

Networking for Friends? The Case of the TOMODACHI Initiative's MetLife Women's Leadership Program

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友情のためのネットワーキングか？

— TOMODACHI イニシアチブの MetLife Women's Leadership Program —

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Abstract

The TOMODACHI Initiative is a public-private partnership between the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, the U.S.-Japan Council and the Japanese government that was built around the idea of international friendship. Initially, the initiative was created to support Tohoku youth after the 3.11 triple disasters, however, it has since expanded into a full-fledged U.S.-Japan relationship institution that facilitates leadership, cultural, educational, and alumni programs for young Japanese and Americans. Scholars conceptualize international friendship as a distinct kind of relationship in international relations and argue the need for more complex interpretations of state interactions. This paper aims to contribute to these debates by analyzing the phenomenon of international friendship through the lens of the TOMODACHI Initiative's MetLife Women's Leadership Program (TMWLP), a project that facilitates leadership trainings and one-on-one mentorship for female Japanese university students. Through interviews conducted with 40 representatives and participants in the initiative between 2021-2023, the data demonstrates how the rhetorics of friendship obscure a more complicated reality that is happening in these cultural exchange spaces. American cultural representations embedded in the institution end of reproducing issues related to power between Japan and America. This sets up expectations for young participants that suggests the friendship between both countries can be understood through reflections of economic motivation, networking, and how to lead in a competitive global market.

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1. Introduction

Following the March 2011 triple disaster that took place in the Tohoku region of Japan, the U.S. military assisted the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) in a joint disaster relief effort known as *Tomodachi Sakusen* (Operation Friendship). The U.S. military and Japan's SDF provided critical supplies and immediate humanitarian relief to victims throughout the region, and the mission was seen as a success by actors in both Washington and Tokyo. Years after the disasters, the Japan Information and Culture Center (JICC) (a public affairs section of the Embassy of Japan in Washington D.C.), created a series of public Youtube videos that commemorated the 10th anniversary of the earthquake with each video focusing on the strength of the U.S.-Japan relationship using "Unshakeable Friendship" as the content's hashtag. Messages of deep gratitude came from Tohoku region survivors in the emotional videos. The embassy's website stated: "This was one of the darkest times for the Japanese people. But at this moment of darkness, support from the American people created a light of hope. We will never forget the spirit of friendship that sent a ray of hope across the ocean" (Embassy of Japan Washington D.C: Information and Culture Center, 2023). Building on the success of Operation Tomodachi, the Japanese government, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, and the U.S.-Japan Council (USJC) all came together and launched the TOMODACHI Initiative (Friendship Initiative and hereinafter Tomodachi) in 2012. Tomodachi is a public-private partnership that was initially created to support Tohoku youth after the 2011 disasters, however, it has expanded into a full-fledged U.S.-Japan relationship institution that facilitates leadership, cultural, educational, and alumni programs for young Japanese and Americans. Certain cultural images related to the values of each country are reflected in the programs.

Koschut and Oelsner (2014) conceptualize international friendship as a distinct kind of relationship in international relations, distinguishing it from other forms such as alliances, stable peace and security communities among states. In doing so, they call attention both to the need for more complex interpretations of state interactions while also reflecting on the ways in which states are anthropomorphized. While there is still much work to be done in the field, this paper aims to contribute to the debate by reflecting both on the rhetorics and contradictions embedded in institutions specifically formed and built around the idea of an international friendship.

This paper analyzes the international friendship between the U.S. and Japan through the lens of Tomodachi's MetLife Women's Leadership Program (TMWLP), a project that facilitates leadership trainings and one-on-one mentorship for female Japanese university students. The TMWLP specifically highlights themes around career mentorship, professional development, and women empowerment — rhetoric popular in both countries that exemplifies how feminism can serve as a neoliberal goal. Neoliberalism highlights the idea of free enterprising individuals in deregulated and competitive markets. It is argued that neoliberal discourse works as a "dominant political rationality" that shifts from the management of the state to individuals as "entrepreneurial actors" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 420).

