

Hikikomori and Japanese Culture

—Possible Contributing factors of Hikikomori—

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The phenomenon, commonly referred to as "hikikomori", is a major social problem confronting Japan today. There are believed to be a million such young adults who refuse to work and who avoid all social contact. In this paper, I consider possible contributing factors of hikikomori, including traditional Japanese culture and its mentality of "giri to one's name"; the psychopathology of taijinkyofusho; the rapid modernization of Japanese society; and the so-called "orphanism" state of social existence.

Keywords: hikikomori (social withdrawal), Japanese culture, giri, taijinkyofusho, modernization

In considering the factors that contribute to hikikomori, one may look to the traditional features of young people in Japanese society. An examination of these traits in comparison with western cultures may also be beneficial. I believe that it is the friction between traditional Japanese culture and modern Japanese society that is at the root of the hikikomori phenomenon.

1. Japanese traditional culture

In considering the traditional Japanese character, I will start by examining the theory of "giri", as described in the book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, and discussing the problem of taijinkyofusho, which is generally considered to be a culture-bound syndrome.

1) The mentality of 'giri to one's name'

The Chrysanthemum and the Sword was written by Ruth Benedict (1946) based on research she conducted on Japan starting in 1944. It describes the characteristics of Japanese people at that time. One of the things she writes about as being very important to Japanese is "giri to one's name." "Giri" is a concept that has been important in interpersonal relationships among Japanese since ancient times. It indicates actions or deeds that must be carried out, even if unpleasant, for the sake of maintaining one's relationship with another party. In a relationship of "giri," a person agrees to perform tasks or work that he or she would in other cases refuse. A person who does not accept the task in question is despised as "a person without giri." "Giri to one's name" is a value concept in which one requires oneself to fulfill the responsibilities appropriate to one's "name," that is, one's rank or professional occupation. However, Benedict used the word "giri" differently from its usual usage in Japanese. In Japan, "giri" is only used in interpersonal situations, and is an attitude toward another person. Benedict used this concept as an

attitude to oneself, such as one's profession or social standing. She described this as follows.

Giri to one's name as a professional person is very exigent in Japan, ... The teacher says, 'I cannot in giri to my name as a teacher admit ignorance of it,' and he means that if he does not know to what species a frog belongs nevertheless he has to pretend he does.... It is specifically to this kind of defensiveness that 'giri to one's name as a teacher' refers.

This sensitivity is especially conspicuous in situations where one person has lost out to another. It may be only that another person has been preferred for job or that the person concerned has failed in a competitive examination. The loser 'wears a shame' for such failures, and, though this shame is in some cases a strong incentive to great efforts, in many others it is a dangerous depression. He loses confidence and becomes melancholy or angry or both.

For in Japan the constant goal is honor. It is necessary to command respect.

To fulfill "giri to one's name as a teacher," a behavioral pattern is selected in which one does not reveal one's ignorance and does not correct one's mistakes. In addition, there is extreme sensitivity to competition with others and loss of self-confidence or a state of depression or anger at being defeated. Benedict writes that the ultimate goal is to be respected by people belonging to one's own world, and that the thing that is most feared is being looked down upon by people in that world or disgracing oneself in their eyes. The psychological features shown here very much resemble the psychological characteristics of hikikomori (Suwa, Suzuki, 2002). The teacher who cannot correct his mistakes in front of others because of giri to his name as a teacher may be said to have the same mentality as the hikikomori who tries to show that he is following his envisioned path and hides his current self. The aspects of sensitivity to winning or losing and loss of self-confidence, or depression at being the loser, also lead to the "defeat without a struggle" mentality of hikikomori youths. Gaining the respect of others as the perpetual goal in "giri to one's name" corresponds to the hikikomori youth's mentality of protecting the ideal self based on the opinions of others. Thus, it may be said that the foundation for the mentality of hikikomori youth closely resembles the psychological attributes and fundamental tendencies of the Japanese of the 1940s as pointed out by Benedict.

