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(Dis)Connections and Silence: Experiences of Family and Part-time Work in Japan

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ABSTRACT

Doing work that is characterized by instability and low incomes, Japanese male part-time workers often remain in the natal home well into adulthood even in cases where there is considerable discord and where familial bonds are strained or complicated. Through detailed case studies this article examines how, for some male part-time workers, a desire to disconnect from familial kin in the search for individual autonomy leads to the creation of alternative forms of relatedness. Meanwhile, for others, pressure to work in particular ways combined with the negotiations of complex family relationships – especially with (male) heads of households – contributes to alienation from family and society. Although work status is not the only cause of family strain, gendered work expectations and labour pressures considerably contribute to discord and can lead to significant experiences of social exclusion and disconnection from the family and wider society.

Introduction

My parents worry about me, about me not being a full-time worker. But, really, there is no such thing as stability at work anymore. I think working for a company for life doesn't really exist anymore. Work is more flexible [than when my parents were working]. So, they worry about what will happen in my future. All I can do is increase my knowledge, get skills, and try and make my own way. (29-year-old male freeter, 2010)

I wonder what freeters¹ are going to do, as they get older. Companies don't want to hire people in full-time jobs after the age of 35 if they don't have experience working full-time in another company. I keep telling my son that he has to find full-time work. I understand that he wants to do something that interests him, but I think he should take what he can, work a few years to get experience, be patient, and later move into something else. That will give him more opportunities. I think young people now expect too much from work. I didn't enjoy my job that much, but I kept at it. Now that I'm retired I can enjoy myself and do what I want. But I think young people want to enjoy all parts of their lives these days. I think it's not realistic. (62-year-old retired male, December 2010)

The above comments illustrate some of the tensions that exist between young part-time workers in their twenties and thirties and their parents' generation. It is perhaps tempting to look at these quotes and conclude that although employment conditions are changing, what we see is simply a case of generation gap. Indeed, parents (and older people) bemoaning the lives and choices of younger generations is hardly new.

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¹Freeters' are understood, at its simplest, as part-time workers (aged 15–34) who are not students or housewives. They are not entitled to paid holidays or sick leave.

However, looking at male freeters and their relationships with kin provides a compelling lens through which to explore how different generations are experiencing neoliberal employment reforms and ideologies in contemporary Japan, and the ways these changes are affecting familial relationships. Drawing upon research that first began in 2007 in Shizuoka Prefecture, this article focuses specifically on male part-time workers in order to clarify the ways gendered expectations of labour in a neoliberal Japan contribute to their historically specific social alienation and, for some, a lack of subjective well-being.²

Throughout the postwar period, expectations of male labour have been relatively stable and, for the middle classes at least, based largely on a notion of complementary incompetence: men have generally been expected to be the main breadwinner, with women expected to run the household domain whilst (perhaps) working part-time to supplement the family income.³ However, the gradual implementation of neoliberal economic policies since the mid-1980s has begun to destabilize the reality, if not the ideal, of a predominantly single-earner household.⁴ Workplace conditions that helped maintain the gendered division of labour – for example, ‘permanent’ employment, seniority-based wages, mandatory transfers, and long working hours on the one hand, and a flexible irregular labour sector dominated by female workers on the other – have also been changing as a result of the prolonged recession and labour law deregulation in 1998 and 2004.⁵ The loosening of workplace laws has allowed companies greater flexibility in hiring (and firing) irregular workers. These changes have considerably reshaped the employment sphere and opportunities, especially for the middle classes and for young male workers.⁶ Indeed, recent figures suggest that the irregular labour market now constitutes 38.2% of the workforce,⁷ and the percentage of male irregular workers continues to rise.⁸ This has led to concern about if and how men in such work can move into the full-time employment sphere as they age.

There have also been significant education reforms that have contributed to changing understandings of work and selfhood among young people. In particular, since the 1980s the Japanese government began stressing individuality (*kosei*) as a means to

²Well-being is a state that is both subjectively experienced and externally assessable. Objective factors such as access to resources, education, and employment affect well-being, as do subjective factors such as how individuals *feel* about their lives. See, for example, Ogilvie, cited in Mathews and Izquierdo, ‘Anthropology, Happiness, and Well-being’, 4–5. Furthermore, when we learn about how individuals ‘feel – about themselves in general, about relationships, institutions, processes, and events’, we are in fact learning about well-being; Thin, *Why Anthropology*, 30. In this article, well-being is understood as both subjective and socially mediated, with the focus primarily on family relationships and the institutions of gender and employment.

³Edwards, *Modern Japan Through its Weddings*, 120–25.

⁴Reitan argues that neoliberalism in the Japanese context has successfully used ideas of ‘middle-mass’ society (in which people are socially and economically equivalent) and *nihonjinron*-esque claims to cultural homogeneity as foils to both legitimize neoliberal policies and effectively mask social disparities; Reitan, *Narratives of Equivalence*, 44. Gradually, however, a discourse of the increasing gap between rich and poor has begun to permeate public consciousness. See for example, Yamada, *Kibō kakusa shakai*.

⁵The deregulation of labour laws that has allowed companies to hire part-time workers for more than the previous one-year fixed limit has been part of a strategy to increase the competitiveness of Japanese industry with relatively little consideration of how these changes would affect workers; Itoh, *Assessing Neoliberalism in Japan*, 244–45. Increased unemployment and a steep increase in numbers of irregular workers has been the result.

