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Welcome to the September/October edition of TLT Interviews! For this issue, we feature an interview with one of the JALT2021 International Conference plenary speakers, Makiko Deguchi, who is a professor in the Faculty of Foreign Studies and the Director for the Center of Global Education and Discovery at Sophia University, Tokyo. Professor Deguchi completed her doctoral studies in cultural psychology at Boston College. Her research interests include the impact of social oppression on the psychology of both advantaged and disadvantaged group members and factors that lead people to take collective action, and qualitative research on life histories of people who become allies to minority groups. She currently teaches courses in Cultural Psychology, Psychology of Discrimination, Psychology of Positionality: Understanding Majority Privilege, and a seminar in Qualitative Research Methods. She was interviewed by Nathanael Rudolph, who is an Associate Professor of Sociolinguistics and Language Education at Kindai University, Higashiosaka. Nathanael's research interests include translingual practice, critical approaches to language teacher and learner negotiations of being and belonging, and (in)equity in language education and beyond. So, without further ado, to the interview!

"White" and "Japanese" Privilege (?): An Interview with Makiko Deguchi

Nathanael Rudolph

Kindai University

Within the globalized domains of applied linguistics and English language teaching (ELT), critical attention to identity, experience, and equity/inequity has historically involved highlighting and problematizing theory, inquiry, and practice predicated upon the essentialized knowledge, skills, experiences, thinking, and behaviors of an idealized "native (English) speaker" (e.g., white, Western, male). This work has both shaped and been shaped by scholarship seeking to: (a) account for the diversity and complexity characterizing identity and interaction and (b) examine and unpack the origin

and nature of privilege and marginalization manifesting within and transcending ELT. Critical dialogue has grown increasingly complex, drawing upon theory and inquiry most often originating in North America (e.g., critical race theory, intersectionality; raciolinguistics). Simply put, category-based conversations regarding "nativeness" juxtaposed against "non-/not-nativeness" are increasingly viewed as largely synonymous with binaries including whiteness/otherness, privileged/marginalized and oppressor/oppressed. With the scope of criticality generally delimited to a focus on "(non-)nativeness in English," however, contextualized, sociohistorical negotiations of being and belonging have largely been left un(der)theorized.

Though not directly focused on contributing to critical dialogue pertaining to identity, experience, and inequity in English language education, professor Makiko Deguchi's conceptualization of *Japanese privilege* contributes to an increasingly resounding and transdisciplinary call for theory, research, and practice in ELT to situate classroom explorations of privilege and marginalization in broader and sociohistorical negotiations of identity and community membership within and transcending Japan. In the following semi-structured, co-constructed interview, Professor Deguchi and I discuss her personal and professional background and unpack and interrogate her conceptualization of *Japanese privilege*. In doing so, we hope to prompt readers to reflect on potential implications for theory, research, and practice in ELT.

Background

Nathanael Rudolph (NR): *Thank you so much for talking with me today! It is an honor. Would you mind sharing a little about your personal-professional background and what has led you to explore the topic of Japanese privilege?*

Makiko Deguchi (MD): I was born in Japan, but I moved to the U.S. due to my father's job. He was working for a Japanese trading company. Most of my education was in North American public schools (New York) and in Montreal, Canada. I returned to Japan for about two years from age nine to 11, which

