



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Poverty in a Rich Country

A Case Study on the Perception of Poverty in Japan

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Author: Kotoe Mimura

Supervisor: Bent Jørgensen

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Abstract

Since the economic recession in Japan in the 1990s, there has been a rapid increase in inequality. Along with the recession which was accompanied by the increase of aging population, the introduction of a new employment policy backed by neoliberal economy has been contributing to the growth of inequality. Despite such precarious background, the Japanese concept of 'self-responsibility' puts the responsibility of poverty on individuals. This individualization of poverty causes repercussions on the society, especially because of stigma and shame it remains hidden which makes the problem hard to alleviate. In this thesis, I analyze how people perceive poverty in Japan drawing on the concept of undeserving poor. Based on my findings from Japanese people's comments and feedback on various online forums, it shows that the majority of people perceive that poverty cannot be solely blamed on individuals, but at the same time, it also shows that there are people who believe that poverty is solely due to the lack of self-responsibility. This research highlights that the individualization of poverty exists in Japan and the notion of undeserving poor. Ultimately, how poverty is understood and improved is influenced by people's everyday discourse in the societies, hence, these findings suggest that there is room for improvements to be made for policy makers to enforce the disconnection of poverty from the concept of 'self-responsibility'.

Keywords: poverty, Japan, self-responsibility, undeserving poor, perception of poverty, individualization of poverty, discourse, inequality

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1. Introduction

After the Second World War, Japan was able to build itself up through the 'Japanese economic miracle'. Because of that, Japan was the first country in Asia to industrialize and, consequently, rose to the second¹ largest economy after the United States by 1968. By the 1970s, the majority of the population managed to attain the lifestyle of the middle-class. This phenomenon was seen as a 'mass-middle society' (Murakami 1997) and it was described as the most egalitarian country amongst the countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (hereafter OECD) (Sawyer 1976). However, since the economic recession in the 1990s, there has been a rapid increase in inequality causing Japan to no longer hold its egalitarian feature (Tachibanaki 1998).

Other than the recession which was accompanied by the increase of aging population, the introduction of a new employment policy backed by neoliberal economy has been contributing to the growth of inequality (Inagami 2008). According to Tachibanaki (2006, 16), poverty rate in Japan in the past was not low, but it was not a major social issue because family members were able to help each other economically. However, since the change of family patterns from an extended family to a nuclear family, and the precarity faced by different generations that has been influenced under the neoliberal politics, the old model of the economic support that once worked no longer functions (Fujita 2017). Accordingly, 1,746 people died from starvation in 2011 in the rich country Japan (Amamiya n.d.). This number is not limited to the elderly that live alone, but it also includes middle aged people as well as young children. Suzuki (2004) explains how easily it is to be trapped into destitution, even for a young and abled-body person from a combination of low wage employment, unemployment, separation from spouse, illness and/or economic reliance from the elderly. Suzuki (2004) argues thus that anyone can face impoverishment in such precarious conditions.

Still, poverty in Japan can be viewed as derived from an individual's fault – 'self-responsibility'² (*jiko sekinin*). 'Self-responsibility' is a concept that has its root in Japanese culture and is a norm

¹ As of now Japan is third after China since 2010 (Moore, 2011).

² 'Self-responsibility' here is treated as a phenomenon. Otherwise, it is described as *lack of self-responsibility* which is without the apostrophes before and after the word.

among the Japanese people (Shimizu 2017). The tendency to pin the cause of poverty on an individual, the individualization of poverty, creates multifaceted repercussions on the society. Fujita (2017), who is an associate professor of Seigakuin University and also the director of the non-profit organization '*hotto purasu*' (adding relief) advocating the social problem of poverty in Japan, claims that 'self-responsibility' is a distinct feature in Japan that makes it difficult for people to ask for help and create a climate that problems are to be solved by one's own hand. He claims that the high suicide rate³ of Japan is reflecting such a reality due to people rather finding a way out by committing suicide instead of asking for help. Moreover, due to the central feature of poverty – stigma and shame (Sutton et al. 2014), poverty is not a condition one can openly discuss and one tends to hide it, so it stays hidden and it is not understood and known by the rest of the population. This can contribute to inadequate understanding of poverty issues by the general public. Due to this, there is more discussion of *whether there is poverty* than *how and why there is poverty* in the Japanese public discourse (Fujita 2017) and some government officials believe that there is no poverty in Japan (Brasor and Tsubuku 2018).

According to Lister (2004, 8), how poverty is understood are influenced by people's everyday interactions in societies and from the way they are talked about by politicians, officials, professionals and the media. The negative effects of poverty in Japan such as high suicide rates, poverty that stays hidden, people's lack of knowledge about Japanese poverty, and politician's ignorant attitude are all linked together and influenced by the Japanese people's poverty discourse. If the poverty situation is to be improved, it is eminent to study the poverty discourse, and it requires policy makers to discern and locate the issues which can differ from culture to culture. Japan has a unique feature in implying poverty as an outcome of lack of self-responsibility. Therefore, in this thesis, I will investigate how people perceive poverty in Japan from comments and feedback Japanese people made on various online forums in order to get a glimpse of the poverty discourse in Japan.

1.1 Aim and Research Question

³ The number of suicide in Japan has increased from steady annual rate of 20,000 to 30,000 since the mid-1990, and as a per capita ratio, is twice the amount of the suicides in the US (Shinoda 2009, 3).

The aim for this research is to investigate how people perceive poverty in Japan. Therefore, I want to inquire how prevalent the individualization of poverty is in Japan, and what other opinions are out there. For this case study, the research will be based on comments and feedback Japanese people made on various online forums. The implications for poverty alleviations in Japan will be discussed in the end.

Hence my research questions are

- How Japanese people express their opinions about poverty on online forums?
- How prevalent is the concept of 'self-responsibility' applied in understanding poverty by Japanese people on online forums?

1.2 Delimitations

The time period this thesis covers is the present day Japan. Although I discuss Japan's neoliberal politics as a strategy to understand poverty in Japan, this research is a qualitative study delimited to people's perceptions of poverty. Thus, it falls outside the research's limit to examine the structural causes of poverty in Japan.

During the search process of relevant studies, I encountered a limitation in acquiring information due to books and articles only available in libraries in Japan, and archived academic papers available only to its members of academic websites. Thus, the previous research done on perception of poverty in Japan was gathered from the information that was available on the internet.

1.3 Relevance to Global Studies

This thesis explores poverty and inequality which are the products of uneven distribution of resources and wealth under the influence of globalization. Scholte (2005, 319) states that globalization is not the sole cause for a growing global inequality, but it tends to allocate resources and benefits in ways that further favor the privileged and further marginalize the disadvantaged. In fact, according to Oxfam International, 1% of the population amassed 82% of all wealth created in 2017 (Kottasová 2018). At the same time the bottom 50% of the world's

population saw no increase in wealth (ibid.). For this phenomenon Byanyima, the executive director of Oxfam International, points out how unbalanced our current economic system is. She argues that 'the billionaire boom is not a sign of a thriving economy but a symptom of a failing economic system' and the global economy favors the rich by rewarding wealth and not work (ibid.).

Apart from poverty and inequality, this thesis also refers to the existence of the underclass. Not only that globalization enhances global inequality, globalization is creating an underclass in advanced industrial societies among others according to O'Brien and Williams (2013, 306). This thesis deals with the population that are deemed underclass in Japan. Furthermore, it seeks to challenge the existing norm in Japan, in this case, the concept of 'self-responsibility' pertaining to poverty. Hence, the research of perception of poverty in Japan is linked to Global Studies because it examines poverty, inequality, and the existence of the underclass which are issues stemmed from globalization. At the same time, this thesis also seeks to challenge the existing norms in Japan.

1.4 Background

Poverty in Japan

If we look at the number of Gross Domestic Product of Japan, accessibility to clean water supply, good health care system, and high literacy rate, Japan can be considered a developed and an advanced country. However, Japan has a high level of income inequalities among the OECD (see Tachibanaki 2005). In fact, Japan ranks 6th highest in poverty rates among 35 OECD countries with the poverty rate of 16.1% (Statista 2018). If semi-developed countries were excluded, Japan is the second highest after the US⁴. The poverty line in Japan is equivalent to people who make less than 2.3 million JPY (20,300 USD). Among the population, 7.4% people live on about 100,000 JPY (882 USD) monthly, which means that this population live on roughly 92,000 JPY (826 USD) less than the one who makes half the monthly median income (McJilton 2009). Moreover, Japan is the only country with an increase in absolute poverty by 5% between

⁴ The order of the highest poverty rates in OECD: 1st Israel (19.5%), 2nd Turkey (17.2%), 3rd United States (16.8%), 4th Mexico (16.7%), 5th Latvia (16.2%). Sweden ranks 22nd with 9.2% poverty rate.

the mid-1980s and 2000 among the OECD (Jones 2007, 6). McJilton (2009), the executive director of Second Harvest Japan which have provided food security since 2002 in Japan, based on their own study, suggests that there are at least 650,000 people (0.37%) who lacks food security. As to child poverty, it is also high. One in seven children (14.3%) are living below the poverty line (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2016).

In Japan, it is estimated that the number of homeless people living on the streets or in public shelters are 24,000 in 2001 which is a 50% increase since 1997 (OECD 2005, 25). The number of 'internet café refugees'⁵ has also increased due to the increased figure in homelessness (Murakami 2018). Moreover, due to the growth of economic imbalance between salary-increase and university tuition, students whose family cannot support their expensive tuition are forced to sell sex or work at 'black enterprises' (*burakku kigyō*) in order to pay the school fee. These enterprises take advantage of young people by giving them low wages and long working hours in bad working conditions. The scholarship system is not helpful as it is a type of scholarship that one has to pay back after a certain period of time upon graduation.

Labor reform

The introduction of labor reform under the deregulation policy replaced a once distinctive feature of the Japanese society, namely the life-time employment or the stable long-term employment, with non-regular employment (Shinoda 2009, 6-7). The labor reform introduced the flexible employment, namely the part-time worker, contract worker and dispatched worker. The non-regular employment is beneficial for employers as it requires lower cost and greater flexibility. However, it has resulted in the worsening of working conditions due to the intense competition allowed by deregulation, and it provides no job security, sick-pay, or pensions for workers (Shinoda 2009; Inagami 2008, 5).

The wage difference between regular and non-regular workers is large. As a consequence, despite the low level of unemployment in Japan, the relative poverty rate for the working-age

⁵ A café that open until late or open 24 hours for internet surfing. Because it is cheaper than staying at a hotel, many people, including tourists and students use internet café to spend the night.

population in Japan is high (Jones 2007, 20), which gives rise to the ‘working poor’⁶ phenomenon (Inagami 2008). It is also noteworthy that the number of people who die from overwork (*karoshi*) in their 20s and 30s are also on the rise (See Mie 2013). The non-regular workers earn about 60-75% of the full-time workers’ salary, despite the fact that they perform the same task as the full-time workers (Shinoda 2009, 6-7). Similarly, part-time workers, who work fewer hours than full-time workers with continuous contract without the benefits, account for two-thirds of non-regular workers, and they earn roughly 40% of full-time worker’s salary (Shinoda 2009, 6-7; Hendry 2003, 168; Jones 2007, 10). Shinoda (2009, 6-7) claims that such practice of labor abuse is permitted in Japan, because there is no comprehensive law to protect discrimination of wages and benefits of non-regular workers. According to Jones (2007, 10), the growing number of non-regular workers is a key explanation to the increase of inequality in Japan.

