

# Message to the World from the Stricken Area: Tohoku Sociological Society

Tohoku Sociological Society  
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## 1 History

The Tohoku Sociological Society (*Tohoku Shakai Gakkai*) was established in 1954. Its first chairperson was SHINMEI Masamichi, who was a researcher who exemplified the nascent stages of Japanese sociology.

Tohoku refers to a region in the northeastern part of Japan, and consists of Aomori, Iwate, Akita, Miyagi, Yamagata, and Fukushima Prefectures. The society's members mainly consist of researchers who graduated from universities located within the Tohoku Region of Japan, as well as researchers and graduate students who are active in universities and research institutes in the Tohoku Region and its surrounding environs, but its members reside in areas all across Japan. There are no regional restrictions for membership eligibility. The current number of members is approximately 250.

The Tohoku Sociological Society has been publishing *Newsletters* since it was first established, in addition to which in FY1963 it launched the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society* (*Shakaigaku Nenpo*). This was accompanied by a change in the name of its *Newsletters* to *Society Newsletters*. Moreover, it also holds annual meetings every year in early summer. The venues for these meetings are established on a rotating basis in the above mentioned six prefectures plus the seventh prefecture of Niigata. In addition, regular research meetings are held several times a year.

The papers that are published in the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society* come in two types: special feature papers that authors were commissioned to write by the editorial board, and papers that were freely submitted by members. The publication status for papers since the time of the report's launch is listed below.

- 1963 (Vol. 1) (No special feature)
- 1966 (Vol. 2) Urban and Rural Communities Today
- 1968 (Vol. 3) (No special feature)
- 1970 (Vol. 4) Issues in Marxian Social Theories
- 1971 (Vol. 5) (No special feature)
- 1975 (Vol. 6) Structuralism and Sociology
- 1979 (Vol. 7) (No special feature)
- 1980 (Vol. 8) (No special feature) (Vol. 9) (No special feature)
- 1981 (Vol. 10) (No special feature)
- 1982 (Vol. 11) On French and German Sociology
- 1983 (Vol. 12) New Trends of Rural Society Studies
- 1984 (Vol. 13) Luhmannian Sociology in Japan

- 1985 (Vol. 14) Language and Social Action
- 1986 (Vol. 15) Issues in Mathematical Sociology
- 1987 (Vol. 16) Methodology of Urban Community Studies
- 1988 (Vol. 17) Transformations of Japanese Youth
- 1989 (Vol. 18) Rationality and Sociology
- 1990 (Vol. 19) (No special feature)
- 1991 (Vol. 20) Problems of the Aged in Japanese Rural Communities
- 1992 (Vol. 21) Decline and Rebirth of Urban Communities
- 1993 (Vol. 22) Rethinking Modern Individualism
- 1994 (Vol. 23) Rethinking *Ie/Mura* in Today's Agricultural Rural Communities
- 1995 (Vol. 24) Individuality and Sociality in Contemporary Society
- 1996 (Vol. 25) Information, Space, and Modernity
- 1997 (Vol. 26) Tohoku Society at the Turn of the Century
- 1998 (Vol. 27) The Welfare State and Citizenship Theory
- 1999 (Vol. 28) Nuclear Power Generation and Resident Self-Governance

Since its launch in FY1963 up through the 1970s, a situation persisted in which it was difficult to constantly publish reports once every year for financial reasons. The steady publication of the reports only became possible starting in the 1980s.

As for the themes of the special features, one major strand of these has consisted of research related to classical and contemporary sociological theories, while another major strand of these consisted of research related to local communities (including those in both urban and rural areas). In terms of the classical theories, examples of these include Vol. 4, which featured a theoretical investigation of Marxism, as well as Vol. 11, which undertook a study concerning the Durkheimian school of thought and Helmut SCHELSKY. With respect to contemporary social theory, in Vol. 6 a special feature was assembled that focused mainly on the structuralism of Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS, while Vol. 13 examined Luhmannian social systems theory. Special features were also produced that placed their focus on linguistic turns and the Japanese Association for Mathematical Sociology.

Since the later half of the 1990s, special features began to be produced on themes concerned with new challenges for contemporary sociology that had not existed previously. Namely, special features related to information society theories and the transitions of the welfare state were produced, and new challenges related to the various problems confronting modern sociology sprang up. The fact that issues surrounding nuclear power plants were already being taken up by the end of the 1990s is a point that is worthy of special mention.

