

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

From dreadful shame to manageable incident: How post-mortem cleaning workers' narratives change the feeling rules about “lonely deaths” in Japan

Mika Toyota 

Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin, Germany

Email: toyota@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

Abstract

Since the 1990s, Japan has experienced the rise of a phenomenon known as “lonely death” (*kodokushi* 孤独死): people who die alone and whose death goes unnoticed for a certain period of time. This has triggered public anxiety and moral panic because lonely death is often perceived as a form of “bad death” and a sign of the breakdown of family ties and neighborly relations. In the 2020s, this “feeling rule,” which associates lonely death with shame and fear, has quietly begun to be challenged by a group of post-mortem cleaning workers. By sharing their work experience and feelings through blogs, artworks, and books, the workers’ accounts of how they deal with the remnants of the deceased have turned the public perception of lonely death from an abstract, totalizing, fearful category into an understanding that such incidents have specific causes that can be faced and even prepared for. The cleaners’ emotional labor, especially their mourning for the dead, creates a sense of relatedness to the deceased, a feeling which is conveyed to the public through the cleaners’ narratives. The cleaners thereby change the feeling rules associated with the labor of dealing with the aftermath of a lonely death, turning it from “dirty work” into meaningful social action. This article contributes to an understanding of feeling rules by highlighting how individuals’ efforts, particularly, their reflections on their emotional labor, can change collective feeling rules.

Keywords: Bad death; dirty work; shame; hegemony; agency

Introduction

“Lonely death” (*kodokushi* 孤独死) – people who die alone and whose death goes unnoticed for some time¹, which has been increasing since the 1990s in Japan, is widely perceived as a form of “bad death” and a sign of the breakdown of social

¹Eric Klinenberg (2001, 2002)’s ethnographic research focused on seniors living and dying alone in Chicago and examined the issue of urban inequality among alienated and impoverished seniors.

relations. These feelings toward lonely death are, in turn, based on perceptions surrounding the work of cleaning the site of the death, which is widely perceived as dirty work. Dirty work is generally defined as “tasks and occupation that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading” (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 413). As Jana Costas (2022: 4) notes, cleaners “deal with the ‘physically disgusting’ . . . matter that people prefer not to see, smell or touch. This makes cleaning a prototypical example of a stigmatized occupation.” Cleaners who work with the remnants of an unattended death – and not just on ordinary dirt – are among the most stigmatized in Japan, as in many other parts of the world.

However, these feeling rules – the socially prescribed emotional behaviors that situate people in different social contexts through affective expectations and norms (Hochschild 1983) – concerning both lonely death and post-mortem cleaning are changing. The change is partly due to a general socioeconomic shift, in particular, the rapid trend toward population aging and the increasing number of solo dwellers, two factors that have contributed to the prevalence of lonely deaths. But changes in the feeling rules are also pushed by individual actors, namely, the cleaners themselves. It is these post-mortem cleaners, who are outspoken and share their experience with the public, that this article focuses on.²

As the affective product of dominant ideologies and norms, feeling rules are subject to macro social, economic, and demographic conditions. This article shifts focus from structurally conditioned feeling rules to individuals’ efforts of navigating, and eventually altering, feeling rules. As I will argue, cleaners who publicize their work through art or other media change the feeling rules not by disputing or confronting the rules directly, but by navigating and bending them quietly. They carry out their work by following hegemonic feeling rules (most prominently, that lonely death is shameful and should therefore remain “invisible” to neighbors), but they can also engender new feelings and understandings about lonely death and cleansing work among the public by sharing their reflections on how they perform the cleaning and what their work means. In doing so, they do not advocate that people – the authorities, community leaders, family members, or neighbors – *should* change their feelings. Rather, they demonstrate how they themselves actually *feel* during their work, feelings that were previously rarely accessible to the public and are therefore novel.

In tackling how individuals navigate and change feeling rules ground up in subtle ways, I find Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” useful. Gramsci (1971) redefined hegemony as cultural, moral, and ideological leadership. Feeling rules associated with good death, cleanness, and family relation are typical manifestations of hegemony. Hegemony shapes social life, but it “is not a static, closed system of ruling-class domination. Rather, it is a society in constant process, where the creation of counterhegemonies remains a live option” (Lears 1985: 571). Stuart Hall summarized Gramsci’s approach nicely:

²The majority of cleaners are on temporary contracts and their turnover rate is high. It is the few with longer-term experience in this sector who are influential in shaping its occupational identity and changing the feeling rules, and it is this group I am interested in.