Gender

Genders plays a big role in poverty in Japan. Due to culturally rooted patriarchic system, poverty affect women, particularly single mothers. The number of single mothers has increased by 23.5% between 2000 and 2010 (Sugiyama 2014). Women who became single parents either from divorces or partner’s deaths are most susceptible to be ‘working poor’ in the Japanese society. Single mothers have difficulty finding formal employment due to the long gap of unemployment and are restricted to less working hours in order to take care of their children (OECD 2005, 61). Statistics from 2011 shows that single mothers who work in non-regular employment equals to 47.4% compared to 8.0% single fathers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2011a). Due to gender difference, women’s wages are lower than that of men. On average, single mothers earn 1,810,000 yen (16,000 USD roughly) annually compared to 3,600,000 yen (32,000 USD roughly) earned by single fathers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2011b). In other words, single mothers make 50.3% of single fathers’ wages. Since the employment system has changed from formal employment to flexible employment, women after divorce were no longer able to raise their children with one job like they used to. On top

⁶ ‘Working poor’ is applied to people who remained poor despite the individual has a job or more than one job.

of that, Sugiyama (2014) states that 80% of the single mothers are not receiving child support from the fathers, because either the fathers are not able to pay, or they simply do not pay because there is no compulsory obligation by law. Consequently, poverty among single mothers are the highest.

Social security system

The social security system, Livelihood Protection (*seikatsu hogo*), is constructed for poor people by the government in Japan. However, the current Japanese social security system is established based on the old norm that family takes care of family. Applicants of public assistance are expected to find all means before they ask for the public assistance, including using up all their savings (Tachibanaki, 2006, 16; Onishi 2007).

Tachibanaki (2006, 18-21) based on his research findings argues that in the current social security system in Japan it is difficult for applicants to apply for social benefits. Although he does not deny the need of having a mean test, he states that the application documents one must fill in are extremely complex. In the application, one has to report one's economic circumstances, show proofing of no savings, and applicant's children must not be attending senior high school. Therefore, he contends that the social security system they have is effective in lowering the number of free-riders, but it is ineffective in reducing the number of poor people. For instance, by 2017, there were 1,640,000 households receiving public assistance (Ministry of Health, labour and Welfare 2017), however, it is estimated that out of the population who live below the poverty line, only about 20% of the population is receiving public assistance (Japan Federation of Bar Associations n.d.). This is due to, as suggested by Tachibanaki (2006), that the screening system prioritizes the elimination of welfare abusers, instead of providing the welfare to people in need. Furthermore, Abe (see 2003) claims that the social security system in Japan is not adequate to handle the problem of the low-income population. Therefore, Japan is one of the lowest country in supplying welfare benefit for low-income households in OECD, except the welfare for elderly people (Jones 2007, 15-19).

In addition to the screening system, one must endure stigma and shame. Welfare recipients are considered a burden to society because in Japan welfare is considered less of an entitlement

than a shameful handout (Onishi 2007). Hiroshi Sugimura, a professor of welfare study in Hosei University, points out that welfare recipients are perceived negatively even in the eyes of the government. He described, 'Local governments tend to believe that using taxpayer money to help people in need is doing a disservice to citizens'. 'To them, those in need are not citizens. Only those who pay taxes are citizens' (ibid.). Thus, even if one is granted social welfare, one has to endure discrimination from the government.

1.5 Previous Research

The following section introduces a summary of previous research relevant to this study. The first section presents the finding of a study published by Masamichi Ida in 2000 about a consensus among Japanese people pertaining to the relationship between poverty and 'self-responsibility', and a research project carried out by several scholars represented by Osamu Aoki on people's perception about poverty conducted from the period of 2004 to 2007. The second section describes the treatment of the poor in Japan in the past and how it affects the treatment of the poor today published by Tipton in 2008.

1.5.1 Findings from Ida

Masamichi Ida conducted a research on whether poverty is due to 'self-responsibility' or imbalance in the social structure, and if the general public wants a small government, where the government's involvement in public policy is minimum versus a big government, where the government having an extensive influence on public policy. Ida (2000) discovered that 44.8% of people that answered the survey think that poor people exist because of laziness and weak mindsets; 48.7% of people think that poor people exist because of imbalance in social structures; and 6.5% of people stated other reasons or don't know. From this survey it shows that there are more people believing that the cause of poverty is a failure in social structures rather than the individual's own fault.

Furthermore, Ida (2000, 366) identified different demographics of the population that answered that the cause of poverty was 'self-responsibility'. From the research, he discovered that people who were most likely to see poverty as a result of 'self-responsibility' belonged to male in gender; 50 years old in age; university graduate in education level; people who worked

in management, commerce and industry, or self-employed in job categories; and people who has high earnings in socioeconomic group. He comprehends that the more the people have economic freedom, the more they will perceive poverty as 'self-responsibility'. He also links economic freedom with the degree of satisfaction in life. If an individual has an economic freedom, then the degree of satisfaction he/she feels about life is higher and therefore critique less on the existing society. However, from further survey in line with the same research, he discovered that the majority of people want the state to take care of poverty whether or not they mention 'self-responsibility' as a cause of poverty (Ida 2000).

1.5.2 Findings from Aoki et al.

Aoki et al. (2010) conducted surveys and interviews to find out how Japanese people (welfare commissioners, supporting workers to single mother households, regional residents, labor union, university students and vocational school students) perceive poverty. Aoki et al. (2010) discovered that people connect poverty with underdeveloped countries or war countries, and there is a limited understanding of the notion of relative poverty among the surveyed. More than half of the people replied that the homeless people and the people receiving the social security system are not poor. Moreover, Aoki et al. (2010) found out that the negative connotation to poverty is derived from the 'self-responsibility' concept; even though people understand that there are social and individual aspects in impoverishment, people are not necessarily conscious about these aspects; and people have minimum association that poverty is linked to future developments of Japanese society. Furthermore, Aoki et al. (2010) revealed that the understanding of poverty among the families who have family members with disabilities are affected by their fear of being impoverished; the people experiencing poverty can elaborate on the poverty situation better than those who are not; and the people from welfare providers show the distinct feature in understating poverty as 'self-responsibility', whereas, people from the labor unions understand poverty as a cause of social factors. Lastly, they discovered that when they were asked who they can rely on to get out from poverty, there are more people who answered 'individuals' or 'family members' rather than 'the society' (the state, organizations and regional support).

Aoki et al.'s (2010) findings can complement what Ida (2000) found from his research. Aoki et al. (2010) discovered that there is a negative connotation to poverty because poverty is linked to the concept of 'self-responsibility'. Ida's (2000) findings showed the demographics where people tended to describe poverty as 'self-responsibility', while Aoki et al. (2010) complemented the findings with occupation. Aoki et al. (2010) discovered that there are more people who blame poverty as 'self-responsibility' from the welfare providers than the people who work in labor unions.

From these two researches, I learned that there are already studies done on this subject. I will also investigate the poverty discourse in Japan but on a smaller scale which will be derived from different websites, however, it will be interesting to see and contrast my findings from recent sources with their studies.

1.5.3 Treatment of the Poor in Japan

How people perceive and interpret the poor in Japan nowadays is greatly influenced by how the poor were perceived in the past. There was an assumption made in the Meiji Period⁷ that poverty was caused due to the moral defect in an individual (Tipton 2008). As a consequence, the treatment of poverty was reflected in how the government tried to reduce poverty. The money they provided for the poor was raised through charities, which was money collected from a benevolent act from the people as a pity (ibid.). In the 1920s, the government introduced new social welfare policies and a Relief and Protection law in an attempt to shift the mindset about poverty (ibid.). This was due to the government acknowledging that poverty can be caused by factors outside of an individual's control due to social and economic influences, so that the state or society have some responsibility to take care of the poor (ibid.). However, this attempt was not succeeded and it failed to transform the previous mindset about the cause of poverty (ibid.). As a consequence, the belief that the cause of poverty derived from the individual remains, and the idea of 'training' and 'disciplining' the poor by instilling the righteousness in getting jobs so they can rid themselves of poverty is still a major approach in present day (ibid.). It also resulted in caseworker's negative approach towards welfare

⁷ The Meiji period lasted from 1868–1912 (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.).

claimants (Okabe 1990). This shows a clear relation to what Aoki et al. (2010) identified that the 'self-responsibility' notion is strong among welfare providers.

Moreover, the notion of 'undeserving poor' and the 'deserving poor' from those who received the relief and those who did not was beneficial for the government to alter people's behaviors (Tipton 2008). The condition for the individuals to get the relief from the reformed social welfare were for those who were not capable to work and had no other support (ibid.). But they have to pay the price to get the relief as they were exempted from voting, targeted for stigmatization and subjected to be investigated in all aspects of life (ibid.). The notion of underserving poor sent a message that the deserving poor should not behave like them, because it was considered that with the virtues of self-reliance, thrift and a will to work, the deserving poor would get their respected place in the Japanese society (ibid.). The perception of sustaining oneself as a virtuous act, and the ability to become the mainstream population motivated people to work. According to Tipton (2008), the distinction of the undeserving poor and the mainstream population was needed for the state, as the state needed to create a new social order and social groups from the aftermath of industrialization, urbanization and mass education. Hence, the underserving poor was used by the government in order to create the mainstream Japanese society who would follow suit.

1.6 Disposition

This thesis will be presented in the following order. **2. Theoretical Framework** introduces the theoretical framework of undeserving poor and key concepts in order to discern the consequence of the individualization of poverty. **3. Methodology** discusses methods used for this research including my motivations, research materials, research strategy, and description of content analysis as well as ethical consideration. **4. Results and Analysis** presents the research findings which shows Japanese people's perceptions of poverty and the prevalence of the individualization of poverty in Japan, and discusses the key findings throughout my analysis. **5. Conclusion and Discussion** presents summary and its implications for practice and policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter provides discussion of concepts that will help to navigate in answering the research questions. In order to understand the research issue, we need to understand poverty as a discourse in contrast to the structural dimension of the phenomenon. The concepts of social constructivism, poverty, neoliberalism, self-responsibility, and undeserving poor will be discussed. The first section presents my understanding of poverty as a reciprocal reality of humans and societies. The second section provides the definition of poverty, the third section presents how I use the term neoliberalism, and the fourth section provides the meaning and implication of the Japanese word 'self-responsibility'. The fifth section seeks to present the concept of undeserving poor that underpins this study and serve to illustrate how it is associated with the individualization of poverty.