Friendship rhetoric is something that many states use to promote trust, cooperation, and

emotional bonding between each other and high level government officials in the U.S. and Japan talk about the relationship using the concept. This case represents the ways in which power relations are reinforced and reproduced in these institutions through the use of friendship rhetoric. Power is conceptualized as a set of images and cultural representations between Japan and America that ends up getting reproduced by individuals on both sides. These claims about highly modern, entrepreneurial, and innovative America as opposed to stagnant and traditional Japan end up getting reproduced safely while participants chase their individual goals.

Friendship functions as something more nuanced compared to these representations in the context of the U.S.-Japan relationship. Through interviews conducted with 40 representatives and participants in the Tomodachi Initiative between 2021-2023, the data demonstrates how the rhetorics of friendship reproduce power dynamics while also obscure a more complicated reality that is happening in these cultural exchange spaces. This can be understood through Okinawan participants talking about their perceived feelings of imbalance between mainland Japan and Okinawa as well as their critical stance towards U.S. military bases in the prefecture. This can also be understood through Japanese American participants wanting to further explore their roots and heritage through the exchange opportunities. Japanese and American students apply because of networking opportunities with powerful people in the U.S.-Japan relationship space. The purpose of this paper is to highlight Tomodachi's Metlife Women's Leadership Program and the experiences of Japanese participants while focusing on the questions: What images of America are being reproduced in a U.S.-Japan relationship program premised on diplomatic friendship? What kinds of expectations and future possibilities do representations of America produce for female Japanese participants? The paper argues that the women's leadership program has reproduced a set of cultural representations reflective of American leadership, innovation, and diversity that reinforces unequal power relations between Japan and America. The representations set up expectations for participants that suggests the friendship between both countries can be understood through American representations that reflect economic motivation, networking, and how to lead in a competitive global market.

2. Friendship, Power, and the U.S.-Japan Relationship

Friendship is a common term used on the international stage to describe the warm bonds between two countries. In the U.S.-Japan relationship, the concept has permeated a majority of diplomatic events, summits, leadership speeches, as well as intergovernmental civil society level partnerships, networks, and cultural exchange initiatives. We tend to think of friendship as either trivial diplomatic rhetoric or we look past it, however, constructivist international relations (IR) scholars argue that the concept has consequences in international politics. These consequences relate to affective attachment, mutual commitment, self-disclosure, and ontological security.

Koschut and Oelsner (2014) demonstrate that international friendships can take place in two forms: strategic and normative. Friendships might be called strategic when actors refer to each other

as friends in political discourse or treaties, and this type does not alter an agent's behavior since it is based on rational self-interest. On the other hand, normative friendships are not based in self-interest alone but share high levels of trust, emotional bonding, and are motivated by friendship itself (p. 15). This type of relationship is not based in rational reasoning but an "emotional and moral disposition" (Koschut & Oelsner, 2014, p. 14). Normative friendships have an affective dimension to them, and states understand this relationship to be special, unique, and "attribute value to the common norms and principles that serve as a guide for appropriate behavior within their relationship" (p. 17).

Berenskoetter (2014) discusses the relevance of friendship as a process that provides ontological security for actors, and that friendship affects issues surrounding security and power (p. 52). For a state to be ontologically secure, that state is able to reduce anxiety brought about by uncertainty in the world. Friendship is understood here as an anxiety controlling mechanism and a special relationship of choice that forms through "a mutual commitment to use overlapping biographical narratives for pursuing a shared idea of international order" (p. 57). In addition, friendship is not only built through shared ideas of order but also by doing things together.

Power gets drawn into the program in all sorts of ways. Historically, the relationship has been characterized by a strong asymmetry, with the U.S. remaining the dominant military power in the region, and Japan continuing to rely heavily on the U.S. for its security needs. Japan does possess diplomatic and foreign policy agency, however, that gets concealed when referred to as the subordinate ally illustrating an imbalance of power with the U.S. side treated as the superior partner in military and economic affairs. Power can also be demonstrated through cultural representations. Leheny (2013) points out how the rhetoric used at the 2011 Women's World Cup match between the U.S. and Japan depicts this sort of power imbalance. The metaphor of the Japanese women's team looking up to their "big sister" (the U.S.) even though they won the match is a metaphor for how Japan, or the "little sister," is represented and imagined in the dynamic (Leheny, 2013, p. 129).

