CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN JAPANESE ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND INTEGRATION OF HIKIKOMORI CHILDREN

Akio Daysuke Nakasato

Department of Psychology, Aichi Mizuho College, Nagoya, Japan

Abstract:

Culture-bound disorders, or culture-bound mental disorders, are psychological disorders or syndromes that are considered specific or closely related to cultural factors and or particular ethno cultural groups By definition, the *hikikomori* (the term can also be used in the plural) is one who retires from the community in order to have a solitary lifestyle. The Japanese term *hiki* means "to pull" and *komoru* means "retiring" or "withdrawing," hence the sense of pulling out from the community. The *hikikomori* is acknowledged a uniquely Japanese phenomenon. The typical *hikikomori* is a male (80% are male), teenaged to 30 years old, who has resigned from school or job, with poor technical skills. usually, the subjects are unemployed, residing in a separate room in his parents' house, avoiding any contact or coming out, taking meals left at his door by his friends or parents, spending the day reading, browsing, viewing television, idling.

Keywords: hikikomori, social isolation, integration, alternative education system

Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare defines *hikikomori* as "*people who refuse to leave their house and, thus, isolate themselves from society in their homes for a period exceeding six months.*" The psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō defines *hikikomori* as "*a state that has become a problem by the late twenties, that involves cooping oneself up in one's own home and not participating in society for six months or longer, but that does not seem to have another psychological problem as its principal source.*"

More recently, researchers have suggested six specific criteria required to "diagnose" *hikikomori*:

1. spending most of the day and nearly every day separated, confined to home,
2. marked and determined avoidance of social situations,

3. symptoms conflicting significantly with the person's regular routine, occupational (or academic) performing, social activities or relationships,

4. perceiving the withdrawal as ego-syntonic,

5. duration, at least, six months,

6. no other mental disorder that accounts for the social withdrawal and avoidance.

Hikikomori are not rigorously hermits (who have a strong psychological or intellectual reason for isolation) and are more properly recluses. But the youth of the *hikikomori*, their radical withdrawal, and their dependence on the tolerance of parents - especially the mother - is considered unique to Japan. A related term or acronym specifically referring to the *hikikomori's* social status (but including *non-hikikomori* as well) is NEET, meaning young people "*Not in Education, Employment, or Training*." While the degree of the phenomenon changes on an individual basis, in the most extreme cases, some people remain in solitude for years or even decades.

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, which long ignored the problem, in 2003 defined *hikikomori* as: "*avoiding social participation, including avoiding school attendance, compulsory education, entering the workforce - including part-time jobs - and associating with somebody outside the home; generally remaining at home for six months or more.*"

The Ministry also maintains that: "*Although as a general rule we define hikikomori as the nonpsychotic phenomenon... it is not uncommon that hikikomori includes schizophrenia before a definite diagnosis is made.*"

Michael Zielenziger notes in his book Shutting Out the Sun that:"*... [Hikikomori] cannot be diagnosed as schizophrenics or mental defectives. They are not depressives or psychotics; nor are they classic agoraphobics, who fear public places but welcome friends in their own homes...*"

Often *hikikomori* starts out as school refusals, or *futōkō* or *tōkōkyohi* in Japanese. Richard Lloyd Parry adds that neither is it: "*...the same as what in Japan is called "school refusal", although inevitably sufferers from hikikomori abandon their educations. Some are teenagers, but most are in their twenties or older...*"

Role of Past and Contemporary Japanese Society

To dispute that social circumstance are a leading origin of psychological diseases in specifically traumatized individuals is not endorsed by modern medicine or science. (A valiant exception is the physician Gabor Mate, M.D.). Yet this thesis is familiar to sociologists. Analysing contemporary Japanese societal transformation provides a

connection for assuming the *hikikomori* experience as a consequence of a long historical process.

Japan was an isolated insular nation until in 1853 United States gunboats under Admiral William Perry "opened" the country to Western domination. Japan was pushed into economic dependence and regime change. With the establishment of the Meiji government in 1868, Japan set out to centralize the imperial government and build a strong military in response to Western humiliations it had suffered, a fate paralleling recent European control of China.

