How Has the Support Called *"Ibasho"* been Discussed?

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This study focuses on ibasho *in Japan in the sense of free spaces for people with a history of hikikomori (social withdrawal) who have trouble in finding employment. The paper reviews previous literature on* ibasho, *and attempts to clarify the role that ibasho are expected to play in supporting these people. As a result of the analysis, six functions of* ibasho *were extracted. Specifically, (1) shelter and asylum, (2) interpersonal relations, (3)* ibasho *as a safe and secure place, (4) bridge to social independence, (5) resistance to dominant values, and (6) dilemmas with* ibasho. *In conclusion, we noted that* ibasho *is a concept that has immense possibilities in practice, although it needs to be refined before it can be used as an academic concept as it is.*

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on spaces called *ibasho*[1] or "free spaces," support facilities that can be freely used by young people with a history of *hikikomori* (social withdrawal) who have difficulty finding employment. This paper reviews research on *ibasho,* which was designed to support *hikikomori* young people, and clarifies the role that *ibasho* is expected to play in supporting these people.

In 1991, Japan's bubble economy collapsed, and the period of stable economic growth came to an end. From the 1990s onward, this led to an increase in the number of individuals not in education, employment, or training, also referred to as NEETs and job-hopping part-time workers (*furita*, in Japanese; this young person/labor problem appeared in the country approximately 20 years after it did in Europe and the United States). In the first decade of the new millennium, support offered to young people facing employment issues began to be institutionalized.

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The "Youth Independence and Challenge Plan" (*Wakamono jiritsu/chosen puran*), which was signed in June 2003 by the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, and the Minister of Economic and Fiscal Policy, served as the foundation of this institutionalization (along with the 2009 "Law to Promote the Support of Children and Young People" or *Kodomo wakamono ikusei shien suishin ho*). With these as guides, various measures have been implemented throughout the country, such as the overnight "Independence School for Youth" (*Wakamono Jiritsu Juku*), based on the United States' Job Corps (2004–2010), and the "Local Support Stations for Young People," based on England's "Connexions" agency where individuals come to discuss issues and receive advice (2006–present).

However, this institutionalization process has clarified that the number of users of these facilities, who have trouble finding immediate employment, is higher than assumed, and includes people who have a history of *hikikomori*, developmental disorders, psychological illness, and so on.

It is said that *hikikomori* is a phenomenon unique to Japan[2]. It is defined as "a situation in which a person, as a result of various factors, avoids societal participation and, as a general rule, essentially does not leave the household for six months or more" (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2010). While conducting statistical surveys regarding this phenomenon is extremely difficult, as individuals in this state are cut off from societal activities, the Cabinet Office, based on a survey, has estimated that there are approximately over five hundred thousand *hikikomori* individuals in Japan.

Table 1. Estimated Number of *Hikikomori* Young People

	Each percentage of valid responses (%)	Estimated number across the country (thousands)	Total	
Those who usually stay at home and go out only when they have something to do which is related to their interests	1.06	365	Quasi-withdrawn people 365 thousand	**Socially withdrawn people, in a broad sense** **541 thousand**
Those who usually stay at home and only go to a nearby convenience store	0.35	121	Socially withdrawn people, in a narrow sense 176 thousand	
Those who go out of their rooms but not out of their houses and Those who rarely go out of their rooms	0.16	55		

Cabinet Office (2016)

Often, the kind of job assistance that is normally envisioned for these people (job skill training, job introductions, etc.), which addresses the individuals' discordance with societal norms through education, is not a good match for them. For those individuals whose problems are especially pronounced, facilities that provide "safe places" have been established by private support groups, municipal administrations, and so on (particularly since 2000) as "in-

termediate facilities for crossing from 'school to society'" (Sato 2004, p. 134). These intend to offer a sense of belonging, stable interpersonal relationships, life experiences outside the household, and so on.

As young *hikikomori* individuals tend to be cut off from long-term societal connections, they feel a strong unease in interpersonal relationships (Saito 1998). This feeling is incompatible with the societal emphasis on communication that has accompanied Japan's shift to service industries. The support provided for these people takes this into account. This support could go in the same direction as the existent self-reliance support, which intervenes in personalities and corrects traits of individuals that are incompatible with societal norms, providing a path to adapt to societal norms. Another possibility could be accepting their personalities and empowering these individuals.

Facilities that provide *ibasho* generally take the latter route. However, it is assumed that these facilities primarily provide support for unemployed young people, and thus they are pressured to encourage them to find employment. At an *ibasho,* which Sumida describes as a site that allows people to be themselves (Sumida 2003) and a place where they can transform "negative self-images" into positive ones (Sumida 2004), the question that arises is, how should the conflicting tasks of accepting individuals' identities while offering intervention be carried out simultaneously?