In the U.S.-Japan Council and Tomodachi Initiative programs, friendship is deployed as a term referring to political and historical contexts with the U.S. and Japan rising above its dark World War II past and becoming the strongest and most important set of friends in the world. Specifically after the 3.11 disasters, the U.S. was able to be a true "unshakeable" friend, and we know this because friends help each other especially in times of crises. Friendship rhetoric is also used among participants in the organization when referring to the importance of having an international network of allies abroad that can be trusted. By analyzing the U.S.-Japan relationship focused programs, it calls attention to cultural representations of Americanness and Japaneseness as well as how both countries imagine they can benefit and learn from one another. Both the Japanese and U.S. national governments have cooperated with regard to helping the Tohoku region which suffers from issues even before the natural and manmade disasters such as economic challenges and "backwardness" in a national imaginary pointing to regional imbalances in the country (Hopson, 2020). Undoubtedly, Japan is behind America in the international context of this imaginary. The imbalance can be understood through Japan's defeat in 1945, the U.S. led postwar period of democratization and

militarization, and America's global influence and dominance.

Scholars have identified friendship connecting to outcomes such as affective attachment, mutual commitment, and ontological security; however, by focusing on friendship as an outcome (re) produced by state officials misses how the concept shapes spaces of cultural exchange amongst individuals connected to these sorts of political programs. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze friendship conceptually at the institution level, and focus on how the concept is engaged with and gets redeployed by participants involved.

3. Data and Methods

The main methods include semi-structured interviews and an interpretation of the rhetorics of friendship used in primary sources connected to the institution. 40 interviews between 2021-2023 have been conducted with Japanese and American participants as well as representatives in the initiative, the U.S.-Japan Council, and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo. This paper highlights the interviews conducted with Japanese female university students in Tomodachi's MetLife Women's Leadership Program (TMWLP). TMWLP has been selected as a case to study in the Tomodachi Initiative for two main reasons: First, the program was created at a particular time in the initiative's evolution in which it shifted from a Tohoku youth centered program to an expanded U.S.-Japan relationship building program for both Japanese and American participants. Second, the program's expected takeaways include leadership, confidence, and mentorship which represent skills taught from the American side. Using friendship as an analytic lens for this case, we can understand how participants engage with the concept as well as imagine the Japan and America that emerges for them based on their backgrounds and experiences.

There is a limited amount of secondary literature on the Tomodachi Initiative, therefore the data archive has been built through primary sources from publicly available data analyzing how the rhetorics of friendship is used as well as identify the cultural representations of Japan and America that have manifested in the initiative. The data collection includes the USJC and Tomodachi Initiative's program syllabi, websites, annual reports, conference documents, Youtube channels, and related secondary source material used to supplement the empirical sections. In addition, mainstream women empowerment and business literature is put in the conversation to exemplify the broader contexts in which this case is situated in.

4. The TOMODACHI Initiative: Legacies, Business Growth, and Women Empowerment

The Tomodachi Initiative is marketed to the public as a way to strengthen the U.S.-Japan relationship, and stories of history, identity, and friendship as well as mantras relating to leadership, innovation, and entrepreneurship are baked deeply into the discourse of the relationship and program. The story of the initiative leads to an understanding of how friendship is imagined in the dynamic, and what images of Japan and America are reproduced. Below is the mission and vision statement of the initiative:

The TOMODACHI Initiative is a public-private partnership, born out of support for Japan's recovery from the Great East Japan Earthquake, that invests in the next generation of Japanese and American leaders through educational and cultural exchanges as well as leadership programs. We seek to foster a TOMODACHI generation of young American and Japanese leaders who are committed to and engaged in strengthening U.S.-Japan relations, appreciate each other's countries and cultures, and possess the global skills and mindsets needed to contribute to and thrive in a more cooperative, prosperous, and secure world. (U.S.-Japan Council: About Us, 2022)

