

## *Autism in Japanese Society*

### **1. Introduction**

#### **Personal Motivation**

I always knew I was different – an octopus swimming in a sea tank of turtles, so to speak. I reacted ‘unexpectedly’ to my surroundings, much to the bewilderment of my teachers. I often felt overwhelmed by interacting with people or dealing with a noisy, unfamiliar environment (cf. National Autistic Society, 2025). I also perceived the world differently from others, processing information in a way that was seen as slow but was often characterised by an intense focus when fascinated by a particular subject (cf. National Autistic Society, 2025). For example, to this day, I am utterly spellbound by geometric shapes. Sometimes, I stop and stare at walls to count their hidden forms – an activity that fills me with a serene and calm sort of joy.

I would not be diagnosed with autism – a lifelong neurodivergent disability (National Autistic Society, 2025) that people are born with (Hull & Mandy, 2019)– until adulthood, and the diagnosis has helped me to navigate challenges in the workplace that come with being neurodiverse such as sensitivity to bright lights, a preference for routine (National Autistic Society, 2025) and overcoming communication difficulties (Carpenter et al., 2019, p. 1). It has also allowed me to participate in organisations like the Autism Hub in Port Talbot<sup>1</sup>, where autistic people can engage in various activities, from watercolouring to board games, under safe and inclusive conditions.

#### **Research Questions**

Considering the points raised above, I am interested in the following research questions:

- How do neurodiverse adults in Japan navigate their day-to-day lives?
- What barriers do they face upon being diagnosed as autistic?
- What measures has Japan implemented to support the neurodiverse community?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nptautismhub.wales>

## 2. Discussion

### Japan's Group Mentality and Its Effects on Neurodiversity

Since Japan's culture relies on fitting in with a group, standing out from the crowd causes people to be ostracised (Davis & Ikeno, 2011) – befitting the saying ‘出る釘は打たれる’, which translates as: ‘The nail that sticks out gets hammered down’. Maintaining harmony, as Human Rights Watch (2019) observes, is viewed as more important than protecting individual rights, even though such actions lead to bullying in places such as schools, with LGBTQ children, for example, afraid of expressing their authentic selves as that would disrupt rigid gender stereotypes and lead to more isolation (p. 3).

More precisely, Markus and Kitayama (1991) state that displaying anything that contradicts the accepted norm is frowned upon, as it violates the social expectation of paying more attention to others than oneself. Such behaviour, they maintain, is typical of *interdependent* cultures—often found in Japan and other East Asian countries—that stand in contrast to *independent* or *individualistic* cultures, which are characteristic of countries like North America. *Independent* cultures focus on people fostering an individual expression of self (p. 224).

Specifically, as Davis and Osamu (2011) claim, Japan upholds a group mentality, with interdependent groups becoming symbols of solidarity and representing one of the underpinning tenets of its modern society. Moreover, such groups create their own rules and codes of behaviour, with communication often occurring non-verbally. Within a group, members usually strive to share the same viewpoint, even if some may privately disagree. Sometimes, the desire to preserve harmony within a group is so strong that it leads to the temptation to commit a crime to uphold its continuous presence (pp. 166-167).

Considering the facts above, Someki et al. (2018) hypothesise that it is understandable that a country like Japan, which emphasises conformity within a community, would attribute more of a stigma to a neurological condition like autism. Moreover, Someki et al. (2018) believe that such a stigma leads Japanese university students, in contrast to American ones, to

maintain social distance from people with autism and be less willing to interact with them, even after undergoing an online training course about the subject matter. Social distancing, as suggested by Someki et al. (p. 2), occurs because students feel uncomfortable around neurodiverse individuals.

Being on the spectrum makes it difficult for individuals living with it to adapt to the unspoken rules of society (p. 3), as they often take things literally and struggle to interpret the feelings or thoughts of others (NHS, 2022). Further symptoms complicating social communication are a perceived indifference to others, a lack of reciprocity, and a high frequency of repeated physical movements (Honda & Yoshinaga, 2024, pp. 23-24).

### **Camouflaging**

Aware of their social isolation, Hull and Mandy (2019) mention that some neurodiverse people—akin to chameleons hiding from predators in the jungle—use camouflaging to fit in with their peers (p. 2); camouflaging is also seen as a response and coping strategy against being perceived as different (Atherton et al., 2023). Additionally, Hull and Mandy (2019) argue that neurodiverse people use it not only to be treated favourably at work or school but also to create a good impression when they want to forge connections with new acquaintances. Several camouflaging strategies – shown in Figure 1 – exist, including compensation, masking, and assimilation (pp. 2 - 3).

