

# Discourses on Lonely Death (*Kodokushi*) in Japan: Development of Community Discourse and Directions in Welfare for the Aging in Japan

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**Abstract** | Lonely death (*kodokushi*) is not only difficult to define in a precise manner, but is a phenomenon that involves a variety of complexly interwoven aspects. As a result, the most essential element driving our understanding of lonely death as a “problem” and our response to it is how this event is spoken and written of. That is, lonely death is an exceedingly discursive phenomenon. This article’s primary objective is to delineate the conditions that gave rise to the discourse that is observed when the phenomenon of lonely death is discussed in Japan. At the center of the discussion about lonely death in Japan is a “community discourse” that frames lonely death as an extreme case of solitude and isolation brought about by the breakdown of community and the rupture of interpersonal relations. This article argues that this community discourse became the prevailing discourse on lonely deaths in Japan within the wider discourse. Moreover, it explores this community discourse’s influence on the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s policy on lonely death established in 2007 and analyzes the case of the Tokiwadaira Danchi apartment complex in Chiba Prefecture, which had a central role in the formulation of the ministry’s policy. This case analysis uncovers important implications for understanding the problems that can arise when community discourse becomes linked with policy. On the basis of this analysis, the article suggests the necessity to reconsider the community-oriented direction so apparent in Japan’s current welfare policy.

**Keywords** | lonely death (*kodokushi*), community discourse, Japan’s lonely death policy, Tokiwadaira

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## Introduction

Social isolation and loneliness are often spoken of as serious afflictions of modern society. When remedies to treat these ailments are spoken of, they are quite frequently preceded by the term “community.” We are often confronted with the idea that the deterioration (or collapse) of the community taking place in the spatial/temporal juncture of the modern era is isolating people and making them lonely, meaning that the best antidote is the revitalization or rebuilding of the community. The production and consumption of such discourse appears to be a crucial trend, especially when it comes to discourses on welfare issues in Japan. However, is the invocation of the community indeed a valid antidote that can bring about practical results when it comes to solving the problem of isolation? Though this article cannot provide a definitive answer to this question, it at very least posits the necessity of such interrogation.

The phenomenon of “lonely death” (*kodokushi*) in Japan proves a very useful example when it comes to such issues. Lonely death is frequently referred to as the extreme end of the social isolation and loneliness brought on by the breakdown of the community and estrangement of interpersonal relations. This article endeavors to retrace the conditions of discourse that centers “community” and how this developed into the prevailing discourse within discussions of lonely death in Japan. In analyzing discursive cases that played pivotal roles in the relationship between discourse revolving around community and associated policy, as well as the process of establishing such policy, this investigation seeks ways to reconsider the community-oriented welfare policy inclination.

A discursive approach to lonely death proves an invaluable perspective from which to analyze the phenomenon. As will be discussed in further detail in the coming pages, this is because lonely death is not only tied up in highly complex issues, but is a phenomenon that is often discussed without much of an agreed-upon definition. Despite this, there is an absolute dearth of analyses of lonely death that take on this perspective within the field in Japan.<sup>1</sup> This investigation’s novel approach therefore differentiates itself from existing scholarship on lonely death in Japan, and as such is significant in that it provides a new perspective that contributes to the sociological discussion endeavoring to elucidate the lonely death phenomenon in greater detail and depth.

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1. Of course, this is not to say that there has been no research on lonely deaths worth noting when it comes to discourse. However, what research does exist either only analyzes media reports on the lonely death phenomenon (Aoyagi 2008; Takao 2008; Hori 2012; Kotsuji and Kobayashi 2011, et cetera), or does not directly address lonely deaths but only takes discourse into consideration in a secondary capacity (Matsuhashi 2012; Sakai 2012).

## Discursive Characteristics of the Lonely Death Phenomenon and Types of Discourse

### 1. “Lonely Death” Phenomenon and Discourse

The term *kodokushi* (lonely death) is used in Japan to refer to a set of circumstances generally described as the following:

An individual who lived alone dies without having received the care of another agent. This death goes unknown to all, is neglected and only discovered after considerable time has passed.

However, there are too many vague factors here to consider this a precise definition of lonely death. There are countless disputed elements when it comes to the definition of what indeed constitutes a lonely death: place of death, type of household, determination of suicide, circumstances before death, whether the individual was being cared for at the time of death, age, amount of time that passes postmortem, among others. The reality is that a variety of definitions are being used with slight differences depending on one's stance on each of the above factors, and at times these definitions are mutually exclusive. Without a single objective definition, there cannot be any official statistics on lonely death. While lonely death involves a definitive occurrence (death), it also encompasses a complexity that complicates its definition as a mere form of death.

As can be gleaned from the above description, lonely death is associated with a variety of elements that range not only from death itself, but issues faced in the life that came before death and the circumstances that follow death. In this way, rather than an object that can be precisely defined in an objective manner, it exhibits a strong character as a phenomenon that exists as “that referred to as lonely death.” Ultimately, the question of what constitutes lonely death can be answered in a variety of ways depending on which of the myriad aspects of this phenomenon a person gives the most weight. It could be argued that the most critical factor advancing this phenomenon of recognizing lonely death as a “problem” and addressing it all comes down to how such circumstances are spoken and written of. In this way, lonely death can be understood as an exceedingly discursive phenomenon.

As the term itself implies, the phenomenon of lonely death is basically recognized as a coupling of the “lonely” (solitary) circumstances in life and the event of “death” (as well as the outcomes death gives rise to). This combination cannot be disentangled when it comes to lonely death, but depending on where

the focus is placed, the manner in which it is discussed can take on a variety of narrative forms. This may also change depending on where one situates the causes of lonely death and subjects that respond to lonely death cases among each of the contributing factors. In short, the variety of perceptions of lonely death in turn contributes to the production of various discourses tied to the phenomenon.

## 2. Types of Lonely Death Discourse

A look at how lonely death is actually talked about in Japan, primarily in the media, gives us three primary forms of discourse on lonely death that can be summed up in the following ways: welfare/institutional discourse, individualization discourse, and community discourse.

With a focus on the circumstances that came before the death associated with a state of loneliness (isolation) and factors external to the deceased, welfare/institutions discourse discusses lonely death with an emphasis on the social context that led up to such a death, rather than the death itself. That is, it is a story not of an individual dying alone (or in similar circumstances), but one of social causes and responsibility for why this individual was unable to live any other way. Of course, the social environment that encompasses those who die alone is not limited to problems of certain institutions in certain areas. The reason for referring to this discourse as one of “welfare/institutions” is that there have been numerous cases in which, when lonely death is talked about in relation to institutional dimensions, it is spoken of in the language of welfare issues, such as welfare for the elderly. The discourse that takes this form is articulated primarily in a manner of understanding the causes and responsibility for the state of solitude (isolation) that ends in death in a social context, connecting this with institutional/policy problems relative to the state/authorities.

