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Hikikomori: A Survey of Hyperspace Hermitage in Japan

> *"T.M. is a 19-year-old Japanese who lives with his middle-class parents in a two-bedroom urban apartment. For the last two years he has hardly ever left his room, spending 23 hours a day behind its closed door. He eats food prepared by his mother who leaves trays outside his bedroom. He sleeps all day, then awakes in the evening to spend his time surfing the internet, chatting on online bulletin boards, reading manga, and playing video games."* (Teo 2009)

The phenomenon of *hikikomori* has become increasingly prevalent in literature about Japan in recent decades. Literally translated as 'turning inward', and more specifically described as acute social withdrawal, the term hikikomori can refer to both subjects with the disorder as well as the phenomenon in general. While there is disagreement about exact criteria, a suitable proxy is a diagnostic list released in 2003 by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare – "1) a lifestyle centered at home; 2) no interest or willingness to attend school or work; 3) symptom duration of at least six months; 4) schizophrenia, mental retardation or other mental disorders have been excluded; 5) among those with no interest or willingness to attend school or work, those who maintain personal relationships (e.g., friendships) have been excluded" (Teo & Gaw 2010). Distinctly Japanese but increasingly recognizable in the west, hikikomori may offer a premonition of the future as "acute withdrawal may become widespread within the advanced nations" (Furlong 2008, 310).

Generally defined by the attribute of extreme social isolation and typically manifesting initially during adolescence, there are only loose estimates for the prevalence of the syndrome in Japan. A 2008 survey carried out in twelve cities projected a prevalence of 0.9-3.8%, or somewhere between 1.2 and 4.9 million people (Teo & Gaw 2010). Others however suggest that even 1% of the general population may be generous (Furlong 2008, 311). The disorder is mostly seen in young men, with estimates varying from 53-80% of the total phenomenon (Furlong 2008, 312), and placing the mean duration of symptoms at about five years, though with high variance – some report their experience as having lasted between less than one year, and others more than ten (Koyama 2010, 70). The lengths tend to skew towards the lower end, however, with more than half reporting a duration of 6-11 months (Koyama 2010, 71). Hikikomori also had a high prevalence of comorbid conditions. One study found that nearly a third suffered from pervasive development disorder, while another 23% had a personality disorder, and 26% had an anxiety disorder (Teo & Gaw 2010). Complicating matters is the tendency to stigmatize mental illness that is common in Japan – the term ‘hikikomori’ itself is frequently employed euphemistically in place of clinical terms like clinical depression or schizophrenia, both bearing heavy social burdens for those with their labels. Additionally, doctors may use it in place of a formal diagnosis of a severe condition, as this stigma carries even to their practice, characterized as “avoid[ing] diagnosing major psychopathology to the extent that it is possible” (Teo & Gaw 2010). It is important to note, however, that hikikomori is considered a distinct phenomenon, and that the withdrawal

associated with it is not considered to have been caused by any of the conditions that the diagnosed subject may hold concurrently.

Furlong argues that hikikomori are a heterogeneous group and proposes at least five subcategories that they tend to fall into (Furlong 2008, 321). The first are the psychologically impaired, those who qualify for formal psychiatric diagnoses and treatment. The second is *otaku*, maladjusted nerds (the term literally translates as 'home', as in 'homebound') who famously devote their energies to anime, manga, or similar consumer popular culture fixations. Third are those participating in alternative scenes, such as youth subcultures. Those falling under this category may have their own social lives and interpersonal relationships, but fall by the wayside of socially acceptable life paths and seek alternatives. The fourth group are 'the lonely,' those who would probably be considered most archetypically representative of the hikikomori phenomenon, though he notes that they may be actively addressing their isolation by seeking employment and friendship. Fifth are what Furlong terms 'anxious travelers,' young people who have gone astray at transitional periods in their lives. Those in this group are acutely aware of the deep gravity of "operating in a system that offers few second chances" and may fear that they have missed the appropriate opportunities or courses of action they could have taken (Furlong 2008, 322). Triggers for this situation vary wildly, with examples ranging from bullying in middle school to dropping out of elite universities for no obvious reason despite strong performance (Furlong 2008, 312).

Hikikomori as a phenomenon has seen its prevalence both in numbers of afflicted and in terms of cultural awareness surge beginning in the 1990s. Antecedent conditions, however, have been described in clinical literature in the decades leading up. Y. Kasahara described *taikyaku shinkeishou*, or 'withdrawal neurosis' as early as 1978 (Kasahara 1978). In 1986, Margaret Lock surveyed 'school refusal syndrome' in case studies of Japanese students (Lock 1986). Lock notes that even at this early period, mass media had drawn attention to the issue. She describes three teenage boys, aged twelve, fifteen and sixteen, who to varying degrees have isolated themselves from their peers and withdrawn from school. As commonly reported in later cases, none of the boys seemed especially maladjusted prior to the onset of symptoms, and seemed only to have faced minor adjustment issues, or at worst bullying from other children. Additionally, Kleinknecht et al. describe *taijin kyofusho*, a Japanese culture-bound syndrome associated with intense shame stemming from a perceived abnormality, such as a body odor or physical attribute, leading to anxiety intensely amplified by a collectivist cultural frame of reference that can fiercely discourage individual deviation from the group (Kleinknecht et al. 1997).