According to Hull and Mandy (2019), compensation involves practising smiling in front of a mirror to appear natural-looking, as neurodiverse individuals often struggle with such facial expressions (p. 2). In this case, compensation refers to addressing a difficulty that neurotypicals do not experience, such as maintaining eye contact or not becoming upset when someone touches them unexpectedly (NHS, 2022).

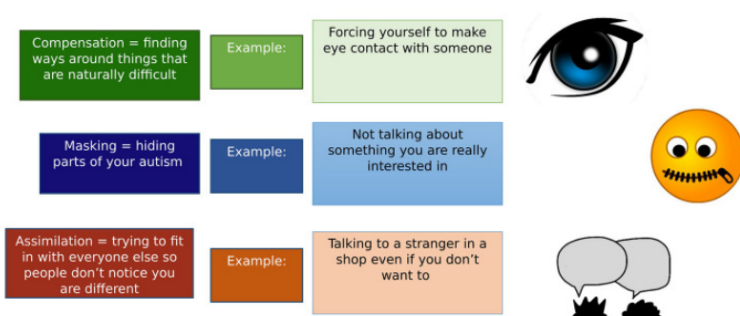


Figure 1

**Figure 1**

Neurodiverse people employ techniques to appear more neurotypical and mask their eccentricities.

*Note.* From Hull and Mandy (2019).

Hull and Mandy clarify that masking is another way people on the spectrum try to hide their autism by emulating the behaviour of other people and, thus, suppressing their own emotions and thoughts. Similarly, assimilation involves trying to fit in with other people by sitting beside the same person in class daily or standing close to peers in a playground without engaging in playful behaviour (pp. 2-3).

While camouflaging can help neurodiverse people pass as neurotypicals and not feel shunned due to their odd behaviour, it, as Atherton et al. (2023) maintain, likewise leads to feelings of fatigue, depression and anxiety (p. 1). In some cases, as Tamura et al. (2024) remark, it progresses to thoughts that develop into suicidal ideation (p. 3), which poses a danger to neurodiverse people, especially when they feel that they cannot live up to a standard that they are not able to understand (cf. National Autistic Society, 2025).

## **Lived Experiences of People with Autism**

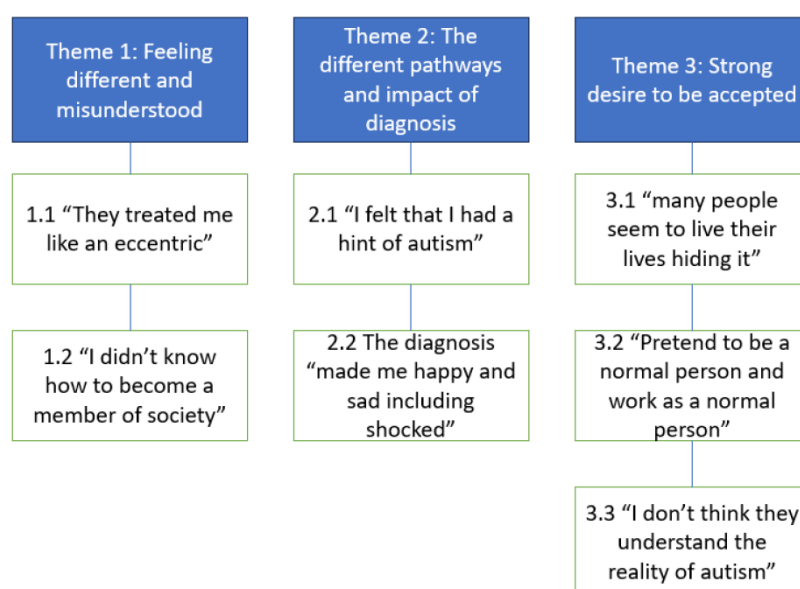
While some recent studies in Japan suggest that autistic adults manage to live independently in Yokohama (Iwasa et al., 2022), it is still unclear whether the stigma associated with being autistic has enabled people in the workplace to be open about their diagnosis. Furthermore, as Nanami Harada et al. (2024) state, autism in Japan is still heavily under-researched, with most studies that directly engage with people on the spectrum coming from the USA or the UK (p. 3). Studies that actively interview neurodiverse participants help clear up misconceptions about autism in the first place (e.g. autistic people not harbouring emotions)

and understand how it manifests in different countries and cultures (cf. Harada et al., 2024, pp. 1-2).

