

**Between Cultural Phenomenon and Mental Disorder
The Social Withdrawal in Japan**

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Summary

The main purpose of this article is not to raise some transient interest in the mysterious issue of social withdrawal in Japan. The explicit mission expressed in this text is to reveal significant affiliations or rather deep inveteracy, or, better still, enracinement of psychiatry in culture, with special attention to the realm of ethics and the context of values. The unique phenomena of mental (social) crises within a certain society (culture) are the litmus paper or rather the touchstone of transitions of values' hierarchy in the culture.

Key words: social withdrawal, cultural phenomenon, Japan

1. Introduction

The history of psychiatry knows very well many examples of mental disorders rooted in specific culture realm. It is said that a concrete culture can entail various psychical traumas, phobias and other specific symptoms of disordered behavior. Those symptoms are classified into better or worse structures of the DSM or ICD systems. Then concrete psychiatric nosological entities can be named and still later cured. The primary feature of a classification is its arbitrariness. However, when some symptoms encompass a large, specific group, bounded by cultural ties, then oftentimes the wide expression “cultural phenomenon” is used. And such a situation occurred in the case of social withdrawal in Japan, known under the “label” *Hikikomori* (引きこもり).

2. Exploring the “Label”

The title of this article is: “Between cultural phenomenon and mental disorder”. The paradox of these words is embedded in the point that it is not so important whether discussed subject is a mental disorder or a cultural phenomenon. Under the persiflage of expression, which I threw in the title, lies a very essential question, uneasy in its nature – what is wrong with concrete person and community to which that person belongs? But we have already coined a label. And exactly what can be done and what should be done is to explore the *Hikikomori* label and what is hidden behind it. Then let me try to unmask this puzzling issue.

Although the problem was and still is very serious, the reflection of its intricacy was strongly exaggerated by the media turmoil. Newspapers (mainly newspapers in English) provided some

shocking news. Allegedly one million of young boys/men lock themselves in their rooms and refuse to participate in everyday life in their family, school, job, local community and society in general [1]. However, it is better not to believe in such superficial data provided by the media.

However, it has to be acknowledged that it is difficult to find reliable and authoritative data due to the nimbus of taboo and shame which shrouded the families affected by this problem. Kawakami faced such a difficulty while researching the number of socially withdrawn individuals among families in selected Japanese prefectures (Kagoshima, Nagasaki, Okayama) [2].

In 2000 the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan began efforts toward preventing the phenomenon of social withdrawal by establishing a special research group [3]. Japanese researchers started to exhort parents to change attitudes and to overcome deeply entrenched shame [4]. A variety of special brochures started to be issued to broaden the awareness of lay people concerned by this phenomenon [5].

And here we are getting on to the content of the *Hikikomori* label. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan, a socially withdrawn person is an individual who, for various reasons, lost the chance to participate in various social activities. Such a person does not have their own living place, but continues to live with their parents, and does not attend neither to school, nor to work [6].

However, it is very crucial to note that in published materials and brochures it was expressed that *Hikikomori* is not a sort of mental disorder, but a kind of social phenomenon [7]. Doctor Tamaki Saito, an expert in the case of *Hikikomori*, coined his own definition, according to which this term

denotes people (mainly young boys or men whose age ranges from teens to 30s) who are withdrawn from society for at least half of year, they isolate from outside world by closing themselves in their rooms; their behavior might include acts of violence toward family members and other people; they refuse to participate in any social activities. And, as I stressed above, the primary cause of such behavior is not a mental disorder [8]. Quite similar definitions were proposed by Isobe [9] and Yamada [10].

In Japan there are also some opinions, according to which *Hikikomori* was classified as a manifestation of *Amae*, a sort of “sweet dependence” on others, mainly on the parents (mother), the closest family [11]. Some theories mention the extended period of psychosocial moratorium. Even there some voice can be heard that this is only a personal problem of certain families in which parents do not know how to properly upbringing their lazy children to be mature and responsible.

There are many theories, scientific and quasi-scientific, as the label of *Hikikomori* is so wide, and it is a very dangerous point of this phenomenon. After preliminary attempts to explore existing definitions, it is high time we moved forward this investigation and started to search in the realm of potential causes.