## **2 Recent Research Focus**

### **1) Special Features from the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society***

The special features of the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society* are compiled to reflect the content of the symposia from the annual meeting of the previous fiscal year. It is not uncommon for non-member researchers who are suited to each theme to be specially invited as

authors of the special features (i.e., keynote speakers at the symposia), and so strictly speaking the special feature themes do not exhibit the trait of being restricted to the research activities of the society's members. Yet this is because the invitations of non-member researchers are planned based upon an extensive survey of academic trends and social conditions in Japan and around the world. Consequently, the special feature themes express the myriad connections that the society has forged with national and global research trends and research topics. Moreover, the society's members customarily serve as coordinators while the majority of the reporters and commentators are also comprised of its members. As a result, they can also be viewed as an expression of the trends in the research results that have been amassed by the society. As this demonstrates, the meeting symposia and the special features of the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society* could be described as materials that are reflective of both the accumulation and development of its members' research activities, as well as of the traditional and the innovative, so to speak.

The themes of the special features (meeting symposia) since the year 2000 have been enumerated below.

- 2000 (Vol. 29) Agendas of Community Welfare Networks
- 2001 (Vol. 30) Methodological Reflections on Area Studies
- 2002 (Vol. 31) Sociology as Social Thought
- 2003 (Vol. 32) Theories on Publicness and Sociology
- 2004a (Vol. 33) Current Studies on NPOs and Voluntary Civic Action
- 2004b (50th anniversary special edition) Social Theories on Modernity
- 2005 (Vol. 34) Aqueous Environments and Rural Communities
- 2006 (Vol. 35) The Future of the Youth Labor Market and the Stratified Society
- 2007 (Vol. 36) Interchange/Settling-down in Rural Communities
- 2008 (Vol. 37) Theoretical Perspectives of Governance
- 2009 (Vol. 38) Theoretical Sociology and Mathematical and Quantitative Sociology
- 2010 (Vol. 39) Sociology of Death and Dying
- 2011 (Vol. 40) Towards the Re-Construction of Local Communities

One of the important intellectual traditions of the Tohoku Sociological Society has been continuous, comprehensive theoretical investigations concerning everything from classical theories (such as those by Karl MARX, Georg SIMMEL, Max WEBER, Emile DURKHEIM, George Herbert MEAD, Talcott PARSONS, and others) to the development of contemporary theories (including those by Jürgen HABERMAS, Niklas LUHMANN, Anthony GIDDENS, Pierre BOURDIEU, and others). These naturally constitute an indispensable store of knowledge that can be used as a resource by any sociologists. But the research performed by members of the Tohoku Sociological Society has been characterized by the fact that it has attempted to reach a systematic understanding that incorporates the underlying issues, fundamental viewpoints, and methodologies found at the base of these theories. The 2002 and 2004b special features attempted to expand upon the research results related to sociological theories by utilizing this accumulated body of knowledge

as social thought that answers contemporary challenges, as well as in the form of a dialogue with the contemporary and modern conditions in Japanese society. The special feature from 2004b in particular commemorated the 50th anniversary since the founding of the society, and so its focus was consciously aligned with the society's subjects. As such it is directly symbolic of the traditions that have followed since the establishment of the Tohoku Sociological Society. Conversely, the 2009 special feature was designed to serve as a turning point marking 30 years since the introduction of research using mathematical and quantitative sociological techniques that were relatively new to the Tohoku Sociological Society. It could be described as a design that strove for a mutual exchange between new and old research trends, in a manner of speaking.

Conversely, the other major pillar of the Tohoku Sociological Society consists of experiential studies and research that have been taken up with a focus on villages and provincial cities. The special features from 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011 are offshoots following in the wake of these research trends. But one new trait from recent years that can be pointed out is the fact that themes such as welfare, environmental conservation, and population flows between urban and rural areas as well as demographic shifts from urban to rural regions, have been added. These special features could be deemed an expression of the contemporary circumstances and challenges of Japanese society, particularly those that are clearly revealed when viewed from the angle of rural villages and provincial cities.

The majority of these sorts of studies are not limited to determining general conditions through interviews with the relevant agencies (including governmental organizations) and statistical data and the like. Rather, an approach of striving to adhere closely to the actual conditions in the daily lives and activities of the targeted people is commonly seen throughout them. Emphasizing such an approach is, of course, a universal fundamental principle of sociology, yet at the same time such studies cannot afford to ignore the research traditions of the sociology that have been handed down, such as the monographical methodology that was cultivated by research on rural communities. Naturally, of course, the aim in such research domains is for modern development that is grounded in these intellectual traditions.