Religious, cultural, and technological change overcame Japan's semi-feudal standards and education. Militarism and rapid social and economic displacement developed, culminating in imperial wars (against Russia, Korea and China) and, eventually, World War II.

The embarrassing defeat of Japan in World War II was compounded by subsequent U.S. occupation and thorough-going dismantling of Japanese establishments. Japan's elites effectively scorned the vestiges of a traditional agrarian economy and its social values to embrace not only industrialization (already dominant since the Meiji) but specifically, capitalism and globalization. Post-World War II children were shunted into a high-stress school system and the populace into industries and administrations. Japan experienced speed, noise, urbanization, population shifts, and characteristic family breakdown. Suburban sprawl and ubiquitous technology became the norm in the crowding islands of Japan.

In 1980's, the feverish economic bubble burst. But there could be no return to the past. Coincidentally, the *hikikomori* phenomenon begins to develop at this time, accelerating in the 1990's.

All authors have noted the unremitting pace of schooling in Japan, rigorous entrance exams beginning before elementary school, high expectations of financial and career success placed on children (especially males) beginning in elementary school, career tracking of youth as early as junior high school/middle school for university versus technical training, 18-hour classroom and study days up to seven days a week, plus bullying, peer pressure, conformity, and burn-out.

As the disparity between parents and children widens, so does the enormous disparity between the myth of hard work for success and the dismal economic and social reality of post-boom Japan.

If men, especially, were driven by a "*manic defence*" in striving for psychological redress after World War II, then post-boom Japan accelerated the relentless pace. For males especially, burning out by high school means no academic or social future.

The dilemma of the *hikikomori* is the initial experience of alienation followed by the psychological but also practical inability to re-enter society.

Zielenziger quotes one mother of a *hikikomori* as saying: *"Hikikomori values the intangibles ... but cannot speak out because there is no place in Japanese society that allows them to. ... A person who challenges, or makes a mistake, or thinks for himself, either leaves Japan or becomes a hikikomori."*

Role of Japanese Education System

The Japanese education system, like those found in China, Singapore and South Korea, puts great demands upon youth. A multitude of expectations, high emphasis on competition, and the rote memorization of facts and figures for the purpose of passing entrance exams into the next tier of education in what could be termed a rigid pass-or-fail ideology induce a high level of stress. Echoing the traditional Confucian values of society, the educational system is still viewed as playing an important part in society's overall productivity and success.

In this social frame, students often face significant pressure from parents and the society in general to conform to its dictates and doctrines. These doctrines, while part of modern Japanese society, are increasingly being rejected by Japanese youth in varying ways such as *hikikomori*, freeter, NEET (Not currently engaged in Employment, Education, or Training), and parasite singles.

Developments in Japanese Alternative Education

In 2001, the Japan Free School Association was established to bring together over 240 "free schools" (*jiyu gakko*), which lie outside of the Education Ministry's jurisdiction and which specialize in teaching kids who have adjustment problems and can't attend a regular school. From 1994, the Education Ministry started recognizing these schools, and today they are teaching more than 130,000 three- to fifteen-year-olds. Thanks to the Education Ministry's recognition, graduates from free schools can now sit for entrance examinations of national universities.

The *ijime* (bullying) problem in Japanese public schools is well known and has resulted in the recent phenomenon of *hikikomori* (stay-at-home) kids. It is estimated that about 150,000 children, out of a primary - middle school age population of approximately 10MM children, skip school more than 30 days a year. While this is only 1.5% of the total and so doesn't sound particularly serious, we should remember that this figure is only for primary and junior high schools. Since senior high school

attendance is not compulsory in Japan (although 90 percent of middle school students continue their education), the numbers of kids cutting classes on a regular basis and for maladjustment reasons is probably much higher.