Facilities known as *ibasho* have been established all over the country, and their philosophies and scales are quite diverse. However, previous studies have not painted a complete picture of *ibasho* in supporting *hikikomori*. In other words, there has been no reflection regarding the kind of supportive place *ibasho* constitute. The primary purpose of this paper is to map the support facilities called *ibasho* for *hikikomori*. The aim is not to seek a definition of the concept of *ibasho,* but to explore the tendencies in their treatment based on papers published so far. The concept of *ibasho* has been used in multiple senses in various social contexts. In order to narrow the focus of the research, this paper focuses on the way "*ibasho* for *hikikomori* youth" are discussed, and clarifies what is expected of *ibasho* and what role they have played in supporting young people's independence.

2. Method and subjects

This paper includes articles and books about *ibasho* facilities established for young people who have experienced *hikikomori*. We searched for articles on CiNii (https://ci.nii.ac.jp/), a Japanese academic paper database, using the search terms *hikikomori* and *ibasho* (ひきこもり and 居場所). A total of fifty-three articles using the above search terms were retrieved. The first article regarding the same was published in 1997. The other articles were all published after 2000. This is consistent with the fact that this problem had not surfaced till the 2000s in Japan.

As the meaning of the word *ibasho* varies, it has also been used for varied purposes. We excluded papers that do not use *ibasho* to refer to a support style. Additionally, we have taken into consideration several major books on the subject of *hikikomori* and *ibasho*.

We extracted the parts of the papers and books that mentioned the function and meaning of *ibasho* and coded them.

3. Analyses: Six features of *ibasho* for *hikikomori* youth

In this section, we review the papers about *ibasho* facilities for *hikikomori* youth and categorize the function that they are expected to play.

(1) Shelter and asylum

Many young people who experience *hikikomori* were bullied in school. In some cases, their relationship with their families is not very good, as they stay away from social activities for long periods of time and are confined to their homes. At such times, it is important for them to have a comfortable place other than school, work, and home, and the spaces created for this purpose are known as *ibasho.*

Mori and Kondo (1997) were the first to focus on *hikikomori* shelters with the term *ibasho.* They identified "friends," "relationships," and "*ibasho*" as the keywords for support activities for young people who have withdrawn from school or do not attend school. They pointed out that the function of *ibasho* is that of "a temporary shelter instead of a school or office" (Mori and Kondo 1997: 113). Takiguchi (2015) also defines *ibasho* as an "asylum," which is a place that allows people to escape external spaces of exclusion and discrimination, where they can attain security and recognition.

Ogino (2006) pointed out that *hikikomori* youths are placed in a social environment where employment is considered inevitable, and most of the debate has focused on their lack of motivation and the failure of their families to educate them as the cause of their withdrawal. In this context, Ogino suggests that families also need *ibasho* as a place where their child's failure to attend school and work is acceptable, not an object of blame or contempt. For *hikikomori* youth, family issues have always been important. Kawakita (2014) points out that for them, "*ibasho* is an aspect of a place where they can get away from the closeness of the family and the conflicts within families" (Kawakita 2014: 429). It is expected that having an *ibasho* will also transform family relationships.

In general, not many discourses describe *ibasho* as a "shelter." This usage is characteristic of *ibasho* when the term is used to imply a support place for *hikikomori* youth. This illustrates how difficult it can be for *hikkomori* individuals to participate in the general community. It is evident that there was early awareness regarding the need to provide a place outside the home.

(2) Interpersonal relations

Mori and Kondo juxtapose friends and relationships with *ibasho.* However, it is important to note that in many discourses, the requirements for the establishment of *ibasho* include good interpersonal relationships among users.

Yamada and Ogiso (2011) interviewed users of *ibasho* and summarized that the following four types of relationships are desired: 1. relationships where people are accepted as they are, 2. relationships where people can heal their loneliness by sharing their thoughts, 3. relationships where people can attain approval, 4. mutually supportive relationships. Yamada and Ogiso see these relationships as continuous and incremental, stating that they progress from stage 1 to 4 depending on the state of participation in *ibasho.* These descriptions indicate that the goals of *ibasho* are not just establishing stable relationships, but developing more relationships and mutual recognition over time. According to Ogino (2007), for mutual recogni-

tion to be established among users, it is necessary for people in "similar circumstances" to gather together. It is the self-help group aspect of *ibasho* where mutually acceptable and empathetic relationships are formed.