3. “Where Does the Rub Lie?” - The Causes

In seeking the potential causes of social withdrawal we should analyze three main realms: the perspective of a person, family and society. The scope of these spheres can allow us to realize a more accurate view of *Hikikomori*.

3.1. Perspective of a Person

Social withdrawal in Japan occurs mainly among boys, (83,7% of reported cases) [12]. This situation is strictly connected with traditional duties and obligations imposed on men. The honor and future of a family depends on the male, and it is not an empty truism, but natural consequence of the traditional family model in Japan. Failure men do not have a possibility to provide for their own family, cannot find a job and it is the main cause for feeling social shame. Great obligations are imposed on the first son. It is observed that many firstborn sons are afflicted by the phenomenon of social withdrawal. Such situations cannot be explained by theories that parents lack experience in fostering the first child [13]. It happens due to still present relic of the primogeniture rules. The pressure and strict demands burdening the shoulders of the firstborn son are significant. He must take care of his old parents, siblings and conduct memorial ceremonies of family ancestors. Such tasks and pressures leave deep trace in the psyche [14]. Kids are prepared for

their social roles since their early childhood - in kindergartens and all levels of school education. Young boys are growing up in the competitive atmosphere and are pressured to achieve success. It can be felt on each level of education, as well as in the job market. In such situations they often escape from society. However, the age of deepest crises is the adolescence. The *Hikikomori* phenomenon most frequently occurs at that age. In such case, what happens in the family? How does the *Hikikomori* phenomenon affect their life? Let me reassess this issue.

3.2. Perspective of a Family

When we talk about the families in Japan we cannot pass over the fact of fatherly absence in the process of raising children. Almost all of the duties concerned in children education and fostering are in the responsibility of mothers and teachers at school. A man has to devote his time and efforts to his job, he identifies with the work he does. That is why in Japan in the traditional family model it is the woman that takes care of the household [15]. Children are involved in the educational system. And this is the beginning of a vicious circle: they withdraw from family life because they do not have much time for such contact, and following their withdrawal they lose the ability to build such relationships in the future. They become more and more withdrawn. In such a situation children do not know how to communicate with their closest ones, their relationships grow weaker, they are gradually losing the ability to maintain social contacts, to manage with conflicts, emotions and all possible difficult situations in social life [10,16]. That is how the causes are mixed with the results. However, first germs of the problem rise and can be seen in the family realm.

Families in Japan faced undeniable crisis which must be overcome. Some Japanese specialists advise not to search for the reasons of the family conflict. Seeking the guilty is not the best method, and it can only escalate the ongoing conflict [16]. It is important to find the solution in the present, very hard situation of the withdrawn person [17]. It is not always beneficial to penetrate painful past.

This special phenomenon is only a tip of the iceberg, and draws attention to the deep crisis which occurred in the Japanese society. The harmony (*Wa*), which is the first rule and the essential kernel of interpersonal relations, was disturbed. The most important matter for a person, particularly in Japanese context, is their interpersonal bounds with their community. In Japan the person is defined by their relations with the community, then why the individual started to destroy their reference system? Let me take an inferential walk to the realm of this society.

3.3. Perspective of a Society

In the last century Japanese society faced great transition. However, the essence of this transition consisted predominantly in processes of active assimilation of foreign values, ideas, and thoughts into its original culture. The countenance of this transition was rapidly changed. This rapid change led to the cul-de-sac of “self-independent” society. According to a certain scientist this is the kernel of the *Hikikomori* problem [18]. Such new model of a society requires new patterns of behavior, much more individualized. The concepts such as self-determination, autonomic acting and all the features characteristic and working well in western societies are highly evaluated. This transition is not only the core of the social crisis, but also an axionormative one. The values and their old hierarchy are subject to alteration. Commonly respected model of norms and aims, in which values of the community were recognized as primary, started to be undermined from the inside. Anything that has a form loses it as time goes by.