Over 10,000 young Japanese and Americans have participated in the over 300 Tomodachi programs since its inception. Examples of past and present programs include The Aloha Leadership Program and the Daiwa House Leadership Conference. The Aloha Leadership Program was a one week exchange that sent six American high school and college undergraduate students from Hawaii to the Tohoku region. The purpose of this program was for the participants from Hawaii to connect with participants from the Tohoku region who were affected by the disasters. The Tomodachi Daiwa House Leadership Conference is a leadership development training program for Japanese and American undergraduate and graduate students. This brings leaders from the private and public sectors to mentor 40 students total from both countries for a three-day intensive conference.

The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, the U.S.-Japan Council (USJC), and the Japanese government are actors creating the programs, and private support for Tomodachi is funded by major transnational corporations. The U.S. Ambassador of Japan at the time, John Roos, held major influence in the beginnings of the initiative and is recognized as an initial founder. Before his ambassadorship, Roos was an executive for a U.S. based law firm that represented technology and emerging growth companies through the beginnings of innovation in Silicon Valley (Embassy of the US: Tokyo, 2013). The business influence is deeply embedded in the programs of Tomodachi.

According to an interview with a representative from the organization, Tomodachi has evolved through three distinct episodes: the first phase or "original Tomodachi" (2013-2014), the second phase or "Tomodachi 2.0" (2015-2021), and the third phase (2022-2023). Following the triple disasters, Roos traveled through the Tohoku region, meeting with government officials and asking what more the U.S. could do to support the disaster hit nation. A popular story told at USJC conferences when spotlighting the initiative's work is the meeting Roos had with mayor Toba of Rikuzentakata in Iwate, a prefecture in the Tohoku region:

When asked what we could do, he [Mayor Toba] shared a little bit about his loss and his experience during 3.11. He had just lost his wife in the tsunami and had sons that he needed to look after. He basically told ambassador that all the adults, including himself, are [...] making sure everyone is fed, making sure everyone has a roof over their head, making sure everyone is accounted for, you know. So these Tohoku kids are kind of left to the wayside. Then when

he was asked for a need he said well these kids, if you can do something to give them hope that would be the best thing [...] they created this initiative that would give hope to kids in Tohoku [...] They learned about civic engagement, they learned about giving back, critical thinking, entrepreneurial mindset [...] things that you might not really learn in a Japanese educational setting. (Interview with Tomodachi Representative)

This quote signals a clear power dynamic; by arming Tohoku youth with different skills, mindsets, networks, and people across the ocean, the U.S. is able to act as the morally just friend helping the disaster-struck region of Tohoku learn about “civic engagement” “critical thinking” and “entrepreneur [ism].” The emphasis on innovation, risk-taking, ambition, and the pursuit of business opportunities is a popular illustration of America’s entrepreneurial spirit. In contrast, Japan is understood to be a frail and risk averse domestic market where former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō hoped to bring America’s innovative culture back into the country through incubator and exchange programs pairing Japanese businesses and schools with Silicon Valley and Stanford University (Detsch, 2015).

Tomodachi’s shifts going from a military operation, to a Tohoku youth-centered program, and then a leadership development and professional training program for students in Japan and America exemplifies the evolving institutionalization of the initiative and change in interests between the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, the Japanese government, and the U.S.-Japan Council (USJC). In addition to representations of American business culture in the initiative, gender equality and women empowerment are also key elements promoted.

The USJC, founded by Japanese American leaders Irene Hirano and Daniel K. Inouye, is a 501(c)3 nonprofit educational organization that launched in 2009. The organization specifically focuses on bringing together Japanese Americans and other leaders across sectors in Japan and America to contribute to the U.S.-Japan relationship. According to an interview with a USJC representative, Hirano was an advocate of promoting gender equality and diversity in the organization and believed that women networks in America could help as women networks in Japan organized and expanded.

