Tuukka Toivonen and Yuki Imoto

Transcending labels and panics: the logic of Japanese youth problems*

Abstract: Social scientific research on Japanese youth experienced something of a boom in the 2000s and is attracting further attention following the triple disaster of 11 March 2011. But while advances have been made in understanding young people's relationship to work, marginalization, and activism, for instance, the premises of this emerging field of research remain shaky. Despite cursory critiques of associated labels and recurring "moral panics," the dynamics of youth problems have not yet been sufficiently understood. This paper draws on the well-known case of the "nerdy" otaku to illustrate how youth problems arise from the complex interaction of labels, incidents, and prominent actors - that is, their more visible side - with underlying assumptions, strategies, and interests – that is, the less salient dimension of such problems. After highlighting important connections between the otaku phenomenon and the two subsequent phenomena of hikikomori and NEET, four key mechanisms are set out that govern the way youth problem debates emerge and evolve more generally (i.e., the respective roles of "industries," "translators," rhetorical strategies, and youth as a "muted group"). The paper concludes by relating the findings to post-tsunami Japan, arguing that the way in which young people are debated in the 2010s may turn out surprisingly similar to the debates in the 2000s, unless the very configuration of the institutions and actors that construct youth debates changes.

Keywords: youth problems, moral panics, labeling, otaku, hikikomori, NEET

Tuukka Toivonen: Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, e-mail: tuukka.t@gmail.com Yuki Imoto: Keio University, Japan, e-mail: yuki.aop@gmail.com

^{*} Both authors would like to thank Sharon Kinsella for her helpful comments regarding our section on the otaku. Tuukka Toivonen is grateful for the feedback he received for this paper in February 2010 from faculty members at the Institute of Social Science Studies, University Putra Malaysia. We also warmly thank the two anonymous referees as well as the DIJ for critical and dedicated comments on earlier drafts of this paper, which contributed to a significantly improved account.

ラベリングとパニックを越えて-日本の若者問題のロジックー

トゥーッカ・トイボネン、井本由紀

日本の若者に関する社会科学的研究は 2000 年代にある種のブームを経験し、 2011年の東日本大震災・福島原発事故の後、さらに注目を集めている。しか し、例えば教育と就労システムの関係性や高校の序列化、あるいは非正規雇 用に関する研究に示されるように、若者が置かれている制度的・文化的構造 に関する理解は進みつつあるものの、この研究分野の前提ともなる「若者問 題」の意味は曖昧なままであり、そのロジックはまだ十分に理解されている わけではない。本稿では社会構築主義の立場から、まずはじめに「オタク」 の事例を取り上げ、若者問題が様々な隠された前提、戦略、利益を基底と し、それがラベル、出来事、主要なアクター像などの「可視的な側面」と相 互的に作用することから発生する過程を説明する。「オタク」 現象とそれに 続く「ひきこもり」、「ニート」という二つの現象との関係性に焦点を当て た後、若者問題のより一般的な現れ方、その発展の仕方を司る四つの主要メ カニズム(「産業」の個々の役割、「通訳者」、レトリック戦略、声無き集団 としての若者)を提示する。本稿の結論では分析結果をメディアの構造的変 容、若者を代弁する研究者たちの登場、そして東日本大震災以後の日本への 眼差しの変化と関連付け、若者に関する議論を構成する制度やアクターの配 置が変化することにより、若者の論じられ方が変容する可能性を示唆する。

1 Introduction

Scholarly research on Japanese youth underwent something of a boom in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Children and teenagers have always been of central interest to those concerned with education and wider socialization processes in Japan (see, e.g., Rohlen 1983; Yoneyama 1999) or with youth delinquency (e.g., Yoder 2004; Ambaras 2006), and student political activism received serious attention from leading US scholars in the 1970s and 1980s (Krauss and Fendrich 1980; Steinhoff 1984). However, it was only in the early 2000s that the scholarly gaze extended to older age groups of "youth," including young adults up to their mid-thirties, often in the context of social isolation and employment problems (Toivonen forthcoming a). Following trends in native Japanese social science discourse, it was arguably only in the last few years of the 2000s that Japanese youth emerged as a distinctive, albeit still rather incoherent sub-field within Japan-focused international scholarship. It is this predominantly English-language scholarship that we wish to address in the present account, though our conclusions have relevance to all researchers broadly interested in Japanese youth and the general topic of youth problems.

The recent research boom has advanced our understanding in a number of crucial issue areas, including: the youth labor market changes that began during the 1990s recession and that extend to the present day (Genda 2001/2005), mechanisms underpinning the so-called school-to-work transition¹ (Honda 2004, 2005; Brinton 2001, 2011), the travails of working-class youth navigating the lower end of education and low-end jobs (Slater 2010), and young middleclass women's contested life choices (Rosenberger 2001). Moreover, there is now a greater appreciation of intergenerational relations and tensions around controversial topics such as the part-time-working freeters (see Matthews and White 2004; also see Kosugi 2008). The authors of these recent studies - a multidisciplinary assemblage of both domestic and international labor economists, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists who often collaborate with one another - have made significant progress toward explaining the institutions and cultural logics that structure the way youth live in, and how some drop out of, mainstream Japanese society at a time when so-called irregular (hiseiki) jobs proliferate. These developments have been said to have put pressure on entrenched middle-class values, a sentiment echoed in the popular kakusa shakai debate on social disparities (Chiavacci 2008). However, regardless of the merits of these studies, there remains a more fundamental - and in a sense prior – logic that has so far largely escaped rigorous scholarly attention, namely the logic that governs what is generally known as "youth problems" (wakamono mondai).