2.1 Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is a theoretical approach to understand that our social world is constructed by the interaction of the social world and the human subjects through discursive practices (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; O'Brien and Williams 2013, 31). This opposes to institutionalists whereby we understand ideas, norms, and identities as fixed values. (O'Brien and Williams 2013, 31). What we believe to be 'reality' is not 'objective facts', but it is socially constructed, historically and culturally specific and it is constantly changing through interaction (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). Ideas, norms, or perceptions that are seen as 'real' by people, thus reflect our social world and how institutions and politicians look at the social problem of poverty.

2.2 Definition of Poverty and Nature of Poverty

The official poverty research was conducted by the former Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan from 1953 to 1965, but was halted due to the economic boost of Japan. It was resumed again in 2009 due to the increased inequality (ibid.). The 'poverty lines' were established as a standard set to define poverty (Inagami 2008, 23). There are absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is a condition when one's income cannot support the

cost of living necessary for survival; and relative poverty is poverty relative to the rest of society (ibid.). Absolute poverty can be observed when one cannot afford to buy, for example, food, clothing and housings for physical subsistence. Whereas, relative poverty is socially defined and dependent on the social context. For example, people who do not have a standard of living adequate to participate in social activities unashamedly are regarded being in relative poverty (ibid, 25). In addition, Townsend (Inagami 2008, 26) describes that if one is unable to participate in social activities that is a customary to one's culture, then it is also regarded being in relative poverty. Japan uses the methodology of the OECD for calculating the relative poverty rate which is based on the income less than half of the country's median income (Noda 2015).

However, Lister (2004, 7) argues that there is no such thing as definition of poverty, and it is simply a measure. A measure is merely a technical device which are derived from constrained limitations of methodology and by the available data (ibid.). Lister (2004, 7) states that a definition should distinguish the state of poverty from that of non-poverty. A broader conceptualization of poverty helps people to understand the non-material aspects of poverty especially for those who have not experienced poverty themselves (ibid, 8), because poverty is deprivation of material and non-material aspects (Nussbaum, 2011; Lister 2004). That means poverty is not only the state of having a lesser income, but it is a condition that is closely related to multifaceted issues such as social inclusion/exclusion, health status, rights, and freedom (ibid.). Lister (2004, 8) claims that poverty should be understood as 'a disadvantaged and insecure economic condition but also as a shameful and corrosive social relation'. Similarly, Amartya Sen defines that poverty is not merely related to lacking commodities, income and wealth, but the deprivation of capability (Nussbaum 2011). He argues that poverty robs people of their chances of achieving their dreams and goals (ibid.). The United Nations defines the condition of poverty as dehumanizing, and it is pledged to eradicate poverty as one of the millennium development goals (UN General Assembly 2015).

Regarding the nature of poverty, it is understood differently depending on one's political stance. The political left view poverty as an inherent part of a social system and describes that the locus of poverty is in a group (Jørgensen, 2006, 69-71). The group here is a group of people divided into different categories based on the social stratum such as class, caste and rank. Since

the individual can hardly influence this system, the locus is focused on the group rather than the individual itself. On the other hand, the political right view poverty as not an inherent part of the social system, because they believe that an existing social system does not cause poverty in itself (ibid.) The rightist view poverty as a dysfunction in a group and an individual. The dysfunction in the group can be found if there is a discrimination targeted to a certain group, and a dysfunction in the individual can be found from deviations like disability, sickness, alcoholism, laziness, etc. (Jørgensen, 2006, 69-71). The poverty case of Japan locates 'self-responsibility' as the explanation of poverty which reveals that the nature of poverty in this case is leaning to the right political spectrum which blames poverty on the dysfunction of the individual and not in the social system itself.

2.3 Neoliberalism

As it was promoted by Thatcher and Reagan, neoliberalism was also introduced as a structural reform (sanmi-ittai) under the Prime Minister Koizumi. Neoliberalism is neoclassical economic propositions met with the political project of implementation (O'Brien and Williams 2013, 268). The neoclassical economic propositions are an agreement among many financial, corporate and state elites for the development that often termed as 'Washington Consensus' (ibid). The 'Washington Consensus' comprised of policies included fiscal discipline, liberalizing trade, freeing exchange rates and interest rates, privatizing state industries, deregulation, tax reform, redirecting public expenditure, and securing property rights with minimum state's involvement (ibid.). The institutional economic changes accompanied by neoliberalism was believed that by relying on unconstrained market forces 'laissez-faire', it can bring prosperity, growth and stability as well as liberty, democracy and peace to society (Scholte 2005, 38). In practice, neoliberalism restricts government's intervention as minimal as possible, authorizes private enterprises to take charge, opens domestic markets to international competition, permits money to move across borders with minimal restrictions, and allows capital to move where it will be used most efficiently (A Challenge to economic orthodoxy 2016). Indeed, 'neoliberalism is capitalism in its purest form' (ibid.).

The labor reform in Japan was introduced under the deregulation policy of neoliberalism which was discussed in section 1.4 Background under Labor Reform. The introduction of labor reform changed the working practice of Japan and as a result there are more people employed in the form of non-regular employment without any benefits which could be the key in producing inequality in the Japanese society (Jones 2007, 10).

2.4 Self-responsibility

According to Shimizu (2017), 'self-responsibility' has its root in their custom of ostracism. If someone in a group has broken a rule or order, everyone in the same group was punished in the past; therefore, it was extremely important to take precaution not to trouble others (ibid.). Due to such custom, Japanese people have been accustomed to have respect in not troubling others, and the spirit of 'self-responsibility' is applied to everyday Japanese discourse. Shimizu (2017) claims that what is viewed as Japanese virtue such as not littering on the streets and being polite are all stemmed from the spirit of 'self-responsibility' (2017).

In terms of the word's meaning, the prefix 'self' from 'self-responsibility' denotes the locus of responsibility in an individual in contrast to a group responsibility in Japanese (*rentai sekinin*) (Hook and Takeda 2007, 93). The most authoritative Japanese dictionary, *Kojien*, did not have this word in the 5th version printed in 1995; and it did not appear until in the 6th version printed in 2008 (Ishikawa 2014). The dictionary defines 'self-responsibility' as a state when 'one must take responsibility to the consequence resulted from one's judgement'. Among the common dictionaries, only *Sanshodo Gendai Shinkokugo Jiten*, 5th version printed in 2015 has a definition for 'self-responsibility'. In contrast to *Kojien*, it defines the word more specifically and it states that 'one must take responsibility based on one's judgement even if it turned out to be an unfavorable outcome, and not to blame the society or the other people for that' (ibid.).

By its definition, 'self-responsibility' is not a negative word as it is derived from the word 'responsibility' which is defined as the state or fact of being responsible, answerable, or accountable for something within one's power, control, or management. Despite that the word 'self-responsibility' is not negative by itself, it is often portrayed and used by many Japanese people and the

in the negative description in recent times. In contrast to the positive affiliation with the 'responsibility', 'self-responsibility' on the other hand, is used to accuse people for the lack of carefulness and smartness, so that it was the victims' fault that they got into trouble. This distinction is further exemplified in the accusation of becoming a victim of poverty, bullying, sexual abuse and more.

In terms of the usage of the word, in the beginning, 'self-responsibility' was a word mainly used in media. For example, by the early 1990s, the word 'self-responsibility' was used in the newspaper coverage critiquing the compensation made by an investment company to its major investors against the backdrop of the bust economy. 'Self-responsibility' was used to accuse investors to take responsibility for the losses (Ishikawa 2014, 7). However, it took a new turn when the news coverage for Japanese hostages in Iraq was circulated in 2004. Since this incident 'self-responsibility' was no longer used only by the media (ibid., 9).

The storyline of hostages of Japanese citizens in Iraq turned into a big scandal in Japan. The following report were extracted from the Washington Post written by Taylor (2015). Two Japanese humanitarian workers and a journalist were captured by the extremists in Iraq in 2004, and they and their families were heavily scrutinized by the general public and the media. The Prime Minister Koizumi refused to negotiate with extremists' demand of retrieving Japanese troops from Iraq and forgoing funds allocated to US invasion, and official spokesman denounced the hostages for being irresponsible despite the warning travelling to Iraq announced by the government. The hostages were scorned by Foreign Minister Officials at a press conference that just because they had forsaken the 'basic principle of 'self-responsibility' (*jiko sekinin gensoku*), the government can deny responsibility for them. Fortunately, all three hostages were released a week later after the ransom video footage was shown, thanks to a mediation by Islamic clerics. Nevertheless, they were greeted by a hand-written placard 'You got what you deserve!' at the airport, and the Japanese government announced that they will bill the hostages the airfare home and any additional cost that entailed in responding to the angry citizens. The 'self-responsibility' discourse was so dominant that the hostages' action overshadowed the kidnapping by the extremists. Yasuo Fukuda, the Chief Cabinet Secretary of Japan at the time, said at a press conference: 'People who go there say they do so on their own

responsibility (risk), but they should think about how much trouble they cause when something like this happens,' and 'I wish they would use a little more common sense.' Due to the severe bashing of the hostages viewed by the general public pertinent to 'self-responsibility', they avoided the public. As a consequence, a psychiatrist treating the hostages told the New York Times that their stress level was higher in Japan after they were released from hostages than when they were captured as hostages (Taylor 2015).

However, the general usage of 'self-responsibility' was not only ignited by the incident in Iraq, but according to Allison (2014, 152), Glenn and Takeda (2007, 94) the notion of 'self-responsibility' was also encouraged by the government. It was done so because the notion of 'self-responsibility' was useful for the government to promote the individualist mindset in the wake of neoliberal politics. Similarly, Ishikawa (2014, 3) argues that the popular usage of 'self-responsibility' emerged in the late 1990s to 2000 when neoliberalism and the new employment system was introduced. According to Allison (2014, 152), the ethos of 'self-responsibility' connotes with self-reliance, self-independence and self-sustainability which fits the individualist mindset that is required for the neoliberal politics. Glenn and Tanaka (2007, 94) claim that the Japanese government promoted the discourse of 'self-responsibility' to the public after the Cold War as a mean to make people get onboard with globalization which is accompanied by risk taking. By promoting the 'self-responsibility' discourse, the government could reason the public to promote individual risk management by handing over the power from the state to the individuals (ibid.)

2.5 Undeserving Poor

The notion of undeserving poor has existed since long ago in history, however, as Scholte (2005, 319) argues that neoliberalist globalization tends to reinforce class hierarchies, neoliberalism can contribute to strengthening this notion. Nunn and Biressi (2009, 111) contend that the existence of underclass is part of the reinforcement in class hierarchies in the modern industrial societies. There is a consensus in many fields about the disappearance of class caused by the disruption of class-based solidarities due to the promotion of social mobility and consumerism on the rise of neoliberalism (ibid, 110). While the cling to class seemed unnecessary because

'class can no longer give us purchase on the big social, political and cultural issues' (Pakulski and Waters 1996), the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1982, 192-193) claims that it still holds its validity today. Bauman (1982) claims that the redundant concept of class for some still has its significance because it is deeply embedded in our social practices. He explains that people's presumption of class yields as a real explanatory value and it is applied to social practices. As a consequence it is reinforced as something substantial.

