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Concentric Circles of Guilt in R. J. Lifton’s Survivor Study

KOHEI TAKAHARA*

1. Introduction—empathy and apathy after disaster

Directly after a natural disaster strikes, empathy for survivors permeates society. Citizens are eager to read any news from the devastated area, and try to share the agonies and grief of the victims. Some positive slogans pervade society to maintain solidarity. For example, slogans such as *kizuna* (絆, meaning: friendships or ties) and *ganbarō Kōbe* (がんばろう神戸, meaning: cheer up Kobe) spread widely after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 and, the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995 (Kobe was a major city struck by the earthquake), respectively. An emotional integration including both the disaster-affected area and the non-affected areas arises.

However, as times passes, empathy turns into apathy, support into denial. People outside the disaster area unconsciously wish to keep a psychological distance from information about the terrible incident. In their minds, they may even feel it is “unfair” that victims obtain help, recognition, and some goods without compensation. They gradually start to evade the harsh reality near ground-zero. A report by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of the Japanese Government) highlights an extreme example of this psychological change from acceptance to dismissal.¹ The report shows that at some elementary schools and junior high schools students who evacuated from the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster in 2011 had been bullied. The report cites some abusive words spoken by assailant students to evacuating students, such as “*hōsha-nō ga utsuru*” (放射能がうつる, meaning: “You are contaminating us with your radioactivity”). This suggests that in their

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¹ The office of the elementary and secondary education, Japan MEXT 文部科学省初等中等教育局, “Genshiryoku Hatsudensho Ziko tō ni yori Fukushima-ken kara Hinan shiteiru Zidō Seito ni taisuru Izime no Jōkyō tō no Kakunin ni kakaru Forō-appu ni tsuite (Heisei 29 nen 4 gatsu 11 niti genzai)” 原子力発電所事故等により福島県から避難している児童生徒に対するいじめの状況等の確認に係るフォローアップについて (平成 29 年 4 月 11 日現在)
http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/29/04/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/04/11/1384371_2_2.pdf (last accessed: October 5th, 2017)

ignorance some children viewed the evacuating victims as something extraneous and alien, and they interpreted the disaster and its effects not from the perspective of science and morals but from a more primitive sense, like *kegare* (穢れ, meaning: uncleanliness). In other words, the feelings of refusal or apathy after a natural disaster could be derived from somewhere deep beyond reason.

The rapid transition from empathy into apathy hurts survivors. It not only wounds their feelings but also their fundamental reliance on others. How can we construct and maintain true sympathy and dialogue with survivors? What arises in the situation of apathy and refusal? These questions require vast and long-ranging research. In order to obtain some clues, this paper will examine the ideas of Robert Jay Lifton. In particular, it will discuss his idea of “the concentric circles of guilt” in atomic bomb survivor research. Applying his concentric model into modern society after a disaster will open the inquiry into empathy and apathy to new dimensions.

2. R. J. Lifton—a pioneer of survivor studies

R. J. Lifton (1926–) is an American psychiatrist, and a former professor at Yale University. He trained in the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition, but does not hesitate to express antagonism toward the obsolete tradition that he experienced in his young days. He calls his methodology *Psychohistory*, following his mentor Erik Erikson (1902–1994), the psychologist famous for *Ego psychology* or the idea of *identity*.

In Japan, he is referenced solely as a person who played a major role in establishing the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the late 1970’s. However, this role represents only a tiny aspect of his whole practice and philosophy. The fundamental, consistent thought and concern on which he based his life work is the psychology of survivors. The 20th century was an era of mass destruction and psychological trauma. In the earliest part of the century, some psychologists and psychiatrists, like S. Freud and P. Janet, found this caused new and old problems, especially in war neurosis and sexual violence. After World War II, a few psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and therapists expanded their research concerning trauma into more various fields, for example, natural disaster, gigantic accidents, fire, criminal victims, domestic violence, and so on. The 20th century was the era of the survivors of those catastrophes. From the 1950s when Lifton started his career as a therapist

and researcher, he interviewed many survivors of historical incidents. It is no exaggeration to say that he paved the way for the rapid development of trauma studies from the 1970s.

