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A Review of Social and Cultural Causes of Hikikomori: Collectivism in Japan

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ABSTRACT

The Hikikomori phenomenon, first observed in 1970s Japan, is particularly characterized by severe social withdrawal and a refusal for social interpersonal relationships. The hikikomori phenomenon was first observed in the 1970s in Japan and started to boost after the collapse of the 1990s bubble economy, which dealt a blow to the public confidence of adults and adolescents. Hikikomori was widely accepted as a cultural syndrome unique to Japan, where the deeply rooted collectivist values seem to leave room for the prevalence of social withdrawal. Despite the fact that an increasing number of cross-country studies on the global prevalence of hikikomori are helping scholars better understand the relationship between the formation of hikikomori groups and domestic values in one country, more detailed and embedded investigations focused on Japanese culture are needed to draw a macroscopic analysis on the nature of hikikomori and its prevalence in Japan. This review aims to provide basic information for the rationale causes of the hikikomori phenomenon in social and cultural contexts. The hikikomori phenomenon will be assessed in relation to Japan's culture-specific syndrome, including collectivist values, social ostracism, and peer rejection. This review also includes the effect of the economy collapsing on the social expectation of Japanese youths during the 1990s; and how the economic recession leads to hikikomori from the perspective of masculine hegemony adherents in Japanese culture. The prevalence of the Hikikomori phenomenon among Japanese youths is analyzed, and this involves not uncommon school bullying, peer rejection, and familial ignorance due to the social stigma related to Japanese cultural values of collectivism.

Keywords: *Hikikomori, Collectivism, Conformity, the Lost Decades, Masculinity, Social ostracism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Japanese psychologist Yoshimi Kasahara first studied the hikikomori phenomenon in 1978, when he referred to the phenomenon as 'withdrawal neurosis' and characterized it by severe social withdrawal and unwillingness of individuals engaging in any social activity[1]. The word "hikikomori" has been widely used since the late 1980s, originating from two separate Japanese words: 'to pull back' ['hiku'] and 'withdrawing' ['komoru']. According to the figure given by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2007, more than 14,000 cases were being regarded as hikikomori, and the figure was greatly underestimated as it only includes individuals who reported to health and welfare centers[2].

Groups that are similar to hikikomori include "parasite singles" and "NEETs." However, according to researcher Lars Nesser, the latter are considered problems, while hikikomori is thought "useless, mentally unstable, and potentially dangerous." [3]. Hikikomori groups are featured by extreme social withdrawal, but they are also diagnosed with other mental illnesses, including depressive disorders like dysthymia, social anxiety disorder, and other negative symptoms, such as prototypical fear of making eye contact [4] [5]. Being a hikikomori could be the source of social stigma and the rationale for tension in family relationships. Additionally, it is an alarming phenomenon as the nature of hikikomori implies a series of long-term problems, such as labour shortages and an increasing number of people living relying upon one another's welfare and familiar wealth.

This review aims to make a conclusion on how to explain the hikikomori phenomenon in terms of Japanese collectivist values. The review looks through various qualitative studies on Japanese culture, and the review is able to provide a microscopic overview of correlations between hikikomori, and Japan's collectivism, including the notion of community, group acceptance and identity.

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2. THE NORMS AND VALUES IN COLLECTIVIST JAPAN

2.1. Cultural tightness

A general overview of Japan's collectivist culture is required to explain the hikikomori phenomenon based on the Japanese social context. Sociologist Émile Durkheim describes collectivist societies as having a strong sense of belonging to a community as well as collectivistic social values that expect individuals to prioritize society's collectivistic interests. Sociologist Durkheim suggests that individuals behave to meet their obligations in society and their extended family. For example, starting from the 1980s, the Japanese experience of industrialization stressed the importance of a job for life with the same company. Employees were encouraged to view the companies and their workmates as part of a more prominent extended family, and consequently, the idea of obligation to contribute to and sacrifice for the group was emphasized as critical cultural values. As a typical collectivist country, Japan is characterized by cultural homogeneousness and tightness and similar norms and values of in-groups. Dissimilar norms are seen as deviance, and in-groups would exclude members with different norms [6]. Triandis gave a comparison between the collectivist culture in Japan and the individualist culture in the USA and found that Their teachers often criticized Japanese children for being 'inappropriate' after they had finished a period of residence in the West [6]. The criticized behaviour included bringing Western food instead of Japanese food to the lunch [6]. Triandis explains that deviances from in-group norms are open and tolerated in Western culture, in which societies place more values on individualism, while deviations from normative behaviour are largely deterred and criticized in collectivist cultures like Japan. Thus, Japanese culture is an example of so-called 'tight' culture.

2.2 Japanese's identity: Public selves driven by social expectations

In addition, whether people are acting in accepted ways is determined by society, people's public selves (tatemae) and their private self (honne) could be very different in Japanese culture, meaning that people may intentionally socialized their identity in the way that caters for the expectation of society when they are in public. In the United States, there is a virtue of not being a hypocrite, so keeping public and private consistent is encouraged (Doi, 1989). More specifically, Triandis argued that people are expected to behave in line with their groups and try to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships [7]. The behaviours which are in favour of self-enhancement——such as prioritising personal achievements and ambitions——will be stigmatised as 'selfish' or 'irresponsible.' Individuals' personalities and traits are unclear and changeable, as they are inclined to shape their "public selves" to fit the social expectation [7].