Unlike the welfare/institutional discourse that focuses on the circumstances associated with solitude (isolation) before death, individualization discourse takes up the perspective of the deceased as an individual. Because this discourse talks about the causes and responses to lonely death either wholly or partially with a stress on individual choice, I have termed this individualization discourse. Such discourse can appear to deny lonely death’s character as a social problem. However, as lonely death is not solely the lot of aging people nor a phenomenon delimited to a particular space, such as a disaster-stricken area, but something that can happen to anyone and anywhere, it could be argued that discourse on individualization is also based on an understanding of lonely death as a wide-ranging phenomenon in society, beyond the individual.

By recognizing lonely death not as the affairs of (certain) others, but something that could happen to oneself, this sort of generalization enables a high level of empathy. It also has the effect of reducing the distance between the subject and object of perception. Such a characteristic, written of as “a heightening of reality resultant of the routinization of lonely death” (Nakamori 2013, 192), leads to two forms of individualization discourse. One is a positive assessment of solitude as a result of an individual’s subjective choices. That is, it is a narrative form based in the logic that if solitude becomes a routine phenomenon rather than something unusual, it is necessary for us to accept it positively rather than negatively. On the other hand, the second form of individualization discourse considers solitude an even more negative circumstance, and reflects a heightened sense of anxiety about it. This form of discourse does not fundamentally deny that the problem may be resolved by policy or institutions. But, because such a resolution can only have a limited effect when it comes to the issue of loneliness, ultimately there must be more concerted effort at an individual level to prevent lonely death. However, despite such differences, these two discourses share a commonality of individualization in that they discuss the importance of individual responsibility and self-reliance.

Finally, community discourse underscores community when it comes to diagnoses and solutions to the problem of lonely death. Rooted in the phenomenon of “a death that takes place alone, unknown to anyone” and “the neglect of death,” such a recognition places utmost focus on “death” as the corollary of a state of solitude. When such a recognition is strong, there is a tendency to exclude cases of deaths that occur when not alone and cases of loneliness that do not lead to death from the category of lonely death. That is, the focus is on what happens around the phenomenon that manifests in the form of “death” itself. Accordingly, it easily boils down to an issue of how to identify and prevent lonely deaths ahead of time, or, when doing so is impossible, how to detect the death as fast as possible.

When it comes to these problems, community discourse’s primary diagnosis is to point to the loss or absence of (human) relations, and thus the remedy is spoken of in the language of recovering/rebuilding lost relationships. The community in which a lonely death is situated is always pointed to as the lead actor in this problem of relationships. Of course, community discourse quite often takes issue with institutional aspects, just as individualization discourse does. However, whatever path the development of the discussion takes, its terminus always bends toward community. Here, the subject that responds to (or must respond to) the problem of lonely death is the community. In many instances, this is a community that once enjoyed strong ties, a community that is

now fading away and thus must be restored. As will be discussed in the following sections, this community discourse has prevailed within the discourses on lonely death in Japan.

## Conditions of the Development of Lonely Death Discourse in Japan

### 1. 1970s: The Prelude to Community Discourse

The term “lonely death” (*kodokushi*) first appeared in Japanese media and elsewhere around 1970. Of course, though they did not make use of such terminology, cases that would today be referred to as lonely deaths can be traced back to newspapers and other writings from as early as the Meiji era (Kotsuji and Kobayashi 2011, 121-30). Still, the phenomenon first began being discussed as a social problem with the label “lonely death” in the early 1970s.

The influence that the frame of “problems of the elderly”—raised following the enactment of the Act on Social Welfare for the Elderly (1963)—had on the recognition of lonely death as a social problem in Japan at the time cannot be overstated. At the start of the 1970s, numerous surveys were actively carried out on the issues and “problems of bedridden (*netakiri*) elderly,” “problems of elderly living alone,” and other “problems of the elderly,” with the results publicized.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a social atmosphere known as the “elderly boom” was forming against the backdrop of an increased demographic proportion of those over sixty-five,<sup>3</sup> marking Japan’s transition into an aging society. The enactment of a policy of free medical care for the sixty-five-and-up population in 1973 was considered a watershed event in Japan’s welfare for the elderly. Furthermore, the first survey that put forth the term “lonely death” took place in 1973 as well, the results of which were published and publicized the following year under the name “Report on Follow-up Survey on Lonely Death Elderly” (*Kodokushi rōjin tsuiseki chōsa hōkokusho*; Zenkoku Shakai Fukushi Kyōgikai and Zenkoku Minsei Iin Jidō Iin Kyōgikai 1974).

This shift in which deaths of solitary aging citizens were highlighted as an object of welfare signifies that the early era of discourse on lonely death was in a good position to develop into a discourse centering on welfare/institutions that

2. Representative examples include Zenkoku Shakai Fukushi Kyōgikai (1968), Naikaku Sōri Daijin Kanbō (1969), and Tokyo-to Shakai Fukushi Kyōgikai (1971), among others.

3. In 1970, Japan recorded a sixty-five or older population proportion of 7.1 percent, making it an aging society for the first time.

placed the state/authorities in the position of the responding subject. But as the following excerpt from a news article shows in a typical fashion, one stand-out characteristic in the early development of discourse is the problematization of “relationships.”

A forty-one-year-old woman who lived alone was found dead in her apartment in Amagasaki, Hyogo Prefecture. Around eighty days had passed since her death, and her body had become mummified. . . . Her neighbors told reporters, “Because we had hardly crossed paths, it wasn’t particularly alarming that no one had seen her.” . . . The woman’s coworkers also expressed disinterest in her absence. . . . This case perhaps reflects a dark side of our modern society of control where, while people check on one another at the workplace, such interest disappears once outside the work area. . . . (“Kodoku na shisha” 1973) (omissions by author)

As the above excerpt illustrates, Japan’s discourse on lonely death showed a link with the issue of attenuated interpersonal relations in modern society since the early 1970s. News articles on lonely death from that era that reference “urban solitude,” in particular, would sometimes present the necessity or resolving the issue at an institutional level, but primarily underscored the “loss of relations” as a chronic phenomenon accompanying modern society.<sup>4</sup> Hori (2012, 49), who carried out an analysis of newspaper articles related to lonely death, wrote that one can pick up on “surprise’ at the attenuation of interest in one’s surroundings and relationships that no single person in an area recognizes that a death has taken place in a certain period” in these articles. What is key here is that the “surprise” is not oriented at the deceased themselves, but at the circumstances surrounding the death, particularly at the change in relationships. Such a characteristic of discussions of lonely death in the 1970s signifies the beginnings of a vast shift toward community discourse at the center of lonely death discourse in Japan.

