was taking a few sips from a water bottle. We had a brief chat observing the rest of the group working. While the volunteer supervisors encouraged us to take time off in order to prevent dehydration and physical exhaustion, I felt the hostile gaze of some peers when the other volunteer and I came back to take up our work. I could not help but feel pangs of guilt that we had rested while our industrious peers were doing our share of the work. I was all the more surprised when a few weeks later, I met one of our team leaders by chance. She said that she had really enjoyed working with our group as we had been one of the hardest working she had ever supervised. On a different day when I was out toiling away to plant sunflower seeds with a small and more casual volunteer group close to the fire-gutted ruins of the Kadonowaki school in Ishinomaki, a long-term female volunteer admonished me that a part of my underwear was visible. In many cases, rather

than the volunteer group (paid) staff, it is the long-term volunteers who seem to have internalized the rigid rules of everyday volunteer routine and who create an atmosphere of monitoring and self-monitoring.

## Narratives of Individual Transformation

One of the recurring topics volunteers talk about is the (mostly positive) change they have experienced as a result of volunteering. One company employee in his late 50s who is based in Tokyo mentioned that after starting to volunteer in Tohoku regularly on weekends, he started to greet colleagues in the company elevator back in Tokyo, even if he did not personally know them — something he would not have considered until then. Many mention that the social exchanges they have been exposed to as volunteers have broadened their mindsets and perspectives and improved their social skills. Many state that they have become more outgoing and communicative on the whole. Some mention a healthier life and greater satisfaction with their social interactions as a positive effect of volunteering. A 35-year-old female volunteer who is originally from Hokkaido remarked in an interview in August 2014 that she feels that she has many peers who deeply care about one another. Last but not least, many interviewees indicate that less rigid daily routines and greater control over their lives in terms of time management has also contributed to their life satisfaction. However, numerous long-term volunteers who have chosen to stay in the disaster area even after the majority of volunteer groups have ceased their activities indicate that they are busier than they were when they were working as company employees since they engage in a variety of non-paid activities to support their (volunteer) peers.

In this section, I will discuss three individual cases of disaster volunteers in order to highlight how pro-social activities impact and shape volunteers’ lives and personalities.

The first example is Y, a 27-year old female volunteer from Yamanashi Prefecture. She had been doing volunteer work for several months when I met her at a small NGO headquarter in Tome, Miyagi Prefecture, in the summer of 2012. She describes her transformation from a fashion-conscious, consumption-oriented urbanite to someone who has developed an interest in nature, organic farming and a sustainable way of life:

Before I was wearing cute clothes, was interested in manicure and was an avid reader of fashion magazines ... but now, I feel I have enough clothes. I feel

more like working with the earth, doing activities on the ground. But I have not yet tried farming myself. Last year I worked with a fisherman in Kobuchihama until November, helping him to set up kelp growing structures. We harvested the kelp in March. This time I did not go there as a volunteer but was asked to do paid work for a month. I was reluctant at first because I wanted to work as a volunteer but since there was a lack of people, I eventually went. I was surprised about how much work is required to make food ready for consumption. Right now, I do not consider myself as a volunteer—I do this because I have to do it. I do not think that I do it for myself, but because I want to do this. I live off my savings—the money I earned last autumn during the kelp harvest, but my savings are almost gone. The work started at 5am and went on until 4pm, after that we had dinner, took a bath and went to sleep at 10pm: Life was so healthy!

Whereas Y seems to be part of the volunteer family at the NGO headquarter in Tome since she has been there for a long time compared to other volunteers, she also tells me about the difficulties she encountered at the beginning of her volunteer activities getting used to the collective life at the volunteer center. She used to sleep in her car occasionally to cope with the lack of privacy at the volunteer headquarters. She strikes me as an outgoing, energetic person. At the same time she also says that she is not sure what she is going to do in the future. Going back to her former profession of hairdresser is out of the question for her. She talks about the sense of satisfaction she gets out of working for a good cause together with her fellow volunteers, about the sense of *tasseikan* (achievement) when locals thank them for their support; ‘doing good’ resulting in ‘feeling good’ for her. Despite her initial difficulty of ‘being good’, i.e. getting used to collective life, she describes her sense of belonging with her group of peers and her appreciation of being part of and working with this group, not longing for anything material as she did before.