2.3. Cultural characteristics of Japanese culture using Hofstede's model

Hofstede's (1980) study of work-related values among employees of multinational corporations in 53 counties and regions helped him to identify the four main dimensions of a nation's culture in his work in 1982: 1) Power distance, 2) Individualism vs. Collectivism, 3) Level of uncertainty avoidance and 4) Masculinity and Femininity. Ng et al. (1982) collected data from 9 Asian and Pacific countries using the Rokeach Value Survey. A correlation reanalysis was done by Hofstede for the overlapping countries in two studies, and the result shows that Hofstede's defined cultural dimensions could be identified in the Ng et al. as well[8]. According to Hofstede, the cultural dimension of power distance refers to "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations accept that power is distributed unequally." The dimension of Individualism/Collectivism refers to whether the cultural values emphasize more on prioritization of groups' interest, conformity, and sense of belonging, or prioritization of personal interest, self-achievements, and self-enhancement. The dimension of Uncertainty avoidance is defined as "the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations, and have created beliefs and institutions that try to acid theses." The dimension of Masculinity/Femininity refers to whether the dominant values in society are money and things (masculine values) or caring for others and the quality of life (feminine values)[8].

According to Hofstede's study (1980)[8], Japan is one of the most uncertainty avoidance countries with a high score of 92. Kim Rosa's (2019) interpretation of Uncertainty Avoiding suggests that uncertainty avoiding cultures would have a set of rules expected to be adhered to by members of society[2]. This interpretation correlates with the results of the comparison of Ng et al.'s study and Hofstede's study, which suggests that the quality of "polite" and "obedient" is emphasised when it comes to uncertainty avoidance. Additionally, Japan is defined as a culture with high power distance and high masculinity (Hofstede, 1980). The correlation analysis shows that in high power distance cultures, "parents put a high value on children's obedience" and "students put a high value on conformity" [8]. With a Masculinity score of 95, the essential proofs of having masculinity include competitions: children's competition in sports

and employees' competition in the workplace; and whether male works could become the ideal "salaryman."

2.4 Discussion

For all studies mentioned above, it is indicated that Japan is characterized by a 'tight' collectivist culture, characterized by high power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance, emphasizing the values of "obedient" and "polite." A brief description of Japanese culture would help explain the relationship between the hikikomori phenomenon and the domestic values adhered to Japanese culture.

3. RATIONALE CAUSE OF HIKIKOMORI WITH CULTURAL COLLECTIVIST EXPLANATIONS

3.1 The bubble economy in the 1990s and "the lost decades": pessimism of adults and adolescents

The Plaza Accord signed in 1985 fuelled the price stagnation of the Japanese Yen as its value was doubled against the dollar's value in the forex exchange market between 1985 and 1987. This appreciation dealt a blow to Japan's balance of payment with reduced exports. Japan's solution of increasing domestic demand through lowering loans and interest rates led to an inflating land and stock market price during the 1980s. The bursting of the price bubble started with the government's sharp policy of raising the inter-bank lending rate, which led to overly-leveraged banks and insolvent firms. In the words of Paul Krugman, the Japanese economy was captured in "the liquidity trap" as the government attempting to stimulate the economic growth through decreasing the interest rate in further war ineffective as the interest rate was already unprecedentedly low, below 1%. The government should take responsibility for their poor performance that has led to the missing of opportunity to reform [9]. The burst of the bubble economy, followed by an economic recession, is blamed for the difficulties of new graduates to find a permanent job between the late 1990s and early 2000s. A wave of anxiety and pessimism rapidly pervaded Japanese society: youth employments have risen, the average unemployment rate for males under the age of 25 increased about 10%, and the annual unemployment rate has surpassed that of the USA[2]. A documentary conducted by BBC called A Story of Love and Hate tells the Japanese's despair for the future and the pessimism. Ramsey Mahmoud Ismail notes that "latent issues such as suicide, depression, hikikomori, long-brewing but hidden behind the veil of economic success, only needed to come to the fore." The social images of suffering youth also collapsed under social expectations [10]. Youths are described as "the lost generations" with crippled hopes and future (Anne Allison), and job-hopping Japanese are called "freeters" [2], who were also referred to "NEETs" as they were "Not in Education, Employment or Training" [11], or "parasite singles" as most of them lived with their parents and being unmarried. The economic recession correlated with increasing unemployment and low confidence and expectation for the future, resonating with the hikikomori phenomenon as "Japanese youth were publicly stigmatised for not finding a job and the prospect of a "no-future"

