

[論 文]

Newsworthiness of Homicide in Contemporary Japanese Society

現代日本社会における殺人事件のニュース価値

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the newsworthiness of homicide cases in contemporary Japanese society. This study analyzes the nature of newsworthy homicides by comparing crime statistics and newspaper articles on homicides known to the police and cleared in 2018. The findings are as follows. First, regarding homicide types, completed murder, completed infanticide, attempted infanticide, and completed robbery-homicide were deemed newsworthy. Second, regarding suspect characteristics, ages 14–19, 20–29, and students were newsworthy. Third, regarding victim characteristics, ages 0–5, 6–12, 13–19, 70 and above, female, employed, and students were newsworthy. Finally, regarding the suspect-victim relationship, cases with no acquaintance were newsworthy.

Keywords : newsworthiness／homicide／contemporary Japanese society

I. Introduction

This study aims to identify the newsworthiness of homicide cases in contemporary Japanese society.

In the realm of crime reporting in mass media, reports of homicide cases have a significant impact on society. However, trends in the reporting of homicide cases often diverge from overall trends in homicide occurrences. Therefore, it is necessary to exercise caution when treating homicide cases that receive considerable coverage as representative examples of homicides.

Newsworthiness influences the likelihood of a criminal case being reported. In the United States, numerous studies have investigated the newsworthiness of homicide cases through multiple regression analyses using individual homicide case data provided by criminal justice authorities (Akahane 2024). However, in Japan, individual homicide case data remain unpublished, making it difficult to calculate newsworthiness using multiple regression

analysis.

Nevertheless, studies have explored newsworthiness through simple comparisons between crime statistics and newspaper articles (Ditton and Duffy 1983; Tanaka et al. 2019; Yajima 1996). This study builds on research to clarify the newsworthiness of homicides in contemporary Japanese society.

II. Method

1. Sample

This study analyzes the nature of newsworthy homicides by comparing crime statistics and newspaper articles on homicides known to the police and cleared in 2018.

The reasons for selecting 2018 are as follows. First, the inclusion of 2019 would have caused significant distortions in the analysis due to the Kyoto Animation Arson and Murder case, which resulted in 36 deaths. Second, after 2020, media coverage may have shifted due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The crime statistics analyzed included homicide and robbery-homicide cases known to the police, cleared, and involving arrestees in 2018, as listed in the *Crime*

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Statistics in 2018 (National Police Agency 2019). The total number of homicide cases known to the police was 915 (including 905 human victims), of which 886 were cleared (819 excluding unfounded or unpunishable cases¹⁾), with 836 arrestees. The total number of robbery-homicide cases known to the police was 25, all of which were cleared, with 43 arrestees.

The newspaper articles analyzed included reports of homicides and robbery-homicides from January 2018 to January 2019, published as national news in the Tokyo headquarters editions of the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Asahi Shimbun*. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* covered 152 cases in 572 articles, while the *Asahi Shimbun* covered 116 cases in 435 articles. These newspapers were selected because they are the largest and second-largest in Japan by circulation (ABC circulation: 8,512,674 for the *Yomiuri* and 5,954,336 for the *Asahi*). January 2019 was included because coverage of cases known to the police and cleared at the end of 2018 extended into the new year. Case coverage is defined as reporting from the discovery of a case to the indictment or non-indictment of a suspect. Articles were selected by comparing the indices of the reduced-size editions and database searches.

2. Classification and Comparison Method

To compare newspaper articles with crime statistics, homicide cases reported in newspaper articles were classified according to crime statistics.

As a result of the classification, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported 184 cases known to the police, 170 cleared, and 158 involving arrestees, while the *Asahi Shimbun* reported 143 cases known to the police, 129 cleared, and 115 involving arrestees. The numbers of cleared cases and arrestees exclude unfounded or unpunishable cases.

The following eight characteristics of homicide were used for comparison: (1) homicide type, (2) suspect age, (3) suspect gender, (4) suspect occupation, (5) victim age, (6) victim gender, (7) victim occupation, and (8) suspect-victim relationship. Cases in which the characteristics of the homicide were unknown were excluded from the comparison.

This study employs a bias index for comparison. The bias index is defined as the ratio of a specific type of case to the total number of newspaper articles, divided by the ratio of that type of case to the overall crime statistics (Ditton and Duffy 1983: 162; Tanaka et al. 2019: I_140). This indicates whether each type of case is more likely or less likely to be reported compared to its presentation in crime statistics. A bias index greater than one indicates that a case is more likely to be reported, while a bias index less than one suggests that it is less likely to be reported.