⁶These changes were largely concealed until debates about freeters and the increasing gap between rich and poor (*kakusa*) began to appear in the mass media throughout the 2000s. See for example, Miura, *Karyū shakai*; Yamada, *Kibō kakusa shakai*; and Genda, *Jūyonsai kara*.

⁷‘Hiseiki shain hiritsu 38.2%’.

⁸In 1990 the ratio of irregular labourers to regular employees was 18.8% (with males constituting 8.8%); Abe, ‘Hiseiki shain no kōzō henka’, 25. By 2006 this ratio was 33% (with males constituting 17.9%), and in 2012 it was 38.2%, with male figures at 22.1%; ‘Hiseiki shain hiritsu 38.2%’.

promote creativity.⁹ Since then debates have appeared in the media that indicate a greater emphasis on understanding the self as an individual. These include discourses related to ‘being yourself’ (*jibun rashisa*), ‘searching for yourself’ (*jibun sagashi*), and seeking ‘self-actualization’ (*jiko jitsugen*),¹⁰ all of which featured to varying degrees in the narratives of freeters I worked with (see below), tied up with narratives of work. This shift in the understanding of contemporary selfhood, as well as many young people’s apparent adoption of these ideas in relation to work, lifestyle and aspirations, has buttressed reforms that have made the employment environment more flexible. With the focus on selves as responsible individuals in charge of their own destiny and in pursuit of individual fulfilment, the onus is put on individuals to have the skills and creativity needed to navigate shifting employment waters.

Despite these neoliberal logics of independent self-actualization that encourage youth to take control of their own destinies, interpersonal connections remain important in the workforce. Indeed, surveys by the Japan Institute of Labour indicate that those freeters who successfully move into full-time employment often get their chance as a result of networks created via relatives and friends.¹¹ In this article, I suggest that different generational understandings of economic, employment, and education reforms lead in some cases to significant familial strain, discord and disconnectedness. This often undermines the very thing needed to find secure work: connections.¹² Family relationships thus provide us a lens through which to understand how neoliberal employment reforms are being lived and experienced by part-time workers.

Methodology

Thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork were conducted in Shizuoka Prefecture between August 2006 and September 2007. During that time I spent nine months working with self-identified freeters and student part-time workers at a nine-screen cinema, and the same amount of time with a NEET NPO which helped young people who were Not in Education Employment or Training to find employment – often part-time. In addition, semi-formal interviews were done with 42 freeters (who at the time ranged from 19 to 40 years of age), and 29 non-freeters (aged from 22 to 64). Follow-ups were conducted yearly between 2009 and 2011 and then in 2013. As noted above, freeters are usually understood to be between the ages of 15 and 34, and although I used this as a general rule I have also included men who were above 34 if they personally identified as a freeter.

⁹Ho, *Private Love in Public Space*, 33.

¹⁰Ibid., and Cave, *Educational Reform in Japan in the 1990s*, 173–91. Kariya argues that young people’s desire to find work that is interesting and meaningful to them is the result of an education system that now teaches young people to look for such work; Kariya, ‘Wakamono yo’.

¹¹Hori, ‘Situations of Social Network of Jobless Youth’.

¹²Brinton makes an important argument regarding the ramifications of the breakdown of school-to-work transitions, and the changing employment environment. She argues that individuals’ association with *ba* – understood as ‘an organization or bounded collective to which individuals belong and from which they derive a sense of identity and security’ – is changing; Brinton, *Lost in Transition*, 3. Moreover, structural changes are leading to a loss of *ba*, making connections more important than ever. This article seeks to extend beyond structural issues to explore what happens within family relationships as individuals navigate changing employment opportunities, and how the ideology of the family’s role in welfare provision helps shape some of the generational discord that emerges.

In total, 58% of my interviewees in 2007 held university degrees, 20% had graduated from vocational college, 13% from high school, and 9% from junior high school. Defining class is highly complex, and as Ishida and Slater state, it is necessary to factor in 'class structure, formation and consciousness'.¹³ Taking into account individual education level, parents' education and occupation, and the class-consciousness of individuals I worked with, 75% could be broadly classified as identifying as middle-class, and 25% working-class.

In this article I provide an extended presentation of three cases that broadly typified the main responses found in freeters' relations with family. Although I also draw on the views of parents, for the most part they are not the parents of the freeters presented. This was often due to the difficulties freeters felt they were having with their families, or because of a preference to keep family, work, and friendships separate. However, I interacted extensively with individuals in their late fifties and sixties throughout my fieldwork – people who worked at the NEET NPO, parents of friends (and their friends), and attendees at the local community hall where events and fitness classes were held. The perspectives they offered ranged from deep concern for what would happen to young male workers who continued working irregularly, to a desire to support youth in finding work that fulfils them. Their voices are included to give a counterpoint to freeters' analyses of their family situations.

Ideological Discord

Individuals in their twenties and thirties have been surrounded by media and education debates imbued with neoliberal conceptions of selfhood, whilst at the same time living with parents who are more likely to subscribe to older life-course ideals that hinge on notions of stability. Parents in my study acknowledged that the employment environment in Japan has changed in the past 20 years; however, they considered that the best and safest route to employment was to find work as a full-time salaried employee. Although they wanted their children to be happy and understood the desire for a job that had meaning, they often pressed their sons to find this in (reputedly) secure salaried employment. Enjoyment at work was understood to be an ideal, but not a necessity: enjoyment, they felt, could be pursued post-retirement or through hobbies outside of work.