In response to this there are two other research themes that raise questions about new trends in contemporary Japanese society and its future potential that must be mentioned: (1) the degree of maturity of civil society and (2) the emergence of new social problems. In other words, on the one hand new forms of publicness and governance that are not limited to conventional government sectors are gaining in prominence, and in practice the relative importance of civil activities and NPO activities have been on the rise. However, this has been paralleled by mounting criticisms of the welfare state, with criticisms having been leveraged into the deployment of neoliberal policies. This has resulted in the emergence of a number of problems, such as a hollowing out of governmental welfare programs and widening economic and social disparities. The 2003, 2004a, 2006, 2008, and 2010 special features have dealt with these issues. When viewed in terms of its methodology, the 2004 special feature included observations regarding precedent activities that the author was personally involved in, as well as considerations based on their practical involvement. The 2006 special feature consisted primarily of a macro-level class analysis through a quantitative method,

while that from 2008 undertook a theoretical debate that was grounded in empirical reality, and the 2010 one aimed for micro-level inquiries related to care through a grounded approach. From these it can be seen that methods were adopted that conformed with their themes and challenges. The claim can surely be made that sociological approaches have grown more diverse from the limited number of approaches that were previously available.

## 2) Freely Submitted Papers

As for trends in the submitted papers that are synchronous with the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society*, keywords indicating their approximate themes were created and the frequency with which they appeared was counted for the freely submitted papers to the annual reports from between 2000 and 2011 (68 such papers; these differ from the keywords appended by the authors themselves). The results are listed below.

Theory	16
Communities and rural/urban areas	14
Education	6
Information	5
Medical care, nursing, and life	5
Welfare	4
Class	4
Exercise and group behavior	4
The environment	3
Gender	3
Networks	3
Trust	3

Two or more of these keywords apply to quite a few of these papers. For example, some of the papers discuss themes such as local communities and welfare, education and class, rural villages and gender, and communities, trust, and networks.

The vast majority of the theoretical studies consist of cases in which a specific individual—such as Weber, Durkheim, Parsons, Habermas, Mead, John DEWEY, Robert PARK, Daniel BELL, Anselm L. STRAUSS, or N. K. DENZIN—is dealt with intensively in an attempt to delve deeply into his/her thinking. Naturally, individual papers are examined by establishing a viewpoint of some sort (such as religion or ideology, for example). Consequently, even when research is performed on a single theory it will come to be tinged with thematic qualities of one form or another. However, the approach of taking up a particular classical body of work and reading deeply into it is a stronger one than that of studies that perform a comparative examination of assorted sociological theories through a theme or viewpoint.

The majority of the papers dealing with “communities and rural/urban areas” are case studies that use provincial cities or rural villages for their fieldwork. In such scenarios there are numerous

themes that are representative of contemporary problems, such as gender and aging in rural villages or welfare and networks in provincial cities, by way of example. “Education” is another theme that has been emphasized since the time the society was created, but in recent years there has been a tendency to study this in conjunction with other themes such as “Class” (which includes such keywords as disparity, underclass, youth, and labor) and family issues.

In contrast to this, research dealing with the subjects of “Information” (disclosure of information, media literacy, computerization, and democratic communication), “Medical care, nursing, and life” (organ transplants, home nursing care, visiting care, and medical safety), and “The environment” (trash problems) represent new research areas that have come to be focused on since the year 2000.

At the same time, this is certainly not meant to imply that subjects such as family, children, ethnicity, disabilities, discrimination, and the media have been completely absent among the papers published in the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society* thus far. But while these have been debated, there have not been all that many papers that have done so. Though academic societies that are specialized to each discipline exist, hopefully shining a light on the society’s tradition of placing high regard on diversity in research themes will prompt additional research to be promoted in these areas.

In addition, there have been six examples of papers that have attempted to perform international comparisons, or precedent studies in which the fields of study have been overseas. One point that is worth taking note of is the fact that among these there are not only attempts to perform comparisons with the West, but studies have appeared that are set in or that have performed comparisons with the Asian region, including countries like Indonesia and South Korea. International comparison studies by the society’s members have been carried out in considerably large numbers, though the number of these pieces published as papers in the *Annual Reports of the Tohoku Sociological Society* has been limited. This is a manifestation of the fact that not only are comparisons with Western societies crucial for determining the present state of social changes like modernization, rationalization, and internationalization, but so too are comparisons with Asian societies and empirical research related to mutual exchanges in the Asian sphere.