Symbolized by widely disseminated, instantly recognizable labels such as otaku, hikikomori, and NEET, alongside many others such as freeters, parasite singles, and so forth, it is precisely these kinds of high-profile issues that we argue direct the gaze of social scientists interested in Japanese youth (the present authors being no exception on this count). Quite simply, the sheer symbolic lure of these categories (see Fu 2011: 1-2) is so powerful that it predisposes researchers across disciplines to pursue certain topics, neglect others, and implicitly adopt many of the associated assumptions. The following quotes

¹ The pioneering scholar on the topic of school-to-work transitions in Japan and in Japanese youth sociology more broadly is Kariya Takehiko (see Kariya 1988; Rosenbaum and Kariya 1989). His work has strongly influenced the research of scholars such as Honda Yuki and Mary Brinton in particular.

exemplify how well-known international scholars working within the broad field of Japanese studies anchor their research in popular categories:

The problem of Japan's purportedly one million hidden youths (hikikomori) who have shut themselves away in their parents' homes, refusing to leave for months or even years on end, has captured a great deal of attention both within Japan and internationally [...] I argue that hikikomori is best understood not as a specific problem but, rather, as the outcome of multiple kinds of social, medical or emotional problems. (Borovoy 2008: 553)

But for others – the youth who do not work or attend schools (NEETs), or who live in a state of social withdrawal (hikikomori, of whom there are reportedly 1.5 million these days) – the situation is at once more complex and more precarious. Indeed, it is the state of such youth - whose numbers are rising - that is most clearly and problematically the symptom of Japan's crisis of reproduction of today. (Allison 2009: 99)

The number of unemployed Japanese youth has doubled since the early 1990s. The number of furītā (young people who move among temporary jobs, often with spells of nonemployment) was estimated to have reached more than two million by 2005 and the number of NEET (youth who are not in education, employment, or training and who are not actively looking for work) has also increased dramatically. (Brinton 2011: 180)

These quotes are from insightful and recognized pieces of anthropological as well as sociological research, each of which takes certain well-known youth labels as a key starting point. While it is not problematic in and of itself that these authors cite particular youth labels, they run short of questioning and unpacking the origins as well as associated assumptions of these categories. They implicitly take for granted and thereby reaffirm the existence of certain contested youth problems, suggesting they affect a large, and possibly increasing, pool of youth (1 to 1.5 million hikikomori and over 2 million freeters). Furthermore, the three authors extract enormous mileage from these and other labels in striving to speak to larger topics, with Borovoy (2008: 554) viewing the *hikikomori* as a manifestation of the "darker side of a Japanese commitment to social equality," and Allison framing the state of withdrawn youth as a sign of a wider "crisis" in Japan. For Brinton, phenomena such as NEETs and freeters are assumed to have their natural origins in the unraveling in Japan's schoolto-work transition system and, therefore, require little scrutiny as concepts.

Furlong's welcome analysis of the hikikomori (Furlong 2008), which is rooted in a British youth and labor research tradition, is more skeptical about the numbers of withdrawn youth in Japan; however, Furlong also jumps to larger issues, namely the breakdown of traditional structures and anomie, before interrogating the category itself in depth. These particular analysts are not alone. Indeed, the majority of researchers working on Japanese youth today treat mainstream youth problems and associated labels – often the initial trigger and basis for their research – as a type of black box without much attention to why or how the label came into existence, or to the question of to what extent we can claim that the problem actually exists. Moreover, little time is spent on explaining why the particular "problem" of interest is more important or relevant than the plethora of other potentially problematic issues.

But how can we be sure that the situation of the socially withdrawn hikiko*mori* is necessarily "more complex and more precarious" than that of other nonworking youth or that of young people attached to possibly risky jobs, say, in the sex industry or at other presumably abusive workplaces? Why exactly should we be so fixated on the "multiple kinds of social, medical, or emotional problems" of the hikikomori and not, for instance, on the possibly debilitating circumstances of significant numbers of "burnt-out" workers on prolonged bouts of sick leave? And should we take at face value the assumption that there are "over two million freeters" or that NEETs are "dramatically increasing" when many *freeters* do not see their part-timer status as problematic at all (see, e.g., Furuichi 2011) and when the "alarming numbers" of freeters and NEETs are based on the strategically expanded age group of 15-34 (Toivonen 2011a)?

It is clearly not as uncomplicated as we are often led to believe to interpret the state of Japanese young people by making reference to popular categories and debates. In recent work, we have shown that the underlying politics of youth problems, when subjected to immersive, long-term analysis, emerges as a nuanced yet largely predictable process (Toivonen and Imoto 2012). In this paper, we argue that categories powerfully frame not only the public debate but also academic research on youth in Japan and, therefore, we call on all youth scholars to appreciate how related social problems and key signifiers are generated in the first place. Moreover, it is important, we find, to inquire into how particular youth problems transform over time and result in certain policy outputs and legal reforms.

The significance of these questions is illustrated in this paper by surveying the rise and transformation of the well-known debate around the "nerdy" *otaku*, followed by brief comparative observations on hikikomori and NEET. The otaku case study in the third section of this paper presents a re-analysis of existing research, demonstrating that the type of approach (to youth problems) we set out in the second section can be applied to inquiries of varying scale and aspiration, from student dissertations to book-length manuscripts by seasoned scholars, based on either rich primary data or somewhat more limited secondary sources, or a mix of both.

Throughout this account, we avoid the trap of simply stating that various youth issues have aroused "moral panics" in the media and explain, at the outset, why youth problem debates are conceptually distinct from mere "panics" and constitute broader phenomena than the "labels" they produce. This is further clarified in the fourth section of this paper in which we identify four key mechanisms that have governed the development of high-profile youth problems in postwar Japan. In conclusion, we consider the relevance of the findings to the post-tsunami era and posit that, unless underlying institutional relationships are significantly reformed, the way in which Japanese young people are debated in the 2010s may turn out surprisingly similar to the way in which they were discussed in prior decades.