An important factor that underlies the parental desire for their offspring to be working productively in full-time positions is the obligation that makes families, rather than the state, primarily responsible for providing welfare assistance to their members.¹⁴ As Garon points out, the main duty to provide care for children and the elderly in the postwar period has fallen on the shoulders of the family. Men are understood as breadwinners and women as caregivers, with state welfare reserved for the citizens most in need.¹⁵ Miura

¹³Ishida and Slater, *Social Class in Contemporary Japan*, 13.

¹⁴Hook and Takeda, "'Self-Responsibility' and the Nature of the Postwar Japanese State". Although there are a number of welfare schemes that the government provides to families, like assistance for child-rearing and tax deductions for dependants, there remains an expectation that families should help as much as they can by providing, for example, a place to live or financial assistance to members in need. Individuals who are eligible for social welfare (*seikatsu hogo*) may be refused because they have living family members who are assumed to be able to help, regardless of the state of the relationship between them. See Allison, *Precarious Japan*, and Miura, *Welfare through Work*.

¹⁵Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds*, and Garon, 'State and Family in Modern Japan'. See also Borovoy, 'Japan as Mirror'.

characterizes Japan's system of social protection as one of 'welfare through work' – a hybrid of conservative and liberal regimes, in which there are high levels of employment and low levels of social spending. It is a 'gendered dual system' with strong employment protection for permanent employees (predominantly men) who in return work long hours and, if the company requires it, leave the family home to work in other locations for extended periods of time. Women have played a crucial role in supporting this kind of employment protection throughout the postwar period by affording companies a peripheral flexible labour force.¹⁶ Since the labour market reforms of the 1990s and the continuation of weak safety nets for irregular workers, employment protection remains an integral part of the social protection system; however, it covers a smaller number of core male employees as the non-regular labour market has rapidly expanded. Most non-regular workers are women, making their already unstable labour position more so; but as already noted, there is also a steady increase in the number of men in these non-protected positions.¹⁷ Whilst social perceptions of female marriageability are not tied to employment status, the expectation that men should be breadwinners makes marriage a problematic prospect for many irregular workers.¹⁸ The stakes are thus high for men and women as employment protection covers fewer people and social spending remains low.

Alongside low spending on social protection, social insurance schemes are also problematic.¹⁹ Social and individual insurance schemes depend on categories such as employee, self-employed, unemployed, private or public sector, the size of the company an individual works for, annual income, working hours and marital status. Benefits and premiums also vary. The assumption is that the 'standard' person insured under this system is a male breadwinner in permanent employment.²⁰ Individuals are thus assumed to be paying into an array of social insurance schemes that function as a type of social welfare. Although three-quarters of the men I worked with paid into the mandatory national pension scheme (the cheapest one) and the national health insurance scheme, they could not afford any other insurance.²¹ Social protection through insurance and welfare thus remains limited at the very time that employment protection has shrunk to a smaller number of people able to attain stable employment. Many parents consequently considered not only the individual, but also the potential familial and financial repercussions of their children working in the irregular employment sphere.

Male freeters were, however, conflicted about parental pressure to be working 'properly' (*chanto hataraku*). They spoke of wanting (and needing) stability as they aged, yet they were much more cynical about the existence of security and employment protection in today's labour market. Growing up in a time of recession, they were not convinced that it was worthwhile to stay in a job that didn't make them particularly happy. And while many felt obligation towards the future care of their parents (and

¹⁶Miura, *Welfare through Work*, 66.

¹⁷Osawa, 'Gender-Equality', notes that women in non-regular employment rose from 32.1% in 1985, to 46.4% in 2000 and to 54.2% in 2008. For men, the figures were 7.4%, 11.7% and 18.7% respectively. By 2012, the numbers had increased further to 22.1%. 'Hiseiki shain hiritsu 38.2%'.

¹⁸See Cook, 'Intimate Expectations and Practices', and Cook, *Reconstructing Adult Masculinities*.

¹⁹Osawa, 'Gender-Equality'.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 5.

²¹Irregular workers are not covered by unemployment insurance, and social insurance (*shakai hoken*) can be received only if the individual has paid into it. Allison, *Precarious Japan*.

families), most had siblings and felt that this could be negotiated between them in the future.

These conflicting attitudes often contributed to creating discord within families, with freeters feeling misunderstood and unsupported and parents frustrated by their son's decisions. Freeters were also conflicted about which route they should take and worried about their futures. Many of the freeters I worked with felt that they needed to adapt to the job market in different ways than their parents had done. Under neoliberal economic structures, Beck and Beck suggest that 'individuals must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration'.²² Or as Gershon and Alexy state, 'neoliberal policies ... presuppose neoliberal selves – selves that consciously and reflexively see themselves as balancing alliances, responsibility, and risk through a mean-ends calculus'.²³ Male freeters were well aware of, and living, this balancing act. Indeed, through their experiences, and their parents' concerns, we can see that there is a generation gap in the ways that neoliberal identities are both instantiated and experienced.