Considering the lack of existing material on the lived experiences of autistic people in Japan, Harada et al. (2024) interviewed seven participants—four women and three men—diagnosed as being autistic in their 20s and 30s. These interviews aimed to capture how these men and women experienced school in their youth, dealt with their workplace environment and managed interpersonal relationships while also trying to gauge whether they had access to support services (p. 8).

During their survey, Harada et al. (2024) uncovered several common themes that all participants shared, with Figure 2 showcasing an overview of these collective issues. The first shared theme centres on being misunderstood and feeling divergent compared to others, with participants treated as eccentric and often experiencing some bullying (p. 10) – a reality that children with autism suffer in Japan experience so severely that they frequently refuse to go to school altogether (McClemont et al., 2020). Others reported having difficulty making friends and being forced to adjust their behaviour to interact with people their age (Harada et al., 2024, pp. 10-11).

**Figure 2**



The participants expressed some shared anxieties and concerns.

*Note.* From Harada et al. (2024).

While all participants were able to find work after finishing their education, they were shocked to discover that the gulf between university life and employment was a challenging transition: working life came with unexpected, unwritten rules and also involved communicating with others, which distressed one interviewee so much that she chose to withdraw from the outside world altogether, becoming a *hikikomori* for two years (Harada et al., 2024, p. 11) - i.e. a condition that leads to severe social distancing and isolation (Doug et al., 2022, p. 167). Despite these hurdles, however, Harada et al. (2024) explain that all participants expressed a desire to work, and a few managed to carve out careers for themselves that did not require much social interaction, such as becoming drivers or working remotely as freelancers (pp. 11-12).

The second common theme, Harada et al. (2024) reveal, is that getting diagnosed with autism changed the lives of the participants in some shape or other, with the emotions following the diagnosis ranging from confusion and sadness at having a disability to relief and a sense of pride; for one interviewee, it was a confirmation that she was no longer alone but part of a larger community. Another participant stated that her hypersensitivity was not, as her family believed, a figment of her imagination but an actual symptom of a neurological condition (pp. 12-13).

As Harada et al. (2024) noted, the last theme the participants commented on was the desire for acceptance. People taking part in this survey reported that family and friends struggled to understand their diagnosis, with some going as far as telling them to hide it, as admitting to autism openly might lead to them being a social pariah. Sadly, one participant divulged that being open about his diagnosis led to the loss of friendships; another participant confessed that she hid her condition for a long time due to not wanting to be blamed for it (pp. 14-15).

### **The Japanese Workplace and Autism**

In the study conducted by Harada et al. (2024), participants stated that they encountered a lack of understanding when it came to autism extending to their workplace, with one of them describing how a doctor advised him to keep his diagnosis a secret, as there were no jobs or special considerations in place for people on the spectrum. Another interviewee stated that,

despite the existence of a law eliminating discrimination in the workplace against people with disabilities, his attempts to be open about his autism were not successful. Rather than offering reasonable adjustments, his employers mandated that he undergo training in the areas where he had trouble so as not to cause trouble for others (pp. 14-15).

Harada et al. (2024) maintain that the study participants reported finding employment difficult because Japanese society finds it challenging to accept deviations from established norms. Nevertheless, one participant was able to procure a job while being open about her condition because she was not overly 'autistic', implying that employers are only willing to accept a disability as long as it is not too disruptive. However, acting like a neurotypical led to burnout for all participants, with some pondering the excessive consumption of alcohol as a coping strategy (pp. 15-17).

Despite the existence of services and medical professionals specialising in autism, interviewees still felt misunderstood, with their condition either being misunderstood or being tried to be fixed. Employers seem reluctant to accommodate those who struggle with communication or are hypersensitive to the point of having a nervous breakdown when overstimulated. Some interviewees stated that Japanese culture was stifling in its conformity and that countries like Canada allowed them to be themselves without requiring them to fit in (pp. 15-17).

Honda and Yoshinaga (2024) state that in Japan, the Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Disabilities has made disabled people's access to employment more accessible and raised the legal proportion that mandates that people with disabilities be in work. Before this act, Tamako Hasegawa (2015) says that employers worked with employment quotes, but the addition of "this new element prohibiting discrimination signal[led] a major turning point" (p. 21).

In the Act to Facilitate the Employment of Persons with Disabilities, Honda and Yoshinaga (2024) describe that "developmental disabilities, including ADHD and ASD, are classified as mental disabilities and are distinguished from physical and intellectual disabilities" (p. 23). In 2021, the number of people with disabilities employed in the private sector was 2.3 %, which indicates that 50% of these companies "have achieved the benchmark of the [legal] proportion" (p. 23). Satellite offices, "often established by organi[s]ations that support

disabled people and provide services to private companies” (p. 24), are one way in which employers try to support and retain disabled workers (p. 24).