Similarly, Nunn and Biressi (2009, 110) address that the conception of class is strategically harnessed in social distinctions and it has been used for the expression of social difference and the economics of social status. Nunn and Biressi (2009, 110) contend that the deployment of ascriptions of class and class-positioning have real and symbolic effect. They note that when class-positioning is embedded in our real life, class notion is mixed with emotions. As a result it is practiced as a way to dispense judgement, criticism or praise, and to evoke fearfulness, nostalgia, disgust or shame in popular discourses. When the class notion can evoke certain feelings, it can then be used to represent the measurement of human beings. This explains why the language of the underclass has been associated with a lesser value such as unmodern, economically unproductive, socially peripheral and waste (Nunn and Biressi 2009).

The emergence of the underclass also takes place in Japan. According to Brasor and Tsubuku (2018), a study found by the sociologist Kenji Hashimoto, there were only the existence of two classes after the Second World War: an owner's class and a worker's class, but now it breaks down to five classes: the owner's class who employs at least five people (4.1% of working population), the new middle class who works in administration, engineering and higher education (20.6% of working population), the regular employee's class (35% of working population), the traditional middle class made up of self-employed individuals (25.3% of working population), and the underclass (15% of working population). While the underclass emerges in all developed countries, the underclass in Japan is unfavorable as the underclass in Japan makes roughly 40% of the national median income while the underclass in the European countries make between 60 to 70% of the respective national median income (ibid.). In addition, Brasor and Tsubuku (2018) note that the underclass in Japan is expanding.

Meritocracy has further fueled the individualization of poverty. A political ideology of meritocracy is to create equality of opportunity with a purpose to promote social mobility based on talent over privilege (Nunn and Biressi 2009, 111). At the same time, it emphasizes responsible individualism, consumerism and self-improvement through investing in themselves (ibid.). In turn, this establishes the notion that success can be achieved by everyone if one puts effort in self-improvement (ibid.). Accordingly, social mobility was coupled with the notion of success and it reinforced that success takes place in the public domain through the purchasing of brand names, housing and postcodes (ibid.). Nunn and Biressi (2009, 112) argue that in such climate, it normalizes the labelling for those who participate in activities that are rooted in the private, domestic or local domains; or those who cannot follow the current discursive framework of social progress and personal success as unmotivated, unambitious, underachieving and even morally deficient. Because of such poverty discourse backed by the meritocracy, the discursive landscape of undeserving poor is uncontested and accepted by the majority, and the majority can still enjoy the meritocracy with ease of mind (Nunn and Biressi 2009). The same can be said in the case of Japan when the concept of 'self-responsibility' is applied to view the poor. If the concept of 'self-responsibility' is associated with one's success in getting out of impoverishment, then the poor themselves are automatically blamed for not trying hard enough in this discursive framework.

Furthermore, Bauman (2004) explains that the categorization of poor was made to distinguish consumers from failed consumers in the society as modernization progresses. He states that in order to fill the demand of labor power needed for modernization, states deliberately motivated people by aspiring people for a better life and material wealth as motivations for labor. Also the message of being valuable to the society through working was promoted as a way to happiness. He addresses that when working was coupled with life enhancement and happiness, and coerced into people's framework of work ethic, it soon became the discursive norm among the people. Bauman (2004) claims that modernization is the obtainment of control and subordination of people through the work ethic. It was people's obedience that was the product of modernization (ibid.). Moreover, Bauman (2004) states that if people want to obtain more and consume more, people have to work for it because it was presumed that one

has to give to gain. He claims that when work ethic successfully turned people into consumers, people that did not follow suit, notably the poor, became the default consumers in the society of consumerism and soon they were regarded as abnormal. As described by Bauman (2004, 37-38), 'the propriety of human existence is measured by the standards of decent life practiced by any give society', a successful life, happiness and human decency are measured by the extent of consumption.

As a result, Bauman (2004) states that people who do not have decent standards of life are grouped into one category – the underclass which consists of the poor, juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, welfare mothers, illegal immigrants, addicts and criminals. Although the poor and the other default consumers named above do not share the same behaviors, it was the labelling of the underclass that allowed the stigmatization of the poor. He argues that the labelling rids the moral constrain of 'normal people' who abide modern code of living, and criminalize those who are not part of the 'normal' society. The categorization of people yields to the characterization of the underclass as unmotivated, unambitious, underachieving or morally deficient.

Furthermore, Lister (2004, 8) claims that the social distance is established and maintained due to 'othering' the poor. 'Othering' is a process of differentiation and demarcation by drawing the line between 'us' and 'them'; thus, the poor become the 'other' to the rest of us (ibid). Lister (2004, 11) argues that the language and labels that describe the poor, for instance, underclass, undeserving, welfare dependent, and trailer trash, have been articulated by the more powerful 'non-poor'. He states that people in poverty themselves are often reluctant to be called with a stigmatizing label that has connotations of inferiority, and argues that less value-laden word 'poor' is itself problematic.

According to Bauman (2004, 85), it tuned this way when work ethics become more important than moral ethics. The reason for his argument is derived from the fact that economic profit take precedence over virtue: 'When it comes to our collective responsibility for the continuing misery of the world's poor, economic calculation takes over, and the rules of free trade, competitiveness and productivity replace ethical precept. Where economy speaks, ethics had

better keep silent'. Hence, it is imperative not to dismiss poverty as an outside problem of the political realm.

To sum up, meritocracy and consumerism enforced by neoliberalism can constitute the existence of the underclass. Poor people who does not belong to the mainstream society by showing their appropriateness through self-investment and prosperity is seen outside of the mainstream population. People who is casted outside from the mainstream is grouped together and they are categorized into the underclass. The stigmatization allows the labelling of the underclass anything with inferiority and undeserving; thus, they are criminalized, deemed unmotivated, unambitious, underachieving and even morally deficient. Additionally, Lister (2004) claims that social distance is established and maintained due to 'othering' the poor. As a result, it can contribute to the status quo without improving the situation. When meritocracy and consumerism are in force, and the status quo is maintained without the improvement of the situation, it could result in that the poor are accused for being poor, instead of the non-poor questioning the inequality arising from the unequal distribution of power and wealth. Thus, it places the problem on the poor and shift the problem away from the political realm. Similarly, in Japan, when the cause of poverty is implied due to the lack of 'self-responsibility', the blame is put on the poor; hence the root causes of poverty are ignored, and it is not treated as a responsibility within the political realm.

2.6 The Use of Theoretical Concepts in the Analysis

All of the concepts presented here will be used as a tool to deconstruct the discursive poverty existing in Japan. The ontological view of constructivism, the concepts and nature of poverty, the terms of neoliberalism, the meaning and implication of 'self-responsibility' are the key concepts used in this study. Theoretical perspective of underserving poor will be applied to analyze the empirical data to discuss Japanese people's perception of poverty and the prevalence of the individualization of poverty in Japan.

3. Methodology

The following chapter provides the background behind the choice of case study, material and method. This chapter also discusses the implications of producing a research in the ethical considerations, and issues of reliability and validity in this study.

3.1 Choice of Case Study

The rich is getting richer and the poor is getting poorer in the neoliberal backed economy due to the unequal distribution of wealth (Scholte 2005; O'Brien and Williams 2013, 306-308). The global institutions, for example, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund have been promoting neoliberal doctrine as a ticket for prosperity. But we see the increase in wealth disparity in the global north as well as in the global south (ibid.). Poverty is a serious issue in both the global north and the global south, however poverty in the global south is more spoken of as prominent (see Scholte 2012). As was mentioned in section 2.2 Definition of Poverty and Nature of Poverty, poverty affect individuals differently and should not be regarded less serious because it is happening in rich countries. In other words, poverty is not just a problem in developing countries, but a global problem. From the above-mentioned information, it inspired me to look into poverty in a developed country. Because I am a native Japanese speaker and this thesis studies people's discourse, it is advantageous for me to study Japanese people as I can understand nuances in languages, therefore, I chose Japan as my case study among the developed countries.

3.2 Choice of Material

Data collected from the internet provides an illuminating window in conducting exploratory research that can be meaningful and useful for analysis. (Bryman 2012, 654; Pinçon 2017). While gathering data from the internet have some disadvantages, for instance, the subject will be narrowed down to the population who have access to the internet, and for those who have courage and desire to express their feelings. Nonetheless, it has many advantages. For instance, the access of data from the internet does not require permissions from gatekeepers (Pinçon 2017), it is economical in terms of time and money, it reaches a wide range of the population,

distance is no longer a problem between the researcher and the participants, and data can be obtained very quickly (Bryman 2012, 658). Although, interviews would also be an appropriate method to answer my research questions, because of the above-mentioned advantages and the fact that I can obtain the information from the internet, I chose internet as a source for materials for this research.

Primary data from the internet was selected based on their relatedness to my research questions. To be mindful of the problem in self-selection, I used all the contents that I could find on the internet as my primary data as long as they are related to my research questions with relative amount of comments to be investigated. Based on this premise, I found two questions submitted by different users on the Japanese's enquiry site 'oshiete!goo', with 28 comments responding to 'To what extent is poverty 'self-responsibility'?', and 28 comments answering the question to 'To what extent does 'self-responsibility' link to poverty in the economically divided society?'. I also found responses that are submitted on two different forums on the NHK Heart Net under the homepage of Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK), the most prominent national television broadcaster, as public feedback on documentaries aired in 2012 and 2014 with 14 feedback and 97 feedback respectively. The documentaries aired in 2012 is a series of documentaries that had been broadcasted once a month for a year focused on 'The growing reality of poverty in Japan', with different topic each month. The other one aired in 2014 is a four-day documentary, focused specifically on poverty among children under the title 'Children's crises'. In total, there are 167 voices from the comments and feedback submitted on four different websites. In addition to this, the enquiry site 'oshiete!goo' is equipped with 'like' button for each comment. It is disputable that if these 'likes' is an opinion, but I decided to treat them as an opinion, because I believe there are some of the population who prefers not to write down his/her opinion but still wants to support someone's view; therefore, it will be counted and reflected on in the research. However, in order to give a nuanced view, a summary of data only derived from 'likes' will be shown separately. After including this feature of 66 cumulated likes, there will be a sum of 233 inputs to make up this research. The possibility to analyze 233 inputs from multiple respondents give depth to this research. Still, it is unlikely that people manipulate these inputs on the enquiry site 'oshiete!goo' and the forums of the NHK

Heart Net, but it is not impossible. The comments on the enquiry site is traceable to identify the users, but I cannot guarantee that some has several user's accounts. Also, 'like' button on the enquire site allows only once to click on the 'like' on the same comment, but a same user with a different account can manipulate the numbers of the 'likes'. The website does not provide the function to show who 'liked' the comment, possibly because people can 'like' the comment without logging in to the website. Similarly, people who made feedback on the forums of the NHK Heart Net provide their alias as names, but it is not traceable because it does not require logging in like the enquire site, so one can make different comment under a different alias name. Therefore, it is important to note that the research is not after the authenticity of the source as I cannot validate the source, rather I am after their opinions on these online platforms. All these webpages are numbered and referenced under the section primary sources.