### **3 Message to the World**

The Tohoku Sociological Society mainly consists of sociologists residing in the Tohoku Region, as well as researchers who started their career at the region’s universities and who are using the Tohoku Region for their fieldworks.

In Japan, ever since the 1970s academic associations specific to various disciplines have ramped up their activities, including the Japan Association of Regional and Community Studies, the Japan Association for Urban Sociology, the Japan Society of Family Sociology, and the Japanese Association for Mathematical Sociology. Perhaps the claim could also be made that the installation of high-speed transit networks and the development of the Internet have been accompanied by questions regarding the existence of the regional-specific academic associations that are based in local regions.

Yet no matter what the era is like, there is no denying the significance of what can be achieved through face-to-face communication when it comes to education and research. It is precisely because local perspectives have a local foothold that they can adequately possess universal significance.

Furthermore, Niigata Prefecture and the six prefectures of the Tohoku Region could be described as regions with distinctive regional identities compared with other areas within Japan. Reasons for this include the fact that they have bands of rural districts, as well as regions that are considered backwards. They are also regions that have been stricken by disasters, as they have experienced the Chuetsu Earthquake of 2004 and the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant accident of 2011.

Traditionally, the Tohoku Sociological Society's major strengths have been its research on rural communities and theory-based research. Undertaking research geared towards regional regeneration and reconstruction that is based on diligent studies of the actual extent of the damage from the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant is a major challenge for the Tohoku Sociological Society.

When it comes to research on the agricultural communities in Tohoku, research on the rural areas of China carried out by association member HOSOYA Takashi and Chairperson Kobayashi et. al. have been expanded overseas as well based upon the accumulation of studies in Japan. As for representative research by members that performed fieldwork overseas, examples of this include research performed by YOSHIHARA Naoki and other members in Indonesia.

The Tohoku Sociological Society has fostered a large number of international students. Among the former international students fostered by the Tohoku Sociological Society some scholars have taken up important positions in their graduating universities in their home countries after returning home, such as Professor Raphaella D. DEWANTARI from the University of Indonesia. Furthermore, the society has turned out a host of Chinese researchers who have achieved success by taking up posts at Japanese universities. Examples include LI Yanyan, an associate professor at Komazawa University, who is widely known for works such as *Chinese Civil Society*, as well as LIU Wenjing, an associate professor at Iwate Prefectural University who has studied agricultural communities in China.

One member, SATO Yoshimichi, has also been a member of the Executive Committee of the International Sociological Association since 2006. Since FY2003 he has served as a center leader in the 21st Century COE Program and the Global COE Program, 5 year program of Center of Excellence nominated and financially supported by Ministry of Education, and organized numerous international symposia and other such events in an effort to disseminate research related to social classes and the problems of inequality and disparity internationally. Another member, HASEGAWA Koichi, acted as the Chairperson of the Organizing Committee for the World Congress of Sociology that to be held in Yokohama in 2014, thereby serving as a driving force on the host country side.

As this demonstrates, the Tohoku Sociological Society has an extensive track record when it comes to the internationalization of Japanese sociology, getting the word out on this internationally, and research exchanges. The Tohoku Sociological Society marked the society's 60th meeting in 2013, but it must continue moving forward with becoming more international.

#### **4 Challenges since 3.11**

The Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant that occurred on March 11, 2011 came as a major shock to the entire world. The main afflicted regions of Iwate Prefecture, Miyagi Prefecture, and Fukushima Prefecture are where many of the members of the Tohoku Sociological Society reside, and serve as the central region from which they carry out their research activities.

Fortunately there were no casualties or missing persons among the members of the Tohoku Sociological Society, but there were some who suffered damage such as the partial destruction of their homes from the earthquake. There were some who lost relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and even some whose birthplaces were wiped out by the tsunami. Members who teach at universities that are located in Fukushima Prefecture, such as at Fukushima University, have been severely affected. This is because they must carry on with their educational and research activities while paying careful attention to health issues with themselves, their families, and their students as things currently stand, in which there are no prospects for a complete conclusion to the nuclear accident, and in which radiation doses that are claimed to be low but which in fact are relatively high are being observed.