The second case is 26-year-old male T from Chiba Prefecture. Before, he was a stressed out company employee who worked 18 hours a day and was living in an expensive flat in Meguro, Tokyo. He quit the corporate grind and is now a happy, but precarious freelance social entrepreneur based in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, and volunteers regularly. Interestingly enough, he says that he is personally not into volunteering as such, but sees pro-social activities as a means to an end, i.e. establishing con-

tacts in the region. This fits well with Kaneko’s claim that volunteering often constitutes a form of networking and mode of establishing *tsunagari* (connections)(1992) as well as Brown’s hypothesis of volunteering as “a form of civic engagement through which individuals can make meaningful contributions to their own visions of societal well-being” (1999:3).

T states:

I think I have changed considerably. I view my own life from different perspectives, it is extreme...and it is great fun to have a proper dinner with my mates. Before, I stayed at my office until late at night, ate take away bento boxes from the convenience store, like dog food. My life quality is better in many ways now.

T states that he earns 30% less in terms of cash compared to his previous life in Tokyo but has much greater freedom in terms of self-determination. He remarks that in retrospect, his life as a company worker in Tokyo seems mediocre in terms of life quality. He narrates that before, just like every company employee, he was always thinking “When will it be Friday so that I can get some rest”. Now he does not have such a structured way of working and admits that he does not even know what day of the week it is. He says that now, he oversleeps occasionally—something that could never have happened when he was a company employee in Tokyo. He is part of a social entrepreneur project on the Oshika Peninsula close to Ishinomaki. The project aims to create jobs for locals by using local resources in an innovative manner. He shares a flat in a run-down office block with his three other project colleagues in Ishinomaki. Asked about his career and future, he laughs, saying he has no idea [“*dōshimashō ne*”]. He seems content with his present lifestyle but also adds that in case the social entrepreneur project does not work out in the long term, he is confident that he will find a job in a company, which may be true given the fact that he has a degree from one of the elite universities in Tokyo. Quite in contrast to Y, T talks about how he enjoys making money. At the same time, however, he also yearns for quality of life. His most important aim in life, however, is to tackle new projects and challenges. Volunteering for him, seems to be a mere means to an end, which he enjoys but which he also distances himself from, saying that volunteering should be done by those who want to dedicate themselves exclusively to such activities. For him, volunteering has resulted in ‘feeling good’ as a result of his improved quality of life rather than the sense of achievement as a result of ‘doing good’ as described in the first case.

The third volunteer is B, a 30-year old male from Tokyo with a university degree in social welfare. He set up an NGO with friends from Tokyo in Kesenuma which focuses on supporting school children by providing them with a space to study after school since many of the local children still live in cramped temporary housing. B maintains that he has changed completely since moving to Tohoku. He says that he has transformed from being rather introverted to an outgoing individual who enjoys exchanging thoughts with others. Whereas he spends considerable time researching and making efforts to secure funding for his NGO and the long-term perspective is unclear, he says that his quality of life has increased considerably. He describes the wealth of social interaction he engages through his volunteer activities. He talks about his sense of *ibasho* (belonging) as a result of getting well acquainted in Kesenuma. On the down side, like Y, he mentions the lack of privacy of his lifestyle — he shares a house with other volunteers — and not having a relationship as a result. For him, volunteering is part of his lifestyle, but it also benefits his NGO since he manages to make connections and get better known in the local community. Clearly, ‘being good’ and ‘doing good’ result in ‘feeling good’ but also come with sacrifices with regard to his private life. All three cases show that both benefits and disadvantages come hand in hand with volunteering.