## 2. 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake Era: Lonely Deaths in Temporary Housing

The Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 served as a catalyst that shot community discourse to the fore in relation to the discourse on lonely death in Japan. Following the catastrophic earthquake, a series of deaths among those living in temporary housing for those affected by the disaster garnered attention under the label “lonely deaths.” These (numerous) lonely deaths among those staying

4. “Kakomareta kūkan’ no” (1972), “Mata kodoku na” (1972), “Kodoku na shisha” (1973), “Tokyo hitori gurashi” (1977) and more.

in temporary housing were often framed in discussion as the result of a loss of family, work, and ties with the local community due to the disaster. With this, “disappearance of the community” became a central discursive axis in the problem of lonely death.

Of course, the discourse surrounding lonely death in this era was not limited to only community. In reality, one saw expressions of the liability of the state within phrases such as “poverty of politics,” and an understanding of lonely deaths in a disaster-stricken area as “human disasters” (“Hisaisha no kodokushi” 1997). Ascribing responsibility for lonely death entirely to politics or the state was certainly a form which discussions took after the Great Hanshin Earthquake (Nakamori 2013, 186-87). Moreover, the considerable number of reports on the phenomenon known as “lonely death” taking place in inadequate housing in disaster-stricken areas make it clear that this was not simply an issue of interpersonal relations (“Hanshin daishinsai” 1998). That is, there was an understanding of lonely death as a multifaceted social issue spanning an array of matters including medical care and poverty, and that it required measures at a state/institutional level. “The welfare system is failing to keep up with the diversification of ways of life,” (“Kodokushi fukushi ni” 1996) read one article, showing that welfare/institution-oriented lonely death discourse was being expressed in no uncertain way during the Great Hanshin Earthquake era.

At the same time, the fact that discourse on lonely death in this era greatly focused on those deaths that occurred at temporary housing in disaster-stricken areas played a decisive role in establishing the issue of community as the central axis in the discourse. Because the scale of damage was so great, the construction of temporary housing following the earthquake in 1995 was carried out incrementally. Consequently, those able to move into temporary housing were largely selected via lottery. This inevitably led to situations in which one was forced to become neighbors with people one had never met before and had no standing relationship with. This environment brought about by temporary housing illuminated the fact that victims of the disaster had no choice but to go on with their lives after having been unwillingly torn from the interpersonal relations they had closely maintained thus far following a collapse of the existing community. This typified the disappearance/absence of community.

Media and other places of discourse actively applied the term “lonely death” to cases in which individuals living in temporary housing died on their own, without the care of another (Nukada 1999, 46-47). With this, the collapse of the community and lonely death became naturally linked in the common understanding. Discussions of the lonely deaths that took place in disaster-stricken areas focused on the deaths of people who had lost their job and local community,



their point of contact with society at large. The overwhelming number of this type of story were concentrated on lonely deaths in disaster-stricken areas. In this manner, the schematic of “loss of community = lonely death” combined with the context of “disaster,” which was then used as a sort of standard for the management of disasters going forward.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, discussions of the lonely deaths that took place in the aftermath of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 foregrounded the idea that “the conspicuous collapse of the local community following a disaster has led to lonely deaths.” Discourse bearing this characteristic tone also became the basis for responses to lonely deaths.

### 3. Post-2000s: Lonely Deaths in Kitakyushu and Lonely Deaths in Apartment Complexes (*Danchi*)

In the years following 2000, we observe the individualization discourse shift from barely being extant to a fully-fledged form of lonely death discourse. The most representative narrative form that individualization discourse takes is: “All humans die alone, and whether a person feels lonely at that moment of death is not something others can judge” (“Dare mo ga ‘kodoku’” 2007). It does not take the presence of “loneliness” as an issue. Rather, it urges that the individual accepts this in a positive light and makes a decision and preparations for their own manner of death. This idea can be found at the basis of the discourse on self-responsibility that has led to trends like *shūkatsu* (planning for death)<sup>6</sup> and “ending notes” that emerged in the 2010s. Oftentimes, individualization discourse will take the form of an argument of the necessity to reconsider the negative connotations of lonely death. Suggestions of alternative terms such as “natural death,” “peaceful death,” and “independent death” illustrate well this narrative form.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, as previously mentioned, there is also a form of individualization discourse that considers loneliness in an even more negative light and

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5. Responses to earthquakes after the Great Hanshin Earthquake forefront disaster relief measures underscoring community, such as moving people belonging to the same hamlets into temporary housing in groups (Minemoto 2010, 171-77).

6. An abbreviation of “activities for the end of life” (*shū + katsudō*), it refers to settling one’s affairs in advance before the end of one’s life. The *shūkatsu* fad could be said to be a typical case of “self-responsibility discourse” that argues an individual is responsible even for the handling of their own death.

7. “‘Kodokushi’ to wa” (2013), “‘Kodokushi’ o aratame” (2013), “Dokkyo wa kanarazushimo” (2013) and more.

underscores individual responsibility to make preparations for the accompanying anxiety and sorrow. This has also appeared in the narrative form of “individual experience” in relation to lonely death.<sup>8</sup> Yet even if one only looks for expressions of such discourse in newspaper articles, the majority of such pieces are reader-submitted, meaning that they are told from an external perspective. This also goes to show the extent to which the individualization discourse of the 2000s was stuck in the periphery.

A pivotal incident in the discourse on lonely deaths in Japan in the 2000s was the series of lonely deaths in Kitakyushu.<sup>9</sup> In terms of discourse, the incidents served as a key stimulus for the bolstering of the welfare/institution discourse. The tragedies that occurred between 2005 and 2007 served to bring issues of welfare administration to the surface, such as welfare offices’ rejection of basic livelihood protection (public assistance) applications, in what is known as a strategy of keeping prospective applicants at bay (*mizugiwa sakusen*).<sup>10</sup> That is to say, narratives about the problem developed in a way that centered administrative authorities’ responsibility to respond to the problem, and the media and other sources also actively reflected that tone. At this time, one finds experts enthusiastically quoted as arguing “criminal administrative negligence” in the same breath as “lonely death.” Lines like “a modern-day *Ubasuteyama*”<sup>11</sup> by administrators,” show how lonely death discourse was being thoroughly spoken of within the greater context of institutions and government administration.<sup>12</sup> In regard to the deaths in Kitakyushu, the lonely death discourse associated with welfare/institutions was unfolding in a typical fashion, incorporating ideas such as the need to “rectify welfare services and construct a public safety net for economic poverty” (Matsumiya 2012, 17).

Yet still this narrative was unable to stake its place at the heart of lonely death discourse. What predominated the discourse on lonely death in the 2000s was the frame of community, centered on the narrative of lonely deaths in publicly

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8. For instance, “Otōto ga ‘kodokushi’” (2012).