Despite their awareness of the balancing act needed to calculate employment risks in today's employment market, a significant stumbling block for many freeters was that they were at a loss for *how* to calculate these risks. They heard exhortations from school counsellors, parents, and oftentimes the media, of the merits of working in a salaried position, yet such jobs are increasingly unavailable. Meanwhile, although the Japanese government has set up a 'job café' system to provide interview training and employment advice in an effort to help people cope more effectively with the current employment environment,²⁴ very few of the freeters I worked with knew about and used these services. Only two of the men had gone to Hello Work²⁵ and heard about these services; others looked for employment through the Internet or learned of opportunities through personal connections. Ultimately they were making their employment decisions without the help of government systems.

On the one side, then, were many conflicted parents – wanting their children to be happy, but also wanting them to have a secure, 'safe' lifestyle. On the other were freeters with an experiential understanding of the changes in the employment market who felt the need to develop a more neoliberal selfhood that embodied conflicts of its own: between the virtues of self-directed choice and an absence of signposts pointing to the right course of action. These conflicts often led (or contributed) to discord within families and a strong sense of familial disconnection. It is important to remember in this regard James Ferguson's observation that 'disconnection, like connection, implies a relation and not the absence of a relation ... the state of having been disconnected requires to be understood as the product of specific *structures and processes of disconnection*'.²⁶ Moreover, disconnection is not a state that is felt consistently –

²²Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, 4.

²³Gershon and Alexy, 'The Ethics of Disconnection', 799.

²⁴See Hori, Kosugi and Kukimoto, 'School-to-Work Transition', and Toivonen, 'Introducing the Youth Independence Camp', for discussion of these policies.

²⁵Hello Work is the government's employment service centre. Their website can be found at: <https://www.hellowork.go.jp>

²⁶Ferguson, 'Global Disconnect', 316; italics in the original.

individuals can simultaneously feel disconnected and misunderstood by family in some areas of their lives but connected in other areas.²⁷ Parental disapproval of their labour practices often meant that male freeters strategically managed disconnections in various ways, of which putting distance (spatial, temporal or emotional) between themselves and parental opinions of their labour status was only one. Several who felt unsupported in the home focused on creating family-like networks elsewhere. Some men, particularly those who wanted to start a business or be self-employed, sought to develop business networks, or networks related to their ventures that could provide support and affirmation. Others tried to deal with the disconnection they felt on their own, in some cases leading to increased feelings of alienation. I explore these issues through three cases detailing the familial relationships of male freeters ranging in age from their late twenties to late thirties.

Creating Alternatives and the Experience of Silence

Hideo²⁸ was the eldest son of a nuclear family and had lived at home except when he was at university. His father was a retired elementary school teacher and his mother a full-time housewife. He had a younger brother who was also unmarried and living at home, and a younger sister who was married with children. After graduating from a good university and working for 12 years in a high-status job, Hideo quit at the age of 34, sick of doing a job he loathed. He was 37 when we first met in November 2006 and at that time he dreamed of setting up an NPO to offer language learning and international exchange opportunities. He was living off his savings and working part-time as a language teacher.

His parents were incredulous when he quit his job. Hideo commented:

They couldn't understand why I quit and were very upset. They are still upset. But I hated the work: it was so boring, and I didn't get on well with my co-workers. We would often argue. I just don't fit well with people. It's better if I work on my own or am the boss. But my parents were very upset. Things are still not good with them and my father doesn't speak to me.

From his parents' perspective, Hideo quitting his job exacerbated an already tense family situation. Their younger son also lived at home and was a NEET with no income. It was difficult for them to accept the decision by their eldest son, who was earning good money in a high-status job, to quit. Not only were Hideo's chances of marrying, having children and carrying on the family name significantly lower, it was likely that his parents also worried about the future, with a jobless younger son to support and an eldest who no longer earned a good wage the family's financial future was objectively now less certain.²⁹ Hideo could therefore no longer be relied upon to look after their younger son financially (if he still needed it) after they died. Given the difficulties (and shame) associated with applying for social welfare,³⁰ and the dominant ideology that

²⁷For more on how men strategically managed disconnection and connection within families, see Cook, *Reconstructing Adult Masculinities*, 87–110.

²⁸All names, and some small details, have been changed to preserve anonymity.

²⁹Hideo continued to pay his pension and health insurance, but his brother was a declared dependent and his parents were subsidizing his national health insurance and pension payments.

³⁰See Allison, *Precarious Japan*, for a discussion of the difficulties of successfully applying for social welfare.

families should first and foremost look after their own, Hideo's parents looked within the family – to Hideo – to fulfil this role, if necessary. Their concerns illustrate how Japanese welfare policies that rely on relatives supporting each other may contribute to stress and discord within families by placing pressure on individuals (especially eldest sons) to provide financial support to others within the family unit.³¹

Hideo, meanwhile, was simultaneously critical of his parents and resigned:

After I quit I tried to explain what I wanted to do, and that I had a plan, but they wouldn't listen, maybe they were too shocked. But I think my father is still very disappointed. We don't talk, not even to say good morning. But I can't go back to that job. It's important for me to try and make what I'm doing now a success.

