

# RESEARCH APPROACH TO A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE LONG-TERM HUMAN EFFECTS OF THE ATOMIC BOMB

By MASA HARU HAMATANI\*

Already in this century, we have been confronted with various problems which endanger the survival of all living things including human beings and cultures. Of these, the appearance of nuclear weapons is the most threatening to the survival of mankind.

Has the crisis passed? Can we now afford to be complacent? Have we even developed the necessary perspective and means to get through the crisis? It is extremely doubtful.

The people who suffered in the atomic bombings in 1945 have not been freed from their sufferings even now, thirty-six years later. And their present agony is intensified by their anxiety about the future and the possibility that nuclear weapons will again be used.

To oppose nuclear weapons as immoral and unjustifiable cannot be done without grasping the totality of human suffering caused by the atomic bomb and the human meaning of the alleviation of their sufferings and the release from fear that such suffering will again be inflicted on human beings.

This paper is a note suggesting an approach to understanding the total picture of the atomic bomb destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

## *The Survival of the Human Race and Atomic Bomb Survivors*

In the summer of 1977, an "International Symposium on the Damage and After-Effects of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (ISDA) was held in Japan, sponsored by international NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations). This was the first international conference which took as its main theme the problems of atomic bomb damage.

Although there have been various international and domestic conferences on the problem of nuclear weapons, it is possible to say that none has grappled with atomic bomb damage before this Symposium. Even when the actual conditions of atomic bomb survivors were discussed, these and the more general problems of atomic bomb damage were more or less perfunctorily dealt with as only one of several issues around the problem of nuclear weapons.

Focusing on atomic bomb damage may seem too narrow and restrictive an approach to a study of the many aspects of nuclear weapons. However, if it were not for the recognition of atomic bomb damage to human beings, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and

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\* Associate Professor (*Jokyōju*) of Social Research.

Nagasaki would be "too often regarded as unfortunate historical incidents best forgotten,"<sup>1</sup> and efforts to abolish nuclear weapons would lose their human meaning.

The task of finding the significance of nuclear weapons from the view point of human history has fallen on the Hibakusha, as atomic bomb survivors are called, more than on anyone else. Atomic bomb damage is real to them, actual agony for them. It has been their task to find release from the agony. "How can we give meaning to the deaths of those killed by the atomic bombs, and to the lives we survivors are leading?" Such a question reveals the deep, human anguish of the Hibakusha.

The desire of Hibakusha to live meaningful lives by understanding and transcending their atomic bomb experiences shows us the essential link between the individual reality of atomic bomb suffering and the also real universal necessity to abolish nuclear weapons. Through them (and perhaps only through them) can we acquire the perspective to connect biography and history. Arthur Booth declared that the ISDA "has given nuclear disarmament a human face, and the Japanese Hibakusha are showing the way to regain lost human dignity and human community."<sup>2</sup>

### *"Atomic Bombs and Human Beings"*

The "human face" that Mr. Booth referred to was the new appreciation of the extent and depth of human damage caused by the atomic bombs which emerged at the ISDA. That is, the meaning of atomic bombs to human beings.

What is this meaning? The Japan National Preparatory Committee carried out three surveys of Hibakusha: general, medical and life history. I would like to show the importance of discovering this human meaning by introducing the impressions of several researchers who participated in conducting the general survey:

The experiences of Hibakusha are neither 'softened' nor 'hardened' over time. I was shocked to notice that their sufferings are not only the past agony experienced in the flash and thermal blast of the atomic bomb, but also experienced in their daily lives thirty years later. Although I had been proud of my activities in the peace movement, I began to feel ashamed of myself as I interviewed Hibakusha. Honestly, I hadn't understood at all.

Like many other medical workers, I had regarded 'after-effects' as physical after-effects. But I realized through this survey that the deep mental damage is probably even worse.

One Hibakusha said, "I haven't told my husband that I'm a Hibakusha. Please don't tell him. My father was a naval officer at that time, so I got

<sup>1</sup> Japan National Preparatory Committee, *A Call from Hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—Proceedings, International Symposium on the Damage and After- Effects of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* Asahi Evening News, 1978, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Booth, A. 'Atomic Bombs and Human Beings' *International Social Science Journal* UNESCO, Vol. XXX, No. 2, 1978, p. 391.

special help. I'm really confused and I have such guilty feelings. I survived, but only at the expense of others. So I have talked about it only to my Hibakusha friend." I think it most tragic that they hesitate to publicly claim fair compensation and call for peace because of their guilty consciences, their feeling that their lives were preserved at the expense of others.