Finally, he is famous for his long career as an activist against nuclear weapons and wars. He recently wrote on the web an essay criticizing the use of drone weapons, small remote-controlled military vehicles or airplanes that do not require the presence of a driver or pilot.²

Works

Lifton has published more than 20 books, and half of those have been translated into Japanese.³ The following four books—*Thought Reform*, *Death in Life*, *Home from the War*, *Nazi Doctors*—are his most important.

*Thought Reform: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China*⁴ is an analysis of people who were brainwashed at a political corrective facility of the Communist Party of China. In this book, he describes how deeply the brainwashing process in closed environments can affect the human mind. He interviewed many survivors in Hong Kong. This book is one of the basic text books dealing with the brainwashing process by religious cults.

*Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*⁵ is a study analyzing the psychological impact of the experiences of *hibakusha*, namely, atomic bomb survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He investigated *hibakushas* in Hiroshima in the early 1960s, but before him, there was no psychological study of the *hibakushas* by the Japanese. The concept of “psychic numbing” that he analyzed in this book became his fundamental thought.

*Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners*⁶ is a book dealing with the recovery process of Vietnam War veterans in the United States. In the 1970s, American soldiers who came back from the Vietnam War suffered from the disorders of social adaptation and emotional control. They suffered from traumatic memories of the battlefield

² R. J. Lifton, “10 Reflections on Drones”, *Huffpost*, 04 November, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-jay-lifton/10-reflections-drones_b_3062566.html (last accessed: 6 October 2017).

³ Takahara Kōhei 高原耕平, Lifton wo Nihon zin wa donoyōni yonde kitaka リフトンを日本人はどのように読んできたか (How have Japanese readers understood the concept of survivorship in R. J. Lifton?), *Metahyushika* メタフュシカ, 47, pp. 63–75, 2016.

⁴ R. J. Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychological Totalism: a Study of “Brainwashing” in China*, Norton, 1961.

⁵ R. J. Lifton, *Death in Life: the survivors of Hiroshima*, Random House, Inc., New York, 1968.

⁶ R. J. Lifton, *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans-Neither Victims nor Executioners*, Simon & Schuster, 1973.

and dwelt on the meaninglessness of the Vietnam War itself. Lifton and a selection of veterans made a dialogue group and he tenaciously listened to the stories of the soldiers. He later linked this activity to the establishment of PTSD in DSM-III (1980).

*Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*⁷ is a study of German physicians who worked in Auschwitz. Unlike his previous studies, it analyzed the perpetrators. This has to do with the circumstance that he is Jewish. The problem he wrestled with in the book was why and how professionals like medical doctors, in the huge bureaucratic mechanism around Auschwitz, could have implemented terrible acts such as meaningless painful experiments on inmates and “death selection” before acts of genocide, contrary to their original obligation towards saving lives.

A fact that we can easily find in those books is that his important research (except for *Nazi Doctors*) was actually conducted in East Asia including Japan. He wrote some books in Japan. *Six Lives / Six Deaths*⁸ is co-authored with the Japanese famous critic, Shuichi Kato. In addition, *Destroying the World to Save It*⁹ is an analysis of believers of Aum Shinrikyo. Among those books relating to East Asia and Japan, the study of Hiroshima is the most important. After that, Lifton started a dialogue with Vietnam veterans based on his experience in Hiroshima. That activity with Vietnam veterans led to the establishment of the diagnosis of PTSD in 1980. This notion of PTSD was imported to Japan in 1995, after the Great Hanshin Earthquake. By following the work by Lifton, one is able to see that one of the origins of his ideas on PTSD can be traced back to his research on Hiroshima.