2 Toward a critical, self-aware approach to youth research

In this section, we clarify our approach to youth problem research and identify the legacy of scholarship that we build upon in conducting our own case studies. At its most basic, our call in this paper is toward a reflexive approach to the study of youth. We use the concept of reflexivity here firstly in its anthropological sense of being aware of our positionality and the subjective frame that we bring in and impose on others. Being reflexive is also about questioning the categories put before us and moving beyond their essentialized or culturalized meanings – something that those studying Japanese society from the "outside" or from its borders may be in a promising position to deconstruct. Indeed, our role as anthropologically oriented social scientists is not merely to "report on" the native discourse on youth, but to analyze it at another ontological level through constructionist scrutiny. The aim is to produce a holistic and integrative explanation of youth problems.

At the base of our approach is thus the active acknowledgement that research always reflects the theoretical assumptions, orientations, and prejudices of the researcher. To make explicit our own basic ontological and epistemological premises, society is, for us, characterized not as much by consensus and harmony as by ubiquitous conflict and re-negotiation by competing interest groups (Dahrendorf 1958); shared realities are socially constructed and dynamic rather than "objective" and static. While we stress agency over structural determination, we concur with Giddens (1986) and Bourdieu (1977) that agency and structure are not mutually incompatible concepts but rather determine each other in a dialectic process. This is precisely why we deem it critical to pay attention not only to how individuals create new categories and ideas, but also to how they sometimes become institutionalized within society, so that as "social facts" they come to structure and constrain action, including that of the agents originally responsible for creating them.

In a more direct sense, our approach to the study of youth problems builds upon a body of research spearheaded by Roger Goodman, a social anthropologist by training and one of the leading contemporary authorities on the study of Japanese youth, education, and welfare. Goodman has, since the 1980s, advanced a rigorously empirical approach to the sociological and anthropological analysis of youth problems that has shed much light on how these evolve at the intersection of institutional and class interests, cultural debates, and wider social change. His is an orientation that now has been extensively tested and refined through application to a variety of issues including the so-called returnee children (Goodman 1990), the "nerdy" otaku (Kinsella 1998, 2000), child abuse (Goodman 2006), the socially withdrawn hikikomori (Kaneko 2006), and the presumably lazy NEETs (Toivonen 2011a).

The approach that underpins the account in this paper, too, is best illuminated through application to actual cases, but two further aspects may be clarified before proceeding further. First, borrowing what is perhaps the defining characteristic of Goodman's work, we apply a diachronic perspective to youth problems that allows us to illuminate how they develop over time. Drawing inspiration from Thomas Kuhn's (1962) idea of "scientific revolutions," Goodman (2002) has himself shown how the taken-for-granted paradigm that defines the "problem" of kikokushijo (returnee children) underwent a dramatic transformation between the 1960s and the 1980s, from one that positioned this group of schoolchildren as suffering from educational and cultural deficiencies to one with elite status within an "internationalizing" Japan. This realization that youth problems are fundamentally changeable - to the point of sometimes becoming "de-problematized" - provides a powerful antidote to culturalist and essentialist accounts that portray presumed youth problems such as the hikikomori as ahistorical (static) or as idiosyncratically "Japanese" (in essence), based on presumably unique cultural characteristics such as homogeneity, harmony, and equality (for a recent example of a culturalist account, see Borovoy 2008).

Second, the approach advanced here draws on two classic sociological concepts in operationalizing research puzzles. The first of these is "claims-making" which, instead of viewing them as objective social facts, redefines social problems as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector and Kitsuse 1977: 75). This concept enables us to reject the view that social problems somehow emerge naturally from an amorphous "society" and prompts us to turn instead to the analysis of the concrete strategies and utterances of identifiable actors. In the case of Japan, these tend to consist of, but are not limited to, interest

groups such as rehabilitation institutions, parents' associations, networks of professionals, strategically positioned pundits, bureaucrats, and commercial players.

The other concept of interest is that of "moral panics," originally developed by Stanley Cohen (1972) to sensitize researchers to striking regularities in the way that a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to social values and interests" in the mass media and in how "socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions" (1972: 1). It is important to note that this concept, increasingly influential in both academic and journalistic work, has recently come under criticism as lacking explanatory power and precision (Best 2013). It has thus been proposed that, in order to turn moral panic into a more empirically useful concept, it should be given a far narrower definition as a key stage in wider youth problem debates, at which certain issues become rapidly popularized and constructed as morally controversial (Toivonen forthcoming b). In other words, rather than (inadvertently) conflating the terms "moral panics" and "youth problems," the analyst benefits from identifying episodes of moral panic within longer waves of youth debates (which typically have longer roots and are bound up with more persistent interests). The present account is informed by this more concisely formulated idea of moral panic.

The next section will reveal that the particular debate on the *otaku* has been quite strongly shaped precisely by these kinds of intense episodes of moral panic (triggered by deathly incidents reported in the mainstream media). At the same time, we also find that various claims makers (actors) were able to perpetuate and shape the *otaku* debate even in the absence of shock and panic. Hence, taking "youth problem debates" as the key unit of analysis (instead of youth-related "moral panics") shows that what happens in between episodes of moral panic is often as crucial as what happens during them.

3 The case of otaku

This section addresses a puzzling change in media perceptions, unfolding over two decades, around the category of otaku. Popularized in 1989 as a problematic and "threatening" group of youth with poor communication and social skills, the *otaku* were represented through the 1990s as symbols of an individualized, fragmented Japanese society. However, by June 2008, the magazine AERA was able to pronounce that the otaku had clearly gained their "civil rights" (Noguchi 2008), while a 2007 Japan Times article pondered, "Perhaps we are all otaku now?" (McNicol 25 December 2007). Even former Prime Minister Aso Taro came subsequently to be known as a "manga *otaku*" and, accordingly, delivered campaign speeches to enthusiastic crowds in the *otaku* mecca of Akihabara.