3.3 Choice of Method

3.3.1 Research Strategy

This research strategy adopts mixed methods, but the nature of this research is a qualitative research because subjects like poverty and perception cannot be quantified which are the main theme of this thesis. However, the reasons for adopting the mixed methods are because of my second research question posed for this research which is: How prevalent is the concept of 'self-responsibility' applied in understanding poverty by Japanese people on online forums?. In order to investigate the prevalence it requires quantification of the data. Moreover, by adopting mixed methods, Bryman (2012, 633-634) suggests that it provides: *completeness* to the research which allows a more comprehensive account of the area of enquiry; *explanation* to the research which complements the findings generated by the other; *utility* to the research which the quantified findings can be more useful as a suggestion to practitioners and others; and *diversity of views* to the research which can uncover more nuanced findings, among other reasons why mixed methods are used among researchers, hence my reasons too.

Again, the nature of this research is a qualitative research, but qualitative research has its shortcomings as it often gets criticized for being too subjective, difficult to replicate, restricted

in generalization, and lack of transparency compared with quantitative research, despite the fact that it is debatable if quantitative research is entirely non-subjective (Bryman 2012, 405-406). However, the highlight of employing the qualitative research can bring out an *insight* of the social world reciprocal to human subjects which this thesis seeks to find out – poverty discourse behind the Japanese poverty. The ontological and epistemological standpoints are constructivist and interpretivist. The research questions posed for this study is constructivist itself and it requires hermeneutics to discern social actions by human subjects. Interpretivism unlike positivism's approach to *explain* human behaviors seeks to *understand* human behavior, which is why I am conducting this hermeneutic research (Bryman 2012, 28).

3.3.2 Content Analysis

The method employed to analyze the raw data is content analysis. Content analysis is suitable for research where research questions involve extracting meaning from communication (Hermann 2008). It is also useful for examining trends and patterns in documents as well as monitoring shifts in public opinion (Stemler 2001). Content analysis is more than simple word counts, and it can produce rich and meaningful findings with coding and categorizing (ibid.) A category is a group of words with similar meaning or connotations (Weber 1990, 37) and it must be mutually exclusive and exhaustive (U.S. General Accounting Office 1996, 20). To be mutually exclusive means that no unit falls outside the categories and each unit present only one data; to be exhaustive means that all units are represented without exception (ibid.).

Content analysis is rather an approach to the analysis of texts than a method to generate data in itself, but because it has a distinctive approach to analysis, it is often considered as a research method (Bryman 2012, 289). The employment of content analysis technique has two qualities: objectivity and being systematic. The quality of objectivity means that rules are clearly specified in advance to treat the data. Hence, there is transparency in the procedures for assigning the data, and the biases from an analyst can retain to as minimum as possible (ibid.). Similarly, the quality of being systematic means that the application of the rules is done in a consistent manner so that bias is again reduced (ibid.). Owing to these two qualities, the outcome will ideally be the same even if the data is treated by another person (ibid.). Having said so, the reliability and validity of content analysis inherit certain degree of ambiguity as it is

influenced by how a researcher defines word meanings, category definitions, or other coding rules (Weber 1990). But in order to produce a reliable and valid research, certain measurements were taken which are shown under section 3.4 Reliability and Validity.

Both approaches to coding: 'a priori' and 'emergent' was applied. Some categories were predetermined from the inference based on research issues and theories; and some categories were established following the preliminary examination of raw data (Weber 1990). There are several ways of defining coding units (Stemler 2001). For this research, each comments/feedback are considered natural borders and served as a coding unit. After the coding categories were determined, each comments/feedback were examined to be sorted into the following categories.

1. Respondents' background are identified based on how they portrayed themselves into three groups:

- **A third person** – Comments/feedback based on their knowledge and imagination but without poverty experience will be placed in this group.
- **A first person** – Comments/feedback based on their knowledge from their experience of poverty will be placed in this group.
- **Indistinguishable** – Comments/feedback whose background cannot be distinguished into the above groups will be placed in this group.

2. Respondents' view of poverty are identified into four groups:

- **Derived from individual** - Group of people who suggest that poverty is caused due to lack of self-responsibility.
- **Derived from non-individual factors** – Group of people who denies that poverty is due to 'self-responsibility'.
- **Nuanced** – Group of people who suggests that the cause of poverty is nuanced, because it depends on an individual's effort to get out of impoverishment. In other words, they accept that the view of poverty is derived from lack of self-responsibility for those that are simply not trying hard enough, but they also acknowledge sometimes it can be caused by factors outside of an individual's control.

- **Unstated** – Group of people who did not state their stance on poverty.

3. Respondents' motivations to their answers of poverty, if respondents provided motivations for their answers on poverty, their motivations will be described under their respective stance on poverty which are (A) derived from 'self-responsibility', (B) derived from non-individual factors or (C) nuanced. All motivations are outlined under (A), (B), or (C).

(A) These are motivations for perceiving poverty as derived from 'self-responsibility'

- **Lack of hard work, effort or laziness** – Motivations which describe that the poor are lacking in their actions in order to get out of poverty.
- **Dependency (*amae*)**⁸ Motivations which describe that the poor become poor or stay poor, because of their strong tendency in relying on other people.
- **Poor choice making (including poor choice of men)/poor risk management/poor life planning** – Motivations which describe that the poor become poor or stay poor because they keep making bad decisions in life.
- **Others** – For this research, it is determined that the motivations that appeared less than three times will go under the categories of 'others'. It is the same for answers that are deemed irrelevant. Irrelevant answers are the motivations that do not correlate to the Respondents' view of poverty.

(B) These are motivations for perceiving poverty as derived from non-individual factors

- **Unpredictability of life** – Motivations which explain that people get impoverished due to life's unpredictable events, such as illness, accidents, natural disaster, terrorism, bad economy, family environment, theft or bad luck.
- **Difference in individual's ability** – Motivations which explain that people are born with different abilities; therefore, there is a difference in people's productivity.

⁸ 'Amae' is a concept very unique to Japanese people and has no direct translation in other languages (Shirahase 2013, 2). It has a characteristic of the parent-child relationship that can also inherit the notion of 'love-dependency' (ibid.). It is not a negative concept, but as a sort of underlying trust relationship that strengthens the solidarity of groups (ibid.).

- **State/government/policy** – Motivations which explain that poverty is due to the effect of state/government/policy.
- **Social structure/society** – Motivations which explain that poverty is due to the social structure/society they live in.
- **Employment system/women’s employment system** – Motivations which explain that poverty is due to the employment system. Some specifically state that it is due to the disadvantaged situation in the women’s employment system.
- **Capitalist society** – Motivations which explain that poverty is due to capitalism.
- **Lack of law enforcement to get alimony from fathers** – Motivations which explain that poverty is due to the lack of law enforcement to get alimony from fathers.
- **Others** – For this research, it is determined that the motivations that appeared less than three times will go under the categories of ‘others’. It is the same for answers that are deemed irrelevant. Irrelevant answers are the motivations that do not correlate to the Respondents’ view of poverty.

(C) These are motivations for perceiving poverty as nuanced – Motivations from both (A) and (B) appear here.

In addition, these two answers can be found in both groups (A) and (B).

- **‘Self-responsibility’ to overcome poverty** – These respondents claim that no matter what the cause of poverty is, they believe in ‘self-responsibility’ or individual liability as the solution to overcome poverty because the current society will not fix the problem for the poor.
- **One’s perspective** – These respondents claim that the poor are not necessarily poor, whether they are or not in reality, because the respondents think that it is a matter of perspective.

All the primary data gathered from the four different websites which amount to 233 inputs will be content analyzed using the above coding schedule. After the content analysis of these 233 inputs, respondents’ background, respondents’ view of poverty, and respondents’ motivations to their view of poverty will be revealed in section 4.1 People’s Perception of Poverty:

Quantitative data. The quantitative data discovered will not only answer the second research question but will be followed by the discovery of qualitative data based on respondents' comments and feedback applying the theoretical frameworks, and presented in section 4.2 People's Perception of Poverty: Qualitative data.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

According to Weber (1990, 12), in order to produce a valid inferences from the text, it is important to be consistent during the procedure of classification and that different people should code the same text in the same way. Weber (1990) advices to have a set of explicit recording instructions in order to produce research results with reliability. He suggests two instructions to follow: stability (also known as intra-rater reliability) and reproducibility (also known as inter-rater reliability). Stability is to test if the same coder gets the same results try after try; and reproducibility is to test if the same text will be applied to the same coding schedule by different people. For the stability, I have tried more than three times in producing the coding, so it will be consistent in my findings. However, since the coding was done by me alone, the reproducibility cannot be tested for this research.

For the validity, it is important to have a methodology that serves the research question (Stemler 2001). Stemler (2001) advices to use multiple sources of information and to have some sort of validation study built into the design. He recommends triangulation as an approach for validation in qualitative research to build credibility. However, due to the time scope of this study I was not able to carry out the triangulation method. But in the process of coding, I recognized the necessity in redoing the coding categories several times as expansion of coding categories was necessary upon discovering new categories that I previously did not consider to be people's responses. This was also to follow Stemler's (2001) suggestion of being 'mutually exclusive and exhaustive' when coding so that all comments/feedback will be reflected in this study. Finfgeld-Connett (2014, 342) explains that 'alterability is important since one aim of qualitative systematic reviews is to test, adapt, expand, and in general, improve upon the relevance and validity of existing frameworks'. Weber (1990) also states that coding requires revision of the categories to maximize the research result. Together the stability suggested by

Weber and alterability suggested by Finfgeld-Connett, the research result was maximized the best way I could.

3.5 Use of Non-English Data

The targeted research object for this study for the perception of poverty is Japanese people; therefore, the data gathered from the websites are written in Japanese. The translation of these non-English data are produced into English to the best of my knowledge. However, it still remains that these data are generated through my own interpretation.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The convenience using internet as a source of materials does not mean it does not require any ethical considerations simply because researchers can acquire the materials without permission and the public nature of the information (Lambertz-Berndt and Allen 2017). In fact, Lambertz-Berndt and Allen (2017) address that there is a challenge in balancing the blurred boundaries of privacy and internet accessibility when using information from the internet. Having that in mind, the data acquired from the internet for this research is confined to forums: discussion forum on a homepage of NHK and enquiry forums where people can provide their answers to questions. These two type of sources are relatively more public in the nature of the information compared to for instance gathering information on personal blogs. Thus, I consider ethical violation is greatly minimized in conducting this research.

Nonetheless, it is important to be aware of one's positionality and reflexivity in conducting social research as it is unavoidable to be completely subjective and value-neutral as each individual has different ontology and epistemology. Reflexivity is understood here as it to be reflective about the choice one makes throughout the research production, because it entails values and biases upon choices one makes (Bryman 2012, 393). Because writing is indeed a manifestation of one's ethos (Nygaard 2017, 14), one's values intrude in all phase of the research process from the selection of research question to the generation of conclusions (Bryman 2012, 149). Therefore, it is eminent to have critical reflection in consideration. In this

research I will try to treat the data as neutral as possible, and not to use them so I will produce a biased result.