She did not look like a Hibakusha at first glance. She began to speak emotionlessly, and said, "At long last, I can control my feelings and talk about my experience." But when I asked her to draw a picture of the atomic bombing as she remembered it, she started to cry and said, "I can't." I was shocked to realize how serious her experience was for her.

I had only abstract knowledge about Hibakusha before, but through the survey the atomic bomb damage became real for me. One Hibakusha said, "I was young at that time. Confronted with the sufferings of many people, I learned a lot. It was mental and spiritual sustenance." Above all, I was affected by the phoenix-like strength to survive and overcome death in the people I interviewed.

To summarize these impressions, this survey changed the researchers' previous image of Hibakusha and atomic bomb damage, and deepened their understanding. This was true even of those who had long been active in the relief movement for Hibakusha or the movement against atomic and hydrogen bombs. What they all came to realize was how deeply the atomic bomb survivors were hurt—physically, mentally, socio-economically—and that the hurt has not gone away, and remains with them even now. But what amazed them was the true humanity of the Hibakusha who were able to transcend their agony in the search for the significance of their atomic bomb experiences in spite of total damage to their own lives.

Thus the survey greatly changed the interviewers. They inherited atomic bomb experiences from the Hibakusha. At the same time, those who were surveyed must have changed too, because answering questions led Hibakusha to open their minds to their terrible memories, to see themselves more clearly as atomic bomb victims, and to recognize and identify everything that causes them to suffer.

"Atomic Bombs and Human Beings" is the title of the ISDA Working Document III submitted by Japanese social scientists. It also suggests an approach by which we can analyze and summarize the psycho-social effects of atomic bombing, especially the problems of atomic bomb sufferers. This approach consists of two questions:

1. What have atomic bombs done to human beings?
2. What should human beings do about the atomic bomb?

It is the life history survey of Hibakusha that makes it possible to ask these questions and gives us a reasonable hope that we can find the human meaning of atomic bomb damage. The great number of people who supported the ISDA assured that the significance of these questions for the comprehensive study of atomic bomb damage would not be forgotten.

*Life History Survey as a Means of Constructing a Comprehensive  
Picture of the Human Effects of Atomic Bombs.*

On the other hand, Arthur Booth described the achievements of Japanese social scientists in the psycho-social field as follows:

Although there have been some notable contributions to study in this psycho-social field, the area generally must be regarded as virtually virgin ground, and the International [Investigation] Team described research as a whole in this field as "pitiful".<sup>3</sup>

Various factors contribute to this present condition of the study of atomic bomb damage. Mr. Booth remarked that "Generally, these compassionate souls [social workers and others who work with the hibakusha organization] are accused of bringing 'politics' into their work."<sup>4</sup> For example, The Advisory Committee on Japanese Government Measures for Relief of Hibakusha, in its report to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, in December 1980, refused to recognize any sufferings other than the physical effects of radiation as atomic bomb damage. This is a "political" decision because it rejects those aspects of suffering which are most likely, in conjunction with the medical evidence, to lead us all to an understanding of the dehumanizing effect of nuclear weapons and the need to renounce them if we hope to retain our humanity.

But aside from such political considerations, it is true that the attitudes of social scientists in Japan are partly to blame. Individually, many scholars desire the abolition of nuclear weapons, but only a few have directed their own studies toward the problems arising from the atomic bomb experience and its sufferings. And even those who have connected their research to their human concerns and studied these problems seem to have gotten bogged down with a lot of data, abundantly accumulated, and have not yet given enough academic consideration to analysis and synthesis. They have not tried hard enough to grasp the human meaning of atomic bombs, or to understand atomic bomb damage as comprehensively as is necessary.