Survivor study

As mentioned above, his research has quite extensive themes—brainwashed persons, *hibakushas*, Vietnam veterans, Nazi doctors, believers in cults, or victims of flood disasters.¹⁰ All this research can be summarized as “survivor studies”. The survivor for him is a person who has survived a historic major incident in particular—for example, wars, concentration camps, the atomic bomb, and natural disasters. People who have survived those major

⁷ R. J. Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide*, Basic Books, 1986.

⁸ R. J. Lifton, M. R. Reich, Kato Shuichi, *Six Lives / Six Deaths: Portraits from Modern Japan*, Yale University Press, 1979.

⁹ R. J. Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*, Owl Books, 2000.

¹⁰ R. J. Lifton, E. Olson, “The Human meaning of Total Disaster: The Buffalo Creek Experience”, *Psychiatry*, 39, pp. 1–18, 1976.

incidents not only carry deep wounds in their minds but they also have deep insights into such terrible incidents and the social circumstances behind the atrocities. He says that we must learn from such insights of the survivors. Thus, his survivor studies are not just psychiatric, psychological, or psychoanalytic in a narrow sense. They expand to more various fields like society, religion, thanatology, and ethics.

The main feature of his methodology is to conduct long interviews with survivors. He focuses on a group of survivors of an incident. However, he considers not only the psychological trauma of the individual survivor but also the social and historical aspects. In other words, he does not analyze “psychiatric symptoms” but analyzes the relation between social, historical dynamism and the survivor's psychology. He calls it “Psychohistory”.

3. Key concepts

The basic ideas consistent in Lifton's research are “guilt” and “psychic numbing”. Before discussing the “concentric model of guilt”, I will introduce the two key concepts below.

Guilty feeling

It is generally known that survivors of tragic incidents tend to feel guilty about their own survival and the death of others. Especially in the case of A-bomb survivors in Hiroshima, Lifton analyzes that it is a deep trauma for *hibakushas* that they abandoned victims seeking help and water, and they ran away alone. Actually, the survivors were not responsible, but they often felt guilty.

Lifton examines the guilt of survivors as follows.¹¹ In our daily lives, we live with the knowledge of the order of life and death. For example, we believe that when a person dies, a funeral will be held and people will grieve, but new generations will follow with the birth of new lives. However, in the case of the atomic bomb or other catastrophes, this usual order of life and death collapses. Survivors feel responsible for this collapse.

In Japan, this analysis by Lifton can be categorized as thanatology rather than psychology or psychoanalysis.¹² It should be highly evaluated in that he considers the sense of guilt in

¹¹ R. J. Lifton, *Death in Life*, p.484, pp.492–494.

¹² Ikezawa masaru 池澤優, Bunkateki Sai no Shiten kara Shiseigaku wo kangaeru 文化的差異の視点

relation to the problem of death, because in Japan, the sense of guilt tends to be considered as an issue of individual psychology or a traumatic symptom, and the relationship between guilt and death is often overlooked.

Psychic numbing

Psychic numbing is the most important concept in Lifton's work. He finds that A-bomb survivors cannot regain vivid sensitivity towards the world, others, and the self; he names it "psychic closing-off" or "psychic numbing". In psychic numbing, survivors lose their current relationship not only to the world (trust, hope, expectation, interaction, and possibility, etc.) but also to their own past and future.¹³ The diminishing of sensitivity caused by the survivor's traumatic experience is consistently the object of Lifton's interest. He found it not only in *hibakushas*, but also in many survivors who have suffered trauma.

However, Lifton notes that psychic numbing can also spread to people other than survivors. In other words, people who are outside a catastrophe also cannot maintain a vivid sensitivity towards a traumatic incident. They close the windows of their minds towards the outer world.

I came to recognize what I called the numbing of everyday life, the barriers we automatically establish against the large bombardment of stimuli to which each of us is constantly subjected, barriers of numbing necessary to get thorough the day.¹⁴

He insists that people who are not survivors also broadly share psychic numbing. This is a very interesting point in Lifton's way of thinking. Put differently, he does not interpret psychic numbing as a psychiatric symptom of a patient but as a social problem. The mixture of psychic numbing and feeling guilty are the major factors blocking us from being able to recognize reality and to construct mutual understanding.