9. This refers to deaths of starvation that occurred in Kitakyushu’s Yahatahigashi Ward (January 7, 2005), Moji Ward (May 23, 2006), and Kokurakita Ward (July 10, 2007). As these deaths became framed as lonely deaths, they prompted a strong rebuke of welfare administrators. For more on the starvation deaths in Kitakyushu, see Soeda (2013).

10. Originally military terminology, *mizugiwa sakusen* refers to a strategy of taking on enemies attempting to invade by sea before they are able to reach land. When used in the context of welfare administration in Japan, it refers to not processing basic livelihood (welfare) applications of those seeking them or turning them away.

11. *Ubasuteyama* refers to a practice of taking aging or infirm parents to a remote mountain and leaving them to die.

12. “Dansei no kodokushi” (2006), “Kyūshū to Okinawa” (2015).

owned apartment complexes (*danchi*). To borrow the words of Matsumiya Ashita, the “lonely death in apartment complex” discourse regarding the lonely deaths in Kitakyushu contributed to the “simultaneous wane of the viewpoint of economic poverty and the close-up on ‘poverty of relationships,’ reinforcing the tendency to underline the ‘reconstruction of relations’” (Matsumiya 2012, 17).

With the demolition of temporary housing that had been put up in the wake of the Great Hanshin Earthquake, 2000 marked the start of a period of stability in terms of disaster reconstruction. It was at this same time that the existence of the “problem” of lonely deaths related to temporary housing began to fade. What had lent lonely deaths in apartment complexes, instead of those in temporary housing, tangibility as a problem was the series of cases that started making headlines in the early 2000s. As shown by the massive impact generated by a TV documentary broadcast on NHK in 2005 titled *Alone in a Room of an Apartment Complex* (*Hitori danchi no isshitsu de*) that dealt with lonely deaths in Tokiwadaira Danchi, an apartment complex in Chiba Prefecture (Sasaki and NHK Supesharu Shuzai Han 2007), such deaths in apartment complexes served as a direct trigger for increasing the general public’s interest in the phenomena of lonely death.

In particular, with a success story of responding to lonely death based on the local community being highlighted, the apartment complex discourse that emerged in the early 2000s with response to cases in Tokiwadaira Danchi performed a substantial role in stirring up public interest in lonely deaths. Once an object of desire, the apartment complex had by this time become emblematic of issues of obsolescence and aging, and provided a potent look at the dark side of Japanese society as it faced unprecedented population aging. In this way, “lonely deaths in apartment complexes” transcended the idea of the apartment complex to have a broader bearing.

While it is true that the discourse on lonely deaths in temporary disaster relief housing following the Great Hanshin Earthquake opened the public’s eyes to the idea that they, too, could end up dying a lonely death, there was still an understanding of lonely death as not a routine type of death, but one associated with “exceptional circumstances,” such as a disaster. What transformed “exceptional circumstances” into “universal” ones was precisely the discourse associated with lonely deaths in apartment complexes. The fact that lonely deaths were routinely occurring in the most everyday of spaces could be said to have greatly minimized the psychological distance people felt towards lonely death. As narratives about lonely deaths in apartment complexes became widespread across the media, they lent strength to the lonely death discourse that orbited around community.

This community discourse came to occupy a central position in policy discussion as well, with the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's 2007 measures for addressing lonely deaths putting restoration of the community at the top of the priority list. Such a discourse flowed into the "relationless society" discourse that took Japan by storm after the broadcast of *Relationless Society: 32,000 Shocking Deaths of the Relationless* (*Muen shakai: "muenshi" sanman-nisenin no shōgeki*). The idea of the relationless society—in which an individual's blood ties (*ketsuen*), ties to their local-based community (*chien*), and ties to work (*shaen*) have become attenuated—became a sort of fad that spread across the country, forming the primary current of the anxiety arising from a loss of relationships and absence of social bonds. The Tōhoku Earthquake in 2011 functioned as a driving force for this shift.

The national disasters in the form of the magnitude-9.0 earthquake and tsunami, as well as the resultant nuclear meltdown, that hit Japan on March 11, 2011, provided the context for an explosion in narratives about the preciousness of solidarity and the bonds people share that cannot be bought with money among those living in Japan. The word *kizuna*, or "bond," became the most frequently invoked and stressed term in the wake of the earthquake,<sup>13</sup> and the continuous production/consumption via the media of this discourse narrativizing the hope about a revival of bonds further strengthened community discourse in association with lonely death. In this way, community discourse exists as a central discourse within the wider discourse on lonely death, and is a crucial factor characterizing the development of the phenomenon of lonely death in Japan.

Of course, there have always been narrative forms besides community discourse in the development of the discourse on lonely death in Japan, like discourses concerning welfare/institutions and individualization. However, community discourse prevailed over other discourses in the end, claiming a central position in lonely death discourse. To this day, community discourse rules when it comes to lonely death discourse, and shows little sign of abdicating.

## Community Discourse and the Establishment of Lonely Death Policy

Community discourse associated with lonely death was vitally influential to the appearance of policy on lonely death in Japan. The discourse functioned as a

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13. *Kizuna* was selected as "*kanji* of the year" in Japan in 2011.

particularly decisive catalyst in the “Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention”<sup>14</sup> formalized by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2007.

Since discourse on lonely death first emerged, policies addressing lonely death have long existed in Japan as a part of welfare policy for aging citizens. However, the epithet “lonely death” only first began to appear in official policymaking agency documents in the early 2000s (*Shakaiteki na Engo o Yōsuru Hitobito ni Taisuru Shakai Fukushima no Arikata ni Kansuru Kentōkai* 2000, 3). As discussed in the previous section, it was around this time that community discourse focused on lonely deaths in apartment complexes began to determine lonely death discourse in Japan. In fact, the Tokiwadaira Danchi residents’ association—a demonstrative subject in lonely deaths in apartment complexes—played the biggest role at the time of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare’s establishment of policy explicitly addressing lonely death. In August 2006, the residents’ association and the complex’s local social welfare council’s petitions against the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare was a direct contributing factor to the ministry’s “Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention.”

In response to the petitions filed against it, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare joined with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, among other agencies, to explore comprehensive measures for remedying the lonely death problem and carrying out pilot projects. This was pursued under the name “Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention” (also “Zero Isolated Deaths Project,” or *Koritsushi Zero Projekuto*), and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare set aside 172.95 million yen in the 2007 elderly welfare budget (proposal). This was, in short, the first time the Japanese government pursued policy clearly aimed at lonely death.