Silence was a significant part of Hideo's family experience when trying to create a path that was meaningful for him. Rather than being merely an absence of noise, silence can be a significant communicative act with distinct meanings. Glenn argues that when silence is imposed it can 'reveal positive or negative abilities, fulfilling or withholding traits, harmony or disharmony, success or failure. Silence can deploy power; it can defer to power'.³² Lebra, meanwhile, has noted that there are four interrelated dimensions of silence within Japanese communication, which she lists as truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. The latter dimension of silence, Lebra argues, often expresses estrangement or hostility, which 'is the logical inverse of the second dimension where silence is a means of creating or maintaining sociability'.³³ Contrary to embarrassment and social discretion, which often involve hesitancy as a communicative strategy, 'defiant silence is openly expressive and assertive of the self'.³⁴ For Hideo, his father was expressing his disappointment and hostility at his decision through an extended period of silent treatment.

Although resigned to his father's behaviour, Hideo in turn expressed frustration with his younger brother and rarely communicated much beyond daily greetings. He sought to differentiate himself from his brother through 'trying' and was very keen to be successful, not just for himself, but to prove to his parents that he had made the right decision to quit and go his own way (and perhaps end the extended silence that swirled around him at home). Despite these difficulties at home, in our conversations Hideo was heavily invested in ideals that define the *jibun rashisa* debate, which are themselves quite neoliberal: he was committed to making his own way, living for himself, and doing something meaningful for himself, and he expressed regret that he hadn't taken the leap and quit his job when younger.

In his attempts to carve a successful second career for himself, Hideo turned to, and created, a number of networks. One was related to business: he met other would-be entrepreneurs each month for mutual support and to discuss business issues. He also became involved with the local international community.³⁵ In his spare time he

³¹Miura argues that in Japan the social safety net for the unemployed, especially the long-term unemployed, is particularly weak, with individuals 'solely responsible for improving their circumstances'; Miura, *Welfare through Work*, 21. Family thus becomes a crucial component of support for those unable to provide for themselves.

³²Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, xi.

³³Lebra, *The Cultural Significance of Silence*, 120.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Hamamatsu has one of the largest Latin American Nikkeijin populations in Japan. See Roth's *Brokered Homeland* for accounts of Japanese-Brazilian lives in Hamamatsu.

organized language exchanges, studied other languages, set up a blog and appeared on radio to report on and protest the treatment of Brazilian and Peruvian workers (many of whom worked in the manufacturing industry in Hamamatsu) who were made redundant after the Lehman shock³⁶ and were offered flights to leave Japan – and not come back – by the government.³⁷ He actively cultivated connections and emotional support outside the family, creating a niche for himself within the international community, and was spurred on by his desire to be vindicated in the eyes of his parents.

While Hideo's case is unusual in that he quit stable employment in his mid-thirties, the tensions he described were found in other families' narratives, especially those whose children had attended university. After paying for a university education, parents found it difficult to understand why their sons would choose low-paying, unstable work chasing dreams that seemed risky and unachievable. In some cases, communication broke down entirely, resulting in long periods of silence with intermittent arguments. One man in his late fifties stated:

I don't understand why my son is working like this. He worked hard at school and went to university. He could be working for a company now, earning good money, but he decided he wanted to be a writer so he works part-time and writes in his free time. But it's not sustainable and I don't think he'll succeed. I don't know what to say. I've said everything, but he hasn't changed his mind. I have nothing left to say, so I don't say anything to him at all.

Of course, not all parents were so adamantly uncompromising. One man in his early sixties, for example, had come around to feeling that his son's plan had a good chance of succeeding:

My son wants to open his own company. It's hard to do that and I worry, but I want to support him. He has a good plan, so we've loaned him some money to help him get started. Once it's more stable he can pay us back. Before this [a couple of years ago], he wanted to open a bar, but I refused to help him. This was after he had quit his [full-time] job. He worked there for a year after graduating from university but didn't like it. I thought that opening a bar wasn't a good business. I was really against it and didn't want to support that, so I refused to give him a loan ... I worry still about if he'll succeed, but he's very determined, his business plan is good, and there's a gap in the market he is targeting, so I'm hopeful.

It has been argued that middle-class Japanese parents, having invested heavily in education, are much stricter regarding the employment choices of their offspring.³⁸ Although in broad brush-strokes this is the case, it is also too simplistic a picture. There are a variety of reasons why parents may or may not support their children's aspirations. These reasons are influenced by diverse factors, not least of which are

³⁶The 'Lehman Shock' is often used as shorthand in Japanese media and in conversation to refer to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, of which the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc. has become emblematic.

³⁷Tabuchi, 'Japan Pays Foreign Workers'.

³⁸Hori, 'Situations of Social Network of Jobless Youth'. Conversely, Kosugi and her colleagues argue that families of high school graduates who become freeters tend to care less about the kind of work their sons do, that working (in any capacity) is the most important thing, and they tend not to interfere with their children's choices; Kosugi et al., 'Young People in Transitional Crisis'. Although my research data supports this to an extent, family history and familial relationships strongly mediate and complicate this picture, often leading to parents feeling they cannot or should not interfere with their children's choices while simultaneously worrying about what the future holds for both their children and the family.

the kind of relationship they have, and the amount of communication and trust between them.

Communication was an issue between Hideo and his parents; and with the added worry of a son who didn't work at all, his parents were strongly opposed to what they considered a plan that wouldn't be lucrative or successful. But for Hideo, making a lot of money was not the point; he was attempting to create opportunities to do the kinds of work that he found enjoyable and meaningful, and he was determined not to worry overly much about what the future held.