から死生学を考える, *Shiseigaku Ōyōrinri Kenkyū* 死生学・応用倫理研究, 21, pp. 84–100, 2016.

¹³ Psychic numbing can be a kind of "dissociation" (解離, *kairi*) in current psychiatry.

¹⁴ R. J. Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: a Memoir*, Free Press, p.130, 2011.

4. Concentric Circles of Guilt

In *Death in Life*, Lifton introduces the idea of the “concentric circles of guilty feeling”.¹⁵ According to him, *hibakushas* feel guilty towards the dead victims of the atomic bomb, Japanese who are not *hibakusha* feel guilty towards the *hibakushas*, and people around the world feel guilty towards the Japanese. Each group has the feeling of “I am sorry I survived”, or “I should exchange the other’s death or pain for my own life”. In other words, all human beings have experienced the atomic bombing to some extent – people from other nations, Japanese, *hibakushas*, and the dead. They stand in each “circle” in the ideal model of concentric ones, and feel guilty towards those standing in the circles further inward. The core of the circles is the zone of the dead.¹⁶

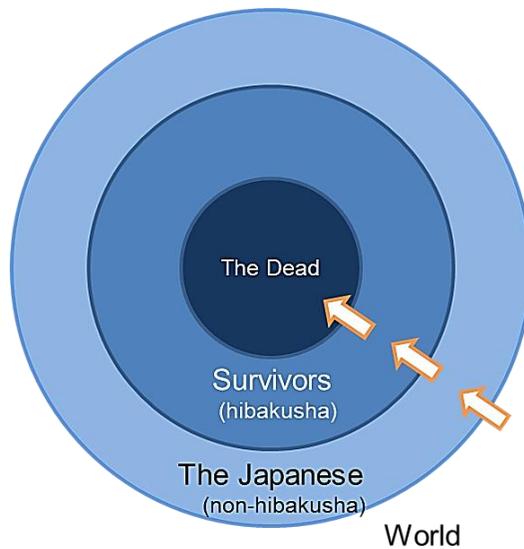


FIGURE 1: the model of the concentric circles of guilt.

(Arrows signify the direction of guilty feelings)

It is the main viewpoint of this paper that this “concentric circles model” is useful for considering the problem of empathy and apathy after any disaster, not only the A-bomb.

¹⁵ *Zaiseki-kan no doshin-en*, 罪責感の同心円. R. J. Lifton, op. cit., pp.498–499.

¹⁶ Dr. Naoko Miyaji, a prominent Japanese psychiatrist in the field of traumatic medical anthropology, advocates a model called “Circler Island of Trauma “. It has some similar points to Lifton’s concentric model. Cf. Miyaji Naoko 宮地尚子, *Kanjōtō = Torauuma no Tiseigaku* 環状島 = ト라우マの地政学, Misuzu syobō みすず書房, 2007.

However, in fact, Lifton himself does not use the expression “concentric circles”. The Japanese translators of *Death in Life* added the expression. Here is a comparison of the original text and the Japanese translation.

Identification guilt, moreover, like the bomb’s lethal substance itself, radiates outward. In Hiroshima this “radiation” moved from the dead to the survivors to ordinary Japanese to the rest of the world. That is, survivors feel guilty toward the dead; ordinary Japanese feel guilty toward survivors; and the rest of the world (particularly but not exclusively Americans) feels guilty toward the Japanese.