For the “Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention,” Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare launched the “The Conference on Creating the Community Where the Elderly Can Live at Ease on Their Own (Toward ‘Zero’ Lonely Deaths)” (hereafter Community Creation Conference) via the National Long-Term Care Insurance/Elderly Public Health Welfare Manager Meeting. In a series of four meetings between August 2007 and March 2008, this Community Creation Conference debated the primary orientation and content that would

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14. Rather than “lonely death,” this project uses the term “isolated death” (*koritsushi*). Reflecting an intent to use a concept that can be looked into “objectively” rather than a subjective or sentimental one, the term is generally preferred by Japan’s administrative agencies over lonely death. However, because it too lacks a clear definition, a mix of both “lonely death” and “isolated death” are used in official Japanese government documents.

make up Japan's lonely death policy. Numerous government bureaus and related agencies, as well as independent organizations, took part in these meetings and reported on local governments' response cases and various pilot projects that took place across the nation in relation to measures to address lonely death.<sup>15</sup>

The final report that came out after these four meetings considered lonely death as injurious to human dignity and argued, "In order to prevent in advance the tragedy of 'lonely death' that is an affront to human dignity, the issue of 'solitary' people who have fallen into 'loneliness' while living alone must be relieved." To do so, they argue, there is a need to "establish social relations and interpersonal relations of any form in the local area to ensure that these people living 'solitary lives' do not fall into isolation," claiming that "unearthing the sense of community that has declined in local areas and revitalizing it is of utmost import" (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2008a, 11). In proposing communities aimed at preventing lonely death, this final report suggests making communities centered on relieving isolation and highly sensitive communities/dynamic networks. At the same time, it underscores the need to consider "Operation Zero Lonely Death" as part and parcel with measures for addressing elderly abuse and dementia, and moreover disaster prevention measures. Finally, it stresses various means for the lonely death prevention networks and the development and continued management of a monitoring system (12-19).

The long list of initiatives reviewed during the process of policy formation at the time and those carried out across the country after the policy was put in place, with the exception of those aimed at collecting data on the situation and raising awareness, generally focused on monitoring work and the construction of a wellness check (and emergency contact) system using local community resources, and laying the groundwork for forming relationships that could reduce the sense of isolation for those at risk of lonely death.<sup>16</sup>

In short, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's lonely death policy explicitly aligned around the keywords of "local area," "local region," and "community," an orientation that has consistently undergirded lonely death-associated policy in Japan. This was a direct reflection of the discourse that saw the lonely death issue as the fruit of attenuated interpersonal relations and the disintegration (or absence) of the community, the fundamental answer to which was the recovery of relations, and the reconstruction of the community that can enable

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15. In particular, the head of the Tokiwadaira Danchi residents' association at the time, Nakazawa Takumi, took part in these meetings, where they reported on measures for lonely deaths in apartment complexes.

16. This is made clear in the 279 cases listed in the "Current Status of Policy for Preventing Isolated Death" in Kōsei Rōdōshō (2008a, 32-37) and Kōsei Rōdōshō (2013).

the recovery of relations.

## Thoughts on Community Discourse: The Case of the Tokiwadaira Danchi Apartment

The story of the Tokiwadaira Danchi apartment was the starting point and central locus of attention directed toward lonely deaths in apartment complexes in 2000s Japan. The impassioned lonely death response strategy, that the apartment's residents' association played a central role in, came to be considered an important model of success for dealing with lonely death. Widespread media attention on the case spread the story. This apartment complex circumstance is a central factor that cannot be left out from the discussion on lonely deaths at apartment complexes. Moreover, the case became a "symbolic story" in the lonely death discourse that orbited around community.

In the sense that most of the activities that took place at the complex were reflected as-is in the government's policy project that followed, it can reasonably be argued that the case was considered a desirable model for success when it came to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's formulation of policy. It is necessary to delve into the story of the Tokiwadaira Danchi case because if there are limitations made apparent by the case's narrative, then these limitations are also inherent in Japan's policy orientation on lonely death.

### 1. Tokiwadaira Danchi as a Dispatch Tower

In the over half-century since it was erected, the Tokiwadaira Danchi (as well as other apartment complexes) has transformed into something different from its original form. As shown by the term "*danchizoku*" (apartment tribe)<sup>17</sup> that appeared in Japan's white paper on the economy in 1960—when Tokiwadaira Danchi's first residents moved in—relatively high-income young families made up the majority of residents, making it an object of envy in the local area. But as time passed, the building aged, as did its residents. By the 2000s, the complex had transformed into a space characterized by an increase in vulnerable populations: seniors, single-person families,<sup>18</sup> and those reliant on public

17. Japan's economic white paper for 1960 summarizes *danchizoku* in the following way: typically young tenants, often small families with dual earners, who tend to have higher incomes than their peers, working at first-rate companies or government offices; intelligentsia, salarymen.

18. In 2007, the proportion of residents of Tokiwadaira Danchi over sixty-five was 29.2 percent, far exceeding the proportion of Matsudo City in general (17.6 percent). In particular, the proportion

assistance. While it must be acknowledged that this change itself has a level of correlation with the occurrence of lonely deaths, the reason that the apartment complex caught the public's attention was that it served as a dispatch center, providing information and a space for discussion on lonely death.

Two lonely deaths at the Tokiwadaira Danchi—one in 2001, found three years after death, another in 2002, found four months after death—served as impetus for the complex organizing its efforts around the lonely death issue. While there is a general tendency to be opaque about lonely deaths when they occur in communal dwellings, making talk of it taboo, the Tokiwadaira Danchi chose to tackle the problem head-on (Nakazawa 2008a, 14). That is, the apartment's residents' association volunteered itself to play the role of dispatch center, widely sharing information on lonely death and building a place of lively discussion.

On July 17, 2022, three months after a lonely death case, the apartment complex held the "First Symposium for Thinking About 'Lonely Death.'" This marked the start of its place as a continued source of discussion on the lonely death problem. Moreover, lectures, interviews, and books, by the leader of the residents' association, Nakazawa Takumi, brought the case to the attention of more members of the public and media platforms. This work was sharply angled at transmitting information to government administrators as well. It could be argued that the work had a not-so-insignificant part in prompting the public release of data on lonely deaths in 2004 as a result of active call for disclosure related to the 2002 survey on lonely deaths in Matsudo City, the two rounds of petitions to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2005 and 2006, and the case report on the response to the lonely deaths at the Tokiwadaira apartment by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2007 (Nakazawa 2008b, 33), and thus had a pivotal role in the central government and prefectural governments paying keener attention to the issue of lonely death.

The response to lonely deaths at the Tokiwadaira Danchi is introduced in the 2006 Local Welfare Plan for Matsudo as well as the Chiba Prefecture Elderly Health and Welfare Plan (2006-2008). Furthermore, it is referenced as a model in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's "Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention," and reflected without modification in the ministry's 2008 report proposing a concerted effort be made on the creation of prevention-oriented communities. The real-life work done at this one apartment complex—offering information, a "greeting movement," an "*iki iki* salon" that fosters inter-

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of single-person households that were sixty-five or older was around 27.9 percent (Takao 2008, 29-30).



personal relationships between local residents, and constructing a monitoring system that included creating an emergency hotline for lonely death (#110), safety registration card system—can all be seen as the core elements of the ministry’s “Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention” that sought to induce revitalization/bolstering of local communities.