### **The *Hattatsu Shōgai* Movement**

A study by Kawakami et al. (2023) shows how mothers with children who have autism often have issues accepting their child's diagnosis, as symptoms take time to develop. Later, these mothers struggle with raising their children, using a trial-and-error method to help their children's social and mental development. As mothers often feel the burden of raising children, they frequently feel helpless due to a lack of support from their husbands and outsiders. Such emotions typically lead to the mother developing a new perspective on the world and an increased understanding of how others interact. In turn, this can benefit the child but leave mothers feeling depressed and worried about their son's or daughter's future welfare (pp. 174-176).

As Junko Teruyama (2009) states, terms related to learning disabilities, such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), are new to Japan, with only some academic articles making a reference to them in the 1980s. However, it was not until the 1990s that the term *hattatsu shōgai*, which stands for developmental disability, became widely used. The term's emergence led the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to conduct a nationwide survey in 2002 to determine how many primary children had special needs. Consequently, in 2007, legislation required all schools to provide specific instructions and resources for children with special needs (p. 299).

However, Junko Teruyama (2009) believes cracks appear underneath the surface despite Japan's shift towards a more favourable attitude towards people with diverse needs. In particular, the *hattatsu shōgai* movement, led by mothers with children who have neurological disabilities, criticises educational institutions' inflexible and rigid stance towards providing accommodation for children with special needs, favouring a highly centralised system over enhancing a child's individual needs (pp. 299 - 300).

In the 1980s, as Teruyama (2009) explains, MEXT started favouring a more individualistic approach towards teaching children (*kosei*), which led parents of children living with the *hattatsu shōgai* to believe that children with disabilities would lead to more favourable



treatment. In this sense, as shown in Figure 3, children with autism are not treated as outsiders but rather have their strengths and weaknesses juxtaposed against each other to showcase that the education system should help them strengthen their existing talents rather than focusing on developing a well-rounded individual (pp. 300 - 301).

Figure 3



In the *hattatsu shōgai* movement, children with neurological disorders are depicted as individuals with strengths and weaknesses.

*Note.* From Teruyama (2009).

Instead, Junko Teruyama (2009) suggests this movement seems to determine that having autistic traits is something trivial that can be treated as simply as impaired eyesight, with the emphasis placed instead on respecting the person's differences and enabling them to make the best of their lives by playing to their strengths. Thus, this breaks tradition with other movements associated with disabilities that paint a more pessimistic picture – and, as Teruyama hints at, the *hattatsu shōgai* movement downplays some of the more severe traits related to developmental disabilities, such as mental disorders (pp. 300 - 301).

Teruyama (2009) makes it explicit that the medical reality often paints a more dire portrait of people with *hattatsu shōgai*, particularly adults who suffer from secondary symptoms associated with it, such as social isolation, alcoholism and other side effects that come from a

lack of self-esteem and the daily stigma of living with a disability. Advocates of the *hattatsu shōgai* movement argue that these adults are victims of having been diagnosed too late, with early intervention having rendered the issues above avoidable. However, opponents of the movement say that too much psychiatric intervention leads to children already being ostracised by putting their differences on display and ignoring how differences can manifest in various ways without the need to label them medically (pp. 301-302).

### **3. Conclusion**

While countries like the UK might have arguably better support for people with autism, it is still tricky for neurodiverse employees to adjust to an office environment that lacks quiet spaces and flexible working arrangements (cf. Wassmer, 2024). Often, employers fail to provide adequate support and promote a culture that sustains ableism, leading to discrimination and bullying (Fire Brigades Union, 2024, p. 6). Furthermore, employers' lack of understanding when it comes to neurodiversity leads them to maintain policies and procedures that are detrimental to people with autism (Fire Brigades Union, 2024, p. 6).

In Japan, despite measures introduced to facilitate employment with neurodiversity (cf. Honda & Yoshinaga), society -- due to its focus on group mentality -- still makes it difficult for people with autism to feel comfortable in their own skin due to a combination of wanting to fit in and people misunderstanding their diagnosis (cf. Harada et al., 2024). Thus, while Japan still needs to invest more time and research (cf. Harada et al., 2024) to understand the needs of neurodiverse individuals better, it becomes clear that the Japanese -- and other societies as a whole -- need to develop more empathy and understanding regarding autism. Empathy and understanding would benefit not only the autistic community but society, as they would foster respect and collaboration rather than division.

(3000 words.)

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