How did this change of perception come about? How did otaku metamorphose from a deviant, disparaged group to a national symbol placed in the mainstream of Japan's popular culture? In 2007, the otaku market in Japan was estimated to be worth 186.7 billion yen (about 1.7 billion dollar) (Azuma 2009: xv), and the marginal otaku was being discussed as the symbol of Japan's cultural power and the key component of the government's "Cool Japan" branding strategy. Taking the apparent change in the media image of *otaku* as our driving puzzle and applying the constructionist approach outlined above, we present in what follows a brief diachronic account of how this term emerged, how it became associated with deviant youth, and how it later expanded to take on multiple meanings.

The word "otaku" originally existed as a formal and distanced way of saying "you." Its current popular usage of referring to a category of people – amateur fans of anime and manga - came about in the early 1980s. In a 1983 article for the magazine *Manga Burikko*, journalist and *dōjinshi* ("self-published anime") artist Nakamori wrote about the nature and appearance of youth who gathered around the comic market, describing them as unkempt and obsessive fans who addressed each other using the overly formal reference of *otaku* (Kinsella 2000: 128). The term otaku, and by 1985 the otaku-zoku ("otaku tribe"), thus came to be used among manga artists and fans as parodied, witty reference to themselves, but remained relatively unknown beyond this small community of SF and anime consumers.

It was in 1989 that "otaku" entered general public awareness through the sensationalized media reporting of the Miyazaki murder case. Miyazaki (executed in November 2008 at the age of 46) was convicted of killing four girls, aged between four and seven, mutilating their bodies and sexually molesting the corpses. The reports of Miyazaki's arrest revealed images of his room stacked with collections of pornographic anime films so that the media gave Miyazaki the label of *otaku*, thereby introducing the term to the public and instigating an otaku moral panic. As Kinsella (1998: 311) explained, "the sense that this unsociable otaku generation was multiplying and threatening to take over the whole of society was strong"; and as Namba (2005: 139) pointed out, the *otaku* tribe came to take on the image of isolated young males who shut themselves up in their room, engrossed in media.

In alliance with the media, sociologists and other social critics began to comment on the otaku, presenting their definitions of the term and the surrounding phenomena. Based on empirical research of university students conducted in 1985 and published in 1991, Miyadai Shinji defined *otaku* as "unbalanced specialists" with low interpersonal skills who tended to be avoided by others because of their unkempt and unclean appearance (Miyadai 1994). Fiction writer and critic Nakajima Azusa published a book titled Communication Disorder Syndrome in which she defined otaku as young people with personality problems who find more meaning in relationships with objects, media, and other creations, rather than with people; and she claimed that these individuals were in need of socialization (Nakajima 1995).

By the late 1990s, the discussions and writings on *otaku* had accumulated to a point where there was now an "industry" around the discourse of otakuron 'otaku-ology' (see Lamarre 2004). The meaning of otaku ramified into various levels and hierarchies and the term became increasingly multi-vocal, appropriated and manipulated by academics, politicians, artists, commercial and educational industries, being projected back and forth across national borders. Although a detailed examination of this web of competing voices is beyond our scope, we will next introduce some of the key actors involved in the construction of the *otaku* discourse to emphasize the role of individual agency.

A key figure who actively worked to change the perception of otaku was Okada Toshio, the anime producer and founder of the company Gainax that produced the influential TV anime series Neon Genesis Evangelion in the mid-1990s. As a result of his success in the anime media industry, Okada began to lecture on subculture and multimedia at the Faculty of Liberal Arts at the University of Tokyo from 1994, and in 1996 and 1997, he lectured on otaku bunkaron ('otaku cultural theory'). From 1996 onward, Okada proceeded to write prolifically on otaku. Having been fully involved in the activities of dojinshi and anime production from the early 1980s, he came to take on the position of a charismatic figure within the otaku community, and came to refer to himself and to be known to others as Otaking (i.e., the King of Otaku), with a mission to "eradicate discrimination" against the *otaku* (Okada 2008).

Another of Okada's strategies to elevate the meaning of otaku was to reimport an "internationalized" otaku concept in order to associate it strongly with a "Japanese" national identity instead of a deviant subculture. From the 1990s, internationally distributed Japanese anime such as Power Rangers, Dragon Ball, and Sailor Moon were steadily gaining popularity abroad, in a context where there was no historical association of manga and anime fans with the negative connotations of otaku. Okada actively reported on this situation where otaku culture was being appraised, consumed, and identified as "cool" abroad, thus contributing to the elevation of *otaku* culture as "Japanese" culture.

While the mission of Okada and other individuals who identified themselves as representatives of otaku - such as Taku Hachiro who branded himself on television as an *otaku* advocate – has been to emancipate the group from its negative image, there are a group of otaku theorists whose interests are explicitly in explaining Japanese society and culture through an intellectual discussion of otaku culture. Psychiatrist Saito Tamaki published a book in (2003) in which he provided an explanation of otaku from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis. Sociologists Miyadai Shinji (1990, 1994) and Osawa Masachi (1995, 2008), as well as philosopher Azuma Hiroki (2009: xv) - who argues that the *otaku* phenomenon has become "a focal point for understanding both Japanese society and the postmodern world" - have all produced writings and articles on *otaku*, thus establishing and legitimizing the topic within subculture studies.

These individuals belong to the cohort of scholars who came to lead the academic public discourse from the mid-1990s - the period that Azuma (2008: 71) views as the "era of sociology and psychology." A series of key traumatic incidents in 1995 – most notably the Great Hanshin Earthquake and the terrorist attacks by the religious cult group Aum Shinrikyo - shook the nation and marked Japan's retreat into a period of economic depression and social pessimism. It is this context of Japan's economic and social "malaise" that induced the increased discursive prominence of psychologists and sociologists that Azuma notes. Uno (2006: 19) points out that these "new generation social scientists" who play in the field of cultural studies, capitalism theory, and youth theory, changed the landscape of Japanese social sciences by increasingly taking on an active role in defining the intellectual contours of the discussions of Japanese society as "critics" (hyōronka) through the media. It is interesting to note that this generation of social scientists can also be classed as "the first generation of otaku" (Azuma 2008) - those born in the 1960s who grew up being exposed to TV anime and manga during the Shōwa period of industrial growth. Perhaps partly for this reason, *otaku* has proved a concept of affective, as well as professional and economic, interest for many male scholars of this cohort.