is considered a critical period of learning culture. I think I became very culturally Japanese again, so my second time going back as a fifth grader to the United States was much tougher. And so, I was hoping that we would be sent back after three to five years which is the standard, but for some reason, that didn't happen, and so I ended up going to college in the U.S. My parents were still in New York, and I attended Wellesley College. I think there was a part of me that was like, "I never chose to come to the United States on my own," you know? I would have preferred to have stayed in Japan, and so there was this constant feeling of "Why am I here?" because I had difficulty adjusting to American culture. So, I always had this sense that I wanted to return to Japan. I finally got the chance to do that for my junior year via study abroad in Japan and that experience really just cemented my sense of wanting to be in Japan, and so after graduating with my B.A. in 1988, I moved to Tokyo. I worked in an English editorial production company, and this was during the bubble economy when the Japanese economy was really strong. I was working in the translation editing business, so I did that for about seven years and then that's when I decided to go back for my graduate degree. I majored in economics as an undergraduate but I actually was more interested in anthropology, women's studies, sociology, and psychology. I was accepted to Boston University and Boston College in their psychology programs, and I ended up attending both, graduating with two master's degrees in three years. I needed these years to give myself a foundation in psychology as a discipline since I had actually never taken a psychology course before. And that's when I discovered cultural psychology. I read the seminal article by Markus and Kitayama (2003) on the Japanese self and how that's different from the Western conception of self and I thought, "Wow, for the first time, I feel like I have something to say." My experience was always being caught between Japanese and American culture, so I was like really excited, and I thought about a Ph.D. in cultural psychology. I think a real turning point for me was when I was teaching at Wellesley College, my alma mater, as an adjunct professor, about East Asia and the West. The students were interested in being able to have dialogues across race, and that's when I was floored because I didn't want to go there, you know, I didn't want to talk about racism... I didn't want to revisit my own experiences of racism; I wanted to stay out of it. I read, however, Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege" article in 1996 or so. Well, the students asked for it, so I slowly started. I had graduate student friends of color doing counseling psychology, and we had cultural psychology study groups, where we just kind of met

and talked about ideas. I think that really sort of began my journey. It was my own exploration at my own pace. I started introducing the white privilege piece (in my classes), and I noticed, you know, students' (mostly positive) reactions, even though in my graduate program all students, except for me, were white. Then, when I was teaching in the United States in 2009, the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers occurred. I was lined up for a tenure track assistant professor position, but they put a freeze on all tenure track hires. So, that's when I decided to look elsewhere, and you know I wasn't even looking to go back to Japan, but Kobe College said they had an opening for one year. Following this, I moved to Sophia University.

White Privilege? Japanese Privilege?

Peggy McIntosh's (1989) article, *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack* defines white privilege as systemic, skin color-based privilege, and an:

invisible package of unearned assets[,] which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code-books, visas, clothes, tools[,] and blank checks (p. 10).

Professor Deguchi (2017a) references McIntosh's (1989) list of skin color-based privileges she contends are afforded to white Americans, in framing her definition of *Japanese privilege*:

Even though these examples of racial privilege are about the experiences of [w]hite Americans, these privileges can easily be transferred and applied to Japanese people living in Japan, where the Japanese are the dominant racial group. The Japanese can continue to live their lives without knowing or understanding the lives of ethnic minorities or foreign residents in Japan (p. 97).

I prompted Professor Deguchi to unpack her view of *Japanese privilege* with the following question:

NR: How do you define Japanese privilege, as opposed to white privilege?

MD: Whiteness, as you know, is a color—a race. Japanese privilege can mean so many more things. It's actually a huge privilege. It's language—the Japanese language; it can mean Japanese nationality; it could mean race, ethnicity, and passing for Japanese; appearing Japanese. It could be about knowledge of Japanese culture. When I use Japanese privilege in a Japanese educational setting, I do kind

of limit it to the ethnicity racial piece of it. When I teach it in a university setting—when I talk about Japanese privilege—it's more to do with *Zainichi* Koreans or Okinawans. I also talk about *Burakumin* (a historical social caste of people marginalized—in ways that continue to present—as a result of their “unclean” occupations, including butchering and undertaking), but it gets really messy too, because they are Japanese.

Privilege in general, according to Professor Deguchi, involves the following:

MD: Automatic sliding doors that open for you. Both from point A to point B, right? You want to move ahead—like all these invisible doors open to you and you don't even notice that they're opening for you; you don't even know that the door exists. You're a good person, and you don't mean to harm anyone, but you're getting a lot of benefits, and you don't recognize those benefits. When you look back and see all these people behind you, you say, “Hey, come on over here,” and they can't because the doors are closed. You don't see the doors. You don't see the structural discrimination. You're a good person and well-intentioned and you think, ‘Hey, what are you doing back there?’