Of course, it is difficult to call monitoring activities and projects like the “*iki iki* salon” unique to the Tokiwadaira Danchi, as they had been continuously implemented elsewhere as well.<sup>19</sup> Therefore what is key when exploring how Tokiwadaira’s response came to be considered a success story is not each individual program enacted, but the subject that led and enacted the programs, as well as their understanding of the programs’ objectives.

## 2. Internal Characteristics of the Tokiwadaira Danchi Case

Of the main pillars of the response to the lonely death at Tokiwadaira Danchi—apartment complex’s residents’ association, the local social welfare council, and the community welfare commissioner—the residents’ association was the most essential. No discussion of the association’s activities can be complete without mentioning its leader, Nakazawa Takumi. Most of those involved would not deny that had Nakazawa, who had a major hand in all the association’s activities and wielded considerable influence, not been there, no activities that are considered successes today, including Operation Zero Lonely Death, would have been able to succeed. What is important to point out here is that *indeed* had he not been involved, none of these efforts would have succeeded. That is to say, at the heart of the Tokiwadaira Danchi’s success was not an impersonal, abstract system, but an extremely arbitrary and personal element.

Tokiwadaira Danchi’s residents’ association launched in 1962, two years after the first residents moved into the complex, and remains active to this day. A founding member, Nakazawa was first appointed as the association’s president in 1978 and served off and on for more than thirty years until 2017,<sup>20</sup> making him truly a living witness of the apartment’s residents’ association and an emblematic figure. One of the primary activities of the association was the publication of a monthly newsletter called *Tokiwadaira*, which printed its first issue in

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19. For instance, the *fureai-iki iki saron* (lively contact salon) was proposed by the Japan National Council of Social Welfare in 1994, and was enacted in 1996. By 2001, there were already 19,647 such salons across the country (Kuroiwa 2008, 75).

20. After resigning from his post as president of the residents’ association in November 2017, Nakazawa Takumi took on a new active role as advisor to the residents’ association based on the decision of the complex’s residents’ association in 2018.

June 1962 and continues to be published to this day.<sup>21</sup> This too can be considered a product of/by Nakazawa. Until his retirement at age fifty-four in 1984, Nakazawa worked at the *Sankei Newspaper* (*Sankei shinbun*). He continued to serve as editor-in-chief of Funabashi's town gazette, *Monthly My Funabashi*, after his retirement. One could argue that his career background was a major factor in the continuous publication of his apartment complex's residents' association newsletter. Flipping through the majority of past issues of *Tokiwadaira*, one will find the pages filled with articles authored by Nakazawa himself.

All the lectures at universities across the nation, interviews with media, written works, petitions, and case reports about Tokiwadaira happened on account of Nakazawa, and exceeded the scope of the job description of president of the residents' association. But this was not all that was dependent on Nakazawa the man. As the #110 lonely death hotline plainly shows, this work led to a substantial loss of personal privacy: The first contact number in the call tree for the hotline was not to the residents' association office, the UR (Urban Renaissance Agency), or the police—it was Nakazawa's personal phone number. This included not only his office number at the *Monthly My Funabashi*, but his own home phone number for any calls that may come outside of working hours.

The indivisibility of the residents' association, the local social welfare council, and the community welfare commission also illustrates the unavoidable way the human factors of personal sacrifice and strong will accompanied the work. Judging that sharing the task and common understanding was crucial, the method that Nakazawa put forth was one of all actors performing multiple roles. The president of the residents' association also served as the director-general of the local social welfare council, and the other high-ranking members of the residents' association moonlighted as directors of the local social welfare council, while the chairperson of the local social welfare council served as deputy commissioner of the complex's community welfare commission and deputy president of the residents' association. Meanwhile the director of the lonely death prevention center was on the board of the community welfare commission and the complex's residents' association, and members of the community welfare commission/children's commission were required to serve on the board of the residents' association.

Setting aside an assessment of the outcomes, there is certainly a decent amount of doubt as to whether this situation of having individuals work as part

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21. Tokiwadaira's residents' association was given a commendation by the Minister of Internal Affairs and Communication in 2009, with its newsletter's contributions to community/local revitalization being listed alongside their "Operation Zero Lonely Death" and "*iki iki* salon" as reasons for the honor (Shimizu 2017, 25).

of myriad organizations truly constitutes “connection” in the strict sense. One struggles to eliminate concerns as to whether a type of management reliant on such methods is sustainable. The activities of the Tokiwadaira Danchi’s residents’ association were not simply the activities of a residents’ association, but involved taking on a variety of other roles as well. While the road to success may be smooth so long as there are people glad and willing to take up such roles, the fact is that in a reality of intensified aging and individualization, it is difficult to be so optimistic that this will continue to be the case. This reality festers behind the surface of Nakazawa’s need to author articles for print in the newsletter and spearhead so many efforts as the president of the residents’ association even well into his eighties. The exceptional abilities and passion of human resources deserve the highest praise. At the same time, the fact that already aging people are still active on the front lines of the issue means that there is no one to take their place.

It cannot be denied that having a powerful and passionate figure to get things done is a huge asset for work in responding to lonely death. But Tokiwadaira’s success story cannot be reduced to simply the presence of such human factors. Had there been no heightened collective consciousness among residents, the success of their activities could not be guaranteed by personal charisma alone. In this sense, Tokiwadaira Danchi had its own special story.

Unlike the majority of old public housing in Japan, which features a mix of rental properties and owner occupancy, all units in the Tokiwadaira Danchi apartment were leased to tenants. When considered in concert with the class characteristics displayed by the apartment’s first tenants, it could be argued that there was a sort of common ground among residents from the outset that served to enhance a common consciousness among the residents. But there is another context that contributed to the strong collective consciousness among residents even as they aged and the makeup of residents changed over time. Primarily, the accumulation of collective experiences, such as their shared struggles against rent increases and opposition to redevelopment must be considered.

The residents’ initiation of a lawsuit against their landlord in 1988 was significant in that bolstered the solidarity and community organization of the residents through the resulting trial. The “rent trial” (*yachin saiban*), as it became known, began in December 1988, when Nakazawa was elected president of the residents’ association for the first time in a decade. He and three other residents of the apartment complex argued that a rent increase was wrongful and filed a written complaint against the housing corporation. This was the first movement against rent hikes that took the form of residents’ suing their housing corporation in Japan. The fight lasted nearly four years, starting with the first

proceedings held in February 1989.