The participation in the ISDA of scholars from many different fields provided new opportunities for inter-disciplinary cooperation. Scholars of history, philosophy, literature, law, social welfare, and others found themselves asking the same questions, how their disciplines had performed and how they might in the future work towards answering those questions. The Symposium also made it clear, however, that simply dividing the task among the various disciplines and collecting the disconnected data obtained thereby cannot yield any humanistic and comprehensive understanding of the effects of the atomic bomb on human beings.

"Human beings" are whole, not a collection of random fragments, and atomic bombs affect *whole* people and communities. Thus, some way of structurally connecting the various

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<sup>3</sup> *A Call from Hibakusha of Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, p. xiii

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

elements and the various academic approaches must be our first concern. A comprehensive understanding of the effects of atomic bombs on human beings first requires a clarification of the structure of relationships between the elements that we isolate for study. Secondly, it is necessary to understand how these elements and their structure change over time, because this is an inherent factor defining these elements themselves and their meaning in the larger context.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have seriously affected various aspects of the survivors' lives and the human damage was not limited in time and or to any one aspect of life. That is, it was not limited to the immediate post war years, but has in fact continued and even expanded over time. The survivors are still suffering thirty-six years after. Even now, it is not yet possible to determine the full range of damage caused by the atomic bombs. Thus, to clarify "what atomic bombs have done to human beings" in terms of history and structure is one goal of our research.

Our group, led by Professor Tadashi Ishida, adopted a life history survey of Hibakusha as one method of approaching this question. The framework of the survey is as follows.

It is in survivors' lives that the many kinds of damage caused by atomic bombs are interrelated in various forms. It is possible that "re-creating" their lives historically and structurally by means of the survey may cast light upon the ways in which atomic bomb damage intersects with personal history. The life history was divided into four chronological periods—before the atomic bombings, at the time of the atomic bombings, after the atomic bombings and at present. Structurally, the life history was divided into three realms: health history, social history and mental history. Health history follows atomic bomb influences on the survivors' physical condition. Social history follows influences on their social conditions that is, family structure and livelihood, etc.

Mental history as a way of determining the psychological effects revealed the following: The dehumanization of the atomic bombings left deep mental scars on Hibakusha. At the same time, physical and social damage suffered as a result of the atomic bomb exerted continuing and unpredictable long-term secondary effects on the survivors' lives, not infrequently robbing them finally of even the desire to live. None the less, most survivors are actively seeking the recovery of their human dignity and the meaning of life, as mentioned in the impressions of the general survey researchers. This suggests that mental history should not be perceived only and simply as the result of psychological influence, but as the essence of the struggle for the recovery of their humanity against the dehumanization that atomic bombs enforce. The struggle appears to be between two different ways of thinking, two different attitudes: one, helpless drifting and feeling of desolation; the other, active resistance.

Therefore, personal history (or biography) cannot be described as a process of one-sided receiving of atomic bomb damage. There is subjective choice about how to deal with the atomic bomb experiences. This we have learned from the Hibakusha. And in this way, we may come to see answers to the second important question: "What should human beings do about the atomic bomb?"

The only way to discover the importance, meaning, and relevance to other factors of the various kinds of damage caused by atomic bombs is to find a way to grasp the *human* meaning of each kind of damage. Without this there can be no integration of the otherwise seemingly disparate effects of the bomb. An enumeration of effects is of little use. Without reference to the real integrated experiences of the Hibakusha, and their efforts to

make sense of their experiences, the task of integration would be much more difficult if not impossible.

Through the Hibakusha, the two questions are linked, even though they themselves are often unaware of how much they have done for all of us by simply surviving—not only physically but also humanly. This is why life history surveys of the Hibakusha are so important.

Our group has been making life history surveys of the Hibakusha since 1965. We contributed both a general survey and a life history survey to the ISDA, and we will continue to conduct surveys, always building on what we learn from the Hibakusha.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See our survey reports, Ishida, T. (ed.), *Han Genbaku; Nagasaki Hibakusha no Seikatsushi (Anti-Atomic Bombs; Life Histories of Hibakusha in Nagasaki)* Mirai-sha, 1973 and its second series, 1974, Ishida, T., Hamatani, M. and others *Genbaku-Sensō Taiken to Sōzōryoku (Atomic Bomb-War Experiences and Imagination)*, *Hitotsubashi Ronso (special number)*, Vol. LXXXIII, No. 2, 1980.