[Gramsci] draws attention to the given and determinate character of that terrain, and the complexity of the processes of de-construction and re-construction by which old alignments are dismantled and new alignments can be affected between elements in different discourses and between social forces and ideas. It conceives ideological change, not in terms of substitution or imposition but rather in terms of the articulation and the dis-articulation of ideas. (Hall 1996: 435)

In other words, people change hegemonies not by declaring one set of rules dead, and a new set of rules born. Rather, they follow the rules, bend them, create new layers of feelings that are not necessarily contradictory to the old ones, and create new feelings. This dynamic Gramscian approach enables me to analyze a hegemonic feeling rule in transition. As I detail below, while the cleaning workers participate in maintaining the existing feeling rule when interacting with their customers (family members, landlord neighbors), they cultivate new feelings and redefine old feeling rules. They do so, first, by creating a new space, social media, that brings them and a large public audience together and, second, by initiating new activities: writing and artistic works. As a result, they are reshaping the values and public attitudes by negotiating and adapting feeling rules.

To understand how the cleaners achieve these subtle modifications to a dominant affective structure, I will delve into two layers of emotional labor present in the specific work of post-mortem cleaning. The first layer is what could be called conventional reactive emotional labor: engaging in direct interactions such as providing grief-care to bereaved family members, and dealing with negative emotions, for instance, the disgust, shame, and irritation of landlords and neighbors. The second layer consists of the reflective aspects of the active emotional labor cleaners perform: some have shared their work experiences and feelings with the wider public through social media, writing, and artwork. These two layers, the immediate reactive emotional labor (“surface acting”) and this more long-term reflexive emotional labor (“deep acting”), are interdependent (Ashforth and Tomiuk 2000; Bergman Blix 2007). Following Hochschild’s (1979, 2003 [1983]) distinction between “surface acting” and “deep acting,” I argue that it is through reflexive emotional labor (“deep acting”) based on reactive emotional labor (“surface acting”), specifically through the cleaners’ narratives and their creative outputs, that they transform the feelings rules associated with lonely death. Hochschild (2003 [1983]: 7) “use[s] the term emotional labor to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value.” The original elaboration of Hochschild’s concept of emotional labor foregrounded alienation. However, a focus on alienation tends to overlook a new form of creative social labor process that constitutes the subjectivities of individual workers, such as their engagement with the audience through social media. The labor-time of the cleaner should be understood as more open and processual – as open-ended unfolding of human experiences rather than measurable units concertized in material outputs. My study thus revisits the notion of emotional labor and suggests the possibility of its empowering instead of alienating effects.

In what follows, I will first provide an overview of the emergence of a clean-up service for the remnants of the deceased in Japan as a result of broad demographic and socioeconomic changes. I shall then describe how cleaners navigate the dominant feeling rules around lonely death in residential communities. Although cleaners do not directly challenge the negative perceptions that they face, their detailed reflections about how they manage these feelings through their value-producing activities outside of the conventional labor time and the work place, raise public awareness about such perceptions. The remaining two sections focus on how cleaners' emotional labor, both at the reactive and the reflexive levels, can change feeling rules by turning lonely death from a fearful prospect, imbued with negative connotations, into an incident that can be managed meaningfully by creating a sense of relatedness to the dead.

Before I proceed, a note on method is necessary. In this article I primarily rely on a number of post-mortem cleaning workers' first-person accounts. These narratives allow me to look into the ways that individual cleaning workers negotiate the meaning-making processes related to their work. I focus on narratives by six post-mortem cleaners because they enjoy a large readership and a high level of public influence, and they are reflective and write themselves in their narratives about the cleaning work. Apart from the texts that constitute the central subject of my analysis, I also collected and watched a number of TV programs and followed a number of newspapers related to lonely deaths and post-mortem cleaning. My detailed discursive analysis is critically informed by my earlier research (2012–2020) on the emerging service industry that accommodates the new needs of an aging population in Japan at a time when family, community, and the state can no longer satisfy the provision of needs. My earlier research helps me to contextualize the specific feeling rules and their changes that I shall discuss below.

The emergence of post-mortem cleaning services

The management of mortality, which in Japan was typically the exclusive duty of the deceased's next of kin, is increasingly being outsourced to the service industry due to massive demographic shifts, chiefly, the declining rates of both marriage and childbirth. The number of Japanese men aged 50 who have never been married or had children increased from 2.6 percent in 1980 to 28.3 percent in 2020. In terms of the proportion of childless women the same age, Japan, at 27 percent, has the highest rate among developed countries.³ As a result, the number of middle-aged and older solo-dwelling people for whom post-mortem care must be arranged without relying on family relations is rapidly increasing.

To meet this demand, various mortuary services, known as the "end-of-life business"⁴ (*syūkatsusangyō* 終活産業), have emerged. One type is a cleanup service for the remnants of the deceased.⁵ The Japanese term for this service is *ihinseiri*

³Living alone has become the new norm not only in Japan but also in the USA. The rise of living alone is regarded by Klinenberg (2012) as one of the most significant social changes of the modern world.

⁴All the translations from Japanese to English in this article are mine.

⁵By the time cleaners arrive, the human remains have already been removed by authorities.

