

Quality of Life in the Context of Social Withdrawal in Japan

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the issue of quality of life in the context of an attention-grabbing phenomenon – social withdrawal of youth in Japan. The concept of quality of life is scrutinized at three levels: 1) the level of individual, 2) the level of family and 3) the level of community. In conclusion, the concept of “quality of life” is not only the indicator of personal or communal well-being (or its decline), but might also be used as “litmus paper” showing emerging transformation of values in the given culture.

Keywords: *Hikikomori*, social withdrawal, quality of life

Introduction

Social withdrawal in Japan¹ [1,2], known under the name of *Hikikomori*, is a very delicate, multidimensional problem. This “label” is used to describe young boys/men, who lock themselves in their rooms and refuse to participate in everyday life. According to the definition coined by Doctor Tamaki Saito, an expert in the case of *Hikikomori*, this term denotes people (mainly young boys or men whose age ranges from teens to 30s) who are withdrawn from society for at least half of year, they isolate from outside world by closing themselves in their rooms; their behavior might include acts of violence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. However, the primary cause of such behavior is not a mental disorder.² How this phenomenon refers to the concept of “quality of life”? This paper aims to analyze this perspective.

Using the concept of “quality of life” in the context of social withdrawal in Japan might be considered as a provocative practice. However, this is not a matter of provocation or some puzzling collation. This research perspective has not been taken into consideration yet. Therefore, this gap has to be filled. Let me bring you closer to this poignant matter.

1. The sound of one hand clapping...

How should we examine the concept of “quality of life” on the example of socially withdrawn individuals in Japan? Firstly, the most important elements of the concept of “quality of life” should be named. They include: 1) physical,

2) mental and 3) financial conditions; 4) social life (relationships with family, community, partners; social roles); 5) the comfort of living; 6) activities (work, education, hobbies); as well as 7) the subjective feeling of fulfillment. These general categories should be described in detail.

Physical condition of a socially withdrawn individual varies from person to person. However, it does not mean that nothing can be said about this crucial component of “quality of life” among the withdrawn people. Staying in a small isolated room for a long time without exposing oneself to the sun rays might cause physical weakness in the whole organism. Additionally, the lack of any physical activity, reversed sleep cycle (sleeping during the day time), using a computer for a long time, irregular meals (eating disorders which can lead to drastic loss of the weight), the lack of vitamins and microelements – these are trigger factors contributing to the declining health of a socially withdrawn person. A general feeling of pain might also occur.

Bad physical condition inevitably affects mental condition of socially withdrawn person. *Hikikomori* is not recognized as a sort of mental disease. However, long-term isolation might lead to some mental disorders. It starts from negative thoughts and feelings about the person's own life, which might result in low self-esteem, self-blame, hatred, which may finally lead to depressive moods and suicidal thoughts.

Bad mental and physical condition of a socially withdrawn person might be deepened by their financial situation. Lack of money might or might not be a special problem. The food and drinks are provided by family. However, money is needed to buy certain things on the Internet. In such cases socially withdrawn individuals may steal the money from their families. In this sense the financial condition of withdrawn youth does not seem to

¹ This problem was previously analyzed in this paper: S. Olejarz Between Cultural Phenomenon and Mental Disorder The Social Withdrawal in Japan. Curr. Probl. Psychiatry, 2010; 11(1): 63-66.

² SAITO T. Shakaiteki Hikikomori: Owaranai seishun. (Social withdrawal: Everlasting adolescence). PHP Institute, Tokyo 1998, s. 25.

pose such a serious problem. The fact that they cannot earn any money themselves is more significant. Therefore, they lose the sense of agency.

The next step in reviewing the quality of life of the Japanese called *Hikikomori* is to consider the defining element of this phenomenon – social life. These young Japanese men have no social life. They lose touch with their family members (or very minimal, in special situations), do not keep peer-relationships, shun interactions with the local community. Such a situation results in getting rid of or rather rejecting previous social roles (that of a learner/ a student/an employee, a son/a grandson/a brother; a member of community, etc.). This long-lasting lack of social contacts leads to atrophy of almost every social skill such as maintaining a conversation, social rules and standards of proper behavior, empathy. Cognitive functions and memory also tend to gradually decline.

The difficult element to analyze is the comfort of living, as it tends to be very subjective. The life of a socially withdrawn person seems to be very comfortable, full of leisure and free of duties and responsibility. However, the absolute passiveness of such life has to be pointed out here. The scope of autonomy is strongly limited. Such a person is almost absolutely dependent on his family and cannot survive without their help.

Living in permanent seclusion, people labeled as *Hikikomori* lose their sense of agency and competence. They are unable to do almost anything of their own accord. Such lack of confidence in your own ability to act might transform into permanent helplessness.

Talking about the comfort of living and the passiveness of socially withdrawn people, we cannot forget about a very important element of “quality of life”, namely activities. Withdrawn *Hikikomori* people do not act in any field. They refrain from education, work, doing sports, travelling or even having a hobby (except using the Internet, playing games, watching movies or *Manga*). Lack of mobility also entails lack of stimuli and challenges. Such lifestyle inevitably leads to the diminished level of vital energy.

All of the elements mentioned above convince the socially withdrawn male that in his life there is no place for any feeling of fulfillment. It leads to the rigid conviction that in his life he can only experience permanent boredom, helplessness, existential anxiety, lack of meaning. It is almost impossible to change his life (however, desperate suicide attempts might be considered as a sort of change). So he sticks to doing nothing.