When Japan Free School Association started in 1995, the problem of truancy and the inability of some children to fit into the rigid Japanese school system were beginning to be recognized by the Education Ministry. Back then, the Association was a trailblazer and fighter and had to overcome resistance by both government regulators as well as families who didn't want to face the problem. The turning point came in the late 90s, when the Education Ministry started to confront the issue of the spiralling number of school truants and realized the necessity for an alternative system. Today things are much better, and teachers at local government-run schools across the nation now willingly refer problem children to free schools.

The Case of NKG (Nihon Gakuin) - Japanese International Institute

A mid-sized but fast-growing player in the field is the Nihon Gakuin (Japan International Institute - NKG for short), based in Kashiwa, Chiba. NKG has about 200 students, children who for emotional or other reasons can't attend standard public schools. The school is run by founder Toshiaki Furui, and currently offers a full curriculum for kids aged 10 years and older.

In order to join NKG, the evaluation starts with a counselling meeting. Accompanied by mom and dad, both student and parents are invited to identify what they want the student to achieve. The objective is to gain a buy-in from all parties, to maximize commitment and the chances of success. Mom might be asked to promise to listen more to the child's fears and problems; dad might be asked to be home earlier and to play catch or help with homework; and, of course, the student commits to come to school regularly and to actually try to improve his or her habits and lifestyle.

From the counselling session, NKG can tell whether the child is simply misunderstood, ipso facto, under pressure, or whether the child suffers from a deeper disorder or psychosis. The temptation, even at free schools, is to turn away kids with deep-seated problems and to send them to a medical specialist. In theory, this sounds reasonable, but unfortunately Japan's capabilities in dealing with childhood psychiatry are not very advanced and heavy medical prescriptions are usually part of the fix. The kids may become more manageable, but can be lost to institutional care in the process.

NKG's approach is to not give up on a child until it is absolutely clear he or she is beyond their help. Toshiaki Furui is inflexible on this point and believes that every child wants to re-engage with life. As a result, NKG's counsellors spend lots of time just

listening to their charges. After being exposed to a good listening partner, Toshiaki Furui reckons almost all the kids who have gone through his school are able to emerge from their shells.

Once at school, kids struggling back to normalcy are given a range of therapies -- most of which revolve around improving the child's communication skills and self-confidence. Music is one popular therapy, since it seems to let kids make the instrument "talk" on their behalf. Another therapy is a hands-on activity - such woodcraft, art, local travel and foreign language study - all things that make children feel that there is something special they can do. These activities are common elements in other free schools around Japan, too.

Although NKG uses counsellors intensively, Toshiaki Furui tells us that in some ways the school has to compromise. Again, he points out that Japan is still sadly lacking in this field and has no national qualifications that recognize counselling as a medical discipline. As a result, Toshiaki Furui draws both on people with a clinical psychology background, and older people without professional training but with extensive community support and youth counselling experience.

Conclusion

Hikikomori is in part a unique social and cultural circumstance of Japanese society, but no observer has perceived *hikikomori* as the transformation of a long history of eremitism characteristic of agrarian, semi-feudal Japan - and the apparent disfiguration of eremitism in *hikkikomori*. It is not difficult to imagine the modern young *hikkikomori* as the hermits, wanderers, and monks of a bygone era. As the mother quoted by Zielenziger noted, *hikkokomori* simply do not fit in the modern age, but cannot go back to the past either.

The great irony in *hikikomori* lost to Western observers is the theme of solitude and isolation in Japanese history, culture, and lore. The ancient Shinto creation myth describes the female deity Amaterasu lost in isolation in the emblematic world of the dead after failing to create a proper life for herself and her mate. She is forever destined to hide her disfigurement. This Japanese archetype culminates in the story of the contemporary Japanese Princess Masako (born in 1963), who lives in seclusion, said to suffer depression but, perhaps, suffering a too-realistic view of her world.

And now, the fate of the Japanese people so historically beset by disaster and tragedy, culminates in the unspoken probability of Japan's destruction by nuclear radiation and the ironic disdain of the West after centuries of hostile attention and exploitation, an entire nation ruefully represented in the *hikikomori*.

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