遺品整理, translating as “sorting out the belongings of the deceased.” The number of *ihinseiri* companies registered under the Association (*ihinseiri-shi nintei kyokai* 遺品整理士認定協会) in Japan increased from 2,560 in 2015 to 12,541 in 2021 (“Surge of companies” 2021). The dominant *ihinseiri* business model is the independent, small, owner-operated enterprise. Often, operators were previously in the waste collection and transport business, or in the moving and transportation industry, but expanded into *ihinseiri* services due to the growing demand. In cases of unaccompanied death, where corpses go undetected for a certain period of time, special cleaning techniques and treatment are required. This includes applying insecticide to treat flies and maggots, cleaning and disinfecting fluid stains, and removing the smell of the dead body – all of which happen before sorting out the belongings of the deceased, collecting mementos, finding items to be included in memorial services, disposing of waste, and arranging items for resale. *Ihinseiri* work is thus typically a demanding, demeaning, and undesirable occupation.

People performing dirty work seek social affirmation to retain their occupational esteem (Perry 1978; Thompson 1991). There are different ways they do so. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) delineate how those who do so-called dirty work maintain a positive self-identity in the face of pervasive stigma by forging group solidarity and a collective occupational identity, and by clearly demarcating boundaries. In the case of Japanese specialist cleaners, a positive occupational identity is not the result of group solidary or work-based socialization, but is constructed by some pioneering cleaners through their writing and artistic work.

The Japanese cleaning workers examined here seek to change the feeling rules related to their occupation in two ways. First, *ihinseiri* operators frame themselves as a “family replacement business,” highlighting that they provide the service on behalf of the bereaved family. Kimura, the owner of an *ihinseiri* business who started offering online training courses for cleaners in 2013, stressed that an *ihinseiri* cleaner deals not with “things” but “emotions.” It is not manual labor, he argues, rather, the cleaners are “professional mourners” and experts in their field who are “substituting for family members.” This affective dimension – the ability to deal with grieving relatives – is indeed considered the most important skill in the *ihinseiri* profession (Kimura 2015). As such, *ihinseiri* businesses and cleaners adopt positive feeling rules borrowed from the intimate domain of family life to mitigate the negative feeling rules associated with cleaning jobs.

Second, and more importantly, *ihinseiri* cleaners are dedicated to the emotional labor their work entails. They pay close attention to family members, neighbors, and, most importantly, to the deceased themselves. Furthermore, many cleaners have reflected on and shared their feelings about their work through books, blogs, artworks, and by speaking to the media. The first such example was Taichi Yoshida’s book “What an *ihinseiri* expert saw!! Helping you move to heaven” (遺品整理屋は見た!!: 天国へのお引越しのお手伝い), which was published in 2006. His detailed work stories instantly attracted considerable attention, inspiring a TV drama series titled “What an *ihinseiri* expert saw” (遺品整理屋は見た), a novel, and a film, both titled “Life Back Then” (アントキノイノチ),⁶ and several comic

⁶The film, *Life Back Then*, directed by Takahisa Zeze, received an innovation award at the 35th Montreal World Film Festival in 2011.

books. Yoshida was a pioneer in the field. In 2002, he established the first *ihinseiri* business in Japan and distinguished his new enterprise from already existing “disposal brokers” by paying attention to the aspect of “emotional care” the service provides. He defines and describes the mission of his business as follows:

The rooms we visit contain everything that has been left behind by the deceased, and carry a variety of messages to the bereaved family. We believe that our service plays a very important role in feeling these thoughts in our hearts and conveying to the bereaved family members the personality and thoughts of the deceased, which they did not know. Even after the funeral, the deceased has not yet completely passed from this world until their belongings have been sorted out. However, once the belongings are sorted out, the way of life disappears and the deceased becomes a person in the memories of the bereaved family. Our company assists the bereaved family in their final days with consideration for their feelings and with dignity for the deceased.⁷

Following Yoshida’s success, a variety of non-fiction books written by specialist cleaning workers have been published. These writings, alongside other forms of artistic works, powerfully refined what post-mortem cleaning work means. They also brought the feelings associated with the deaths and cleaning work, which hitherto had not been widely accessible, to public attention. In doing so, they introduced new feeling rules and affected existing feeling rules. Facing how the neighbors of the deceased feel is one of major challenges that the cleaners reflect on, which I will turn to now.

Navigating feeling rules in the neighborhoods

Ihinseiri workers have to face the strong negative feelings of the deceased’s neighbors. According to the accounts of some cleaners, neighbors often express disgust, annoyance, deliberate indifference, or embarrassment to the death of someone living close-by. Some avoid eye contact with the cleaners, while others vent their irritation at them. They find it upsetting that an unattended lonely death has occurred in their neighborhood, and instead of expressing gratitude to the cleaners, neighbors and landlords air their frustrations (Taicho 2014 [2012]: 55).