The discord that Hideo described in his family appears to have occurred as a result of his (and his brother's) employment decisions. His parents were relatively affluent and worried about how their sons would survive financially in the future. Other freeters came from families that had experienced significant change and discord unrelated to their sons' employment decisions. This situation shaped reactions to their sons being freeters: some parents were more supportive, either as a way to compensate for their own perceived failures or because their own work issues had contributed to family breakup. In some cases, family problems were part of why men chose to be, or ended up being, freeters. In other cases, becoming a freeter was a way of trying to build confidence and connections.

Family-style Networks

Originally from Hamamatsu, Jun was from a divorced, single-mother family. He moved to Tokyo at the age of 20 and found a job doing the night shift at a convenience store. His parents had divorced when he was eight years old. He supported his mother's decision to divorce, largely as a result of how he viewed his father:

He was not a good man. He had affairs and treated my mum badly. One day, after I saw his new girlfriend, he said 'did you like her breasts? She has a great pair eh?!' I was disgusted. Now I'm not in touch with him and I don't know where he is. I have never really felt that I had a father – when I was small he used to come home very late, and leave before I got up, so I thought 'who is father?'

His mother didn't remarry and instead brought Jun and his older brother up alone whilst working full-time:

It was hard for my mum. She did the best she could. I worried her a lot. I got into a lot of trouble and she couldn't do anything. During junior high school I was bullied, physically and emotionally, and it got so bad I was afraid to go to school. My mum tried to help; she talked to the school about it, but nothing changed. So I started skipping school because I was scared. I know she wanted me to try hard, do well in school and get a good job. I don't like working at the convenience store, but I don't think I have many options. I can't really talk to her about it because it would just make her worry more so I don't really communicate with her much these days. She is always worrying about me and it makes me feel anxious ...

Here silence was used to protect both his mother from worry and himself from anxiety. It was a dual form of care.

In what Jun said was an attempt to become tougher, he joined a Brazilian *bōsōzoku* gang during junior high school where he became friends with the leader:

I felt it was good to join the gang. I felt supported and gradually stronger. It felt good to have people behind me. I had a place. The leader liked me, and we became friends. The gang became my family, my brothers. At that time, because of being bullied, I didn't really see people as human beings any more. I didn't really care what happened to people.

He was steadily drawn into the workings of the gang: facilitating drug deals and doing any 'errands' that the leader's father – a high level member of a local gang – wanted. For a time, the gang operated as a family-like network that sustained him.

Fighting, however, was commonplace. Most often it involved other gangs, but they also threatened (and sometimes beat up) people who had not paid their dues. At that time, violence became his way of life: no longer targeted at him individually, as at school, but as a way of dealing with others. Gradually, however, he became scared:

I was there when one guy died of a beating ... After that, I started to feel scared and wanted to leave. I had panic attacks and got very depressed. I went to the doctor and they gave me medication that made me feel really out of it. If I had stayed in the city I would never have been able to leave the gang. It wouldn't have been possible. I was really scared. I didn't want to die, but I felt that if I stayed longer I would die. So I left and came to Tokyo. I moved into my brother's place and started working in a convenience store doing the night shift.

His troubles didn't end there. He found living and working in Tokyo difficult and continued to have panic attacks regularly when surrounded by many people:

When there is a wave of people coming towards me in the station, when everyone has got off the train and people are coming out of the ticket gates, I panic. I want to hide in a corner when that happens. So I have medicine. It kind of works, but not totally.

His financial situation was also problematic. Despite sharing an apartment with his brother (who also worked part-time) it was difficult to make ends meet. Consequently, instead of getting his anti-depressants from a doctor he bought them cheap from a co-worker at the convenience store. Although he described feeling safer living with his older brother, he also seemed chronically lonely, asking advice on how to make good friends because all of his were 'bad people'.

Clearly, Jun felt stuck in his situation:

In the future I'd like to get a stable job, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to. It's hard to be around people. And I didn't graduate from high school. I don't like my job but it's probably the only kind I can get. And on the night shift there aren't many people. Honestly, I want to go back to Hamamatsu but I feel I can't because if I do I'll be drawn back into the gang and I don't think I would survive. Also it would be really bad for my family. I've caused my mum a lot of trouble ... She was worried a lot about me. But I couldn't stop, couldn't get out, not if I stayed there. I think she's happy that I'm living in Tokyo with my brother.

Although Jun was not estranged from his mother, they were in contact only occasionally because he found it hard to deal with her worries about his work and mental health. His difficult relationship with his father, in addition to his choice to join a gang, lack of qualifications, and depression and anxiety, had left him with limited choices for his future. Although Jun's experiences of violence and joining a gang are not

the norm, a number of my research participants echoed his feelings of lacking the educational capital necessary to find a stable secure job.

Working-class parents worried about their sons, but were also matter-of-fact. One woman in her late forties stated:

Of course ideally I want my son to work [full-time] for a company and have stable employment. I want him to have a good life, a stable life. But we didn't have the money to send him to cram school or university. And the big companies weren't hiring students from the kind of high school he went to. So, it can't be helped. He's working hard at his job and he hopes to be made full-time in the future.