“Resistance” to “Privilege”

Next, we discussed resistance to Professor's Deguchi's conceptualization of white and Japanese privilege, and how they might be problematized and addressed:

NR: *What resistance to the concepts of white and Japanese privilege have you encountered?*

One common reaction from students and teachers relates to their concerns about Professor Deguchi's motives for discussing privilege:

MD: They [students?] think I'm suspicious... They think they're going to be scolded; they're going to be blamed. And that's when the dialogue sort of breaks down. Another source of resistance is students' pre-conceived notions of “Japan,” “Japaneseness,” and “Japanese history.” I always find that's a really tough one for the Japanese...they don't learn a lot about their history, and even before World War II, you know, so they don't even know about colonization. I didn't know any of these things, you know, being a dominant Japanese person. I had to study about minorities in Japan.

Professor Deguchi recalled one student's view of the discussion of privilege in the U.S. as a biased, political tool. She acknowledged that discussions of privilege and marginalization are situated in social dialogue pertaining to identity and community membership:

MD: I did have one student who was really angry at the type of readings, (believing) that the minorities are capitalizing on their oppression. I know that this is an idea out there. Right now, I think ‘identity politics’ is a popular term—a loaded word. You know, it unfolds like an identity Olympics, or something.

Professor Deguchi mentioned an additional type of resistance when introducing the concept of white privilege into her American classroom. One student reacted very negatively to the notion that all individuals positioning themselves and/or positioned as “white” are privileged in the same manner, regardless of context:

MD: In a study group session, one white woman stormed out. I couldn't explain white privilege well (at that time). I could kind of understand why she would be so mad because she was a first generation immigrant from Poland. She said that her father had worked really hard and “how did you know” (her situation), so she got really upset.

This topic of discussion prompted me to ask Professor Deguchi to reflect on how she conceptualizes “Japaneseness”:

NR: *Speaking about Japan, some stakeholders in language education, and education in general, may be wary of the notion of Japanese privilege, as it may appear to be inscribed with assumptions regarding identity, experience, and inequity that do not account for the complexity of negotiated identity and community membership in Japanese society and beyond. This wariness may relate, in other words, to the feeling that the concept of Japanese privilege is being imposed upon people and communities, stripping them of voice. What about people of Korean ancestry, for instance, who have chosen to become naturalized citizens or whose parents did so, or the diverse peoples of the Ryukyus (modern Okinawa Prefecture and southern Kagoshima Prefecture), people of Ainu ancestry, or, for instance, people with one parent or both originally from abroad? Though highlighting Japanese privilege is intended to bring attention to diversity in*

Japan, such an approach appears to equate “Japanese-ness” with ethnic homogeneity, thus marginalizing diverse ways of being and becoming “Japanese.” What might you say in response?

MD: Thank you for this question. I’ve been grappling with this. So, in 2016 or 2017, I invited Peggy McIntosh and Janet Helms to Sophia because they were the white privilege and racial identity people. In 2018, which was the year of my sabbatical, I invited Dr. Kim Case. She wrote two books on intersectionality or teacher pedagogy teaching about privilege. She is a white, American, heterosexual, cisgender woman; but she was also the first in her family to attend college. She was the one who kind of taught me that you have to start with intersectionality. I’m not quite there yet, in terms of the way I have built my career. I foresee doing it. My thinking is evolving. The intersectionality piece is one that came much later, I would say a few years ago, when I was taught, “You’re doing this,” or “You’re teaching this (privilege) wrong.” You know you’re working in this kind of silo. You’re doing racial privilege, and gender privilege, but you really have to stop doing that. You need to integrate them, and I was just floored. I think that the blindness on my part comes from the fact that I really only have one minority identity really—being a woman. So, I didn’t see that; it took me a long time. I’m still grappling with that.