Following Hirano’s passing in 2020, a majority of the leadership positions in the council have been held by women. The current president is Suzanne Basalla, former U.S. Navy officer and Secretary of Defense Director for Japan. The co-chair, Kathy Matsui, was former chief Japan equity strategist for Goldman Sachs Japan and coined the term “womenomics” — an economic policy that she coined in her 2011 TED talk in Tokyo. Abe adopted and often advertised “womenomics” and connected it to “Abenomics,” aiming to get more women into the workforce and to brand himself as an advocate of women empowerment. Matsui, who is Japanese American, published *Josei shain no sodate-kata, oshiemasu* (2020) (How to Nurture Female Employees) where she highlights 10 points that companies can do to better manage and develop women in Japanese corporate life. In debates around Japan’s economic and social challenges, the lack of women in the workforce compared to men is regularly presented as a major issue. Women’s social progress is represented as Japan’s key

that would help the country align with international norms and strengthen economically.

From entrepreneurship to the empowerment of women, these representations are exercised in Tomodachi and can be understood as a friendly way where America helps Japan nurture a generation of confident, career-focused, and marketable young women. This is seen as a win-win exchange between the U.S. and Japan where the friendship is not just about support, but to sustain a relationship dedicated to a common project in which both countries uphold a set of shared beliefs and values (Berenskotter, p. 62, 2014). The next sections will look at the MetLife Women's Leadership Program, and showcase the experiences that Japanese women have had as participants in the program.

4.1 The TOMODACHI MetLife Women's Leadership Program

The Tomodachi MetLife Women's Leadership Program (TMWLP) is a 10 month career development training for Japanese female university students that launched in 2013. MetLife, a multinational life insurance company, partnered with the Tomodachi Initiative to "develop the next generation of global female leaders" who have "influence in organizations and communities (private, non-profit, government, entrepreneurship, etc.) and thereby be agents of change in society" (TMWLP: Program Syllabus, 2019). In addition to the students' qualifications and background, the application process includes a two part essay written in English that describes the students future plans and goals as well as a challenge (societal, professional, or personal) that she feels passionate about solving. Japanese students who are successful candidates receive leadership training, one-on-one mentoring with a Japanese mid-career professional woman, and an all expense paid trip to New York City and Washington D.C. for 10 days to connect with American women leaders who give advice on career, work-life-balance, and leadership skills. 100 Japanese participants are selected annually which include 50 undergraduate-level female university students (mentees) and 50 mid-level career women (mentors). Mentee participants are required to attend five leadership development sessions, the U.S. trip, the Annual Conference in Tokyo, and to meet with their mentor a minimum of six times. As stated in the TMWLP's 2019-2020 program syllabus, the major program takeaways include leadership skills, confidence, and support from a network of women in both the U.S. and Japan. Leadership is defined by a set of five core components: self-awareness, collaboration, paying-it-forward, global perspective, and resilience.

TMWLP has attracted female Japanese undergraduate university students from strong socio-economic backgrounds and this can be understood through the high ranking university attended, a strong grasp of the English language, and prior international exposure. This exemplifies Tomodachi's change in interests going from an initiative that prioritized helping young disaster survivors of the Tohoku region into a U.S.-Japan relationship program that wants American and Japanese students to learn and bond through a specific set of skills (i.e. leadership, entrepreneurship, and confidence). This suggests the friendship between the U.S. and Japan is being built through a neoliberal goal that seeks high-ranking students in both countries to create futures that are connected through this

powerful network. The next section will analyze the Japanese participants who have experienced the TMWLP while highlighting the various American cultural representations that are manifested in the program. The data illustrates how there is a specific candidate that the Tomodachi program attracts, and the desired outcomes for young participants relate to a future that promises an international career network, mentorship, and an edge in professional skill building. Inequalities manifest through the reproduction of American cultural capital, and this is illustrated by the perceived sense of imbalance between mainland Japan and Okinawan students as well as the elite segment of women the program attracts.