In cases of exposure to low levels of radiation the effects of being irradiated can potentially manifest themselves several years or even two decades later. It is difficult to distinguish between reputed courses of action and rational, defensive courses of action for avoiding the risk of exposure. Universities in the Tohoku Region could potentially be impacted indirectly by the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant over the long-term through a decrease in their number of applicants, for example.

The outcomes produced by the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant have not all been negative. Members of the Tohoku Sociological Society have been carrying out outstanding activities from early on regarding assistance for afflicted regions, research on disaster victims, research on nuclear issues, and so on. This is being done in cooperation with other organizations like the Japan Sociological Society, the Japan Association of Regional and Community Studies, and the Japanese Association for Environmental Sociology.

Based on these studies, the Tohoku Sociological Society hurriedly established the “Special Session: The Great East Japan Earthquake as Social Problem—What Sort of Approaches should Sociology Take?” at its meeting held in July 2011. In addition, at the meeting held in July 2012 one theme report session entitled “Science, Ethics, and Society” and one special session entitled “The Great East Japan Earthquake as Social Problem—Issues Revealed by Social Surveys in the Afflicted Regions” were held. Through these, efforts were made to select out clusters of sociological challenges concerning the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. Reports pertaining to the earthquake were also given at free reporting sessions. When viewed on the whole, at the meetings held over this time period the following sorts of themes were taken up and a diverse array of research reports pertaining to the earthquake and reconstruction were given. Namely, these have included issues related to comparisons of the impacts of the damage from past earthquake disasters and that from the Great East Japan Earthquake, the extent of the damage in



Fukushima, the homeless problem at the time of the earthquake, attitude surveys of residents residing in evacuation shelters in an ongoing manner, disaster assistance from NPOs, the restoration of shopping areas in tsunami-stricken regions, preservation activities for the photographic records of victims from the tsunami, civic participation in reconstruction plans for the tsunami-stricken regions, the possibility of overcoming reliance on nuclear power, and science/technology and risks. Members have also reported on initiatives and research activities in the stricken regions at the regular seminars that are held four times a year, which have received significant responses.

The Great East Japan Earthquake had a complex nature in the sense that it not only involved direct damage from the earthquake, but was followed by a massive tsunami, fires, and a nuclear accident. On top of this, the afflicted zone was spread out over a wide area (complexity and wide-ranging nature of the damage). Consequently, many of the members are carrying out research that has employed a wide variety of approaches to shed light on multiple aspects of the disaster. Integrating the results of these together will be indispensable when it comes to the reconstruction of the Tohoku Region in the future.

Many members are conducting research related to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant. The followings are some examples. Scholars of the Faculty of Policy Studies at Iwate Prefectural University formed a disaster prevention and reconstruction working group to vigorously conduct surveys and research in the city of Ofunato, which was hard hit by the disaster. They have also contributed to an urban development plan for disaster prevention and reconstruction in Ofunato in cooperation with a civil workshop. Members of the Tohoku Sociological Society also play a central role in this working group. Tohoku Gakuin University has been publishing the *Shinsaigaku (Earthquake Studies)* journal since FY2012, with members of the society from this university, who have taken the stricken regions of Miyagi Prefecture as their fields of study, serving as its editors and contributors. One member, KATO Masayoshi from Fukushima University, has been working to compile together sociological research results in order to determine the current extent of the damage and rebuild from it since FY2012. He has done this in his capacity as the research representative for a Basic Research (A) project under the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research entitled “The Great East Japan Earthquake and the Rebuilding of Japanese Society—The Damage from the Earthquake, Tsunami, and the Nuclear Incident and the Path to Overcoming This.”

Many of the members of the Tohoku Sociological Society carrying out research and educational activities in the Tohoku Region are not outsiders temporarily visiting the regions that are the focus of their studies with regard to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant, as might be expected. Rather, they are pronouncedly marked with “insider”-like status as people who permanently reside in the region. As an academic community, the Tohoku Sociological Society must continue to carry out studies and research over the long-term spanning ten or 20 years into the future when it comes to the Great East Japan Earthquake and the accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant.

## **5 Other**

The society's annual meetings (for which an entrance fee is required) and its regular seminars (no entrance fee required) are both open to the participation of non-members. Information on these is provided via the Society Newsletters and its website.

The Tohoku Sociological Society's website: <http://tss.sal.tohoku.ac.jp/>

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