Anthropologist Jason Danely, who analyzes the unwitnessed death in Japan describes the awkward response of neighbors: “His voice was low and tired, sounding more annoyed than concerned” (Danely 2019: 214). He continues, “For my Japanese neighbors, the possibility that another solo-dwelling older person (*dokkyo rōjin*) had just died around the corner was not shocking, as it was for me, but rather produced a mood of grim dysphoria for a world that had become disarticulated from the home. What made the event unhomey was its unwitnessing, which all of us were implicated in and which placed our existential survival in question” (Danely 2019: 216).

⁷The name of Yoshida’s company is Keepers, and the mission is stated on his company’s website. See: <http://www.keepers.co.jp/>

To understand the existing feeling rule, namely, why “lonely death” provokes such pronounced feelings of not only disgust but also embarrassment among neighbors, it is crucial to take into account its specific historical and cultural construction in Japanese society. In 2010, public television broadcaster NHK aired a sensational special documentary on “Disconnected Society” (*muen shakai* 無縁社会), which dealt extensively with the phenomenon of disconnected death (NHK disconnected society project team 2010). In this program the phenomenon was projected as a sign of the demise of traditional values and the breakdown of the collective bonds of various institutions – from family to community relations, as well as the safety net of the company, all caused by the lost decades of economic stagnation and precarity in contemporary Japan. A sense of unease and anxiety, and of urgency to avoid instances of “disconnected” lonely death, became a widely shared feeling rule. Thus, the main focus of various policy interventions to prevent such isolated deaths has been the rebuilding of human relationships and revitalization of traditional models of mutual assistance and moral obligation within the neighborhood community.⁸

As such, neighbors are mobilized to surveil each other to prevent lonely deaths from occurring in their neighborhood. The negative image of *kodokushi* is expressly utilized as an incentive to construct efficient local welfare networks and appeal to the moral responsibility of the surrounding community (Dahl 2020).⁹ But despite community members’ best intentions, some solo dwellers find it humiliating to become subjects of social surveillance and prefer to cut themselves off from neighborly relations. This can create a new tension between isolated individuals and the surrounding community (Toyota 2022a: 104–5). The incident of lonely death is, therefore, perceived as a failure of community self-governance. It is shameful not only for the immediate family members but for the entire neighborhood, too. The residents complain to the local neighborhood authorities (*chonaikai*), but they also distrust and blame each other, which can cause fissures between residents and hinder community feeling. In addition, local residents are anxious about being perceived as a part of a “bad neighborhood.” The strong, and often twisted, expressions of grief and guilt on the part of landlords and neighbors thus become legible through the specific “feeling rules” in such neighborhoods, and it is this that the cleaning workers have to deal with.

The pronounced reactions of neighbors must also be understood against the backdrop of historically shifting notions about the visibility of death. Before the 1970s, dying at home was common in Japan, and death and the dead were visible to family members.¹⁰ Dying on the *tatami*¹¹ floor at home was considered the ideal way of concluding life. Between 1965 and 1974, 80 percent of funerals were still held at home

⁸The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare launched the nationwide “isolated death prevention project” in 2007. The Council for the promotion of community development for older people to live alone safely (Aiming for Zero “isolated deaths”) was established. See also Allison (2023); Dahl (2020); Nozawa (2015).

⁹An Act to promote community-based comprehensive medical and long-term care (医療介護総合確保推進法) was issued in 2014, which also promotes at-home care. Other policies stipulated around the same time have fostered the marketization of the welfare system and the deinstitutionalization of care.

¹⁰Multi-generational households used to be common in Japan.

¹¹*Tatami* is a type of straw mat, used as flooring in Japanese-style rooms.

with the support of the local community (Tsuji 2006: 394). Since then, however, the number of hospital deaths has gradually increased and since 1976, it has become more common for older people to die in hospital than at home. Over the decades, the percentage of at-home deaths has declined markedly: 82.5 percent in 1951, 70.7 percent in 1960, 56.6 percent in 1970, 38.0 percent in 1980, 21.7 percent in 1990, and 13.9 percent in 2000 (these percentages were extracted from National Demographic Statistics by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare). As the medicalization of death and hospitalization of the dying has become a general practice, the great majority of deaths now occur away from the everyday living space. Death has become invisible and odorless, at least for family members and neighbors. Allan Kellehear (2007: 7) has called this the “well-managed death,” that is, dying in the hands of professional institutions.

The phenomenon of lonely death, however, has made dying visible again. It is full of penetrating odors that affect the wrong people, including complete strangers, rather than the family. The landlord notices that rent payments are overdue or neighbors wake up to the intolerable stench of a decaying body. The cleaning workers often mention seeing neighbors passing by the site, pretending as if nothing has happened. Their awkward behavior may indicate that they wish to absolve themselves of any responsibility or shame associated with the incident. Neighbors fear that such an event will devalue not only the property in question, but also the surrounding properties in the residential area. The cleaning workers have to cope with this public gaze, anxiety, and impatience.