4.2 Expected Program Takeaways: Mentorship, Confidence, and Leadership Skills

The mentor and mentee relationship is a key feature that sets up a space for collaboration and self-discovery for the young students in the TMWLP. Representatives and participants understand this relationship to be a valuable experience and something that is not practiced in Japan. According to an interview with a Tomodachi program director, Japan has a *senpai* and *kohai* culture. In contrast, the mentor and mentee relationship “isn’t as popular in Japan,” is “more equal,” and “collaborative.” Among interviewed participants, there were mostly positive experiences towards the mentorship aspect. One participant said that her main objective participating in Tomodachi was “to have a female mentor, which was difficult to find as a college student.” Another participant explained how she never had a mentor before which made it difficult to know how to communicate with her. Mentors are mid-career professionals selected across Japan. They are expected to support their mentees by sharing their professional career experiences and guide them towards a deeper understanding of mentee’s strengths and weaknesses. After the program, participants still keep in contact with their mentors:

We have a really great relationship, because we still meet even after three years. She’s from Japan, but she grew up in the states. She also graduated from Waseda University. What I learned is that having a mentor is really important to realize your dreams, and we focused on how to build a good relationship between mentor and mentee. (TMWLP Participant)

The pairing process for mentor and mentees is decided by the initiative’s administrators. Mentors come from a variety of careers, and can be paired with a mentee with a completely different interest. For example, a participant with an economics degree was paired with a mentor that works in the STEM field:

My mentor works on flash memory and she has a PhD in physics. I have an economics degree, not very familiar with the sciency fields so we had very different career focus areas. But she was in her mid-thirties and was also working on getting more women into STEM. She really helped me figure out what I really valued, what my strengths were, we talked one on one a lot. I

even see her to this day. (TMWLP Participant)

Mentorship is represented as a lesson taught to the Japanese from the American side. Friendship in Tomodachi therefore is not just between Japan and America, but within Japan through the mentor and mentee dynamic. The mentoring relationship, in the context of career and women empowerment, is a key theme that Sheryl Sandberg discusses in her book, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) and her non-profit organization, the Lean In Foundation, which creates women circles and programs that aim to empower women through mentorship and leadership skill building. Sandberg, an American woman famously known to be the previous chief operating officer of Facebook, advocates for women to actively seek out mentors to help navigate career challenges and biases.

Confidence and leadership are both key skills that the TMWLP spreads in the trainings. A Japanese participant expressed how she “didn’t have much confidence” but after meeting with American women leaders during the 10-day study tour in New York City and Washington D.C., she learned how to communicate and present herself through the workshops and sharing of experiences from women leaders. Topics were mostly related to business, work, self-development, socializing skills, and well-being: “For me, socializing skills is very important and it became clear the importance of confidence in getting a job, connecting, and networking.” Friendship here can be understood as an exchange in skills through learning. The development of a certain set of empowering skills taught to Japanese young women not just from the American side but also through their Japanese mid-career professional mentor, reflects an understanding of the kind of ideas that are acceptable to exchange in the dynamic.

With friendship as the backdrop, Japan and the U.S. are able to adopt institutions as a way to sustain their interests and goals. Confidence, leadership, and mentorship is popular rhetoric that women empowerment discussions often point to in order for women to find success and rise professionally. Sandberg is an example of an American women that has found fame through her career and published work, however, criticism has pointed to the responsibility placed on women to overcome systemic barriers and the guidance from *Lean In* does not address broader structural issues at play. While Sandberg’s book offers a look into the challenges women face, it is overly simplified saying that if women work hard enough and assert themselves, they can thrive at home and at work. This does not take into account women with less privileged backgrounds compared to the certain elite professional that Sandberg’s work might resonate with (Gibson, 2018). Similarly, this connects to critiques towards Japan’s “womenomics” in which the arguments are framed towards the national economy and an elite segment of Japanese women, not the livelihoods of most women and their dependents (Schieder, 2014, p. 54). With Tomodachi’s leadership program, the data demonstrates similar rhetoric used in these women empowerment spaces, and leans towards a certain elite class of women reproducing class distinctions.