Note that this comparison is based solely on the number of cases known to the police, the number of cases cleared, and the number of arrestees; it does not reflect the number of articles per case.

3. Analysis Method

This study analyzes the components of newsworthiness by following the framework proposed by Pritchard and Hughes (1997). Pritchard and Hughes divide deviance, a key component of newsworthiness, into four categories: statistical deviance, status deviance, cultural deviance, and normative deviance.

Statistical deviance refers to “the extent to which something is unusual” (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 51). Homicides with a high level of statistical deviance are regarded as newsworthy; for instance, unusual homicides, such as those that involve White suspects or victims.

Status deviance pertains to “the extent to which a person or group is different, using the well-established benchmarks of high status in U.S. society” (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 51). Homicides with a low level of status deviance are considered newsworthy; for instance, those involving high-status individuals, such as wealthy Whites.

Cultural deviance is defined as “the extent to which an act is considered to be unhealthy, unclean, or perverted” (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 51). Homicides displaying a high level of cultural deviance are seen as newsworthy; for instance, cases involving victims who are the older, children, or women.

Normative deviance occurs “when an act violates

formal norms” (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 52). Homicides with a large degree of normative deviance are deemed newsworthy; for example, a homicide punishable by a long prison sentence is more newsworthy than an act of shoplifting, which is punishable by small fines.

This study presents the results of the analysis using two tables showing the characteristics of the homicides.

The first table is used to determine the presence or absence of newsworthiness. In this table, considering potential error, the bias index is underlined and bolded when the degree of bias is 1.1 or higher. Factors with a bias index of 1.1 or more in both the *Yomiuri Shimbun* and the *Asahi Shimbun* are identified as newsworthy.

The second table determines the components of newsworthiness. This table is an adaptation of that employed by Pritchard and Hughes (1997) to facilitate analysis within the context of Japanese society. It predicts which homicide characteristics are newsworthy based on the type of deviance. In the table, the characteristics determined to be newsworthy are underlined and highlighted in bold. The deviance category that provides the most consistent explanation is identified as a component of newsworthiness.

III. Findings

This section presents the analysis results of the characteristics that contribute to newsworthy homicides and the deviations that are components of this newsworthiness, in the following order: homicide type, suspect characteristics, victim characteristics, and suspect-victim relationship.

1. Homicide Types

Table 1 indicates that, regarding homicide types, completed murder, completed infanticide, attempted infanticide, and completed robbery-homicide were all newsworthy.

Table 2 provides newsworthiness predictions based on the type of deviance, highlighting the characteristics of the newsworthy homicide types mentioned above. Status deviance is excluded from the table because the homicide types are unrelated to the status of the suspect or the victim.

Cultural deviance was considered a component of newsworthiness in infanticide, while normative deviance was considered a component of newsworthiness in completed murder and robbery-

Table 1: Percentage of Homicide Types and Bias Index (Number of Cases Known to the Police)

| Homicide Type | | Newspaper Articles | | Crime Statistics | Bias Index | |
|--------------------|-----------|--------------------|-------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | | Yomiuri | Asahi | | Yomiuri | Asahi |
| Murder | Completed | 58.15 | 60.14 | 29.57 | <u>1.97</u> | <u>2.03</u> |
| | Attempted | 32.07 | 29.37 | 60.43 | 0.53 | 0.49 |
| Infanticide | Completed | 2.17 | 2.10 | 0.64 | <u>3.41</u> | <u>3.29</u> |
| | Attempted | 1.63 | 1.40 | 0.43 | <u>3.83</u> | <u>3.29</u> |
| Attempted Homicide | Completed | 2.72 | 3.50 | 3.72 | 0.73 | 0.94 |
| | Attempted | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Assisted Suicide | Completed | 0.54 | 0.70 | 1.91 | 0.28 | 0.37 |
| | Attempted | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.64 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Robbery-Homicide | Completed | 2.17 | 2.10 | 0.96 | <u>2.27</u> | <u>2.19</u> |
| | Attempted | 0.54 | 0.70 | 1.70 | 0.32 | 0.41 |
| Total | | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |

Note. *Yomiuri Shimbun*: N=184

Asahi Shimbun: N=143

Table 2: Homicide Type Characteristics Hypothesized to Enhanced Newsworthiness Across Three Types of Deviance

| Characteristic | Deviance Type | | |
|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Statistical | Cultural | Normative |
| Homicide Type | <u>Infanticide</u> | <u>Infanticide</u> | <u>Murder</u> |
| | Attempted homicide | | <u>Robbery-homicide</u> |
| | Assisted suicide | | |
| | <u>Robbery-Homicide</u> | | |

Table 3: Percentage of Suspect Characteristics (Number of Arrestees) and Bias Index

| Suspect Characteristic | | Newspaper Articles | | Crime Statistics | Bias Index | |
|------------------------|------------|--------------------|-------|------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | Yomiuri | Asahi | | Yomiuri | Asahi |
| Age | 14–19 | 8.23 | 12.17 | 4.66 | <u>1.76</u> | <u>2.61</u> |
| | 20–29 | 32.28 | 33.04 | 20.36 | <u>1.59</u> | <u>1.62</u> |
| | 30–39 | 21.52 | 16.52 | 18.66 | <u>1.15</u> | 0.89 |
| | 40–49 | 15.82 | 15.65 | 20.93 | 0.76 | 0.75 |
| | 50–59 | 10.13 | 9.57 | 12.06 | 0.84 | 0.79 |
| | 60–69 | 6.33 | 5.22 | 12.74 | 0.50 | 0.41 |
| | 70– | 5.70 | 7.83 | 10.58 | 0.54 | 0.74 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |
| Gender | Male | 81.01 | 80.87 | 75.31 | 1.08 | 1.07 |
| | Female | 18.99 | 19.13 | 24.69 | 0.77 | 0.77 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |
| Occupation | Employed | 43.18 | 38.61 | 40.27 | 1.07 | 0.96 |
| | Student | 8.33 | 9.90 | 4.10 | <u>2.03</u> | <u>2.42</u> |
| | Unemployed | 48.48 | 51.49 | 55.63 | 0.87 | 0.93 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |

Note. *Yomiuri Shimbun*: Age N=158, Gender N=158, Occupation N=132

Asahi Shimbun: Age N=118, Gender N=118, Occupation N=104

homicide.

2. Suspect Characteristics

Table 3 shows that, regarding suspect characteristics, the age groups 14–19, 20–29, and students were considered newsworthy.

Table 4 presents newsworthiness predictions based on the type of deviance, highlighting the newsworthy suspect characteristics mentioned above. Normative deviance is excluded in this table and beyond because

the extent of punishment cannot be determined.

The table indicates that statistical deviance was identified as a component of newsworthiness for suspect characteristics, except for females (not considered newsworthy) and non-students aged 20-29 (considered newsworthy).

3. Victim characteristics

Table 5 shows that, regarding victim characteristics, ages 0–5, 6–12, 13–19, 70–, female, employed, and

Table 4: Suspect Characteristics Predicted to Enhanced Newsworthiness for Three Types of Deviance

| Characteristic | Deviance Type | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------|-----------------|
| | Statistical | Status | Cultural |
| Suspect age | <u>Under 20 years old</u> | Middle age | Child or senior |
| Suspect gender | Female | Male | No prediction |
| Suspect occupation | <u>Student</u> | Employed | No prediction |

Table 5: Percentage of Victim Characteristics (Number of Cleared Cases) and Bias Index

| Victim Characteristic | | Newspaper | | Crime | Bias Index | |
|-----------------------|--|-----------|-------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | Articles | | Statistics | | |
| | | Yomiuri | Asahi | | Yomiuri | Asahi |
| Age | 0–5 | 7.69 | 7.04 | 3.94 | <u>1.95</u> | <u>1.79</u> |
| | 6–12 | 3.30 | 4.23 | 2.13 | <u>1.55</u> | <u>1.99</u> |
| | 13–19 | 6.04 | 5.63 | 4.57 | <u>1.32</u> | <u>1.23</u> |
| | 20–29 | 15.93 | 12.68 | 13.62 | <u>1.17</u> | 0.93 |
| | 30–39 | 10.44 | 11.27 | 13.09 | 0.80 | 0.86 |
| | 40–49 | 15.93 | 16.20 | 15.64 | 1.02 | 1.04 |
| | 50–59 | 7.69 | 10.56 | 12.87 | 0.60 | 0.82 |
| | 60–69 | 9.34 | 9.86 | 12.98 | 0.72 | 0.76 |
| | 70– | 23.63 | 22.54 | 20.11 | <u>1.18</u> | <u>1.12</u> |
| | Corporation, organization, and no victim | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.06 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Total | | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |
| Gender | Male | 51.69 | 48.55 | 58.09 | 0.89 | 0.84 |
| | Female | 48.31 | 51.45 | 40.85 | <u>1.18</u> | <u>1.26</u> |
| | Corporation, organization, and no victim | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.06 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |
| Occupation | Employed | 50.00 | 50.98 | 45.43 | <u>1.10</u> | <u>1.12</u> |
| | Student | 26.15 | 25.49 | 10.85 | <u>2.41</u> | <u>2.35</u> |
| | Unemployed | 23.85 | 23.53 | 42.66 | 0.56 | 0.55 |
| | Corporation, organization, and no victim | 0.00 | 0.00 | 1.06 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |

Note. *Yomiuri Shimbun*: Age N=182, Gender N=178, Occupation N=130

Asahi Shimbun: Age N=142, Gender N=138, Occupation N=102

Table 6: Victim Characteristics Predicted to Enhanced Newsworthiness for Three Types of Deviance

| Characteristic | Deviance Type | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Statistical | Status | Cultural |
| Victim age | <u>Under 20 years old</u> | Middle-age | <u>Child or senior</u> |
| Victim gender | <u>Female</u> | Male | <u>Female</u> |
| Victim occupation | <u>Student</u> | <u>Employed</u> | <u>Student</u> |

Table 7: Percentage of Suspect-Victim Relationships (Number of Cleared Cases) and Bias Index

| Suspect-Victim Relationship | Newspaper Articles | | Crime Statistics | Bias Index | |
|--|--------------------|-------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | Yomiuri | Asahi | | Yomiuri | Asahi |
| Family | 38.69 | 38.28 | 49.76 | 0.78 | 0.77 |
| Friend, acquaintance, work-related person, and other | 37.50 | 34.38 | 33.65 | <u>1.11</u> | 1.02 |
| No acquaintance | 23.81 | 27.34 | 15.40 | <u>1.55</u> | <u>1.78</u> |
| Corporation, organization, and no victim | 0 | 0 | 1.18 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | | |

Note. *Yomiuri Shimbun*: N=168

Asahi Shimbun: N=128

Table 8: Suspect-victim Relationship Characteristics Predicted to Enhanced Newsworthiness for Three Types of Deviance

| Characteristic | Deviance Type | | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| | Statistical | Status | Cultural |
| Relationship | <u>No acquaintance</u> | No prediction | Close |

students were considered newsworthy.

Table 6 presents newsworthiness predictions based on the type of deviance, highlighting the newsworthy victim characteristics mentioned above. The category “corporation, organization, and no victim” was excluded from this table and beyond, as it was not reported.

The table indicates that cultural deviance was more likely to be a component of newsworthiness concerning victim characteristics. While statistical

deviance may be a component of newsworthiness, it does not predict newsworthiness for seniors. Status deviance might be relevant for the employed; however, this study does not emphasize it due to its low bias index and lack of consistency.

4. Suspect-Victim relationship

Table 7 shows that, regarding a suspect-victim relationship, cases with no acquaintance were deemed newsworthy.

Table 8 presents newsworthiness predictions based on the type of deviance, highlighting the newsworthy suspect-victim relationship characteristics mentioned above.

The table indicates that statistical deviance was considered a component of newsworthiness in relation to suspect-victim relationship characteristics.

IV. Conclusion

The findings are as follows.

First, regarding homicide types, completed murder, completed infanticide, attempted infanticide, and completed robbery - homicide were deemed newsworthy. Cultural deviance was identified as a component of newsworthiness for infanticide, while normative deviance was considered significant for completed murder and completed robbery-homicide.

Second, regarding suspect characteristics, ages 14–19, 20–29, and students were newsworthy. The analysis indicates that statistical deviance was a component of newsworthiness for suspect characteristics, except for females (not considered newsworthy) and non-students aged 20-29 (considered newsworthy).

Third, regarding victim characteristics, ages 0–5, 6–12, 13–19, 70 and above, female, employed, and students were newsworthy. Cultural deviance was likely a component of newsworthiness for victims.

Finally, regarding the suspect-victim relationship, cases with no acquaintance were newsworthy. Statistical deviance was considered a component of newsworthiness for the suspect-victim relationship.

Notes

1) Cases that are unfounded or unpunishable refer to those confirmed as such following a police investigation. These typically include instances where no criminal act occurred, or the perpetrator was legally insane, or a minor aged 13 or younger, among other circumstances (National Police Agency 2019: introductory remarks).

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