When a lonely death occurs in a rental property, the landlord is responsible for commissioning the cleaning of the flat and the disposal of the belongings. They must also bear the costs if no next of kin can be found. Even residents in nearby rooms may feel “polluted” and eventually move out, which leads to an increase in vacancies and a sharp drop in rental income. Often, landlords and management companies therefore ask the cleaning service provider to make sure that the fact of a lonely death does not become known to neighbors (Kojima 2019: 46).

Some property managers additionally request that a rite of exorcism be arranged. This purification service is conducted by a Shinto priest, who is believed to be able to expel evil spirits from a place. Ninety percent of requests for exorcisms are made by property management companies (Kanno 2020: 174). This is because they are obliged to notify the next tenant or buyer about instances of lonely death that took place on the premises (for the past three years for renters and for all time for buyers) (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism 2021). To make the properties more acceptable for the next occupants, the company requires formal confirmation that an exorcism has been carried out. A priest should perform the ritual and issue a certificate (Kanno 2020: 177–87). The rite of exorcism can be expensive, but property managers consider the socio-cultural and psychological costs of not having it performed much higher.

The neighborhood feeling rules regarding lonely death are so strict that single older men, who are considered a high-risk group for *kodokushi*, often face difficulty in finding a rental property. A recent survey conducted by the Association of Japan Rental Property Management (2018) indicated that 80 percent of rental property owners are disinclined to rent out to older people. While property insurance mechanisms against *kodokushi* are currently being developed to protect owners and landlords against potential losses, neighbors tend to treat single older males vigilantly.



Figure 1. The bookcover was illustrated by Hanazawa, a cartoon artist, who took part in cleaning the death scene along with the author Takaesu to achieve a realistic illustration. Copyright: Asuka Shinsha.

This excessive surveillance toward potential lonely death victims has pushed some older male retirees to leave Japan entirely to avoid the public gaze and humiliation (Toyota 2022b).

Faced with such negative feelings, cleaners normally comply with the feeling rules of the neighborhood. Takaesu, a cleaner, explains in his book that it is part of professional etiquette to refrain from telling neighbors exactly what they are doing inside the concealed space. Rather, they pretend that “I am doing a renovation of the room or piping repairs” (Takaesu 2020: 14). As the rooms are completely shut, workers have to wear goggles and a special mask that can withstand toxic gases and must be fully protected from head to toe when entering the site to prevent infection. In this way, the cleaning workers erase the traces left by the dead and revive the rooms into livable spaces, all without being seen themselves (Figure 1).

While cleaners comply with the feeling rule in the neighborhood, they do not simply reinforce it. Through their publications, blogs, books, and art practices, workers make their experience visible to the general public. In his writing Yoshida (2011 [2006]: 244) detailed the procedure workers followed to eliminate the smell of

death: “We can’t open the windows because the neighbors complain. So we use a machine to generate ozone to crush the odour and make the airborne odour particles once they are in a state of nothingness, and if the dead smell comes out of the wall again, we crush it with ozone. We repeat 20 times a day. After two weeks of doing this, the odour is finally removed.” Although it is difficult to measure whether residents’ feelings toward a neighbor’s lonely death in Japan are changed by such accounts, Yoshida’s detailed revelation is meant to make readers understand and sympathize with the cleaners, if not changing then at least complicating existing feeling rules. In sum, the feeling rules regarding lonely deaths among the neighbors are deeply ingrained due to economic, social, and cultural reasons. The cleaners are sensitive toward feeling rules, they carefully and politely comply with them when they are directly interacting with their customers. Yet when they reflect on their own experience they make it clear that these feeling rules require careful emotional labor (of cleaners) to be sustained and are not automatic. Such a public awareness is likely to entice new public feelings. In the next section I shall delve into another way that the cleaners alter public feelings. Instead of navigating existing feeling rules, they create previously unaccessible information (primarily about details of the cleaning work associated with lonely death) based on which new feelings emerged. They do so by detailing their firsthand experiences of dealing with others’ lonely deaths and bringing in autobiographical reflections.

Unpacking the category of lonely death

Instances of lonely death trigger fear and anxiety. For most people, however, lonely death remains an abstract, dark image. People are well aware that lonely death is on the rise and that they may even die alone themselves, but very few people have direct experience with someone’s lonely death. The looming presence of the phenomenon exacerbates the feeling of fear. The personal experiences and reflections of cleaning workers regarding specific instances of someone’s lonely death have helped to demystify such totalizing imagery. Miyu Kojima, a 27-year-old female cleaning worker, has played an important role in changing the public feeling rules regarding lonely death.

