

Doctoral Dissertation

**An Examination of the Meaning of Atomic Bomb Survivors'
(*Hibakusha*) Demands for an Official Apology and State
Compensation
Summary**

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Nearly eight decades have passed since the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered the devastation of the first atomic bomb attacks in world history. Now that we are approaching a time when there will be no more first-generation *hibakusha*, it is imperative to make haste in learning how they perceive the efforts made so far by the US and Japanese governments to support them.

The US government has traditionally justified the atomic bombings and has shrugged off responsibility for assisting *hibakusha*. However, in 2016, then-US President Barack Obama became the first sitting US President to visit Hiroshima. Although explicit words of apology were not used, the visit was so highly symbolically charged that a survey conducted just before it reported that the majority of Japanese people considered it as an ‘implicit apology’ for the bombings. On the other hand, the Japanese government, although with a considerable delay, has provided *hibakusha* with relief measures. Most significantly, in 1994, the Atomic Bomb Survivors Support Law was enacted. It provided *hibakusha* with comprehensive medical, health, and welfare support. The law is not explicitly framed as compensation by the state. However, its measures are enacted in the spirit of commemoration of those who have lost their lives, and their complexity and substance exceed those of the existing social assistance policies. Indeed, the measures have been interpreted by the Supreme Court as ‘state compensation-like’. Thus, the two governments have provided generous but ambiguous measures and gestures that could be said to resemble reparations for the atomic bomb damage.

Despite these advances, the national *hibakusha* confederation (*Nihon Hidankyō*) has been upholding its official position (issued in 1984) that the two governments should provide unambiguous reparations for the atomic bomb damage in the form of an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’. However, while *Nihon Hidankyō*’s position is well known, there is less clarity concerning individual *hibakusha*’s views. Although some opinion surveys show that, even in recent times, a considerable percentage of survivors continue to demand the provision of an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’, existing research in the field of atomic bomb studies does not make clear what *hibakusha* might pursue in terms of these two measures, given the very long passage of time since the bombings and the substantial measures and

gestures that have already been provided. This is a problem relevant also to the field of transitional justice (TJ), where there is a similar lack of understanding of victims' long-term demands for reparations, especially in cases where substantial but ambiguous measures have been implemented.

Therefore, the objective of the dissertation was to examine the meaning that individual *hibakusha* attribute to the need for an 'official apology' and 'state compensation' for the atomic bomb damage. It aimed to reflect the perspectives of *hibakusha* and provide a detailed description of their viewpoints.

To understand the meaning that *hibakusha* attribute to the provisions of 'state compensation' and 'official apology', the dissertation employed an analytical framework drawn from the TJ literature that elucidated how reparations gain significance for victims. Based on this framework, the study discussed the meaning of the demands for these two measures from three different perspectives: 1) their direct meaning as a response to *hibakusha's* suffering; 2) their contextual meaning in relation to other demands made by *hibakusha* and their priorities; and 3) their symbolic meaning based on *hibakusha's* self-perceived motivations for considering these measures important. To provide a detailed description of these three levels of meaning, the study posed three research sub-questions and answered them using mixed-methods analysis.

The first sub-question focused on the direct meaning of reparations as a response to the harm inflicted. It sought to determine for which *hibakusha* the demands for 'state compensation' and an 'official apology' held meaning, based on the injuries they had suffered. Logistic regression modelling based on 11,324 responses collected in a 2005 survey conducted by *Asahi Shimbun*, Hiroshima University and Nagasaki University showed that the two demands tended to be made by the most severely affected respondents and were associated with injuries related to all three dimensions of the atomic bomb damage, particularly emotional and socioeconomic ones, which to this day remain the least well-addressed.