4. Results and Analysis

The following chapter presents the key findings of this study using the content analysis from the collected 233 samples of comments and feedback found on four different websites. The results will be shown and analyzed simultaneously. To make it clearer, the results are shown in two divided parts; quantitative data and qualitative data. This is where the theoretical framework, methodology and the results will be synthesized into findings to answer the research question of:

- How Japanese people express their opinions about poverty on online forums?
- How prevalent is the concept of 'self-responsibility' applied in understanding poverty by Japanese people on online forums?

4.1 People's Perception of Poverty: Quantitative data

From 28 comments plus 28 comments made on two different questions submitted on the Japanese's enquiry site 'oshiete!goo'; and from 14 feedback plus 97 feedback submitted on two different forums on the NHK Heart Net, a total of 167 opinions are collected for this research. On top of that 66 'likes', which is the feature equipped on the enquiry site 'oshiete!goo', are also counted into this research. Using the content analysis on 233 comments and feedback, the following data were discovered.

1. Respondent's background.

Since Aoki et al. (2010)'s study discovered that the people that are experiencing poverty can elaborate the poverty situation better than others, respondents' background were also examined in this research. From the way respondents leave their comments and feedback, it allowed me to observe whether people's comments were from a third person's view, or a first person's view. A third person's view are view that are made from a position who is inexperienced to poverty, and a first person's view is a view from a victim of poverty or people

who experienced it. It was hard to distinguish the background of some of the comments; therefore, it was counted as 'indistinguishable'. There are some comments that were not counted into this figure as they were deemed irrelevant to the topic of the questions, thus they fall under the 'unintelligible' category. Additionally, there was a comment that one respondent made as a correction to the mistake of his/her previous comment; therefore, it was not counted as an extra response, and put under 'others'.

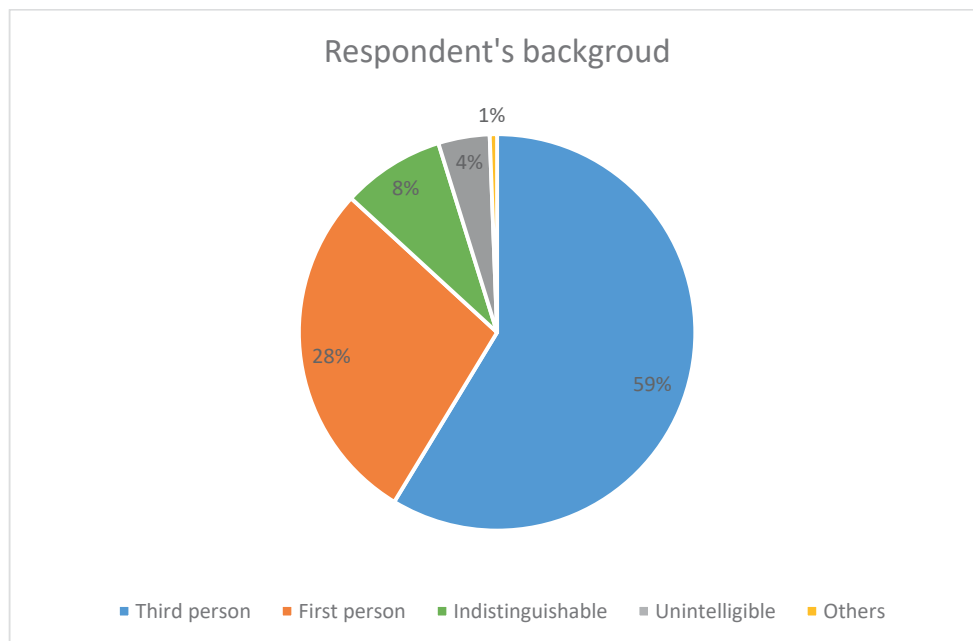


Figure 1. Respondents' experience of poverty

For respondents' background, the 66 'likes' in the inquire site was not included, as I cannot define people's background who 'liked' the comments. Figure 1 shows that out of 167 comments/feedback, 59% of them were made from a third person's view, 28% had a first person's view, and 8% were indistinguishable. From this chart, it reveals that there were more comments/feedback from a third person than the people who experienced poverty themselves.

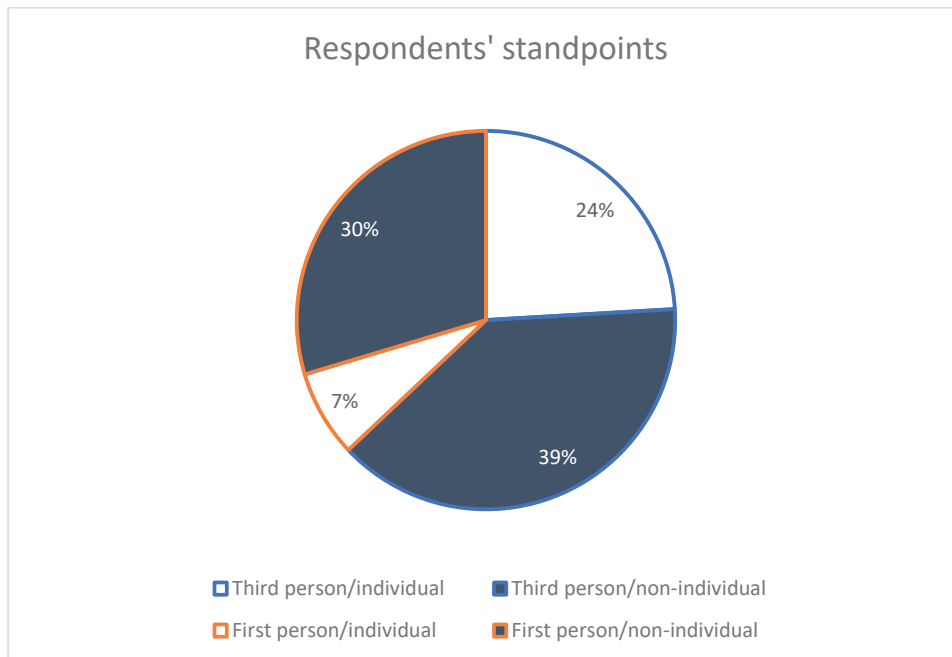


Figure 2. Different standpoints based on respondents' backgrounds

Additionally, I discovered that opposite standpoints exist in both groups, third person's view and first person's view. Figure 2 represents the share of the respondents' standpoints based on the respondents' background from a third person or a first person, therefore the figure only includes respondents who portrayed his/her poverty background and who answered that poverty is caused by either 'individual' or 'non-individual' factors. From the figure, it can be observed that no matter if the respondent was a third person or somebody who experienced poverty, both of these groups provided answers that the fault of poverty lies in the individual. Vice versa, no matter if the respondent was a third person or somebody who experienced poverty, both of these groups provided answers that the fault of poverty derived from non-individual factors. For example, there were comments/feedback made by a third person, who sympathize with the poor, and some who blame the poor for their own poverty. Similarly, there were comments/feedback made by people who experienced poverty themselves, who oppose the idea of 'self-responsibility' as victims of impoverishment, and some who blame the poor by arguing that they themselves are good examples of people who got out of poverty by their own effort. It can be observed that the concept of 'self-responsibility' is used in both the third

person and the first person. Therefore, it was revealed that there are two kinds of background in respondents but there are four different standpoints.

Figure 2 also displays that among the people who experienced poverty, there are more respondents who answer that poverty is derived from non-individual factors. Similarly, it is the same among the third person's background, because there are more respondents who also answer that poverty is derived from non-individual factors. This finding contradict with Aoki et al. (2010)'s finding where they discovered that people who are experiencing poverty can elaborate poverty situation better, but this research shows that even a third person could perceive that poverty is derived from non-individual factors.

2. Respondents' view of poverty

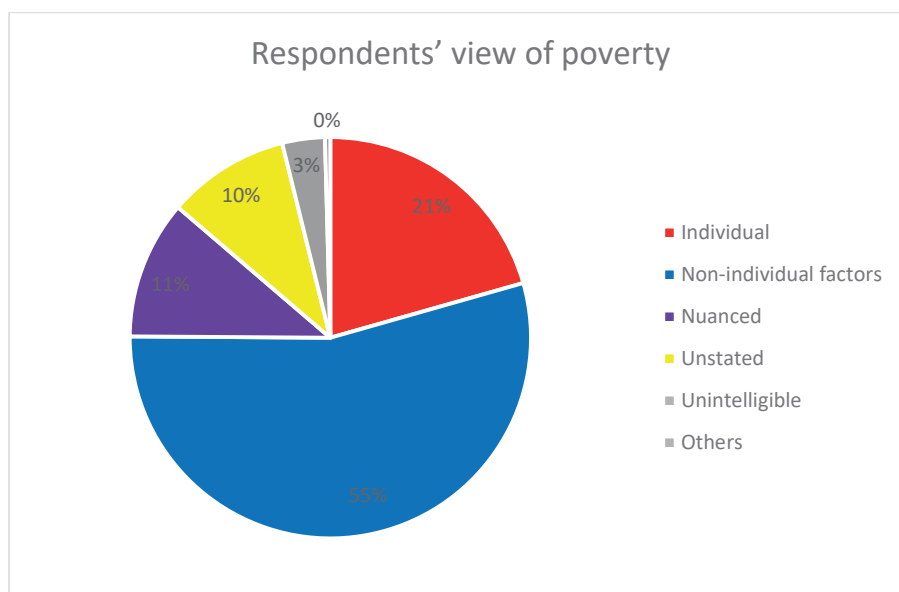


Figure 3. Respondents' view of cause of poverty

Respondents' view of poverty were categories into: individual, non-individual factors, nuanced, unstated, unintelligible, and others to examine how respondents perceive the cause of poverty. The result out of 233 comments/feedback (including the 66 likes) shows that 55% of them view that poverty is derived from non-individual factors; 11% of them think it is nuanced, 21% of them view that poverty is derived from 'self-responsibility'; and 10% of them did not state their

poverty stance. Hence, the majority of the comments/feedback hold the view that poverty is derived from non-individual factors.

My research's result shows similar result to Ida (2000)'s findings where he found that more people (48.7%) think that poor people exist because of imbalance in social structures rather than in 'self-responsibility' (44.8%). However, the difference between my results is bigger than Ida (2000)'s results as it shows that the majority of the respondents are supporting that poverty is caused by non-individual factors compared to the minor difference in Ida (2000)'s.