To raise public awareness of the reality of lonely deaths, Kojima (2019: 6–9) started creating models of interiors – miniature scenes where solitary death has occurred – in meticulous detail (see Figures 2 and 3). She has never had formal art training; she is entirely self-taught. After she displayed these miniatures at ENDEX, the mortuary industry trade show in 2016, they caught the attention of public media and went viral online. In 2019, she published a book, *Rooms Where Time has Stopped* (時が止まった部屋 *Tokiga tomatta heya*), which combined images of the miniatures with texts that explain her work experiences. The book was discussed widely in the media, including outside of Japan (Michael and Tanaka 2019). In her interview, Kojima explains that she treats the deceased with respect, as if the person was a member of her own family. People frequently ask her whether the job makes her feel scared, to which she answers: “I don’t get squeamish if I think of the deceased as a member of my own family and not as an unknown person,” or “Why should they haunt me? I am there to clean the room where they lived and died, and



Figure 2. The miniature scenes created by Miyu Kojima. Copyright: Kosuke Okahara.



Figure 3. Diorama showing cats left behind. Created by Miyu Kojima. Copyright: Kosuke Okahara.

in this way, I am helping them to depart” (Kojima’s narratives in 2021 NHK TV documentary, *Beyond Kodokushi*). She mentions that she sometimes cries together with the family of the deceased.

Kojima reports in her book that she is able to handle lonely deaths because of her personal background. She grew up witnessing her father's excessive drinking (Kojima 2019: 24). Because he was often unemployed, the family had to rely on her mother's income. Her father's personality changed when he was drinking, and sometimes she had to intervene physically to protect her mother from his violence. It was Kojima who suggested to her mother that she divorce him, which she did, and her father went on to live alone. When her mother visited him one day by chance, she found him unconscious, having suffered a stroke. Kojima was in a café with friends after school when she received the call from her sister. When she arrived at the hospital, she saw her father unconscious in bed, tears streaming from his eyes. Soon after, he passed away at the age of fifty-four. It was only then that Kojima (2019: 134), a high-school student at the time, came to regret that she had always avoided her father and never developed a relationship with him. She recalls that, when she was of pre-school age, he had been a good dad. He used to work for a delivery firm and sometimes let her ride in his truck. Occasionally, he joined the family for picnics by the riverside. She was troubled by the thought that he might have lain dead for weeks or months had her mother not visited him that day. This experience of remorse pushed her to enter the specialized cleaning sector in 2014 at the age of 22.

Given that the job is extremely demanding both physically and emotionally, Kojima (2019: 133) notes that she is often asked why she chose it. She agrees that people's incredulity "is not surprising because most of my colleagues, 99 out of 100, leave this job soon after," but points to her personal background to explain her interest. Initially, her mother was against her choice of occupation, but Kojima convinced her by showing her a job advertisement that spelt out its meaningfulness. Such advertisements appeal to readers' hearts, detailing that the nature of the job requires profound consideration for the feelings of both the deceased and bereaved family members. One explains that: "The precious aspect of this work is not simply cleaning the room but to clear people's minds and move forward in the time that seems to have stopped since the moment of death" (Kojima 2019: 136).

When cleaning up a site, Kojima often comes across photographs of a happily smiling man surrounded by family members or friends at the very scene of his lonely death. She says, "I am always perplexed when I see this displacement, this bright side and dark side in life. The deceased's life was never completely unhappy or lonely" (Kojima 2019: 85). By seeing the dead as real, specific individuals, she is able to soothe her own grief over her father's death. In the TV documentary she narrates that she hopes her father would be proud of her.

A 2021 NHK documentary, "*Beyond Kodokushi (孤独死を超えて)*," based on Kojima's experience and her book, showed that most of those who die alone did in fact experience intimate familial relations at some point in their lives. Interestingly, this film is quite different from the NHK documentary that aired 11 years earlier. While the 2010 program set alarm bells ringing, emphasizing the breakdown of family relationships, and spurring fear of the phenomenon, which it presented as an aggregate social problem, the documentary from 2021 centers around concrete human experiences. An important part of the cleaners' experience is mourning, which creates a sense of relatedness to the dead. Through the act of mourning, the lonely dead ceases to be a figure that is completely removed and deserving of fear.

Mourning changes the feeling rules about lonely death, a topic to which I shall now turn.

Relating through mourning

Ritualized mourning is an essential part of post-mortem cleaning work. Workers might sprinkle salt in the room and over the belongings, bow to the bed, join hands in prayer, and burn incense. Even though the corpses of the deceased are no longer present, cleaning workers say they still interact with them. Kojima usually bows and joins her hands before entering the area to pay respect to the space where the deceased lived and died. When the cleaning is done, she burns incense and offers flowers to the soul that has left its body behind as a way of conveying her final condolences before she shuts the door. As cleaning service workers often encounter deaths for which no one has or will send condolences, Kojima (2019: 138) feels that it is part of her job to make sure that the soul of the deceased can depart peacefully.

