

An Afghan refugee in Japan

(from anonymous student research paper)

1. The application:

This student paper draws on the personal experience of the student to explore the ways in which the story of one Afghan refugee in Japan was shaped by and challenged the power relations around his marginal situation. It was written as a short paper for course assessment.

In this paper a student re-examines (his/her) own experience of working on refugee rights in Japan, specifically exploring the experience of one refugee whose case became widely known through the publication of his autobiography. The case uses the power over/to/with/within framework to explore the refugee's experiences, and considers the forms of power and spaces within which it was exercised during the refugee's legal quest for asylum.

This case draws on the personal experience of a student to analyse the ways in which the story of one Afghan refugee in Japan was shaped by and challenged the power relations involved in being a foreigner in a context characterised by xenophobia. It was written as a short paper for course assessment.

It involves trying to enhance voice, as part of a contribution to changing laws and attitudes in a xenophobic context.

2. The case:

The case describes the experience of Ali Jane, an Afghan asylum seeker, who sought refuge in Japan having fled the Taliban in Afghanistan. Although it is signatory to relevant international agreements, Japan has a very low rate of awarding refugee status to asylum-seekers, something that is partly accounted for by widespread popular xenophobia: unskilled foreigners are perceived to contribute to increased crime rates, despite the lack of evidence to support this view and the need within the Japanese economy for additional unskilled labour.

In this context Ali Jane was imprisoned for several months after entering the country with forged documents, and then awarded a provisional release whilst awaiting the opportunity to bring his case to court. Both imprisonment and provisional release were traumatic experiences for Ali, who was constantly in a vulnerable, marginal position and subject to decisions beyond his control. He attempted suicide whilst in prison and was diagnosed with psychological disorders as a result of living in fear as a semi-free but unrecognised person whilst on provisional release.

Whilst awaiting his court date Ali, along with the paper's author, decided to publish his autobiography in order to share his story with the Japanese public and offer a different view on the experience of refugees in Japan. When the book was published with the support of various human rights activists and networks it drew a lot of attention and became widely discussed. Musicians, artists, media people and celebrities became interested and the issue of Ali's experience became shared through talk shows, concerts and other public events. By the time of Ali's court case public interest was such that the courtroom was crowded with observers and supporters, something unprecedented for a refugee case in Japan.

Initially, the court ruled in favour of Ali's right to request asylum, but this was later reversed when the government decided that the situation of Ali's ethnic group (Hazara) had improved in Afghanistan.

3. The analysis:

Looking at this case through a power lens multiple layers of the experience come to light.

At a personal level, Ali tapped into his 'power within' by going through the painful but cathartic process of writing his autobiography and sharing his story. As a liminal, marginal character in Japanese society he gained visibility, notoriety and significance through doing so, although these may not have been his initial intentions.

The process of sharing a personal human narrative about what was otherwise perceived as a generalised and rather abstract process – asylum-seeking – proved to be a very effective way to generate 'power with' across a very wide range of actors, many of whom in turn had the power to mobilise wider popular interest. (It is claimed that even the judge in Ali's case had read his book by the time of the court date.) This served to bring onto the table a set of power issues which had until that point been hidden, around the treatment of refugees in Japan. By sharing this man's story in an engaging, human way these hidden power mechanisms were forced into the light of day and provoked a response.

One of the impacts of this approach was to highlight an important source of invisible power in Japanese society, i.e. xenophobia and popular belief systems that foreigners are threatening, despite a lack of evidence in reality.

Finally the mobilisation of networks of supporters served to create a claimed space spanning many different levels in Japanese society, in which attitudes and beliefs about asylum seekers could be debated and challenged, prior to the case moving into the invited space of the courts.

It is difficult to know how to interpret the ending of this story. All the mobilisation around Ali's case was ultimately unsuccessful in getting him the refugee status that would allow him to settle in Japan and rebuild his life. At the same time, it is likely that his perception of his personal power was nonetheless transformed by the experience, and that public discourse about asylum-seekers in Japan was also altered in a significant way.

4. Implications & significance

The use of power analysis in this case is particularly effective at unpeeling the many layers of a story which is, although specific in its details, far from unique. Rather than focusing solely on the formal decision-making process through which Ali sought, gained and lost his refugee status the exploration of other dimensions of power brings to light significant changes that were achieved despite the final legal outcome. These in turn suggest possible longer-term avenues for change which might alter the power dynamics in which future asylum seekers in Japan find themselves, and the way in which foreign-ness is constructed as a problem.