However, every change requires one thing – the adjustment to it. And here is a very mysterious hint in which direction *Hikikomori* phenomenon has to be reconsidered. Some researchers suggest that our view on a withdrawn person might be changed if we looked at such individual from a different perspective. At first glance such a person is given the label: “socially maladjusted” But this withdrawn person should be considered as an individual who cannot adjust because he tries too hard [19]. People affected by *Hikikomori* are very much interested in the society and its life. However, they can clearly see the hiatus between reality and the desired ideal state, and that is why they cannot take any action, they do not have ability to cope with changes and challenges. In consequence, they do not act at all and they withdraw from society. Then the transition of society is one of the main factors, which contributed to the distorted behavior of young, oversensitive people who are susceptible to changes [19]. Then, what is the relation between the social transition and the phenomenon of *Hikikomori*? Let me elucidate the crucial intricacy of the core matter of this paper.

4. The Social Withdrawal: Serendipitous Role of an Axionormative Crisis

The crisis approaches when the old systems and hierarchies of values are gradually violated and reversed. The axionormative crisis in Japan appeared in three realms and encompassed the person, family and society. Social withdrawal is only one vivid manifestation of this axionormative crisis. What is the scope of ongoing crisis?

The scope of the axionormative crisis, which manifests on the first level – the person - extends

between the autonomy from the individualistic realm, and interdependent harmony, from the side of collectivistic system of value. The content of this crisis, meaning a distorted version of those two values, is some kind of defeatist “outsider-ism”. The individual gives up from the beginning, escapes from the responsibility and autonomy (also in moral respects).

Then, the scope of the axionormative crisis on the level of family encompasses the values extended between the obedience to familial tradition and the individual decision to shape one’s own life independently. The content of the crisis is the frustrated anchoritism. The man decides to withdraw and to be alone, because he does not have the ability to break the mistrust and the lack of confidence. That is why he remains alone in his hermitage.

And the last and most important level of the axionormative crisis is the sphere of society. The content of the crisis from the individualistic part is the value of work for one’s own success, and from the collectivistic part – the work for the reinforcement of the harmony in his community. And the content of the crisis is the distorted version of those two values – cynical parasitism. The individual does not attend to school, does not work which brings some doubtful benefits for him own, but at the same time it does not bring any development; quite the contrary, it leads to self-destruction.

The transition process from the collectivistic into individualistic model caused drastic changes in the hierarchy of values. A lot of young people emerged from the chaos of changes who tried to grope for their hierarchy of values using both models and struck some happy medium. However, the problem occurred in midway between collectivistic and individualistic values where they could not find the *aurea mediocritas*. They started to implement some quasi-values which have nothing common with neither collectivistic nor individualistic values, but are rather a distortion of both models. The embodiment of these “hybrids” contributed to the collapse of these young people and it led to the emergence of such questions: “In what direction should we go, how should we act, and for what should we live?” And that is why they froze in stillness.

What can be done to rescue those young people? Maybe the exposition of proper role models can be some solution? However, is it a remedy or only a palliative?

5. Conclusion

The problem of social withdrawal in Japan has no longer been a new issue. I was researching this topic a few years ago and since that time the name of *Hikikomori* has already been widely spread all over the world. However, it was rather gossip

news, which caused a lot of media hype. All that is left after the unhealthy “flutter” has calmed down are thousands of pages of newspapers, magazines, books, some reportages and much noise. Deeply harmed people are already not so important. But their histories, personalities and pains remain. Some of the withdrawn people, with the great support of their families, are being treated by various methods in special centers in Japan and abroad. Some patients with suicidal thoughts were placed in psychiatric hospitals, being treated by pharmacotherapy or by indigenous therapies (*Naikan* or *Morita*).

Between the mental disorder and social phenomenon young people are continuing “the battle with silence” which goes on in their inside world. And to draw attention to this struggle, not just to the superficial label, was the aim of my paper. The mission of this article was also to show that psychiatry must inevitably take a deep look into the realm of the culture, in which it is entrenched. Phenomena such as *Hikikomori* are the “canaries” indicating the transition of values and other imponderabilia of the culture.

Take Home Message

People are interested in mental disorders, in some unique phenomena, which cannot be perfectly, scientifically explained. Madness and insanity, all strangeness is perceived as *mysterium fascinosum*. After watching or reading about this “spectacle” all that the audience can say is: “interesting”. Very soon they forget about the main actor – the suffering person. *Hikikomori* was the label that became fascinating and, paradoxically, fashionable, but not the real situation of the suffering person. However, I can predict: the doubtful interest will disappear, the corrosive phenomenon will remain. That is sad, is it not?

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