Another key actor involved in the production and consumption of the *otaku* concept is contemporary artist Murakami Takashi. Born in 1962, Murakami attended Tokyo University of the Arts and was the first graduate to obtain a doctorate in Japanese art. However, it was later during his residency in New York that Murakami sought to discover the "Japaneseness" in his art, and that anime and manga became the medium for this expression. Murakami consequently raised the status of *otaku* culture as "Japanese art" abroad – for example, with his life-size figure sculpture "Miss Ko" that sold for nearly half a

million dollars at a Christies' auction – and re-imported a revamped *otaku* concept into Japan. Those anime and manga fans in Japan who claim an authentic otaku identity, however, tend to regard Murakami as an "enemy," making money and gaining international fame through appropriating "their" otaku culture without truly understanding or representing it.

While Murakami Takashi appropriates otaku culture for his artistic and commercial interests, his art is interpreted by academics such as Azuma as a means for constructing their theoretical discourses of *otaku* within postmodern thought, which, in turn, influences and reinforces Murakami's own philosophies deeply entwined with discourses of Japaneseness and postwar oppression. A detailed examination of the connections between otaku, Murakami's artistic concept of "superflat," nationalism, and globalization is beyond the scope of this account (see Steinberg 2004; Sharp 2007); however, what the otaku case illustrates strikingly is the sociological issue of the transfer of a group identified as deviant youth to a group identified at the heart of national cultural capital and pride.

Changes in category meanings are often instigated in reaction to "outside" forces, and it was the popularity of Japanese anime and manga in the United States and Europe - where the concept of otaku was disembedded from its stigmatized connotations - that provided an opportunity for individuals to revamp the meanings of otaku within Japan. Okada, as we have seen, was a major activist of this movement, but equally significant are the political and economic forces that market *otaku* culture as a symbol of "Cool Japan."

"Cool Japan" became a hot topic among politicians after the translation and circulation of Brian McGray's influential (2002) article "Japan's Gross National Cool" that noted the potential "soft power" of Japanese popular culture. Otaku, consequently, came to be perceived as powerful consumers and creators of the "contents industry," while Akihabara, Tokyo's electric town that has catered to otaku subculture since the 1990s, was reframed by political leaders and businesses as a "contents-industry showcase" and a "Japanese Silicon Valley" (Galbraith 2009). Changes in popular perception most significantly came about in 2005 after the TV drama Densha Otoko ('Train Man') featured an otaku as its hero; an international "otaku boom" ensued and Akihabara became a tourist spot for foreign anime fans flocking to the "otaku mecca." By 2006, former Prime Minister Aso Taro was publicizing himself as an otaku, and the images of his campaign speeches to an enthusiastic cheering crowd in Akihabara illuminated the dimension of otaku culture as political and diplomatic tool.

Meanwhile, the gulf between the nationalized/popularized *otaku* discourse and the subcultural minority group of anime and manga youth fanatics continues to grow. As exemplified in Okada's (2008) publication titled "Otaku wa sude ni shindeiru" ('The otaku are already dead'), the debates of whether or not one is otaku, whether or not one understands otaku culture, and whether otaku still exist, have become central preoccupations with the accumulation, commercialization, (inter)nationalization, and intellectual commodification of otaku discourse, so that the meaning has ramified into various levels of authenticity and generational identities, while the increasingly politicized category has become detached from any concrete definition that might refer to a specific minority group of problem youth.

Has the negative image of otaku disappeared? A longitudinal study on the perception of the term otaku (Kikuchi et al. 2007) suggests that negative connotations have significantly decreased. The pathology of the otaku is less discussed, due in part to the emergence and problematization of the category of hikikomori from the turn of the century, to which, some argue, the socially pathological discourses of youth were shifted (Eng 2009). However, characterizations of otaku through terms such as hi-mote otoko ('sexually unattractive men') remain. While *otaku* have been pushed into the mainstream media industry, the "hardcore *otaku*" who resist popularization are identified with the term moe - that is, an 'eroticized affect toward imaginary anime characters' (see Galbraith 2009; Rivera 2009). There are various definitions and possible etymologies for this term moe, one of which is the suggestion by Morinaga (2007) that the word spawned from mo-otoko ('weak man') meaning a man who is neither rich nor good-looking and is unable to form romantic relationships in the "real" as opposed to the virtual world.

Our story is, thus, not of a simple elevation of a category from negative to positive meaning, and we note that the ambiguity and multi-vocality of the category continues to subject *otaku* to problematization. This was crucially illustrated in the reactions to the Akihabara Incident in June 2008 where the serial murderer – a 25-year-old dispatch worker – was labeled an *otaku* by much of the press. This incident was followed by an increased policing of the streets of the "otaku mecca" and several arrests for obscenity charges. The image that the media portrayed was not of creative, "cool" youth, but a sexually deviant and potentially criminal group of youth that bred in the maid cafés and threatened the residents of the "yuppified" Akihabara district (Galbraith 2009).

In sum, the *otaku* case shows how the status of social group categories are fluid and in flux, and how their meanings are interpreted, manipulated, exploited, and guarded by interested agents. Particularly salient are the voices of those experts who act as the public "translators" of certain discourses. They are able to make effective use of the media to disseminate specific interpretations of the category concerned, and to help form and sustain industries around

particular problems. The youths themselves that are being defined and discussed, however, remain peripheral to the discussion as a muted group.