The question has been raised repeatedly in the literature of whether hikikomori qualifies as a culture-bound syndrome – a collection of manifestations or symptoms that is confined to a particular culture. Teo & Gaw posit that "hikikomori may be an amplifcation of Japanese-specific concerns about the quality and quantity of one's social interactions" (Teo & Gaw 2010), especially with regards to behaviors surrounding social shame. Several studies

have tried to correlate the development of hikikomori with dysfunctional childhood relationships with parents, especially with regards to insecure or anxious attachment disorders. Questions of causality have been raised with regards to characteristically Japanese parenting techniques termed *mushi*, which are meant to encourage independence in young children by isolating them from the parent, or by simulating abandonment, e.g. by locking the child out of the home (Krieg 2011, 64). Contrary but particularly prominent is the accusation of enabling parents, "who are seen as pandering to the parasitical tendencies of the younger generation" (Furlong 2008, 310). Sociological surveys of the phenomenon have drawn attention to the Confucian mores of the Japanese family system as ultimately responsible. Hikikomori seems to largely be constrained to Japan in the literature, but at least two cases have been cited elsewhere. Teo & Gaw call attention to cases in Oman and Spain (Teo & Gaw 2010).

Perhaps most promising in terms of explaining the time-frame of the emergence of hikikomori is "anomie that can be linked to a breakdown in opportunity structures," particularly as those structures relate to the economic downturn of the 1990s in Japan (Furlong 2008, 310). The Japanese labor market is highly stratified, with competition for coveted *sarariman* ('salaryman') positions as the primary goal of education achievement, particularly for males. Below these positions are irregular or temporary workers with little job security and much lower pay. The shrinking number of high-quality careers since 1990 and a work culture that has yet to develop much in the way of capacity for second chances for adrift young people

cause “the preconditions for a classic situation of anomie [to be] all present” (Furlong 2008, 320). The grinding breakdown of what may be analogously be understood as something along the lines of ‘the Japanese dream’ has contributed greatly to this situation. This amplifies the already potentially intense anxiety of modern transitional periods, characterized as “particularly conducive to forms of withdrawal” for young people “struggling to re-construct identities as young adults” (Furlong 2008, 315).

The phenomenon has also been associated in Japan’s public imagination with the potential for violence, after several high profiles cases: one involving a young man who took a bus hostage using knives and killed one passenger after a fifteen hours standoff in 2000, another involving a young man who stabbed seven to death in Tokyo’s fabled Akihabara neighborhood in 2008 (Rizzio 2016). Ironically, in the latter case (known as the ‘Akihabara Massacre’) the perpetrator did not seem to meet most of the criteria of hikikomori, but had complained in internet postings about his lack of friends and feelings of worthlessness. There seems to be little to suggest that hikikomori are particularly outwardly violent, as a handful of high-profile incidents across millions of potential cases indicate. However, a further consideration is that up to one in five admitted to violent behavior in a 2003 survey by the Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare, though this tends to be confined inside the home (Teo 2009).

Treatment options are immature and lack rigorous testing. One promising potential program is support groups aimed at hikikomori, with the goal of slowly adjusting them to

increased social activity and eventual reintegration. The activities may be deemed as a bit like herding cats – emphasis is placed on "avoid[ing] labels… avoiding categorizing individual's role identity… and avoid[ing] rigid scheduling of activity" (Teo 2009). A pilot program experienced some success with this model, eventually seeing four of ten patients return to school or work. Another method of treatment has been surrogate sibling programs. One non-profit named New Start sees young workers sent into the homes of the hikikomori in order to establish relationships with the hope of eventually drawing them out. This is particularly suited to the Japanese context, where many children have no siblings. The workers aim to draw the hikikomori out over the course of a six month program, though it is not uncommon to initially meet a refusal even to communicate. New Start also offers a dormitory-style living arrangement in order to teach social skills they may have missed out on, for more advanced clients. There is however a major potential drawback to the surrogate sibling program – some hikikomori have formed deep, sometimes romantic attachments to their surrogates, and suffer profoundly with their inevitable rejection (Furlong 2008, 318).

The rise in popular awareness of hikikomori has been accompanied by representations in popular media, particularly anime, a popular fixation among hikikomori themselves. One 2006 program, *Welcome to the N.H.K.!* centers on characters who are themselves hikikomori and lament their isolation. The protagonist comes to the conclusion that the NHK television station is a sinister conspiracy to create hikikomori by broadcasting anime, in order to generate outcasts for the rest of society to look down upon. Another recent anime, *The*

Tatami Galaxy, aired in 2010 and features an extended allegory for the protagonist's struggle to break out of his hikikomori lifestyle in college, itself drawn from the experiences of its author. The archetype of hikikomori is heavily recycled motif in contemporary anime, generally considered a metatextual critical commentary on consumerism-driven anime culture in Japan.

The concept of hikikomori is a perhaps to easy to confine to a mere diagnostic criteria or strange culture-bound syndrome. Beyond these labels there is a deeper context of Japanese cultural practices, the smothered expectations of young men, and the social detritus cast aside as the Japanese tiger falters in its long recession. As connectivity accelerates, linking disparate individuals as it fuels anomie and subverts traditional social structures, we in the west should not be surprised if we find our young people following the paths forged by the hikikomori in the wake of recessions, globalized industrial outsourcing, and a low-security job markets in many regions. We may look for lessons to preempt these challenges by examining the previous two and a half decades of scrutiny by social scientists, clinicians and media with regards to the hikikomori.

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