Professor Deguchi’s comments about the use of binaries (e.g., oppressor/oppressed; privileged/marginalized; white/other) and the value of intersectionality, prompted me to initiate discussion of how she positioned herself:

MD: Yeah, I pretty much present myself as somebody with a lot of privilege. You know, the English, sounding like a native English speaker in Japan is really a plus. And, by having a Ph.D. and being a Sophia university professor, a lot of people just assume I have something important to say. I think I do place myself as a *doumajoriti* (super majority) member.

NR: *Sensei, it seems that, based on what you’ve said about your lived experiences, your identity is very complex. You are a “border crosser” linguistically, culturally, ethnically, nationally, and academically; largely growing up and studying overseas and then coming to Japan as a professional later in life. You have all of these different layers of complexity to yourself, and so I wonder how you present yourself to your students in this situation. You actually also said that you’re marginalized in specific ways as well. It sounds like privilege and marginalization can be fluid?*

MD: I mean depending on the context, for sure.

Professor Deguchi then discussed wrestling with a need for nuance in approaching identity, experience, and the fine line between telling people who they are and discussing what she views as systemic privilege/marginalization, while attempting to maintain space for voice and potential diversity and complexity. She emphasized a need to ask and not tell people who they are and what they are experiencing. One example of this related to how her views of white westerners living and working in Japan have evolved, beginning with a piece by Debito Arudou (2012) in *The Japan Times* on the topic of microaggressions against internationals in Japanese society (see also Deguchi, 2017b):

MD: There was a microaggression piece in *The Japan Times*. I don’t know if you read it. For me, that was a big turning point because I think I was also at the point thinking like, “What’s the big deal, you know, you’re already so privileged.” Then, I started thinking about the article. That really kind of made me think, “Okay, that’s racist.” I need to sort of step back and understand what it really is like to be a white person, for instance, in a Japanese space, all the time.

As Professor Deguchi shared, I sensed a tension between: a) a need to rely on theory employing essentialized and juxtaposed categories of identity (Japanese/non-Japanese; white people/people of color) inscribed with assumptions regarding lived experience (e.g., privileged or marginalized) and b) a desire to account for diverse and contextualized ways of being and belonging that very often transcend the bounds of language, culture, identity, place, community, time, and space. Spivak (1988) asserts that *strategic essentialism* can empower individuals and groups to organize and attend to inequity. Spivak and others (e.g., Eide, 2016) warn, however, that essentialism can indeed marginalize identities and lived experiences of individuals and groups and render them invisible. Professor Deguchi was transparent about this tension. Throughout our chat, she was very willing to revisit her own ideas with grace and humility, all in the interest of serving her students, colleagues, and the community in which she and they live, work, and study.

Classroom Practice

For the next question, our discussions were related to her classroom practices.

NR: Could you provide an example or two of how you problematize Japanese privilege in the classroom?

MD: First, I start with white privilege. It's less difficult to start with (conversations about) another country, and that seems to be enough cushion for them to eventually kind of go, "All right, let's grapple with the other problems that we have." Later, I start with something like a *privilege of power wheel* (see the privilege flower chart in Arnold et al., 1991). You have all these different identities, and the center is where you have the power and, like in sort of marketing yourself, where you are in this wheel. There are also these blank fields where you can fill in the ones that you know, as well as other blank fields for when you know there are some important identities missing. You don't have to share them (with others) because these are very private things. At least, though, you can sit there and see yourself more holistically. It's also still important to talk about the individual ones (identities), especially the ones that have a lot of impact, when it comes to discrimination and prejudice. So, I am sort of going that way, and I'm noticing that it just relaxes everybody by saying something like, "Okay, you're not accusing me of being a horrible person."

Recommended Readings

My final question for Professor Deguchi related to readings she could potentially recommend:

NR: Would you mind suggesting some of your own work and/or other people's work to professionals living and working in Japan?

Here, she referred once again to Peggy McIntosh's (1989) article, "White privilege: Unpacking the invis-

ible knapsack" and to her own book chapter, "Teaching about privilege in Japan" (Deguchi, 2017a).

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The application form can be found here: <https://forms.gle/jYhbU458qJMbJDxMA>