4 Contrasting otaku with hikikomori and NEET

While an extensive comparison of *otaku* with (the plethora of) other relevant Japanese social categories is not possible here, it is worth contrasting it briefly with the two subsequent labels of hikikomori and NEET. The term "hikikomori" has come to denote the (putative) phenomenon of social withdrawal among a "growing" subset of young people as well as individuals engaged in reclusive behavior (Horiguchi 2012; see introduction to this paper). Though priorly constructed and articulated by the key claims-maker Saitō Tamaki, hikikomori properly entered the public consciousness only through the reporting on three dramatic incidents in late 1999 and early 2000, one of which involved the hijack of a bus and the stabbing of a passenger in southern Japan by a 17-year-old boy who had stopped attending high school. The label "hikikomori" was used in each instance to describe the perpetrator, helping to create an episode of moral panic around mentally unstable reclusive young men. "NEET," denoting young adults aged 15-34 who are "Not in Education, Employment, or Training," emerged on the public radar in 2004 (and peaked in 2005 and 2006) and, initially, was the product of a coherent policy campaign by a group of actors who wished to create momentum for novel youth support programs (Toivonen 2011a). Albeit without support from violent incidents, NEET, too, was transformed into a provocative and morally laden issue as it was pushed into public debate, resulting in a prolonged episode of moral panic over "lazy" youth (especially males) without proper work ethics.

It is therefore very easy to see that the process behind the construction of the otaku, hikikomori, and NEET "problems" is fairly predictable, moving from the identification of an issue (by "experts") to its definition and dissemination, which leads into a moral panic that facilitates rapid popularization. More time will need to lapse for us to answer the question of how the meaning of the latter two categories will transform, but it is already apparent that certain changes are taking place: hikki has emerged as a more friendly and less stigmatized way to refer to young withdrawn individuals (especially within online communities), and NEET is becoming trivialized and casualized as it now refers not only to joblessness but to various forms of disengagement, including disengagement from romantic behavior, as the term ren'ai NEET ('romance NEETs'), popularized by a new TV drama in early 2012, suggests. Just as the negative connotations of otaku were temporarily shifted onto hikikomori in the early 2000s (see

above), it is very likely that newer categories will again surface to take on similar negative themes as the meaning of *hikikomori* itself transforms further.

Adding to a range of other thematic similarities we identified in prior research (Toivonen and Imoto 2012), it should be noted that, according to a historical analysis of Japan's youth debates (wakamono-ron) by Furuichi (2011), all of the three categories can be traced back to the "capsule ningen" debate of the late 1960s. "Capsule ningen" was the first mainstream category in affluent Japan that raised moral alarm over young people who were becoming corrupted by the introduction of new information technology, namely the radio. This technology allowed youth reportedly to become isolated from their communities and families, since vital information and entertainment could be enjoyed in the comfort of private rooms. In addition to fears over new technology, "capsule ningen" also contained a critique of young people's (putatively) decreasing communication skills and represented a prominent earlier (though certainly not the first), example of "youth bashing." While we fully recognize that each youth debate is unique in its precise detail, the extent to which the debates around otaku, NEET, and hikikomori resemble the precedent of "capsule ningen" is striking to the point of almost being disconcerting.

With these important processual and thematic continuities in mind, the next section of this paper more concisely articulates a handful of underlying mechanisms that have governed virtually all mainstream youth problems in postwar Japan.

5 Four mechanisms that govern Japanese youth problems

While our brief comparison of otaku, hikikomori, and NEET pointed to several similarities in how youth problem debates unfold, we now turn to four central social mechanisms that help to further explain such similarities. These mechanisms are consistent with the otaku case as well as with the wider body of youth problem research cited in Section 2 of this paper.² They allow us to go beyond merely following the processes and themes of particular youth problems, and make it possible to identify their structural and institutional drivers.

² For us, a "social mechanism" does not amount to a fully generalizable social "law," but rather, as Hedström and Swedberg (1998: 11) pointed out, to "a constellation of entities and activities that are linked to one another in such a way that they regularly bring about a particular type of outcome."

5.1 Youth problem industries

One of the classic findings of social scientific research into Japanese youth problems is that, whenever a new issue gains prominence and stays on the public radar for a prolonged period of time, it is not just controversial media scoops or claims-makers' verbal skirmishes that proliferate; rather, it is whole "industries" of interested actors that take shape and organize themselves around fresh, fertile concerns.3 Thus, in the case of the otaku, it was not only writers and critics who began to profit considerably from this topic, but also politicians, commercial establishments, and artists. In the case of "bullying" (ijime), the Ministry of Education actually leveraged the second wave of "panic" when establishing and expanding school counseling as a profession (Toivonen and Imoto 2012), while the third ijime shock was exploited also by parents as well as by former Prime Minister Abe in his educational reform drive. Very much the same mechanism - that is, "industries" emerging around "problems" - has been detected in the cases of returnee children (kikokushijo), compensated dating (enjo kōsai), the "withdrawn" hikikomori, and "jobless" NEET, even as the particular line-up of involved actors has varied. There is ample evidence to suggest that, to a considerable extent, it is the self-interest of individuals and institutions (including the survival concerns of groups that cater to youth and/ or children) that stand to benefit, financially or otherwise, from youth issues that underlies the production, manipulation, and maintenance of such issues.

Continuities characterize these industries that appear somewhat ephemeral at first. We may note here the example of well-known private youth organizations (with residential facilities) such as Kudō Sadatsugu's Youth Independence Support Center in Fussa, Tokyo, and K2 International in Yokohama that have nimbly morphed from support institutions for "school refusers" (in the 1980s) to those for "withdrawn youth" (in the late 1990s), only to reframe themselves as "NEET support" initiatives in the mid-2000s. This suggests youth problem industries should be seen primarily (and this may be highly obvious) not as "new" entities, but as re-groupings of various existing organizations, actors, and interests, both public and private.

³ As far as we are aware, Goodman (1990) was the first to articulate these kinds of "industries" in the context of Japanese youth problems, but the idea has parallels in the sociology of social problems. Hilgartner and Bosk (1988: 72), for instance, speak of "communities of operatives" in their synthesis of earlier literature.