A man in his early fifties commented:

My wife and I separated when my son was around 12. She left and I lived with the kids. I think she was unhappy because I was working all the time in my [blue-collar] job. She was also working part-time and raising the kids. I think she got tired of it all. Anyway, now I feel like my work contributed ... and I feel bad about it. My children had to grow up without a mother. So when my son told me that he wants to pursue his dream and didn't want to work full-time for a company, I felt that I have to support him emotionally. I want him to be happy and to have a life where he can express himself. I don't want him to have to work all the time at the expense of everything else.

Although research suggests that freeters who successfully move into full-time employment often do so as a result of networks created via relatives and friends,³⁹ for the freeters discussed in this paper, the family was not a source of connection for the kind of work they wanted. Therefore, building their own outward networks not only helped them create a place where they felt they belonged, but also had the potential to help them succeed. Contrary to Hideo's experiences, Jun's attempts at finding outward support were ultimately not successful and he felt limited by his lack of networks, education, and mental health issues. Consequently, he was unsure what kind of work he would be able to do in the future and was treading water at the convenience store.

Disconnection

Some freeters, after failed attempts to create new social networks, ultimately moved their focus inwards. For example, 22-year-old Shiro was trying to find a way of life that he could be content with. Working as a freeter was a conscious attempt to develop confidence.⁴⁰ He lived at home with his parents, a younger brother, and his grandmother. Shiro's relationship with his parents was complicated:

I feel very lucky and blessed. I feel most parents tell their sons that they must work properly, but my parents want me to do something that I enjoy and like. I think they are really kind, and I feel safe and secure with them. I didn't always feel that way though. When I was younger I always thought it was a little strange that my surname was different, but I was shocked when I found out that my father is not really my father ... Just after I was born my parents got divorced. A couple of years later, when I was three, my mother married again. My stepfather agreed to take me on as his own.⁴¹

³⁹Hori, 'Situations of Social Network of Jobless Youth'.

⁴⁰Parts of Shiro's background have been discussed in Cook, 'Still a Child?'

⁴¹This is an extended version of a quote that was published in Cook, 'Still a Child?', 73.

Despite being raised as his stepfather's child, Shiro was not registered on his stepfather's *koseki*.⁴² As a consequence his younger brother was the official eldest son (*chōnan*). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why his parents were so supportive about his search for what he wanted to do.

He had seen his biological father occasionally as a child, but when he was seven his father died. Shiro hinted at suicide, stating that his father had dark thoughts, and he wondered if that was why his own were sometimes dark. Most people, including his friends, didn't know about his family background and thought his stepfather was his biological father. Although at the time he spoke of having a good relationship with his family, especially his mother, his relationships with the male members – his stepfather and younger half-brother – were complex. He respected his stepfather, but they didn't communicate much and had little in common. Although he felt that his relationship with his brother had become 'okay', after years of being bullied by him, they were not close. Shiro felt that he didn't fit in while growing up, and that this had affected his confidence and feelings of acceptance by his family and in wider society. Indeed, he was most comfortable when social interaction was limited.

Shiro's dream was to make a living growing vegetables, and his most enduring job to date was working the fields at a local organic farm, but he lacked the confidence to sell what he grew. He consequently decided that gaining experience in the world of work was the best way to increase his confidence. Nonetheless, he struggled at and quit one job after another. Between jobs, he worked a small family plot growing vegetables until he came across another job that he thought he could do.

It has been argued that the family home often functions as a place where people who are unable to fit into mainstream society end up.⁴³ It was indeed the place that Shiro retreated to, yet it was not an uncomplicated relief from the stress of the workplace. Each time he left a job he described feeling badly about himself, which further undermined his confidence. Moreover, he was worried that he would become a burden on his family if he was unable to develop the skills he felt he needed to function in society. He turned to psychology and self-help books in an attempt to understand himself and to find ways to more easily connect with others and 'fit in'. Ultimately, however, Shiro was not able to find the kinds of connection or confidence that he was seeking. After bouncing from job to job, he gradually became more introverted and disconnected. Eventually, he stopped answering my emails. In June 2009, at the age of 25, Shiro took his own life.

I will never know definitively what led Shiro to such action. Our communications since I left the field were sporadic. Although he was part of a generation that had grown up with cell phones and computers, Shiro had mostly shunned such technology. He didn't own a cell phone and although he had bought a second-hand computer with his first pay check, from a desire to communicate with other anime fans, he did not continue using it for long. In early 2010 I wrote him a letter to let him know I would be back in the city. His stepfather wrote back with the news and added that Shiro's mother was not coping well and was not able to see visitors.

⁴²The *koseki* is the family registry in which all births, marriages, divorces, adoptions and so forth are registered. Legally, each household must have one. Indeed marriages, for example, only become legal once registered in the *koseki*.

⁴³See for example, Borovoy, 'Japan's Hidden Youths'. See also Saitō, *Hikikomori*.

For people under the age of 30 the leading cause of death in Japan is suicide, with males under 30 accounting for 36.1% and women in the same group 12.9% of the suicide statistics in 2005.⁴⁴ The causes are complex. Some point to the recession and increased unemployment,⁴⁵ but Ozawa-de Silva's work suggests that among youth who attempt or discuss attempts at suicide on Internet chat rooms, a lack of connection to others, an absence of *ikigai* (a sense of what makes life worth living), and a profound sense of loneliness are evident. Shiro's feelings of social disconnection, insecurity and continued failure in the employment sphere seem likely to have played a part in his decision.