4.3 Cultivating International Mindsets: Opportunity, Living Abroad, and the English Language

TMWLP attracts female Japanese university students that come from strong socio-economic backgrounds. For example, this could be understood through the high ranking university attended, a strong grasp of the English language, and prior international exposure. During the 10 month duration, participants are given the opportunity to meet and engage with students from different prefectures in Japan. For example, a Japanese participant originally from Hokkaido shared how meeting students in Tomodachi was really “inspiring” because many students had already lived in the U.S. and some students did internships or volunteer work in different countries. A participant from Tokyo expressed how “interesting” it was “communicating with participants from Okinawa” because it was her first time hearing about an Okinawan person’s experience living on an island heavily influenced by the U.S. military bases. An Okinawan participant revealed that she was “nervous” to join the program because she felt the Japanese mainland students were “really smart” and had “many experiences” in comparison to students from Okinawa. She revealed how before Tomodachi, there was no opportunity or “chance to talk with students outside of Okinawa” or “to collaborate and talk with people from prestigious universities like Waseda and *Tōdai* (University of Tokyo).”

The reflections made by participants from Okinawa exemplify a perceived difference felt: overseas international experience and prestigious educational institutions in Tokyo created a sense of imbalance among program participants not from mainland Japan. This engagement between Okinawan and mainland Japanese participants highlights the role that status and opportunity plays in the organization. Rina, a recent college graduate from Okinawa, shared that she had no experience overseas:

I made some friends from mainland Japan and they have more experiences and ambitions and everything. So I felt motivation. I got motivation because, yeah, they are almost [the] same age as me but they have more big experiences than me. I [made] friends that I can respect. I felt that mainland Japanese people had experiences that Okinawan people don’t have. (Rina, Okinawan Participant)

This perceived difference yet motivation through the program experience was a point that Okinawan participants, Rikako and Saki, expressed as well. During the trainings with other Japanese female university students, discussion groups were formed in order for participants to get to know each other. Rikako said that she was “shocked to meet so many motivated students not just from Okinawa, but outside of Okinawa,” and that “all the students from Okinawa were overwhelmed, it was an eye-opening experience for me.” Although overwhelming, Rikako and Rina pointed out that meeting with mainland students was a memorable part of the program experience:

I’ve never studied in mainland and you know Ryukyu University, people say it’s the smartest

university in Okinawa, but it's not if you think of all Japan, so the level is very different. Most of the participants the year I joined, almost all of them had experience living outside of Japan, and some of them their English is super great, and they're top students in prestigious universities, and I didn't have to but I felt left out kind of. (Rikako, Okinawan Participant)

The feelings of being “overwhelmed” or “left out” stemmed from a perceived sense of imbalance between Okinawan and mainland Japanese educational institutions as well as experience. High English level ability signaled that a Japanese student may have lived overseas for a number of years.

Rei, Misa and Aya are examples of mainland Japanese students who have international backgrounds in Western countries, and returned back to Japan for school or work (*kikokushijo*). Rei, an IT consultant, first lived in the U.S. for 10 years and moved back to Tokyo starting in junior high school. Misa, an investment banker, had a handful of international moves growing up because of her dad's career: she first lived in Tokyo, then moved to the United Kingdom (U.K.), then to Osaka, and ended up in the U.S. for high school and college. Aya went to the U.K. as a study abroad student in junior high school and spent her summers going to various camps in the U.S.:

Most of my experience going abroad was U.S. so even though like my very first overseas experience was UK, I spent every summer [in] the U.S. [...] I had lots of friends there and I think I got like [an] American accent because of that and so [...] I was more kind of comfortable and [...] familiar with U.S. college and also in college I started taking classes in the poli-sci department and I started taking Japan-U.S. relations kind of related classes [...] I think I was kind of naturally interested in [the] U.S. (Aya, Japanese Participant)

The “natural” interest may have been the result of her environment and background going to summer camps and making friends in the U.S. Having these opportunities to travel internationally impacts a young person's view of the world and future decisions choosing majors and careers that align with what was experienced. For example, a majority of participants chose international relations as college majors, studied abroad during university, and then went on to work for major global companies either domestically or abroad.