3.2 Explain adults Hikikomori in terms of the masculine identity of the ideal "salaryman"

In the previous part, it has been mentioned that Japan is characterized by deep-rooted masculinity [8], leading to male hegemony penetrating the Japanese culture and society. Connell (1995) 's theory of hegemonic masculinity gives four dimensions of hegemonic masculinity: 1) power relations, which include the dominance of men mirrored by the oppression of women; 2) production relations, or the division of labour according to genders (men are supposed to work and earn money outside, while women should stay at home and be responsible for housework); 3) emotional relations and 4) symbolic relations. [12]

Masculinity could be concretised by becoming a salaryman, as it was seen as the primary hegemonic model of masculinity [13][14]. Salarymen are valued due to their benefit, which could ensure salarymen job security up until retirement, and so is as with high working stability and ability to support families. However, the notion of salaryman changed during the bubble economy years. Companies suffered from loans, and excessive workers faced the risk of having layoffs. There were reductions in working benefits and the decline of lifetime employment, signing a loss in salarymen's power to be the family's breadwinner [14]. Therefore, the important role of salarymen—the supporter of the family—was weakened. In response to such an insecure masculine image, workers worked harder to live up to the expectation of the salaryman [14]. The prevalence of the hikikomori phenomenon, which started widely spreading in the 1990s, was seen "as a rejection of salaryman masculinity, trading a social life at the workplace for one that is anti-social and devoid of responsibility [14].

3.3. Children and Adolescents hikikomori: peer rejection, bullying and hands-off approach of parents led to failed socialisation of identity

Young children, teenagers, and adolescents who have become Hikikomori in their later life usually share a similar experience of social ostracism and isolation. According to Triandis, bullying usually occurs when

someone does not “fit in.”[7] Victims could be bullied out of physical, racial, linguistic, ethnic, and other reasons [15], or simply being too fat, too shy, and too good at sports or music. According to Zielenziger, “in 1996, 75.000 junior high school students—roughly 1.65 percent o students—had skipped thirty days or more of class to avoid bullying [176]. In 2005, this number increased to an alarming 2 percent for students who refused to go to school entirely”[2] [176].

As Japan has been seen as a society with a high level of cultural tightness, psychologist Imai (1990) found out values that are taught to students pertained to “interpersonal harmony, rule compliant, and self-sacrifice.” Conformity is thought more important than independence, and divergence from the domestic values and norms are disfavoured. This could echo a Japanese custom during the 19th century, that samurai were allowed to kill lower-status people if their behaviour was suspected to be “out of the ordinary” [17]. Group acceptance, thus, is essential for the socialization of young Japanese as they need to gain a sense of belonging and commitment from their collective identity in social groups. Being bullied and isolated by groups means the failure of entering the socialization process with peers, and more importantly, it fails bullied students’ social function of being a part of the group. This would lead to severe emotional trauma, mental disease, and unwillingness and inability to establish social interpersonal relationships, and could be eventually developed into the tendency of social avoidance—the Hikikomori hidden behaviour.

Based on what has been discussed above, bullying, peer rejection, and social ostracism could directly lead to students’ feelings of isolation and social withdrawal behaviour, while scholars contend that familiar ignorance of bullied students’ plights also plays an essential role in promoting and deteriorating social withdrawal behaviour. As Rahardjo notes that, ‘parents of Hikikomori face deep shame because of the Japanese social stigma of standing out [14]. Seeking help would mean to publicize their action to their neighbours and friends…they will hide their child in their home, as is pretending that problems do not exist.’ He explains that the negligence of both mothers and fathers exists in hikikomori households, albeit to a varying degree. There is a lack of intimate expression of love between family members as the figure of ‘father’ is often covered by the figure of ‘breadwinner’ and ‘salaryman.’ Therefore, it is rare to see a family standing out for their children, who suffer from school bullying and a slight feeling of belonging.

3.4 Alternative explanation: Hikikomori is a form of active rebellion

Rahardjo (2013) argues that the hikikomori phenomenon could be interpreted as a form of rebellion against the Japanese traditional culture and the social expectation, instead of a response to social exclusion and a weakened masculine image[14]. Adult Hikikomori represents a rejection of the ideal salaryman masculinity and is devoid of responsibilities, while young Hikikomori may symbolize their rejection of the societal expectation from peer groups. Hikikomori is a “mute resistance” towards social conformity and other pressures in society[18].

4. CONCLUSION

The review demonstrated socially acceptable behaviors in Japanese culture. It can be argued that the occurrence of hikikomori symbols a resistance to social pressures given by masculine identity and the recognition of peer groups, or it is an indication of passive defeat by these social pressure. The social and cultural causes of the hikikomori phenomenon analyzed in this review all correlate to one common rationale: a set of values and norms based on collectivist culture. However, this review is largely based on qualitative studies and sociological materials, lacking a systematic collection of data that could be used to justify the validity of sociological theories on Hikikomori. Therefore, the extent of correlations between hikikomori prevalence and cultural-bound syndrome in Japan needs to be further investigated with more statistical data and quantitative research. Within Japan’s collectivist culture being thought of as a rational explanation of hikikomori, future papers could focus on the relationship between the hikikomori phenomenon and the dominant culture in other countries, and produce quantitative cross-countries studies.

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