Conclusions

It is difficult to make generalizations about freeters and their families, just as it is about any group of people with shared characteristics. Family configurations are important when exploring the lives of freeters, but they should not be taken to be determinative. Whilst some freeters I worked with had troubled backgrounds, most came from families that seemed worried about what would happen to their sons if they stayed in part-time work. They were keen for their children to be 'mainstream', to live a safe life.⁴⁶ From the narratives of freeters and parents, it is clear that working as a freeter oftentimes contributed to discord, especially in nuclear families where sons had graduated from university. Many parents did not understand why their sons were working in the irregular labour market and stressed the need for them to work 'properly'. Underlying this was an understanding that social welfare was not something that could be relied upon. Although they were not blind to changes in the employment market, they subscribed to an ideal of stability that is not easily achievable for today's young people. Freeters, meanwhile, were more realistic about the job market and more cynical about whether such stability even existed any more. In attempts to cope with the increased flexibility of the market, they drew on ideas of neoliberal selfhood to stress the importance of finding work that was meaningful. Furthermore, they sought out support groups or other outside connections (with varying degrees of success) in their attempts to pursue their own paths.

Existing family configurations shaped the responses freeters encountered regarding their employment. For example, in Hideo's case disagreements were not just about his decision to quit his job but were also a parental protest about both of the sons not working productively, as well as revealing worries about what would happen to the family in the future. Hideo, as the eldest (and previously successful) son, was relied on to take responsibility for the family, especially his unemployed younger brother. His parents saw his decision to start out on his own, independently, unmarried and in his late thirties, as a denial and abandonment of that responsibility. In contrast, Shiro was an eldest son who was not legally the eldest. This effectively gave him some freedom from long-term family responsibilities, and his parents fully supported him in his attempts to find a way of working and living that would enable him to be financially independent. Birth order and

⁴⁴Ozawa-de Silva, 'Too Lonely to Die Alone', 519.

⁴⁵Desapriya and Iwase, 'New Trends in Suicide'.

⁴⁶See Borovoy, 'Japan's Hidden Youths' for a discussion of the ways in which schools, families, companies and the sphere of mental health care attempt to mainstream youth.

positioning in the *koseki* were therefore important factors in the kinds of support that some freeters received regarding their work and life aspirations. Jun's choices, meanwhile, were constrained by his earlier responses to being bullied at school (missing classes, not graduating high school, joining a gang), his subsequent mental health issues, and concern for his mother. He felt sure that he would be unable to find white-collar work. All of these factors contributed to his choice to have minimal communication with his mother in his attempts to evade her worrying and not worry her further.

In divorced families or families experiencing unemployment, working as a freeter was sometimes partly a result of disadvantaged family circumstances, but the relationship between familial labour disadvantage and becoming a freeter is not a simple one.⁴⁷ In fact, many non-middle-class parents felt that working in salaried employment would be the safest, but they were nonetheless more supportive of their son's attempts to find work that held meaning for him. This was often based on their own experiences of work and the ramifications their employment decisions had had on their lives and relationships.

In the cases presented, we see men engaging, to various degrees, in the *jibun rashisa* discourse whilst dealing with varying forms of silence. Hideo wanted to live in a way that he felt was most appropriate for him and was positively striving to make a meaningful life for himself with the skills he had. He ignored his father's silent critiques and pushed on regardless. Shiro felt increasingly hopeless when he was unable to turn himself from an introvert into an extrovert through psychology and self-help books, something he considered necessary (and normative) to success in the world of work, and in life more generally. He ultimately silenced himself. Jun, meanwhile, wasn't satisfied with himself or the way he interacted socially, yet had made a tentative peace with it and used strategies of silence as a form of self- and other-care: to minimize his mother's worry and prevent his own increased anxiety.⁴⁸

At the heart of these conflicts between freeters and their families are the changes in employment opportunities wrought by neoliberal reforms. These generational conflicts and contradictions highlight the ways in which freeters themselves are key to understanding the lived (and contradictory) experience of neoliberalism in Japan. Many freeters experience stress and distress within familial relationships because of a disjuncture between how they and their parents perceive employment realities. When freeters are not earning in a way that lends itself to future financial stability, parents are turned unwittingly into enforcers of Japan's 'welfare through work' policy: urging them to get work considered stable, even as stability becomes scarcer. Thus, parental forms of concern and care help to maintain and legitimize a system in which men become the main breadwinners, and the family operates as a unit of welfare provision.

As the social welfare and insurance systems cover fewer people and increasing numbers of people are exposed to the risk of low-paying, unstable work with uncertain futures, securing permanent employment with its associated perks and stability becomes more difficult, and for some, more desirable. Parents are well aware of the

⁴⁷Buraku Kaihō and Jinnen Kaihō, *Haijō sareru wakamonotachi*.

⁴⁸Of course, not all freeters in my study felt disconnected, or disconnected all the time. A whole range of factors came into play: personalities, individual aspirations, family dynamics, and economics. When individuals felt that their aspirations were not understood, or that they didn't really 'fit' and struggled with a sense of disconnection, most sought to find connections elsewhere, in family-like networks or by getting out of the house and pursuing different kinds of work.

risks that their sons are exposed to if they remain outside this system. Freeters, meanwhile, attempt to adjust to the increased flexibility and precarity of the market by cultivating their own skills and desires, and by deferring to a later date concerns over the future of their finances and the creation and care of their families.

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