The “quality of life” of socially withdrawn people does not seem to be worth living. However, what can we say about those who must share the hardships of that particularly heavy burden? Let me consider an area of familial struggle.

2. A Forlorn Hope...

The family of *Hikikomori* is in a pretty onerous situation. The familial area is a “battlefield”, not only “the struggle with silence”, but also with shame. Having a socially withdrawn son (grandson, brother) is a reason to feel guilty (“we - parents have not managed to raise him properly”) and socially ashamed in front of others (in front of neighbors, relatives, co-workers, school teachers, acquaintances). Having a socially withdrawn person in the family affects the family’s physical and mental health and its financial condition. The social life of the family is also affected. Family members tend to gradually become more reclusive and start to isolate themselves together with the *Hikikomori* problem. Feeling ashamed and terrorized by their son, the parents lack the will to stay in touch with other families and local communities. Their “comfort” of life turns into “hell”. Everything is subjected to the socially withdrawn person.

Other family members feel insecure and helpless. That is why they might abandon their activities connected to leisure and pleasure. The concentration on work brings some relief. In such a dramatic context they do not feel any fulfillment in their lives, but rather they consider themselves as helpless “slaves” in their own homes, condemned to the eternal terror they have to endure from the “home-made” eremite.

Both the family and the person labeled as *Hikikomori* are living on the “periphery” of “normal” life. If so, what about those who live “in the centre” – what about local community? How does the *Hikikomori* phenomenon affect it? Let me deepen this topic.

3. Community

It is very important to belong to a local community in Japanese culture. There are various types of communities which for example are based on religion, health care, neighborhood, education, sports and common interests. The main question is how the *Hikikomori* phenomenon affects them. It is not so certain that they just do not care about dropping out of the *Hikikomori* individuals. Because of the prevalence of this problem and the continuous spread of this phenomenon, local communities are very concerned and try to deal with it by various means.

Members of local communities are gradually aging, similarly to the general population of Japan, so their physical and mental health is becoming weaker and weaker. The financial condition of the retired is not so good as compared to the pensioners of the 1980s or 1990s. Aging members of the community want to spend the rest of their days peacefully. However, socially withdrawn people are imposing a great and embarrassing burden on them and other middle-age members of local communities.

One of the main troubling points is financial insufficiency of socially withdrawn people. Of course, all over the world there are people who are unable to provide for themselves. However, in Japan such a situation forms a dangerous trend in a large group of young people. And since this phenomenon has continued for several years, there are reasons to feel anxious about the future of these communities.

Some members of ageing local communities pose rhetorical questions: "Who will work on behalf of *Hikikomori* people in ten or twenty years time? Who will provide them with food and housing? And after 30 or 40 years of such "vegetation", who will be responsible for giving them a pension?" This is a very urgent problem for local communities. Not only a financial problem, but also an educational one.

In a particular way, the *Hikikomori* phenomenon affects all levels of education. The dangerous thing is that such behavior becomes sort of "fashionable" among young generation. Of course, this is often only a transient interest in a new type of sub-culture. However, some young people might not be able to overcome this detrimental "fashion". That is why the most important "battlefield" for preventing youngsters from the *Hikikomori* phenomenon is school, where teachers and psychologists struggle to eradicate the first germs of social withdrawal.

The matter of reproduction poses another very pressing problem related to socially withdrawn people and the community. The generation of *Hikikomori* does not and probably will not produce any offspring. In collation with a very low birth rate in Japan, this is an alarming matter. Socially withdrawn people do not have any partners and are not able to start their own families. It contributes to a dangerous phenomenon – the negative portrayal of a Japanese boy or young man among Japanese girls. Nowadays Japanese girls try to become independent of men. Many Japanese girls, disappointed with the irresponsible behavior of their male peers, postpone getting married.

The described *status quo* is a serious blow to the local community. Furthermore, factors mentioned above have a significant impact on the subjective feeling of "quality of life" within local community.

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The scope and content of the *Hikikomori* phenomenon revealed the sad truth about the hopeless existence of many young men living in wealthy conditions in Japanese families. However, these wealthy conditions cannot contribute to the

subjective feeling of high "quality of life". Taking into consideration this study on "quality of life" in the context of social withdrawal in Japan as well as the previous analysis of the axionormative crisis [1] and the transformation into "self-independent" society (drastic changes in the hierarchy of values) [3], we can draw the following conclusions:

Conclusions

1. Social withdrawal affects not only particular individuals and their families, but it might also destroy the structures of local communities in the near future. "The sound of one hand clapping" of *Hikikomori* is the alarm addressed not only to his family, but to entire society.
2. The concept of "quality of life" is not only the indicator of personal or communal well-being (or its decline), but might also be used as "litmus paper" showing emerging transformation of values in the given culture.
3. The current challenge is not only to save withdrawn individuals, but to detect precisely and change (or modify) the factors responsible for the chasm of the axionormative crisis (revision and new prioritizing of crucial values).

Take Home Message

People think that "quality of life" depends on defeats and victories in personal, familial and communal life. But this is an infernal trap, from which we can see only a fuzzy "slice of reality". If we stay away from that trap, we will be able to experience a truly high-quality life.

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