Ultimately, the court ruled against the residents' association in September 1992, but in 1991 Nakazawa and six others launched another case arguing the "right to *danchi* life" in regard to the housing corporation's rent hikes that did not take into account the reality of its aging and low-income residents. Until another verdict ruling against the residents' association in February 1997, this case, known as the "welfare trial" (*fukushi saiban*), was part of a long-term, continuous movement of lawsuits by tenants. While ultimately the courts ruled against the residents' association in both cases, the lawsuits brought nationwide attention to the Tokiwadaira Danchi. An active relay of information to the complex's residents by the residents' association also had a major role in strengthening the complex's sense of community.

In contrast to the series of court cases, the anti-demolition/redevelopment movement at Tokiwadaira Danchi ended in a complete victory for the residents' association. The movement began with opposition to plans to demolish and reconstruct the apartment complex in the 1996 Comprehensive Plans for Matsudo, and the 1997 Matsudo Housing Master Plan. Intersecting with the vacant house problem (*akiya mondai*), this movement actively utilized the methods of signature collection, public forums, and protests in concert with other complexes.<sup>22</sup> The movement concluded when a memorandum was signed by the residents' association and the housing corporation on March 13, 2000, ultimately reopening applications to lease empty homes and moved to carry out a total review of reconstruction plans. When one considers that redevelopment has weakened existing interpersonal ties in apartment complexes in numerous cases, Tokiwadaira's blocking of reconstruction should be considered significant for maintaining strong solidarity in the complex.

The tight-knit collective consciousness and networks fostered by these sorts of collective experiences bled into the complex's Operation Zero Lonely Deaths, forming the critical foundation from which to build. Among the factors behind the success of the lonely death strategy were the powerful actor formed through homogenous and human relations in the shape of the residents' association, and the existence of a corresponding powerfully bonded collective.

What is noteworthy here is that the characteristics shown in Tokiwadaira Danchi's story are fairly dissimilar from the universal characteristics of what is considered a community in the space-time of modernity. It would be unrea-

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22. In regard to the housing corporation stopping seeking new tenants for empty homes in a scheme of preparing for reconstruction, Nakazawa argued that this would hurt residents by leading to wrongful rent increases, responding by filing for indemnification of loss from empty homes (*akiya sonshitsu hoten*) worth nineteen million yen (Öyama 2008, 74-75).

sonable, if not impossible, to expect every community to have a figure like Nakazawa. Once more it would be a stretch to say most apartment complexes have the same sorts of shared collective experiences as Tokiwadaira. The story of Tokiwadaira Danchi is, in this sense, a perfect piece of bait for the community discourse that is hungry for a success story associated with the revitalization of communities. But upon closer examination, Tokiwadaira's story is an utterly exceptional case of community revitalization. It must not be overlooked that such exceptional successes often highlight ordinary failures.

Put differently, the story of Tokiwadaira Danchi ironically enough exposes the failings of community discourse. The apartment complex's story tells us that without powerful human actors willing to give up all sense of personal privacy and without a community with strong solidarity bonding it together, no efforts to revitalize a community are guaranteed to succeed. In other words, Tokiwadaira demonstrates the paradox that it takes a community to create a community. To integrate Tokiwadaira's exceptional story with community discourse would be a common logical fallacy. When such community discourse is applied to general cases, it will only consist of empty practices due to a lack of such exceptional qualities.

## **Orientations of Japan's Welfare Policy for the Elderly**

The implementation of the "Project for Promoting Isolated Death Prevention" is mentioned as an area of the "Health and Welfare of Elderly people" section of the *2008 Annual Report on Japan's Aging Society* (*kōrei shaki hakusho*), with "lonely death" (isolated death) consistently appearing in white papers since. This shows lonely death to have a clear place as an independent subdivision of welfare for the elderly. Additionally, as the 2008 report by the Community Creation Conference shows, lonely death policy underscored "making communities" and brought the keyword of "regional welfare" to the forefront. These characteristics are confirmed by a report submitted by the "Meeting for Study about the way of Community-based Welfare in the Future"—which was founded at the same time as the Community Creation Conference—around the same time (March 2008). This report suggests "creating communities to prevent isolation among the elderly," echoing the conclusion reached by the Community Creation Conference (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2008b). Such characteristics have remained present in the policies associated with lonely death that have been enacted since 2008.

The policy direction that stresses local areas and communities, as well as placing expectations on them as agents of welfare, is not limited to policy for

preventing lonely death by aging individuals, but continues to be a central pillar of overall welfare policy for the elderly (and welfare policy in general) in 2022.<sup>23</sup> Following its establishment in 2000, the long-term care insurance system has maintained a central position in Japan's welfare policy for the elderly, and the main community-oriented initiatives in the 2007 "Project for Promoting Lonely Death Prevention" are reproduced nearly word-for-word in the long-term care insurance system as part of the project of preventing citizens from falling into a state necessitating long-term care.

In the pursuit of these policies, community discourse has been utilized as a useful resource lending legitimacy to policy. But, as the Tokiwadaira case shows, community discourse inherently carries liability that can rock the basis of this justification. Initiatives taken in the name of "creating communities" often fall into the paradoxical trap of needing extremely "community-based" factors in order to succeed.

Tokiwadaira's Operation Zero Lonely Death and other similar responses have been highlighted as models for community-based solutions. The apartment complex's activities, in fact, had a direct effect on the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's formulation of policy in 2007. Amid a situation in local communities characterized by a decrease in apartment dwellers joining their complex's residents' association and the aging of members of the residents' associations' boards, it is unreasonable to expect that residents' associations all act like the Tokiwadaira Danchi example. It is even more unreasonable to expect that each association has the type of charismatic figurehead that Nakazawa was at Tokiwadaira. Nor can we say that it is common for a community to have the sort of exceptional collective experiences that residents of Tokiwadaira had. Community is certainly not something that can easily be whipped up by a policy initiative, nor can it be commodified. Contrary to the intent, the cases that community discourse mobilizes show how difficult it is to solve problems via community revitalization at the current moment in time.

The problem posed by discourse becoming blended with policy is that the weaknesses of discourse do not end in mere "stories" of failure—the problematic nature inherent in a discourse can have tangible consequences in the lives of individuals. In his analysis of the "relationless society" discourse that made up part of community discourse in the wake of the Great Tohoku Earthquake, Ishida (2001, 21) points out that the discourse conceals the issue of social

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23. The *2022 Annual Report on the Aging Society* proposes the following as a fundamental direction for promoting measure for addressing Japan's aging society: "overhauling the foundations of life in local areas and creating local communities that one can envision living in at any stage of aging in life" (Naikakufu 2022, 67).

exclusion and reduces the crux of the problem to the dimension of interpersonal relations, and argues that this logic runs the risk of propagating an idea of self-responsibility.<sup>24</sup> When we consider this in relation to the development of Japan's welfare system for the elderly, it appears Ishida's concerns are being borne out.