3. People's motivations to their answers

People's motivations to answers are counted to see which motivations are frequently used among the comments/feedback. Note that since one comment/feedback can provide more than one motivation, this chart does not reflect the total number of respondents, rather it is a figure to show frequency in the choice of motivations. The detailed description of each category is listed in section 3.3.2 Content Analysis. Any motivations below three counts and irrelevant answers are counted into the 'Others' category. Each motivations are color coded to blue, red, yellow and green to make it easier to show the difference in their nature of answers:

Blue: Motivations that state that poverty is derived from non-individual factors

Red: Motivations that state that poverty is derived from 'self-responsibility'

Green: Motivations that state that poverty is derived from both individual and non-individual factors



Figure 4. Respondents' motivations to their answers

Out of 233 samples (including the 66 likes), excluding the categories of others and unstated, the most frequently used motivation among answers for perceiving poverty derived from non-individual factors is: state/government/policy. Similarly, the most frequently used motivations among answer for perceiving poverty derived from individual is: lack of hard work, effort or laziness. It is noteworthy that the third most frequently used motivation, whether or not the respondents perceive poverty as a result of 'self-responsibility', overcoming poverty lies in 'self-responsibility'/individual liability.

4. Result from 66 'likes'

There is a 'likes' feature equipped on the enquiry site 'oshiete!goo' and it is incorporated into this research. In order to show how 66 'likes' was contributed to this research, this section addresses the separate result from the opinions of the 66 'likes'. Out of the comments submitted on the enquire site, 22 comments were 'liked'. The most popular comment which got 7 'likes' is the view that poverty is derived from non-individual factors, and the motivations for this comment were supported by the unprediction of life and the difference in an individual's ability. The second, third and the fourth most popular comments received 6 'likes'

equally. Like the first answer, the second, third and the fourth most 'liked' answers share the common view which is that poverty is derived from non-individual factors. Two posts of their motivations are due to the state/government/policy, and one due to the social structure/society. On the contrary, the fifth most popular comment received 5 'likes' and this comment views that poverty is derived from 'self-responsibility' and the motivation was due to lack of hard work, effort or laziness.

4.2. People's Perception of Poverty: Qualitative data

The result of the quantitative data shows that out of 167 comments/feedback (66 likes excluded), 59% of them were made from a third person's view, 28% had a first person's view, and 8% were indistinguishable. Out of 233 comments/feedback, 55% of them view that impoverishment is not due to 'self-responsibility' while 21% of them view that impoverishment is due to 'self-responsibility' or derived from the individuals. The most frequently used motivation among answers for perceiving poverty derived from non-individual factors is: state/government/policy. Similarly, the most frequently used motivations among answer for perceiving poverty derived from individual is: lack of hard work, effort or laziness. This suggest that although there is an indication of individualization of poverty in Japan from the 21%, the majority finds that the locus of the poverty is in the non-individual factors despite that there is a tendency to find the locus of poverty in the individuals in Japan. Moreover, it is interesting to observe that 11% of comments/feedback view that impoverishment is due to 'nuanced' reasons where the respondents admit the complexity of life.

The qualitative data's section will show comments and feedback that were provided from the four websites in order to seek insight into respondents' answers, so together with the numbers gained from the quantitative data, it provides some contents to the numbers. Below I will show some comments/feedback from both side of the angles.

Relative Poverty

Relative poverty depends on one's subjectivity and therefore is difficult for other people to understand the situation, especially poor people living in rich countries such as Japan. In correspondence, this research discovered that the difference of absolute poverty and relative

poverty is not understood by some respondents. There were 12 comments/feedback (5.15%) who described that the poor are not necessarily poor, whether they are or are not in reality, because they believe that it is a matter of perspective.

The following is one of the examples:

(Respondent 47 from Webpage 4): People often talk about child poverty, but out of those children who are categorized as poor, who cannot afford to pay school meals, yet often carry mobile phones. Aren't this because of parents who don't know how to use money properly?... It's annoying to see 'more this and that' behavior. People should realize the happiness in what they already have and be content with it.

This respondent claims that children who own mobile phones cannot be categorized as poor. However, in fact, mobile phones are often one of the items that are deemed necessary to be able to fit into society, in Japan. At the same time, it is also a way to hide one's impoverishment. Thus, possession of some materials do not necessary give away the true picture of the poverty situation. Aoki et al. (2010) also derived a similar finding where more than half of the population in their study thought that poverty means that people are not able to sustain their own lives. Hence, in his research, people do not regard the homelessness or people receiving welfare as impoverished. Therefore, without the understanding of the distinction between absolute and relative poverty, it is hard to understand other's impoverishment.

Neoliberalism

In my research, 21 comments/feedback (9.01%) answered that no matter what the cause of poverty is, they believe in 'self-responsibility' as the solution to overcome poverty, because the current society will not fix the problem for the poor. This could be the result of the Japanese government promoting the discourse of 'self-responsibility' in the era of neoliberalism which shaped a once collective society into a more individualist society. Hence, it affected the thinking of people regarding how to solve the poverty situation.

The following is an example of such a response:

(Respondent 13 from Webpage 1): If poverty is not 'self-responsibility', then it infers that poverty is due to the parents, the government, or the society. However, whether you raise

your voice ... it doesn't do anything.... in reality only you can solve the impoverishment. Even if you blame others, it will only be grumbles. In fact, impoverishment is to be blamed on no one.... How your life turn out ... depends on you.

This comment claims that it is useless to blame others for the impoverishment. The logics behind putting the individual as a responsible measure to find a way to end poverty is influenced by the message of neoliberalism. This is a similar finding to Aoki et al. (2010) who discovery that there were more people who answered that they rely on individuals or family members to overcome poverty rather than relying on the society (the state, organizations and regional support).

Moreover, there is gendered neoliberalism in Japan. Among several categorical answers for people who defined poverty as non-individual factors, three categories were pertained to gender inequality: Employment system/women's employment system (16 counts/6.87%), Lack of law enforcement for alimony from fathers (9 counts/3.86%), and Patriarchy system (2 counts/0.86%). Because of the patriarchy, the society is constructed so it is disadvantaged for women. Also, the labor reform under the deregulation policy promoted by neoliberalism has made women, especially single mothers, difficult to survive.

The following is one of the examples from such an angle:

(Respondent 78 from Webpage 4): I'm a single mother. I work full time on the country side, but I am not formally employed and I am paid an hourly salary of 780 yen (equivalent to 7 USD).... What I really desire is full-time employment.... It makes me furious that we live in a system that people get employed just because they are single or within a certain age, and people can get denied employment if they are a woman, have children, or old age, even if they have work experience.... If I knew this was going to happen, I would never have left my job, given birth or got married.

This example claims that the current employment system is disadvantaged for women. Scholte (2005, 339), argues that the patriarchy has existed long in history and that gendered inequality is not unique to globalization, but under the neoliberalist global economic restructuring, it can further disfavor women's position. The patriarchic employment system of Japan is modeled upon men as breadwinners, so women's work are considered supplementary and thus women are paid less and have a harder time finding full-time employment. The flexible employment

system from the labor reform has made the situation worse for single mothers as they cannot provide for themselves with their part-time jobs. Without family member's support or alimony from their children's father, single mother households are facing destitution.

The introduction of labor reform is disadvantaged for women especially for single mothers, however, it also affects men.

The following is another example of a person questioning the employment system in Japan:

(Respondent 4 from Webpage 2): I suppose an unequal society is not that there are people of high and low earning groups, but that there are people receiving extremely low earning among the low earning group. If we want to apply 'self-responsibility' in this equation, we need to create a system where the low earning group do not get extremely low pay. In this current system, even if every individual works hard, there will be people proportioned to be in a population with extremely low pay; therefore, for people who are facing this situation it is not due to 'self-responsibility'....

The current employment system in Japan is creating people with extremely low income. As it was shown by the example, although women are more prone to be employed as part-time workers, men can equally be stuck in this system and receive extremely low wages.

Poverty caused by non-individual factors

55% of comment/feedback perceived that poverty is caused by non-individual factors and they view that poverty is not derived from 'self-responsibility'.

The following are examples of such answers.

(Respondent 67 from Webpage 4): From my understanding, some families face financial difficulties because there is a problem in our current system built on the capitalist society. Is it 'self-responsible' because people made bad choices? I don't agree. When there is difficult situation, people should help each other out. Japan was like that before and I wish it will continue to be so....

This respondent regards that it is the capitalism that is causing impoverishment. He/she also notices the deterioration of the old social contact/collectivism Japan once had.

(Respondent 63 from Webpage 4): This world is really strange. I too raised two children with my husband. We were able to raise them because there were both of us. It costs lots of money to raise children. People don't get divorce without any proper reasons.... There are opinions out there making only mothers responsible because they gave birth to children, but because we live in an uncertain time, I wish the state or each region could give a helping hand in bringing up the children! What is the government doing? If the government wants to halt the declining birth rate, then they have to devise a system that can help the children growing up in poor families.... Children are the country's treasure. Children's future is our future. At least the education should be made accessible to all. I want Japan to give children a bright future even for those poor household's children.

This respondent is protecting the side of single mothers as oppose to the many comments claiming that impoverishment among single mothers are self-induced. This statement illuminates that the government can do something about this poverty situation which can also help to halt the declining birth rate. It also illuminates that the opportunity for education in children will differ depending on the economic background of the parents of those children.

(Respondent 12 from Webpage 3): Due to harassment at work, I got schizophrenia 14 years ago. As a consequence ... I could not work anymore and it led me to a forced retirement.... I didn't stop working because I was lazy, I was mentally ill. It took me a very long time. I learned the hard way that once you got derailed in life, it is hard to get back on track.... I will keep challenging, but don't you think there is something wrong about this society?

This comments shows that sickness can cause impoverishment and it illuminates that the current social structure has made it difficult for the people who got derailed in life, from different reasons, to get back on track.

(Respondent 14 from Webpage 1): Here is my objection to the opinion 'people is impoverished because they are lazy'. Some people can go to universities because they are smart, but there are people who cannot, because for instance ... they might have a disability that we don't know about. It can also be stemmed from the different environment and situation, for example, people couldn't go to universities due to their family's' opinion. If you are the eldest farmer's son ... of the family, their choice can also be limited. In addition, houses can catch fire or get water damage or get damage from

an earthquake.... If all individuals could start the competition from the same starting line, then one's effort could be the measurement for its success. But no one person stand on the same starting line due to family and social circumstances....

This is an example that shows that meritocracy/consumerism/neoliberalism are not the only reasons people get into impoverishment. Because all individuals are different due to circumstances in life, and there is a factor of natural disasters which one cannot predict in one's life, so effort alone is not enough to make individuals come out of poverty.

In sum, the respondents who think that the cause of poverty is derived from non-individual factors which are shown in the above example include: gendered neoliberalism, the labor reform initiated by neoliberalism, capitalism, effect of government, effect of social structure, difference in individual's ability, and the unpredictability of life.

'Self-responsibility' and the Individualization of Poverty

There is a strong relationship between poverty and the notion of 'self-responsibility'. This observation was made from the kind of questions posted on the Japanese inquiry site: 'To what extent does 'self-responsibility' cause poverty?' and 'How much does 'self-responsibility' matter in the economically divided society?'. The relationship is also noticeable from how people responded to these questions and the feedback made on the NHK homepage after the documentaries about poverty aired on television.