## Discussion

Due to limitations on the length of this manuscript, only three volunteer narratives have been presented here. Stevens (1998), Nakano (2000), Kimura (2005) Fujita and Kitamura (2013), Klien (2013) and Slater (2015) have previously conducted ethnographic research into volunteers. The three vignettes presented above demonstrate the salience of subjective well-being and its intricate relation with the search for self-fulfillment, self-realization and purpose in life. After carrying out interviews with more than thirty volunteers, I agree with one informant who observed that if you have ten volunteers, there would be ten stories, i.e. ten different motives due to people’s respective life courses (Hansen 2012: 128). However, one could contend that what these narratives show is the concurrence of ingrained convention and aspiration to break out from the norm. Numerous individuals who engaged in volunteering themselves pointed out that only *kawatteiru hito* (eccentrics) do *pro bono* work or that it is a special breed of people that are attracted to volunteering. This suggests that despite the

enormous increase in volunteering in the wake of the Kobe earthquake in 1995 and the recent Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, *pro bono work* has yet to become an accepted part of Japanese mainstream society. These statements and the cases presented above make the liminal state of “betwixt and between” (Turner 1964) evident that many interviewees find themselves in: they are not full-fledged members of mainstream society but still perceive themselves and their activities from the mainstream perspective. This study has highlighted the ongoing relevance of Turner’s argument that in postindustrial societies, liminoid phenomena, i.e. phenomena that are “like liminal but are not liminal” (Turner 1982: 32), are neither ritual per se nor a specific phase of ritual. Liminoid experience is characterized by voluntary choice rather than a ritual obligation (Belk and Costa 1998: 233), with individuals in liminoid spaces being liberated from the normal structural obligations imposed by society (1979: 493). The empirical data presented in this study has confirmed that individuals seek to transcend societal constraints in their respective ways. However, the data also shows that individuals face hurdles in doing so, having inherently been shaped by societal conventions and norms. The case of the former company employee turned social entrepreneur shows that Turner’s notion of antistructure, i.e. the subversion of the quotidian, pertains but interviewees simultaneously reproduce mainstream norms by referring to societal expectations. For example, narratives show that conventional notions of gender remain deeply ingrained in female volunteers. A 35-year-old former volunteer originally from Hokkaido has pursued a nomadic lifestyle since she left her hometown at the age of 19; she worked in resort hotels in Okinawa, Chiba and Shizuoka before settling down in Ishinomaki. She describes her hope of finding a partner and indicates that she is the type of person whose task is to support others as she lacks the skills to make her own decisions. Second, Turner’s notion of ‘spontaneous communities’ (1974:79) is also relevant: Volunteers form ad hoc groups based on mutual understanding. At the same time, however, some volunteers also describe feelings of loneliness, pressure and a sense of insecurity despite being embedded in such groups. Third, Turner’s argument that members of liminoid spaces base their moves on voluntary choice rather than a ritual obligation (Belk and Costa 1998: 233) is partly applicable: Clearly, the larger part of volunteers take a determined step to engage in pro-bono work. Yet, we could also claim that their motivations arise from a strategic decision in an increasingly stratified society that leaves them with few other options, especially as individuals in their twenties



who have failed to obtain a job after graduation from university or technical college. Those who come from elite educational backgrounds have a 'plan B' of going back to the corporate grind at the back of their minds in case their attempt at subversion does not work out.

Stories of individual change are often implicitly related to ideas of a radical reform of society, even if volunteers do not refer to these ideas directly. Many do, however, openly remark that they do not aspire to the lifestyles of their parents and the norms and lifestyle prescribed by Japanese society. This study shares Mathews' and White's idea that historical generational change expresses itself in 'a vast array of individual choices and micro-interactions rather than through organized protest or even conscious generational solidarity' (Mathews and White 2004:6). I consider an ethnographic approach to be valuable since it helps us understand such individually-led change and individual transformation that occurs through the framework of helping others. This method also helps to shed light on individuals who are eager to change themselves, but do not yet quite know how to implement this in practice. Ethnography is an effective tool in emphasizing individual narratives while relativizing the face-on meaning of self-evaluations by individuals of their extent of life satisfaction and taking account of non-verbal reifications of subjective well-being over an extended period. Furthermore, the thorough depiction of several case studies allows us to "get a full sense of what it is like to be an emerging adult, in all its complexity" (Arnett 2004: 28).