In the repeated process of revising the long-term care insurance system, for instance, the consistent orientation has stressed "inclusive local long-term care" and "long-term care prevention." This project of "preventing long-term care" has included multiple initiatives with a community-oriented nature. But this thought process of "prevention" in the medical/health field illustrates an idea of self-responsibility that emphasizes individual effort and accountability in Japan's policy discourse.<sup>25</sup> When it comes to elderly care, by encouraging seniors to preemptively manage themselves so that they do not end up needing critical long-term care that is fiscally burdensome to the state, this stress on "prevention" provides leeway to pin the blame for a rise in long-term care levels on personal irresponsibility in self-management.

Moreover, a 2014 revision to the long-term care system exempted certain community-tied services (home visit care and day care, the two largest benefit expenditures) from covered services, replacing them with a "long-term care prevention/comprehensive daily life support program" run as a local welfare project. This consequently engendered situations in which seniors had to submit to a lower quality of care or be forced to pay big sums out of pocket. This served to increase the burden on the nearly one million Japanese seniors and their families that had taken advantage of the existing services (Miyamoto 2016, 26).

In addition, the policy course of "local society of harmonious coexistence" that has been pushed all across welfare policy in Japan should be considered a very typical form of the subtle discourse of self-responsibility using the language of community discourse. The concept of the "local society of harmonious coexistence" is established in the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare's "Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens," proposed by a Cabinet decision in June 2016. This concept is explained as aimed at "a society in which each resident's life and hopes are made in concert with the local community, by having local residents and diverse actors take part in and take ownership of [local

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24. The numerous testimonies that appear in NHK Supesharu Shuzai Han (2010) also take on a typical form, starting off by pointing out problems with social securities and other systemic issues before ultimately arriving at a problem of an interpersonal nature.

25. For instance, the 1956 *Annual Health, Labour and Welfare Report* stresses that one "must absolutely not become indolent in efforts to maintain and enhance one's health," hinting that the Japanese government's health-associated discourse had its foundation in the self-responsibility discourse ever since the 1950s (Kōseishō 1956).

affairs], linking people with people and nature, transcending generation and categories altogether” (Kōsei Rōdōshō “Waga Koto-Marugoto” Chiiki Kyōsei Shakai Jitsugen Honbu 2017, 2). The flip side of this type of wording is that responsibility for issues in local life are being “altogether” placed on the shoulders of local residents, muddying the responsibility of the central and local governments.

When it comes to welfare for the elderly, the vision of community sought by local welfare of having “seniors caring [for themselves], not being cared for” is precisely the vision of the “local society of harmonious coexistence.” That is, the primary systems and thought processes dominating welfare for the elderly in Japan today appear to dredge up pleasant-sounding discursive resources about local society and communities and stress/expect these sorts of roles to be played by the local societies/communities. But the burden of gratifying these expectations ultimately is falling on individual Japanese seniors. This is perhaps simply another form of “personal responsibility discourse” directed at the individual in the name of self-reliance and self-help, simply adapted and amplified under the pretense of local society and community.

In such a situation, Japanese seniors who need care, as well as those who do not, are likely to feel increasingly burdened in their daily lives. If the responsibility for “creating” a community in which the elderly can live at ease and “creating” a community in which no one dies a lonely death ultimately falls to the individual, what do the labels of “success” or “failure” mean for policies that rely on this individual effort, if success is even feasible at all? Japan will have to consider these sorts of challenging questions about the direction of its welfare for the elderly.

## Conclusion

Faced with a problem of diminished interpersonal relations and breakdown of bonds tying people to one another, the idea that recovering these relationships and reconnecting and bolstering the bonds between people will solve the issue, while perhaps superficial, is not inherently invalid. Revitalizing communities and recovering or rebuilding relationships may indeed contribute to decreasing the number of deaths that are deemed “lonely.” One may at very least argue that doing so is a boon for the discovery of such deaths. Additionally, it is undeniable that this method of recovering or rebuilding relationships can succeed if efforts are made. The chief question here is how possible such efforts are.

The true lesson of the cases referred to as successful responses to the lonely



death phenomenon is that so long as a community has agents willing to display astounding devotion, these sorts of efforts may be successful—the irony being that in order for such forceful agents to exist, there must already be a strong baseline of solidarity and social bonds. The other issue is that even with such agents, their successes, if they achieve them, are bound to be limited.

The lonely death phenomenon encompasses all social circumstances an individual is located within, both before and after death. It is easy, however, for this approach of building relationships to focus only on the occurrence of death itself. That is, raising the interconnectedness of relationships and creating a revitalized community can contribute to identifying abnormalities in a timely manner when they occur and save people at death's door. It may even succeed in discovering deaths relatively quickly when they do unfortunately occur. However, whatever the case may be, these successes are only limited to the aspect of lonely death concerning “death” itself. They have little to do with success when it comes to the state of “having no choice but to die alone,” rather than simply “death.”

Turned on its head, to call the idea that an individual is forced to die alone a problem is to say that there is a problem with an individual living alone. This is a common factor generally shared among those who die what are considered lonely deaths. “Lonely death” is merely a label placed on the deaths that follow problems in life: falling into economic crisis upon losing a job or facing unstable employment, being unable to access proper medical services despite having (physical or mental) health problems, being incapable of having a family (for any number of reasons, including those above) or being cut off from family via divorce or other circumstances and having to live alone. This is to say, doing away with the “death” of it all fails to resolve the problems of life, and in fact this eschewal of death constitutes a continuance of problems of life. It is doubtful that the difficulties in life of those who end up dying in this way or are at risk of doing so fall within the jurisdiction of problems that can be solved by their community.

It is difficult to assess just what sorts of effects responses have had on the increase in lonely deaths when there is no unified, clear indicator of lonely death. But at the current point in time, one would struggle to find anyone of the opinion that lonely deaths are on the decline in Japan.<sup>26</sup> That is, while there may be a need to be careful when judging whether a policy is a success or failure, the reality is that more than a decade after the Ministry of Health, Labour and

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26. The 2022 edition of the Annual Report on the Aging Society, published by the Cabinet Office in June 2022, states that “cases thought to be isolated deaths” are on the rise with each passing year.

Welfare enacted its policy in 2007, there has been no change is the level of concern and calls for a resolution to the problem. This is perhaps the greatest indicator of a need to revisit the direction of measure to address the issue.

It is no easy task to delineate the relationship of discourse and policy, and is even more so the case when it comes to complex policies like welfare in which a myriad of disparate factors are intertwined. This is perhaps why there have been so few attempts to approach the issue of welfare from the framework of discourse. This paper, too, has merely exposed the limitations and remaining tasks to conclude with questions about the fitness of community discourse. But when we consider the community orientation that has touched all policy related to Japan's seniors, such questions may be more necessary than ever.

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