The second sub-question focused on the contextual meaning of reparations. It inquired about the priority given to the provision of these two measures in the context of *hibakusha's* other demands. Content analysis of *hibakusha's* messages

collected in a 2005 *Nihon Hidankyō* survey, which received 1,615 responses, revealed that most respondents prioritised peace- and justice-oriented goals. The demands for an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’ were among the most frequently mentioned demands by the respondents. However, the results indicated that, while important, the provision of these two measures was of somewhat lower priority to the respondents compared to the provision of national and international guarantees against the recurrence of war and nuclear weapons-related damage.

To explore what the two surveys did not cover, namely, the self-perceived meanings *hibakusha* attribute to receiving an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’, a third sub-question relevant to the symbolic meaning of reparations was posed. It asked what *hibakusha* expected ‘state compensation’ and ‘official apology’ to achieve for them if provided. Qualitative content analysis of ten in-depth interviews conducted in 2023 showed that the policy-level ambiguity of the extended measures and gestures did not lead to confusion about whether the core elements of reparation had been delivered. The respondents used their judgement of the context as lenses to see through the ambiguity of the measures. Therefore, despite the generous responses of the two governments, the respondents did not tend to think that the atomic bomb damage had been sufficiently addressed. The major meanings associated with the enactment of the two measures were harm and responsibility recognition and guarantees of non-repetition. Some of the other meanings associated with the two measures were letting the dead rest in peace, setting straight the historical record, achieving reconciliation between the victims and the state, and assuring that the state is taking care of its citizens. Furthermore, the analysis suggested that demanding reparations could be seen as a way for victims to manifest empathy and express social solidarity.

Based on the answers to the three sub-questions, the dissertation concluded that *hibakusha*’s demands for an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’ were invested with complex meanings. It was suggested that the ambiguous measures put in place by the two governments were not satisfactory for many of the *hibakusha* respondents, especially for those most severely affected among them. The nature of the governments’ responses mattered to the majority of the respondents in all three

datasets. They did not consider the provided measures as clear-cut reparations and, therefore, demanded the explicit formulation of an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’. The provision of an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’ was seen as necessary to convey the two core meanings of reparations: recognition of harm and acknowledgement of wrongdoing. The recognition of the inhumanity and unjustifiability of the damage and the responsibility for it were also seen as connected to establishing a norm against war and the use of nuclear weapons, a major priority for most of the respondents. Consequently, the formal enactment of the two measures was sometimes perceived as less important than delivering and committing to the meanings they represented. At the same time, however, the formal provision of reparations, and especially ‘state compensation’, was perceived as necessary to address the under-specification problem of the currently provided measures and to address *hibakusha*’s suffering and ongoing needs by recognising the true extent, nature, and severity of the atomic bomb damage. Thus, the provision of the two measures was found to have a complex contextual meaning interrelated with the provision of guarantees against recurrence on one side and adequate support on the other.

The outcomes of the dissertation produced a rich account of the multifaceted meanings that individual *hibakusha* attribute to receiving an ‘official apology’ and ‘state compensation’. As such, it made a significant contribution to the field of atomic bomb studies, which seeks to create a comprehensive understanding of *hibakusha*’s perspectives. Furthermore, it validated *Nihon Hidankyō*’s claims that the currently implemented measures fall short of addressing the full extent of the atomic bomb damage and emphasised the necessity for acts of unequivocal recognition that the suffering caused by the atomic bombings is neither justifiable nor tolerable, as well as for the provision of measures specifically addressing *hibakusha*’s emotional and socioeconomic injuries. Therefore, the results of the dissertation provided valuable insights for the development of appropriate measures for *hibakusha*, as well as other victims of nuclear weapons. Lastly, the dissertation also contributed to the field of TJ by providing empirical evidence for some of the existing theoretical arguments regarding the concept of meaningful reparations.

It should be noted that due to differences in the time of data collection and the content of the three datasets, it is challenging to discuss the results of the analysis in a completely complementary manner. Therefore, further research is needed to address comprehensively the main research question. Due to the characteristics of the data, the findings cannot be considered representative of all *hibakusha*. However, despite their limitations, the data used in the dissertation contained a wealth of information and suggested possibilities for further research.