Asada (2010) indicates that parents talk about their anxiety regarding the fact that *hikikomori* young people struggle while developing interpersonal relationships, quit their jobs after a short period of time, and only seek jobs that avoid interpersonal relationships. Asada states "First of all, it is important for the young people concerned to build relationships with others and then gradually move on to work" (Asada 2010: 194). She adds that the provision of *ibasho* has the function of helping users build and stabilize interpersonal relationships.

From these descriptions, it can be seen that good interpersonal relationships are very important in *ibasho* as a support system. Furthermore, Ishikawa (2004) defines *ibasho* as an interpersonal relationship itself, based on the narratives of *hikikomori* individuals.

> B's feelings of loneliness and alienation may have been deepened by the thought that "I am alone in doing this," rather than by the fact that "no one knows me." In this self-help group, B met "someone who had stayed at home for a long time" and felt that he had finally found his "own *ibasho*." In other words, his "*ibasho*" was a relationship with others who could share their thoughts and experiences with him (Ishikawa 2004: 381).

(3) Ibasho as a safe and secure place

An important condition for engaging in such interpersonal relationships is that the *ibasho* should be a safe and secure place where individuals are not threatened. Sato (2005), who has been involved in supporting young people for many years, describes the people who gather at *ibasho* as having "anxiety about working," "anxiety about the future," and "anxiety about the self." Yamada claims that "the sense of security and safety of a place is the psychological reality of being recognized as a whole, which is the most basic meaning of a place." (Yamada 2006: 204)

Unless *ibasho* is a safe place to be, it cannot be a place of inclusion for youth dealing with withdrawal. The question that arises is, what are the conditions under which safety and security are guaranteed? The papers discussed here includes "shared experiences" (Tazoe 2015), "the presence of peers" (Yong 2017), and "not being denied" (Yamada 2006).

Also, as Yamada (2006) and Shibata and Ikuta (2016) elaborate, *ibasho* must be a place where people are allowed to stay even if they "do nothing." Thus, it is possible to point out the ambiguity of *ibasho,* in which communication through peer relationships is encouraged to ensure safety, while at the same time, the importance of not forcing people to communicate is also emphasized.

(4) Bridge to social independence

As mentioned above, the primary value of *ibasho* seems to be that it is safe and inclusive space. Meanwhile, the overall tone of youth support policies in Japan tends to be strongly in the direction of independence through employment. Some argue that *ibasho* are not an exception, and that they offer intermediate support for employment and social independence. Takiguchi (2019) indicates that it is generally assumed to be "a path of support in

which a supporter visits the person who is withdrawn and invites him or her somewhere to practice human relations and communication, which then leads to work."

Hanashima (2011) argues that the process of social participation through *ibasho* involves a reduction in the number of factors that prevent people from going out into society and a change in the motivation to do so. Otaya (2015) also finds that as the degree of participation in *ibasho* and the acquisition of an identity as a user of the *ibasho* progress, the functions required of the *ibasho* changes from approval to being goal-oriented.

(5) Resistance to dominant values

There has been discussion on the point that individuals adapt to the existing social norms through *ibasho* facilities. On the other hand, discourse also depicts this place as an environment that resists the existing social norms and order. Ishikawa (2008) argues that "in order for a space to be a "*ibasho*," the existence of a person who is only demeaned in the society outside the *ibasho* must be accepted In other words, *ibasho* is a counterpoint to the dominant values of the society (Ishikawa 2008: 124)".

Ando (2019) also criticizes the concept of *ibasho* as a support for self-reliance, stating that "it is not support for being able to work, for being able to go to school, or for improving communication" (Ando 2019: 9). She states that the purpose of *ibasho* for *hikikomori* youths is to use their own experiences to expose the injustices of modern society and become agents of building a just society (Ando 2019: 9).

In other words, the two conflicting functions of adaptation and resistance are expected from the same form of support known as *ibasho*. Other conflicting functions are also expected to be fulfilled in *ibasho* at the same time, as will be discussed later.

(6) Dilemmas with ibasho

It is evident from the discussion so far that supporters working in *ibasho* have to deal with "the conflicting challenges of understanding, praising, and extending young people and supporting them to work at the same time" (Asada 2010: 202).

Thus, *ibasho*, which are positioned as *hikikomori* support programs, have to deal with various dilemmas, to which discussions about *ibasho* often refer. The following statements provide insights therein.

The "*ibasho*" positioned in support of self-reliance have ambivalent norms where the purpose is to "get out," therefore requiring complete participation (Otaya 2015: 116).

Ibasho face the risk of turning into a space of narrow communal assimilation and oppression, which would be similar to self-help groups that share negative experiences. Young people cannot regain their faith regarding the outside world by being there. Therefore, they will not be able to generate the courage to venture out (Sato 2005: 216).