People are pragmatically aware that any solo dweller could pass away any time and that everyone does, ultimately, die alone. That a lonely death is so feared in Japan is not simply about the fact itself that a person has died alone. Rather, it is the absence of grief and care toward the material remains and spiritual aftermath of the dead that is so troubling. For this reason, the workers' practice of mourning for the deceased is regarded as an important gesture as it relieves the anxiety of the public. This resonates with Allison's analysis that conceptualizes Kojima's craftwork of miniaturizing death scenes as "promiscuous care" (Care Collective 2020: 40 cited in Allison 2023: 148). By imitating the scenes with astonishing levels of accuracy, "Kojima is trying to retrieve something in the remains that communicates – the humanness of the deceased" (Allison 2023: 146). However, I would like to go beyond the analysis of the cleaners' care labor in order to tackle the question of its social effects. In other words, how does the symbolic connection created by the cleaners between themselves and the deceased change the public's general feelings toward lonely death?

For the Japanese public, a general feeling rule of fear prevails when it comes to the space and belongings of the deceased. They are considered emotionally discomforting due to the perception of lingering spirit. The cleaning workers are often asked questions such as, "What would you do if a spirit appeared? Aren't you scared?" Some cleaning workers provide alternative viewpoints. Yoshida explains:

if a ghost would appear while I'm cleaning up alone and said, 'What are you doing?' I would reply, 'I'm cleaning up after you.' If he said, 'Don't clean up after me,' I would tell him, 'You should help me cleaning up after yourself together.' But if he said, 'I'm sorry I had to die like that,' or 'If I had died in a clean hospital, you wouldn't have had to go through so much trouble. I am sorry, it's a bit messy, but could you please bear with it and clean it up for me?' Then, I would say, 'Oh, that's all right. I'll do my best.' That would be a normal interaction. So I don't feel scared at all (Yoshida 2011 [2006]: 252).

Some workers further articulate the intense interaction with the lingering spirit beyond the conventional feeling rule of fear. Masaomi Yokoo, who wrote about his experience in 2016, has talked about the “voiceless voices” of the deceased:

After a person has left this world without being cared for by anyone, the room in which he or she has quietly passed away still contains the lingering traces of life, the person’s life background, and how he or she was living and thinking just before death. It is the cleaning workers who can touch these things before they are erased. . . . The cleaning worker is able to receive first-hand the thoughts and feelings of an individual that were never communicated to anyone else. There is a lingering feeling of having lived a ‘life of loneliness and struggle with anxiety’ at the scene (Yokoo 2016: 3).

In addition to feeling connected to the dead, some cleaning workers also feel connected to family members of the deceased, especially when they observe how grateful the family members are. Yoshida (2011 [2006]: 248–49) noted, “Some workers cry together with bereaved family members, which is very emotional . . . Young workers decide not to quit the job because [they feel] that their labor is immensely rewarded by the deep appreciation.” Furthermore, Yokoo felt that performing *ihinseiri* tasks brought about a stronger sense of human connection compared to the sales sector in which he had previously worked: “When I hear a thank you after a cleaning job even if the words of gratitude are the same as I have received before, it feels quite different. I know that these are sincere words filled with deepest feelings. And receiving these words is a great incentive for me [to stay on this job]” (Yokoo 2016: 3).

Yokoo (2016:3) feels that his emotional relatedness to the cries of these individuals drives him to communicate their “silenced voices” to the broader public. He became interested in post-mortem cleaning at the age of 33, after experiencing his own grandmother’s lonely death and seeing the heavy emotional burden laid on family members. Yokoo has actively reached out to the public to convey his sense of professionalism toward his work and its social significance. Costas (2022: 8) noted that “Dignity is about the state of being worthy. It entails both developing a sense of self-worth and being treated as worthy by others.” Through conscious emotional work, these workers provide dignity to the invisible and voiceless deceased, while simultaneously establishing their own sense of self-worth and claim for social recognition.

Similarly, Takaesu (2020: 3), another cleaning worker, mentioned that the main motivation for writing his second book was “a sense of mission to convey the voiceless voice of the deceased.” Takaesu worked as a post-mortem cleaner for over 10 years. After finishing his high school degree in culinary arts in Okinawa he worked as a chef in Tokyo. Having undertaken general domestic cleaning work, he became a special cleaning worker in 2002. After he was featured on televised news reports in 2009, he was approached by a publisher and released his first book in 2010. In it, he describes the death site in graphic detail, even including several photos, as well as the conflicting emotions – the anger and grief of landlords and the bereaved family – at the site in an honest and straightforward manner. He also discusses the hardships of his own life, including the death of his younger sister

when he was a child. The book raises awareness of the actual conditions after a death and what is left behind, in particular, what landlords and the bereaved family have to manage. Though the burden is left with them, Takaesu (2020: 180) noted that, “the actual client of this cleaning service work is the deceased, and the deceased is keeping us alive, as our livelihoods rely on them.”