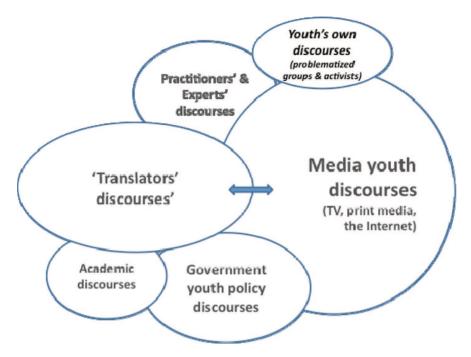


Figure 1: Different spheres of youth discourses and their bridging by "translators." Source: Toivonen and Imoto (2012).

5.2 Central claims-makers as strategists and "translators"

The rise and transformation of the *otaku* debate was powerfully shaped by a handful of shrewd individual actors. What was particularly notable about Okada Toshio, "the King of Otaku," was not the fact that he chose to write prolifically on the subject, but the fact that he was an operator with robust "street credibility" (cultural capital) within the otaku community and that he simultaneously belonged to multiple distinctive spheres (anime production and media business, academia, publishing). Okada demonstrated agency in striving to re-make the image of the otaku by importing a wholly more positive otaku construct from abroad (i.e., from countries where Japanese anime was gaining popularity) and by associating *otaku* closely with Japanese national identity. We posit that the role of such individual operators is pivotal in the development of every major youth problem discourse not driven primarily by high-impact incidents.

Standing typically on the boundaries of several established fields and networks, central claims makers are strategically positioned to communicate across them and to introduce ideas originating in one sphere into another (see Figure 1). In doing so, they effectively act as "translators" who creatively convert field-specific information into simpler messages that are intelligible to nonspecialists. Key examples here include such luminary claims makers as Okada Toshio (concerning "otaku"), Saito Tamaki ("hikikomori"), and Genda Yuji ("NEET") who have brought their respective topics of interest to a wider audience through active engagement with the mass media. It is important to note here that a handful of claims makers successfully promote several youth problems and categories, with Miyadai Shinji playing a significant role in both the "otaku" and compensated dating (enjo kōsai) debates and Yamada Masahiro producing both the provocative label "parasite singles" and the currently ubiquitous term "konkatsu" ('marriage-seeking activities').

5.3 The rhetoric of youth problems and middle-class bias

How do interest groups and competing claims makers "sell" their preferred youth problems? First, it is virtually a requirement that agents manage to show that their particular problem is "growing," "proliferating," or "increasing" to the extent it threatens social order (see, e.g., Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Best 1989). This was the case with the otaku who, it was feared, might "take over the whole society" toward the late 1980s and early 1990s. Second, the ability of claims makers to highlight norm violation in addition to rising incidence so as to provoke moral outrage is equally essential. Beyond being associated with a violent incident (the Miyazaki murder case), being portrayed as isolated and engrossed in media consumption rather than work, the *otaku* clearly threatened dominant norms regarding acceptable male behavior, adding to the provocativeness of the issue.

Though Japan is portrayed often as a homogeneous society, it matters a great deal from the point of view of youth problem research that, in this context, dominant norms do not refer to any universally accepted "Japanese" norms but rather to middle-class norms. As Slater (2010) astutely observes, the "panic" surrounding part-time working freeters in the late 1990s and early 2000s arose not simply because freeters were "part-time working youth," but because they were part-time working youth from the "wrong" social class, that is, the middle class. This applies equally to past scares over "school refusers," "adult children," and "parasite singles": all have been seen as threats to mainstream society and its ideals, such as full commitment to education, the company, and normative gender roles. The historical roots of "youth problems as middle-class problems" extend back, according to Furuichi Noritoshi (2011), to the late 1960s when the belief that 90% of Japanese people belong to the middle classes established itself. One (rather disturbing) consequence of this strong middle-class bias in Japan is that young people from working-class, immigrant, or minority backgrounds simply do not feature in the debate and are, thus, as a rule, excluded from the scope of any (substantial) youth policies as well.

5.4 Youth as a muted group and the negative valence of youth problems

When following mainstream discussions on youth problems, one quickly notes something rather paradoxical: youths themselves appear to be all but absent from them as active agents. Though the voices of youths may occasionally be given a moment of air time here and there, it is apparent to the observer that young people are relegated, in major youth problem debates, to the status of a muted group (Ardener 1975 [1968]). Their voices are assigned to the periphery – from where they can hardly influence the terms of dominant discourse – leaving groups of adult "experts," "commentators," and other authorities free to represent them as best suits their interests and preferences. Indeed, this state of affairs arises virtually by definition; were they in a more powerful position or given more say (for example, as a powerful political constituency), youth would clearly have little interest in "problematizing" themselves or speaking in terms of "youth problems" or "concerns" to begin with.

Is there any way of overcoming the negative framing of youth problems under these conditions? Could young people somehow be constructed in more positive ways in the context of youth problem debates that position them as a muted group?

It would at first appear that youth problem discussion would be incompatible with any positive notions from their outset: central claims-makers find it necessary to exploit the "threat" of a negative "problem" when striving to inspire rapid action on a given issue. On a less cynical note, however, it is possible that in some cases the negative valence of youth problems may shift from the youths at the center of the debate toward related issues in a wider social context. This tends to happen when young people are portrayed as "children," as has been the case in the debate on ijime ('bullying'), and when the societal context shifts in a conducive way, as was the case with part-time working freeters (usually taken to be in their twenties or early thirties). Targets of vehement public criticism from the late 1990s that portrayed them as "irresponsible" youth who had consciously rejected careers as salarymen, freeters came to be seen in a somewhat more understanding light by the late 2000s in a

context where one-third of the labor force were working as "irregulars." With public opinion data showing that most youths in fact desired stable jobs even when they could not get them, attention did turn partly from individual factors to societal circumstances.

