

[Kakenhi Essay]

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My Ambiguous Relationship with Grants-in-Aid

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I was born in 1952. I think that up until recently, many researchers of my age or older in the humanities field had little if anything to do with grants for scientific research. I was one of them. As luck would have it, from fiscal 2009 to 2011 I enjoyed opportunities to serve as a research fellow with the JSPS Research Center for Science Systems and accordingly gained at least a general understanding of the importance of grants for research for overall academic studies in Japan. However, upon being asked to pen an essay of my own experiences with grants-in-aid for scientific research, I found myself troubled by the prospect of not having anything worthwhile to say.

Implying I did not have much to do with grants would not give you a clear picture of exactly how immaterial grant assistance actually was in the context of my own career, so let me elaborate. From fiscal 2008 onward, I was awarded a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) for a series of projects, but prior to that, I had applied for grants only twice, for a couple of projects that involved me as research leader. In both instances, I was fortunate that my applications for grant assistance were approved. The first of those projects was approved for a Grant-in-Aid for Encouragement of Scientists (A). I was 34 years old at that time. The second grant I received was at age 50, for a project in basic research (C). Together, the grant funding for those two projects totaled 3.8 million yen. To some, that might seem incredibly small.

These grants were carefully used, but to be honest, I rarely ever felt that I absolutely needed grant funding for my own research. From my late thirties through my forties, I didn't apply for grant assistance again, but through that period of over a decade, I also never experienced any difficulty nor (I believe) did my research suffer any qualitative or quantitative shortcomings due to a lack of funding. Lest anyone surmise that I enjoyed full access to a faculty research budget at the time, that was certainly not the case. In those days, it was expected that faculty members in our department would spend their research budgets to purchase books used by students in common. As I recall, none of us ever entertained the idea of actually utilizing such resources to fund our own research. That said, however, I never felt constrained by a lack of research funding. Let me go over the reasons why.

First, to researchers like me that conduct historical research with historical documents, from the perspective of research quality, the amount of time spent performing this research is more important than the amount of money invested. In theory, it may be possible to solve the issue of time by utilizing grant funding to pay someone else to assume the task of sorting through or organizing our research materials. That approach might apply if the task in question is fairly straightforward. However, the outcome of reading and sorting through historical documents will reflect the unique individuality and interest of the researcher involved and as such, is not something that we can readily leave up to others. I have delegated such tasks to graduate students several times in the past but was never entirely satisfied with the results on those occasions, and concluded that having others assist in my research was not an approach that worked that well for me. Conversely, from a grad student's perspective, doing research work for others is probably not much fun, either. Consequently, I never felt that having a budget for expenditures would be a guarantee of research quality.

Second, when it came to research, I didn't have any reservations about spending money out of my own pocket; in fact, that was basically something I had come to expect. On the subject of expenses for research in the humanities, book purchases would be the first thing that comes to mind. Many researchers in the humanities field prefer to pay out-of-pocket for their purchases of the books they need for research. Perhaps this stems partly from an intellectual affinity for books in general. In that context, the collections that we each assemble based on our own standards or tastes may be something more than tools for research; it may be that we view them as microcosmic mirrors of our own personalities. I certainly don't own a large book collection but I am not satisfied unless I own the books that I need for research. For my own use, I've typically purchased even those works I otherwise have access to through my university's library collection. Of course, purchasing large compilations of historical source material would be generally beyond my reach but I was relieved that several large library systems in Japan already established extensive collections of these materials with the lavish budgets they have at their disposal.

By now, I imagine some of you may perceive that researchers in the humanities don't actually need any grant assistance. Well, it was not my intention to give that impression at all. The truth is that even in the humanities, some research projects do indeed demand large sums of financial assistance. Now, in my own case, I didn't "feel" a strong need for grant assistance because I was gainfully employed and had my own financial resources available. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that many young researchers years ago and even today have faced serious shortages of funding for their research.

Especially valuable to young researchers would be, for example, financial assistance for the publication of their research results. Yet despite this reality, at least some of us in the humanities field took the position that we could do our research work without seeking grant assistance, as I have described above. I bring this point up because I would like to take a moment here to reflect on how that stance might be viewed in our current day and age.

As has often been pointed out, cuts in government grant-based subsidies for the coverage of administrative expenditures have aggravated the financial difficulties facing many universities in Japan, and as one consequence, JSPS's grants-in-aid for scientific research are increasingly being utilized by universities to fill in those budget gaps. Actually, this was one of a set of circumstances that compelled me to apply for grants in 2008 and following years continuously. Another trend that has emerged in these circumstances is the growing tendency for the size of a grant for scientific research to be equated with the recipient researcher's competence and accordingly influence ability ratings within the institution. This has effectively shamed those researchers that do not apply for grants and puts all researchers under more pressure to obtain grant funding.

However, from the perspective of fiscal frugality, a researcher's decision not to apply for grant funding on the understanding that the quality of his or her research will be unaffected is a decision that deserves commendation, not censure. Although this might lead to a reduction in indirect expenditures accounted for by some universities, within the larger context of academic studies throughout Japan as a whole, it can be expected to help to divert funds in the hands of those that need it the most. In this light, I feel that any criticism of researchers that contribute to fiscal prudence is somehow misguided. Of course, it is also conceivable that in the absence of grant assistance, some research will suffer in terms of quality. However, quality is something better assessed on the basis of research findings. Indeed, true competition in the field of research should be based not on the amount of grant funding received but rather on the accomplishments of the research in question. It may be that my argument here in support of fiscal prudence is out of date. Nonetheless, I feel that in terms of effectively utilizing this precious grant funding that has been entrusted to us with the public mandate, we need to take a fresh look at the simple idea of frugality.