Ibasho are spaces that offer numerous interactional rituals, restore interpersonal relationships, and provide a certain sense of self-affirmation for those who have withdrawn. However, this does not necessarily cause individuals to develop a sense of self-affirmation that enables them to act outside the ibasho (Ogino 2007: 15).

It is evident that *ibasho* have to deal with certain dilemmas as a means of self-reliance, while some institutions that support self-reliance have also been categorized as *ibasho*. For example, the "revolving door" phenomenon (people returning to the place of support because they are unable to settle into their jobs; Tsutsui and Honda 2009) is sometimes reported in employment support services that do not aim to provide *ibasho* for young people,. This clearly shows that the place of support functions as *ibasho* for young people who are tired of working, and at the same time, shows that the place of support functions as a place of healing for them as well. When young people who have been excluded from social relationships seek to participate in society, there are simultaneous conflicting needs for recognition of the individual in difficulty and independence through personal transformation. Therefore, this kind of dilemma inevitably arises in youth support. *Ibasho* are places that can address such contradictions.

4. Overall analysis and conclusion

This paper discusses how *ibasho* as *hikikomori* support systems have been discussed in academic papers.

The concept of *ibasho* has been used for various functions, even in the limited usage of *hikikomori* youth support. They are expected to provide comprehensive support for socially excluded young people to encourage peer relationships, for example, as shelters, to build interpersonal relationships, and to function as a step toward social independence. They have been positioned as ambiguous arenas, containing several contradictory elements, without a clear definition due to their characteristics.

The transition from school to work in Japan has been understood as a "place-oriented" transition where the type of school a student belongs to is emphasized and the student's academic ability is matched by the size and visibility of the company (Brinton 2008). This is in contrast to the Western-style transition, which is said to be based on "qualifications" associated with personal qualities. However, the structure of the "field" that supports Japanese society is undergoing a major transformation. Additionally, the selection and distribution functions assumed to be carried out by school education are becoming less effective. In the current environment in Japan, where children and young people's "places" of transition, such as schools and workplaces, are becoming less self-evident, more attention should be paid to the importance of supporting the provision of such "places." At this point, the possibilities and limitations of a model of transition from the perspective of "affiliation" and "place" for children and young people should be reexamined.

From this perspective regarding young people and employment and the popularity of *ibasho* as a form of support, we see that the field of youth support, which traditionally supported young people's employment, is supporting the formation of *ibasho* functions no longer fulfilled by spaces such as the home, school, or workplace.

Thus, *ibasho* is a concept with immense possibilities, which seems to be appropriate for describing this variety of functions in practice. The importance of place in an increasingly individualized society continues to grow, and research on the practice of *ibasho* will continue to accumulate.

However, *ibasho* needs to be refined before it can be used as an academic concept as is.

Ibasho, or free space, is a form of support used not only by young people with employment difficulties, but also by children, the elderly, and people released from prison. In addition, the concept itself is used in a variety of ways, from general terms to policy terms.

The diversity of usage tends to diffuse the discussion of *ibasho*. This paper focuses on support organizations that provide *ibasho* for young hikikomori, but even with this limitation, it is clear that it is expected to have multiple functions, including shelter, interpersonal relations, safety, and resistance. In order to use *ibasho* as an academic concept, it is necessary to subdivide its functions. The findings of this paper on some of the functions of *ibasho* in supporting *hikikomori* youth will contribute to this process.

This study has certain limitations. This paper does not directly deal with the question of how *hikikomori* talk about their own *ibasho*. Additionally, support for *ibasho* is not limited only to *hikikomori* but also includes measures for poverty and support for the disabled, but in this paper, to prevent diffusive discussion, only support for *hikikomori* youth has been taken into consideration. It is assumed that if the target group is different, the expectations are also different. To comprehensively understand the function of place-based support, it is necessary to consider the relationships between various difficulties and place-based support.

One of the major problems associated with *hikikomori* is the prolonged period of withdrawal and the aging of the people involved. The "80-50 problem," in which children in their 50s are supported by the pensions of their parents in their 80s, has become a social issue. In this situation, the role of *ibasho* as a support system is expected to be very different. The role of *ibasho* as support for elderly *hikikomori* people is also expected to be very different from its role with regard to young people. In this paper, it was only possible to deal with support for young people. Very little research has yet been done on *ibasho* for middle-aged and older *hikikomori*. We hope to keep a close eye on the trend of research on *ibasho*.

Notes
(1) *Ibasho* literally means "a place to stay" or "whereabouts". This term also has the meaning of "a place of belonging" or "a place where one feels at home".
(2) Teo et al. (2015) have confirmed the existence of those similar to *hikikomori* in countries other than Japan.

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