Proceeding outward from the core of the death immersion –from the dead themselves– each group internalizes the suffering of that one step closer than itself to the core which it contrasts with its own relative good fortune.¹⁷

原子爆弾の持つ致命的な実体と同様に、一体化から生まれる罪意識は外に向かって放射する。広島におけるこのような罪責感、死者から被爆生存者へ、被爆生存者からふつうの日本人へ、そしてさらに、その他世界各国の人々へと「放射」的に広がっていった。すなわち、被爆生存者は死者に対し罪を感じ、ふつうの日本人は被爆生存者に対して罪を感じず。そして、その他世界各国の人びとは、日本人に対して罪を感じないのである。(中略)

死の洗礼の核である死者を中心として、同心円状に広がる各集団は、相対的に幸運なそれぞれの運命と対比して、自分より一歩中心に近い集団の苦しみを内面化する。¹⁸

The original sentences in *Death in Life* do not contain the underlined words: *Dōshin-en-jō ni hirogaru* (同心円状に広がる, literal translation: expanding concentrically). According to Lifton's description, it would be more accurate to say “radiation of guilt”.

Why did the translators add the expression “concentric circles”? Probably because many A-bomb survivors and Japanese have imagined the destruction of atomic bombs by concentric circles centered on the hypocenter. Museums and textbooks often use the map of Hiroshima or Nagasaki with the badly damaged zones and concentric circles to indicate the distance from the point of explosion. Japanese officials often determine the issuance of Atomic Bomb

¹⁷ Lifton, op. cit., pp. 498–499.

¹⁸ Masui Michio 榊井迪夫 trans., *Hiroshima wo ikinuku (ge)* ヒロシマを生き抜く (下), Iwanami Gendai Bunko 岩波現代文庫, 2009, pp. 324–325.

Survivor's Certificates (被爆者健康手帳, *Hibakusha Kenkō Techō*) only by the spatial distance from the hypocenter, which is problematic. L. Yoneyama analyzes that the A-bomb survivors have identified with the perspective of the B-29 pilot who dropped the atomic bomb with themselves.¹⁹ There is a possibility that such an image has also entered the translation of *Death in Life*. The concentric model of guilt is the mixture of Lifton's analysis about the feeling of guilt from his psychoanalytic viewpoint and the spatial image shared with many Japanese survivors, an image which has to do with the identification processes of the defeated toward the former enemies.

5. Applying the concentric model to today: at the borderlines of the circles.

Can the concentric model of guilt in Lifton's analysis of A-bomb survivors be applied to natural disasters or other kind of serious incidents in the present day? The one difference concerning the psychological effect between a natural disaster and war is the existence of a responsible actor – hostile soldiers, political leaders, and nations. On the other hand, human beings cannot accuse anyone as the criminal in a natural disaster.²⁰ Nevertheless, the fundamental factor, namely the feeling of guilt, is common to both natural disasters and war. In both natural disasters and in war, there is a sense that pure luck determined whether or how deeply each person suffered from the disaster. And luck prevents us from resolving the guilty feeling. It is a common reaction to having survived an event with an enormous death toll.

In order to apply the concentric model to today, however, it is necessary to divide the circle of “survivors” into two groups, those who have lost their families or close friends, and those who lived in the disaster areas but their family members were safe. If it seems to be the same “victims” from the outside, survivors living inside it have different degrees of damage and psychological trauma.

The illogical nature of luck makes the problem of empathy and apathy, psychic numbing, and guilt even more complicated. Empathy and altruistic action soften the guilty feeling, and apathy protects the people after the disaster from their own guilty feelings. Survivors less damaged feel guilty towards other survivors who are seriously hurt; nevertheless, the latter

¹⁹ L. Yoneyama, *Hiroshima traces: time, space, and the dialectics of memory*, University of California Press, 1999.

²⁰ In the 18th Europe, Christian people could seek any response from God about natural disasters. Cf. E. Kant, *Geshichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens*, 1756. In modern times, while theodicy retrogressed, individual psychology of trauma arose.

Concentric Circles of Guilt

also may feel beholden towards the public for having acquired some goods or donations.

A more important question is what is happening across each of the borderlines of the circles. Empathy and apathy are the representative phenomena there. According to Lifton's way of thinking, the cause of those phenomena is psychic numbing and guilt, but there may be other factors that need to be considered.