When asked how it was like interacting with other Japanese students in the program, one participant explained how it was fun to connect with people that had similar topic interests as well as prior international experience, more than “average Japanese college students.” In addition, understanding the English language was a key aspect to creating more “emotional connections” among program participants:

I think speaking English kind of helps us feel closer because everyone is more friendly [...] there's no keigo because if we speak Japanese, there is honorific language [...] From day one, we were like ‘Oh hey! What's your name?’ (Aya, Japanese Participant)

Honorific Japanese language (*keigo*) is depicted as this wall, whereas the English language evokes a friendlier feeling. Aya expressed how the English language feels more “friendly” to use because if she were to use Japanese honorific language, this creates distance making it difficult for students to connect and become closer with one another.

Kitamura (2016) argues that the English language is marketed in Japan as a way to climb the socio-economic ladder and is represented as this status symbol and practical tool that can help you with your career ambitions. Japanese participants describe this background commonality as having an “international mindset.” This “mindset” is portrayed through the cultivation of English language speaking ability and firsthand experience living abroad. Students are supposedly able to tap into this mindset that not all Japanese students possess or can relate to. A Japanese participant reflected on how most students in the TMWLP have prior living experience abroad and speak English: “I don’t think there were that many Japanese people that have never been abroad or don’t really speak English.” In addition to the English language, the exchange of cultures and having a “global perspective” is a major asset that the program promotes as a key takeaway.

Cosmopolitanism, the moral idea that different cultures can learn from each other, promote greater understanding and share cultural values, is a key message that the Tomodachi Initiative promotes. Misa stated how the program experience was valuable because learning about different cultures, just as she did when living abroad while younger, “helped shape [her] identity” and “it helped [her] see the world from different perspectives from [her] other Japanese peers who lived in Japan their whole life.” Misa expressed how she believes it is important for students in both Japan and the U.S. to learn from other countries and to understand that there are other perspectives and ways of thinking. The U.S. is imagined as a country that promotes diversity and is where you can meet people from all walks of life. Japanese participants have expressed how Japan does not have the diversity that the U.S. does, and if you were raised in one place, it is common to live in that area your entire life — “that’s a very common path” in Japan. Despite America having very clear issues around diversity and racial dynamics, this tends to be ignored and the country is imagined as the model of diversity, openness, and global understanding. While this sounds ideal, researchers have pointed to concerns about how cosmopolitanism is implicated in economic inequalities (Igarashi, & Saito, 2014, p. 223). The ability to study abroad, speak foreign languages, and navigate foreign environments requires a sufficient amount of economic resources. The cosmopolitan ideal signifies openness, however, this can also be understood as a new kind of distinction that creates exclusion (Calhoun, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The preceding empirical sections highlighted the Tomodachi Initiative’s Metlife Women’s Leadership Program, and the representations manifested in this U.S.-Japan relationship institution premised on the foundation of an international friendship. The data demonstrates the American cultural representations that are manifested and how participants in the TMWLP hold prestigious

backgrounds that relate to high English language capabilities, international exposure, and admission to high-ranking Japanese universities.

The paper argues that friendship rhetoric obfuscates issues related to power by reproducing and reinforcing American cultural capital (e.g. women mentorship, leadership, and career growth). The perceived feelings of imbalance, specifically among Okinawan participants, reflects the imbalances inherent in the U.S.-Japan relationship. The American cultural model, which is reflected by the career and networking aspect of the program and overall institution, acts as a reputable space for students to build skills ostensibly needed in a competitive global market. Thus, the friendship between the U.S. and Japan can be understood through a neoliberal vision and goal. While this project may act as a meaningful and practical experience for participants involved, the representations of America that reflect business, leadership, and growth obscure broader structural issues at play.

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