Let's now go back to the Bean Bun Boy March cited at the beginning. In my opinion, the triple reference to 'being good', 'doing good' and 'feeling good' hits the nail on the head with regard to the inherent tension that characterizes individual volunteers' experiences. As Rosenberger aptly observes, "A sense of risk and an ensuing search for new ways to live life and solve problems have captured the imagination of the young people in the nation." (2014: 131). Volunteer narratives testify to this ongoing struggle for alternative lifestyles while grappling with remaining mainstream ideas. Volunteer experiences clearly illustrate that contemporary Japanese society is undergoing a gradual shift of values and modes of work and life, but they also show the challenges individuals face in concretely and successfully implementing these values and ideas into practice. Participant observation and interviews with a range of disaster volunteers in their 20s and 30s show that individuals have multiple reasons and incentives for taking on pro-bono work. Volunteer routine tends to be ritualized for reasons of efficiency, especially in larger organizations. As described above, daily routine in volunteer organizations effectively contains a sequence of rituals to which volunteers

are expected to submit themselves. Whereas subjection to collective rituals is a key aspect of volunteering, we also find repeated incidents of subtle resistance. Individuals who feel constrained by the collective order and have a need for temporary privacy, find ways of achieving distance, just as the female volunteer who sleeps in her car occasionally. Another one mentions that doing a variety of side jobs comes in handy when explaining why she cannot take part in social events she feels obliged to attend but dislikes.

Does rebellion feature in volunteers' narratives? As mentioned before, individual transformation tends to go hand in hand with ideas about contributing to societal change. However, as argued by Mathews and White (2004) and Rosenberger (2014), in the case of contemporary Japanese youth, rather than sudden organized protest or other forms of rebellion, volunteering serves as an experimental site for individuals some of who have clear ideas about reforming society, but still prefer to take a gradual approach by starting out with their individual choices and pursuing small-scale happiness for the time being. Some resort to volunteering in the hope of gaining some time to find some purpose in life and make up their minds. Some perceive volunteering as a convenient ploy to make a socially acceptable choice of not working permanently. Yet others consider volunteering as a negatively laden, but necessary means to their own ends. As the paper shows, daily volunteer experiences entail submission to and internalization of the rigidly ritualized rules and constraints that come with the collective life of doing pro-bono work as well as the aspiration to depart from the values of mainstream society. Empirical data suggests that numerous volunteers struggle to bridge the chasm between 'being good', 'doing good' and 'feeling good'. In other words, volunteer experiences and narratives in post-disaster Japan are pervasively paradoxical as many of the young Japanese individuals who engage in altruistic work see it as part and parcel of their search for a purpose in life or at least, an improvement of their life satisfaction. Whereas numerous individuals who engage in pro bono behavior in northeast Japan do not seem averse to subjecting themselves to the rules and rituals of volunteer routine, this study also confirms the ongoing relevance of Bell's hypothesis about ritualization empowering those who appear to be controlled by power relations (1992) by illustrating how volunteers carve out freedom for themselves in a tightly regulated environment by appropriating ritual practices to their own ends. To sum up, Turner's concept of the liminoid is applicable to this transitional environment of disaster volunteers that is defined by a concurrence of playful experimentation to break out from the norm, a struggle to escape (precarious) work and a self-consciousness of being

different as volunteers feel both strongly aligned with and estranged from their transitory group of peers. However, the data presented here also pinpoint the limitations of the concept since leisure and work is inseparable here and Turner's idea that the liminoid occurs within clear cut lei-

sure settings, away from daily routine does not apply here. In addition, social subversion and individual expression do feature but are also accompanied with attempts to blend in, act in accordance with expectations, self-imposed pressure and societal norms.

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