Research Report

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Title of Research:
Explaining youth social exclusion and ‘independence support’ in Japan: A comparative perspective
日本における若年の社会的排除及び「自立支援」の比較社会政策的研究

Purpose of Research:
The primary purpose of my PhD thesis (written between October 2006 and September 2009) is to explain the emergence of ‘youth independence support policy’ in Japan in the mid-2000s with particular reference to the role of ‘NEET’ as a social policy category. The second purpose of the thesis is to scrutinise the shape and mechanisms of youth exclusion in Japan. The thesis moreover builds a basis for critical and well-informed comparative research into Japanese youth inclusion policy.

My thesis is especially important as it addresses a vacuum in serious research amid a rising interest in both Japanese youth and youth exclusion more generally. Very little was previously known about the nature of youth exclusion at the edges of mainstream society in East Asia, so my work has made a major contribution to the field for this reason alone. One additional important purpose of my thesis is to contribute to youth policy making in Japan and abroad, though this may take some time to unfold.

Content/Methodology of Research:

Though not its only strength, my thesis benefits tremendously from a three-level design whereby the dimensions of media (the ‘NEET’ debate), policy-making (the making of youth policies within the government), and support practice are observed first separately and then together. The ‘NEET’ debate was scrutinized through a media content analysis of key books and newspaper articles on the Asahi and Nikkei newspapers as well as via interviews with scholars and practitioners. Policy-making was examined through repeated interviews with the chief of the Career Keisei Shienshitsu of the MHLW, officials at the Japan Productivity Centre for Socio-Economic Development (I also held an important interview with a former jimujikan of the MHLW). While receiving guidance from scholars such as Genda Yuji and Miyamoto Michiko, I visited altogether 14 sites of youth support across Japan, though I focused on two sites in Yokohama that I visited around 15 times each.

Conclusion/Observation:

One of the key observations that arose from the juxtaposition of media debates, policy-making and policy practice was that there were significant discrepancies between these levels: while portrayed mainly negatively in the media, Japanese ‘NEETs’ were largely treated sympathetically by key bureaucrats within the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and actual practices at sites of youth support – in this case, Youth Independence Camps and Youth Support Stations - were found to be decidedly ‘youth-friendly’. What emerges is in fact a process by which youth policy transforms as it travels from the general ‘youth problem debate’ through policy-making to implementation. This implies that we cannot judge or evaluate policy by its public representations only: it is necessary to conduct long-term field research that goes beyond one-dimensional data on (short-term) employment outcomes (就職率). Sadly, the recent government re-evaluations of its programmes (known as 仕分け) failed to do just this and the state has decided to seize funding the Youth Independence Camp.
However, perhaps the most significant argument my thesis makes is that, first, the ‘NEETs’ supported at new youth centres around Japan are indeed not the ‘most excluded’ youth in the country as they come from the edges of the middle class. Second, such youth are nevertheless facing a real risk of ‘exclusion’ and ejection from the middle-class due to *new social incapacities*. At firsts blush, the data gathered via fieldwork implies that these ‘incapacities’ derive from the presence of a disability, learning disorder or mental illness. But this is not really convincing since such issues did not appear to lead to youth exclusion in the immediate past (also, the medicalisation of such presumed conditions is of very recent vintage). Rather, a structural analysis of labour market changes reveals that certain sectors – family and self-employment as well as employment in manufacturing – have declined rapidly as service-sector employment has increased since the 1990s. As also suggested by youth support staff interviews, this indicates that the Japanese society’s ability to absorb or shelter (if you will) youth not oriented towards service-sector jobs has decreased significantly. At the same time, precarious labour and health-damaging working conditions have spread due to deregulation, complicating matters further. The result is that a layer of young adults in the middle class who have experienced difficult or ‘non-standard’ socialisation trajectories now face a higher risk of being expunged from middle class status. What makes such downgrading particularly painful is not the prospect of poverty alone, but the fact that it violates middle-class norms and expectations internalized by both at-risk youth as well as their parents (indeed, ‘exclusion’ in the sense discussed here would not be a major moral concern for working class members not imbued with similar expectations). So, through navigating through and grappling with this complex set of issues, and through a detailed examination of policy as well as social change, my thesis ultimately winds up addressing the transformation of mainstream Japan, or more accurately, the changing conditions of middle-class membership in Japan.