There are various areas of confusion and difficulties across the borderlines. Firstly, there is the difficulty of dialogue or communication. Conflicts can arise between survivors and the public, as to what they can and cannot express in words. Outside people, too, easily give meanings to what the survivors cannot express. Outside people may miss the point of what the survivors feel.

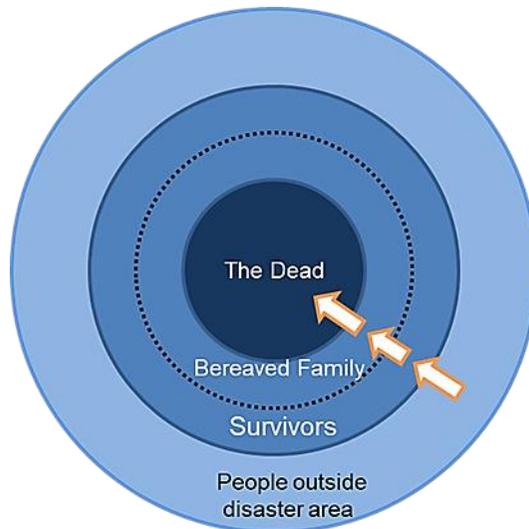


FIGURE 2: the modified model of the concentric circles of guilt.

Secondly, there are various disorders of time. In many cases, time passes normally only in the external circle. Inside the disaster area, time seems to flow at a different speed and rhythm than outside. In the deepest psychological trauma, memory is frozen, and time stops flowing. Each survivor lives in his or her own sense of time. Such differences make it more difficult to redress empathy and apathy.

Third, there is the problem of the difficulty of mourning. In our ordinary lives, the death of family member or friend is to be expected. However, in the case of sudden and mass loss due

to disasters or wars, we are not mentally prepared to accept it. The catastrophes radically destroy the culture and attitude of mourning the dead. In both the private and public spheres, the process of grief is met with difficulty. In my opinion, the difficulty of mourning and remembrance is the core of the problem of a survivor's personal recovery, and of empathy and apathy between survivors and society. This is the most important insight that the concentric model gives: the model provides the viewpoint to see the phenomena in living survivors, society, and the dead in *continuity*. The apathy, refusal, or difficulty of communication between survivors and outsiders cannot be solved without considering the process of mourning.

6. Conclusion

This paper presented the problem of psychological change from empathy into apathy in society after a disaster. Next, it introduced R. J. Lifton's concentric circles model to illustrate how the feeling of guilt affects empathy and apathy. Finally, it discussed that the model can be applied to present-day disasters, and that there are various phenomena around the "borderlines" of the feeling of guilt.

Is there no possibility of untangling the apathy and excessive empathy towards survivors? In *Home from the War*, Lifton delineates that for Vietnam veterans to recover from their trauma, it is necessary for the soldiers themselves to "animate" the sense of guilt to the past.²¹ "Anima" means spirit, and "animating" means "to breathe spirit into something". He insists that *static guilt* prevents the acceptance of reality in the present and past, but *animating guilt* can reestablish it. Our true sense of the reality of time comes from animating our guilt and mourning the dead. True sympathy and dialogue can arise from a dynamic sense of time.

Finally, it is possible to consider the model from the viewpoint of history. This paper discussed the concentric model of guilt as being a contemporary model. However, considering the problem of empathy and apathy within current Japanese society, it is also necessary to contemplate the memory of past wars and their dead. In other words, the concentric circles have a historical dimension. Some thinkers point out that post-war Japanese society has evaded establishing a relationship to the traumatic memory of the

²¹ R. J. Lifton, op. cit., pp.127–129.

War and the dead.²² It means that the guilty feeling towards the past has become static. The problem of apathy at the present time may also be rooted in the fact that the feeling of guilt surrounding historical events has not yet been dealt with properly.

²² Katō Norihiro 加藤典洋, *Haisen-go-Ron* 敗戦後論, Kōdansha 講談社, 1997.