In contrast to the other workers, he uses the pen name, commanding officer of special cleaners (Tokusou Taicho 特掃隊長), has a university degree, and has worked in the business since he graduated in 1992. In his blog, he shared that, having experienced severe depression at the age of 23, he was motivated to enter the profession by “the reaction to his own feelings of unhappiness and curiosity about unusual business” (Taicho 2014 [2012]: 8). He began blogging in 2006, at the suggestion of his manager: “I typed out what came into my mind without worrying about any contradictions that might follow” (Taicho 2014 [2012]: 8). Soon the blog was receiving a steady audience of readers with whom Taicho was excited to communicate:

I do not know exactly, but I may be trying to capture the energy for life by highlighting the way I struggle against the difficult enemy that emerges through my struggle at the horrific scene. At the same time, I may be trying to reflect it back to my weak and foolish other self and burn up the life he has been given to the full. This blog is a searching, self-reflexive written account of such conflicts, anguish, and human agility. (Taicho 2014 [2012]: 6)

Taicho (2014 [2012]: 9) describes his work as follows: “I have experienced many deaths and glimpsed many lives. By cleaning away the visible, I have witnessed many invisible ones. While I have been reminded of the transience of it all, I have erased death and carved out a trail of life, turning death into life.” He explains that he has always been disturbed by his own instinct to explore what life and death means, thus writing blogs became like a “treasure hunt for life.” (Taicho 2014 [2012]: 9) His deeply philosophical blog posts attracted interest, and in 2012 he was approached by a publisher and asked to turn his blog into a book. Reflecting on the nature of his work, Taicho wrote:

The special cleaning business is just a job, yet it does not feel like a business to bereaved families. You can’t do a good job unless you get into the very private lives of the deceased and the bereaved, and I feel a kind of joy in being allowed to penetrate into such an intimate realm of individual life when a client, (even a complete stranger), relaxes one’s guard and trusts me, even though special cleaning work is perceived as a ‘repugnance’ job by society (Taicho 2014 [2012]: 106).

The interpersonal and reflective accounts of these cleaning workers provide a space for the public to encounter, grapple with, and reflect on inevitable social changes. Their narratives reflect and engage with public emotions and help to confront not only the growing public anxiety toward lonely death but also existential questions about the nature of life and meaningful work. It is in this process of social interaction that dirty cleaning work is transformed into dignified work.

Conclusion

Drawing on the rich and nuanced narratives of a group of workers specializing in post-mortem cleaning in Japan, I have demonstrated how feeling rules can be changed by individual actors, namely, the cleaners. A central contribution that this article makes is the foregrounding of individual agency, which is exercised in subtle ways. Existing literature has mainly addressed feeling rules as reflections of structural and institutional forces that shape, or even determine, how people feel and act. For instance, Hochschild's work on feeling rules and emotional labor places great emphasis on labor "alienation" – the subjugation of the individual to the structure. Sociological research on dying alone similarly emphasizes structural forces. Eric Klinenberg's (2002) seminal work on the Chicago heat wave, for instance, uncovered the institutional forces that shaped everyday urban isolation among the old and impoverished residents, which caused many to die alone. However, as Gramsci (1971) taught us through his notion of hegemony, it is never fixed or structurally determined. Hegemony relies on an unstable articulation of a wide range of elements and requires various actors' active involvement. Hegemony is therefore a project that is constantly in the making. As such, it opens up space for people to act in response in one way or another. Following Gramsci (1971), this article asks: How do individuals navigate established feeling rules and react to them? How do people perceive lonely death and how do they redefine the meaning of lonely death?

My study shows that the cleaners' narratives contribute to the shifting feeling rules regarding "lonely death" from a social taboo of dreadful shame to a manageable incident. In analyzing how this has taken place, I have examined two layers of emotional labor of the cleaning workers. The first layer "surface acting" of emotional labor follows the established explicit feeling rules. On this layer, the cleaner's careful, polite, and discrete service maintains and reproduces hegemonic feeling rules in contemporary Japan. The second layer "deep acting" – the cleaners' reflective narratives – is the level of emotional labor through which the cleaners confront and question normative attitudes and feeling rules, thereby becoming agents of change. The cleaners' narratives present lonely deaths as a project that can be managed by individuals, rather than as a shameful event to be feared. Through their engagement with the public, the cleaners turn individual tragedies into a subject for public reflection, an invisible task into a visible activity, and an undesirable and demeaning job into one that is meaningful and dignified. In this process they reshape public attitudes and adapt feeling rules.

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Mika Toyota is a Research Scientist at the Center for Adaptive Rationality, Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. She was a Professor at Rikkyo University, Tokyo, Japan, and worked at the National University of Singapore and University of Hull, UK. She has published widely on issues related to aging and care in transnational contexts. Her current research explores the emerging new service industry around death and the contemporary art of dying well in Japan and beyond.