But stripping away many of the negative connotations of a youth problem is tantamount to "de-problematization." This is, as the cases of otaku and returnee children illustrate (see Sections 2 and 3), a real prospect for at least some youth problem categories, especially after the waning, from the public radar, of episodes of moral panic they have been associated with. As the outcome of "de-problematization," what used to be viewed as morally threatening and even repulsive takes on positive connotations, which may make the category in question a desirable status symbol. In this process, "countermeasures" vanish or mutate into more upbeat and less contested promotional or positive discrimination measures. The catch herein is that the negative meanings that were formerly ascribed to a well-known category such as otaku may nevertheless refuse to disappear entirely; they may be displaced onto other youth types in Japan's rich youth problem pedigree (see Section 3). The question of whether youth may currently be re-emerging as less of a muted group is something we touch upon in the following final section of this paper.

6 Conclusion: unchanging youth debates after the triple disaster?

We began this paper by exposing shortcomings in existing research on Japanese youth - its troubling lack of criticality regarding the origins and dynamics of salient "labels" and "panics" - and proceeded to set out an alternative, selfaware approach to the study of youth problems. We then applied this approach to the well-known case of the *otaku*, followed by brief comparative observations on the hikikomori and NEET issues. Lastly, we clarified four central social mechanisms that have governed the production of youth problems in postwar Japan. We found that while youth problem discourses shift over time (in accordance with the wider context in which the actors are situated), such "problems" possess a rather stable internal logic where similar "industries," claims-makers, biases, and omissions reappear time and again.

Adopting a constructionist approach, our assumption was that youth problems are neither inherently about the youth themselves nor about the "culture" of their society and its "ills." Rather, we regarded youth problems as a processual construct embedded in the structural alignments of media, academia, politics, and other institutions. Such an approach helps us to go beyond the dominant premise of research on Japanese youth that builds and feeds on ubiquitous categories such as otaku, freeter, hikikomori, and many others without interrogating their discursive origins and political dynamics in any depth.

Armed with an awareness of our own positionings as transnational scholars situated outside, or rather on the boundaries of, "native" and "foreign" discourses on Japanese youth, our perspective has allowed for a more holistic and reflexive approach to examining youth-related studies in the Japanese context – with close implications to youth research in other postindustrial societies – by demonstrating how youth problems and associated labels emerge and transform through the agency of strategic interests and ongoing contestation.

One key question that remains concerns the issue of structural (as opposed to discursive) change: To what degree will the internal logic of youth problems that we have delineated remain constant? While we have suggested four underlying mechanisms, we also remain open to the possibilities of how these may change in the future. Indeed, we believe that being reflexively aware of the mechanisms - for we ourselves as social scientists working both within and outside of domestic Japanese academia are potentially complicit in the construction process - can open up possibilities for change. Tentatively, we can identify three interrelated factors that seem to be leading to shifts in structural alignment and hence the youth problem construction model: (i) the changing nature of the media, (ii) the emergence of a new younger cohort of youth scholars, and (iii) the contextual shift of post-3/11.

Although previous constructionist research on social problems has largely relied on print media to analyze the patterns of discourse, the explosive spread of social media since the mid-2000s has undoubtedly influenced the nature of social problem construction. Representations of youth in the media are increasingly scattered and multifaceted, and the position of "translators" mediating the public and the expert field is undergoing change as the boundaries of public/private, lay/expert are being blurred. For example, we see that the "next" generation of sociologists and social critics in Japan, such as Tsuda Daisuke and Suzuki Kensuke, who are in their thirties, are reaching out to the public through a variety of media outlets, adjusting flexibly to the expressional styles of each generation. It is also important to note that the "mutedness" of youth is increasingly being problematized by young native Japanese sociologists who are savvy in their navigation of the evolving public media, and in situating themselves as representatives of the voices of youth. Notable examples include Furuichi Noritoshi and Goto Kazutomo, both in their twenties, who are creating counter-discourses to the dominant wakamono-ron "discourses on youth" (see especially Furuichi 2011).

The disasters that hit Japan on 11 March 2011, have also affected the direction of youth discourse both within and outside of Japanese social science, opening up space for the emergence of new categories and identities of youth in a time of crisis. With the challenges posed by the disaster to be shared and overcome, the media, academia, and funding bodies have turned their attention toward the issue of Tōhoku and "revitalization." The problems of urban youth have consequently fallen off the radar of mainstream media and research. In conjunction with the discourse of revitalization (fukkō), however, stories of "active" youth are gaining visibility. These include young people involved in volunteering activities and social entrepreneurship, as well as individuals who are seen to be creating new values and taking leadership in a time of change (Toivonen 2011b). It is yet to be seen whether the dramatic directional shift of debate on Japan in 2011 will lead to fundamental and persisting reconfiguration of institutional alliances and the norms that weld them.

With the above context in mind, there seems to be scope for any number of further studies that build on the approach we have proposed and extend it, perhaps by delving more deeply into the initial emergence of specific problems or into the interrelationship of youth categories and associated practices (in youth work or education, for example). Most exciting though is the prospect of applying the approach to diverse national contexts beyond Japan, since the accumulation of international empirical evidence would make possible a wellfounded comparative sociology of youth problems.

Bionotes

Dr. Tuukka Toivonen, a sociologist, currently serves as a Junior Research Fellow at Green Templeton College, University of Oxford. He investigates young social innovators in Japan and the evolution of social entrepreneurship in East Asia. Toivonen is the author of Japan's Emerging Youth Policy: Getting Young Adults Back to Work (Routledge, forthcoming).

Dr. Yuki Imoto is Assistant Professor at Keio University, Japan, where she teaches English and social science methods. Her research interests lie in the social anthropology of education, language, and childhood. She is currently writing a book on the emergence of "international" preschools in urban Japan.

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