The following are examples of comments/feedback that connote the individualization of poverty by claiming poverty is due to 'self-responsibility':

(Respondent 23 from Webpage 2): I am for 'self-responsibility'.... I often wonder if these problematic people of the underclass have made right choices throughout their lives. I believe they are the kind of people who repeatedly compromise and are lazy. Isn't it that 99.9 % of people who ends up in poverty is due to 'self-responsibility'? The remaining 0.1 % must be the people who are unfortunate such as having illness or have difficult lives from becoming the victims of crimes.

As it was shown by the example, 'self-responsibility' is directly linked to the individualization of poverty. The labelling of the poor, that they compromise and are lazy, is the result of seeing the poor as unproductive which could be from the influence of meritocracy and consumerism.

(Respondent 1 from Webpage 2): I am also on the side of 'self-responsibility' for poverty. Information is available everywhere nowadays and it is your 'self-responsibility' to choose the right information to navigate your life. At the same time, we live in a time with lots of freedom. I think many people mistake the meaning of freedom. Freedom implies freedom of choice and you have to bear the outcome of choices you make. When I look at the world, people who acted after thinking often get good results and I can say the same for the opposite. If inequality is based on the difference of money and incomes, why didn't people make a choice so they can get them? People who made choices after easy living, hobbies or personalities should not blame it on inequality.... I'm pretty sure that people yield good results because they work very hard.... From my opinion, people who cannot take their own responsibility transfer the blame of poverty to the society.

This respondent displays neoliberalist thinking, where the view of one's choice is an important factor and explain that the outcome of the choice is one's to bear. This is a good example to exhibit that the individualization of poverty can also stem from neoliberalist thinking.

(Respondent 2 from Webpage 4): I think poor single mothers will be poor whether they have children or not. Japanese women are too dependent and accustomed to getting help. They don't use their brains. These people will stay poor even if their children left their nest and they probably have to rely on their children's support to live on. It is irresponsible that fathers don't pay the child support, but it is the women who chose these irresponsible men to be the fathers of their children, so it is the mothers' job to make the fathers pay the child support....

There is a discursive connotation of undeserving poor of single mothers in this case for downplaying them for being too dependent and not using their brains. By claiming that the single mothers are undeserving poor, this respondent seeks the individualization of poverty for the poor among single mothers.

(Respondent 7 from Webpage 1): I think if you have an intelligence to go a university, you would have graduated from any university. If you didn't have the capacity then you would be treated as such and it is not unfair, but fair. To be honest, it is a betrayal for shareholders to pay them a salary. Full-time employees have too much rights in Japan and they should be sacked easily.... Why should my money have to be used for someone who is lazy?

There is neoliberalist thinking behind this comment by claiming that only the strong one, in this case the one with brains, should be rewarded. On the other hand, while the respondent claims

that it is one's intelligence that should be rewarded and get paid for, the opposite is not the unintelligent but the lazy. It suggests that one's intelligence can be obtained through one's effort which could be pinned by the thinking of meritocracy. Thus, the neoliberalist thinking and meritocracy are used as an argument for the individualization of poverty.

From these observations, it indicates that the respondents perceive poverty as derived from individual factors with relation to the 'self-responsibility' concept which are influenced by meritocracy/consumerism/neoliberalism. In other words, 'self-responsibility' is a tool for the respondents to make sense of poverty. This is a similar finding to Aoki et al. (2010)'s study where they found that the negative connotation of poverty is derived from the linkage of poverty to the 'self-responsibility' concept. When the 'self-responsibility' concept is used as a tool for the people in Japan to make sense of poverty, it can create negative connotations for the poor as the undeserving poor.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The final chapter shows how I seek to contribute to the academic discourse by summarizing the research and its findings. This is also where I put my argument into a larger context by returning to the literature. Next section presents the implications for practice and policy from this research's findings.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Based on social constructivist's stance, our social world is constructed on the reciprocal relationship of the social world and the people, which means that our interpretation of the world through our imagination, perception and communication contribute to the manifestation of our reality and vice versa. If our social world is the manifestation of our discourse, then aspects such as poverty can also be perceived, understood and discussed in a way that can affect the outcome of poverty. Likewise, Lister (2004, 8) contends that how poverty is understood are influenced by people's everyday interactions in the societies and from the way they are talked about by politicians, officials, professionals and the media. In this sense, the discourse promoting the individualization of poverty can influence the situation of poverty and

even worsen the situation. This thesis is therefore sought to identify how people view poverty and to what extent such discursive construction of poverty exists in Japan.

It is suggested by academic scholars that in Japan, the common denominator for the explanation of one's impoverishment is the lack of 'self-responsibility'. When the cause of poverty is perceived as a failure in individuals, it constitutes an environment that it is difficult for the individuals to ask for help, because poverty is supposed to be solved by their own hand. Moreover, because of the stigma and shame, poverty is not a condition one can openly discuss. As a result, the general public have inadequate understanding of poverty issues in Japan, and therefore, the discussion of *if there is poverty in Japan* is more prevalent than *how and why there is poverty in Japan*. It also makes government officials in Japan ignorant of this subject since some people in the government believe that there is no poverty in Japan. In addition, due to the current screening system of the social welfare where it prioritizes the elimination of welfare abusers rather than providing for people in need, and the negative attitudes of welfare officials and fellow citizens, it is difficult for people to request what they are entitled to as a citizen. To avoid the scrutiny from the public officials and the general public, the impoverished may be afraid to seek help, and thus may resolve, for instance to committing suicide. The individualization of poverty does not improve the situation for the poor and it leads to the poor blaming themselves for their impoverishment. The individualization of poverty allows poverty to be treated as a problem outside of the political realm.

Therefore, in order to identify how people view poverty and the prevalence of a discourse of the individualization of poverty, I investigated the perception of poverty in Japan from four different websites. This research discovered that 21% of comments/feedback linked 'self-responsibility' to be the source of impoverishment. The most popular motivation to this answer is that: there are poor people because of their lack of hard work, effort or laziness. The second most popular motivation is: there are impoverished people due to their poor choice making, poor risk management, or poor life planning. The third most popular one is: there is poverty due to dependency to others. In addition, regardless of the answers to what the cause of poverty is, 21 comments/feedback (9.01%) stated that it is through 'self-responsibility' one can overcome poverty due to the current society where no one will fix the problem for the poor. On

the other hand, 55% of comments/feedback defined that poverty is due to non-individual factors. Furthermore, I discovered that despite that 59% of the total respondents in this research were commenting from a third person's view, compared to 28% from a first person's view, more than half of the respondents from the third person's view (63%) understood that impoverishment can be derived from non-individual factors. The most popular motivation from the respondents of non-self-responsibility perspective is: poverty is due to the outcome of how the state or the government runs the country, and how they implement policies. The second most popular motivation is: there is poverty due to life's unpredictable events such as illness, accidents, natural disaster, terrorism, bad economy, family environment, theft or bad luck. There are two motivations that were the third most popular which are: there is impoverishment because there is a failure in the employment system; and because there is a difference in individual's ability because of individuality.

In short, this research revealed that the majority of respondents perceive poverty as something that one cannot solely blame on individuals. Despite the influence of neoliberalist thinking of individualism and the tendency to blame poverty on individuals in Japan, and meritocracy/consumerism, the majority of the respondents claim that it is the existing social structure and the unpredictable situations that causes people to get trapped in impoverishment. It could also indicate that some people in Japan is discontent with the neoliberal institutional changes that took place. However, although the number is small, it still shows that there are some people who believe poverty is solely related to the lack of self-responsibility. Because of such a discovery, I can conclude that the individualization of poverty exists in Japan and so does the notion of undeserving poor. This finding can be compared with the findings from the literatures by Nunn and Biressis (2009), Bauman (2004) and Lister (2004). Nunn and Biressis (2009) urge us to have a perspective on how the poor can be seen in the normative framework of meritocracy. When the ideology of meritocracy, where people are presumed to be able to be successful by self-investment in skills and knowledge becomes the norm, one can likewise interpret that the people who did not succeed are simply not trying hard enough. Just as meritocracy could be disadvantage for the poor, Bauman's (2004) logic behind the birth of consumerism and modernization gives us the insight into how work ethic

disciplines us to work. However, at the same time, the work ethic contributes to a norm that the poor are different from the majority and thus categorized as the underclass and stigmatized for being poor. To further explain the consequence of categorization of the poor by Bauman's work, Lister (2004) discusses that the categorization of people create an 'us' and 'them' discourse. The effect is that the poor is reduced to 'others', who is not 'us'. The process of 'othering' can contribute to maintaining the social distance. This could contribute to the situation not improving, or investigating the root causes of poverty, and all in all shifting the problem away from the political realm. Therefore, the concept of undeserving poor presented by Nunn and Biressis (2009), Bauman (2004) and Lister (2004) in light of meritocracy, consumerism, and the process of 'othering', helped me deconstruct the problem of the individualization of poverty generated by the 'self-responsibility' concept on poverty in Japan.

5.2 Implications for Practice and Policy

Since similar researches were carried out in 2000 and 2010 with a bigger scope than this research, I believe there is already a focus on the topic of poverty and 'self-responsibility'. Therefore, instead of making suggestion for future research, I provide implications for practice and policy.

This research suggests that there is a strong link between poverty and the concept of 'self-responsibility' in Japan. As discussed earlier, the research by Aoki et al. (2010) discovered that negative connotation to poverty is derived from the 'self-responsibility' concept too. Thus, I believe there is room for improvements to be made in this aspect for policy makers to enforce a disconnection of poverty from the concept of 'self-responsibility'. In order to make people openly discuss a negative subject like poverty, it requires delinking poverty from the concept of 'self-responsibility', so that poverty becomes unhidden from stigma and shame. Once poverty is no longer a stigma or shame, it allows the hidden poverty to be seeable by policy makers, so that the problem can be treated. Additionally, the delinking of poverty from 'self-responsibility' puts the responsibility of poverty back to the government from the individuals, which means that poverty that is treated outside of the political realm can transfer back into the political realm.

Furthermore, the delinking of poverty from 'self-responsibility' allows social welfare to become the people's rights instead of a shameful handout, so they will be willing to ask for one when it is necessary. However, in the current situation, as is shown earlier, due to the individualization of poverty, welfare claimants and recipients have to endure harsh scrutiny given by welfare providers and the majority. Aoki et al. (2010) also found that the people from the side of welfare providers shows the distinct feature in understanding poverty as 'self-responsibility', whereas, people from the labor union understand poverty as caused by social factors. I believe this distinction has to be minimized on the side of the welfare providers. Thus, practitioners can put an effort in minimizing this gap through educating the welfare providers, so that there will be a consensus where the lack of self-responsibility is not the sole reason why people ended up in poverty. Overall I think there are lots of measurements that can be taken to make the situation better for the impoverished people in Japan, but first it requires delinking poverty and 'self-responsibility', so that it will be an entitlement for the people to receive social welfare, but not a shameful handout in difficult times, especially in these precarious time such as now.

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