2) The psychopathology of taijinkyofusho

The taijinkyofusho defined by Morita in 1932 is also intimately related to the psychological features of Japanese. Taijinkyofusho is a neurosis connected with how one is seen by others. In taijinkyofusho one's attitude, actions, and physical characteristics are felt to be inappropriate in social interpersonal situations, a continuous emotional response such as a feeling of shyness is displayed, and strong distress is felt. In world psychiatry taijinkyofusho has been understood to be specific to Japan, and the state of interpersonal relations of Japanese people affects the form in which this phobia is expressed.

However, since the concept of social phobia was included in DSM-III there have been reports on social phobias from countries around the world. The idea that taijinkyofusho is unique to Japanese culture and that it is a culture-bound syndrome has come to be questioned. However, as pointed out by Kitanishi, et al. (1995), the typical symptom in social phobia is related to anxiety about one's "conduct" in front of people.

This has been exemplified by fear related to speaking and conducting oneself well; using public restrooms; eating meals; and writing in front of others. In contrast, in *taijinkyofusho*, phobias such as fear of blushing or fear of eye-to-eye confrontation, which are problems of how one's expression or line of sight is seen by other people, are related to the "way of being" of the self. Oka (2009) compared social phobia and *taijinkyofusho*, and said the difference is that whereas the former is a problem of the correctness of actions "done" by the actor in comparison with social norms, the latter is a problem of the naturalness of physiognomy that one "is" physically. These points would seem to indicate that while there are areas of overlap between social phobia and *taijinkyofusho*, in the end they can be understood as different pathological phenomena.

The roots of both *taijinkyofusho* and *hikikomori* may lie in the characteristic of Japanese, indicated by Benedict, to have as a constant goal gaining the respect of others, and in the mentality of apprehension caused by obsession with what others think.

Here let us consider the differences between *taijinkyofusho* and *hikikomori*. Neither the anxiety about "being" unnatural in how one looks, felt by people with *taijinkyofusho*, nor the anxiety toward "doing" or acting appropriately in conversation, felt by people with social phobia, are present in *hikikomori*. The object of the fear of *hikikomori*, in being exposed to the eyes of others, is having others find out whether or not they are working and how they are living; in other words, their lifestyle. In that sense the thing feared by *hikikomori* is more internal than the surface "expression" or "way of being" of people with *taijinkyofusho*, and may be considered something closer to the actual "self."

2. Modernization of Japanese society

The form taken in interpersonal relations among Japanese has changed greatly in recent years. As the country achieved economic growth the structure of Japanese society changed from small-scale production activities in local areas to large organizations on a national scale. Taking the place of communities are the companies or workplace organizations to which individuals belong. Social existence has gone from a structure in which individuals belonged to families and families belonged to communities to one in which individuals are each linked directly to some large organization such as a company. With these changes the cornerstone of the former way of being, in which individuals valued human relationships within small groups in the community and were supported by their role and position within those groups, may have been lost. In Western Europe, respect for the individual has long been recognized and the individualistic way of thinking has been developed over several centuries. In living according to one's individual characteristics, links between various individuals are formed in various groups, including social organizations and community or like-minded individuals. In contrast, Takeda (1998) wrote that amid the rapid changes in Japanese society respect for individuals has led to a state in which there is no orientation toward any group and an individualism has been formed that is oriented toward both physical and mental isolation, which may be called "orphanism". In *Millennial Monsters* (2006) Anne Allison asserted that *hikikomori* is one manifestation of orphanism, and that behavior on trains is a good example of this. Disinterest in others who are in close physical proximity, while at the same time having an obsessive focus on a distant person or information via mobile phone, e-mail or the Internet, can often be observed in

Japanese youth these days. Attaching little importance to one's immediate environment, isolating oneself from both family and local community, while placing priority on interactions in a preferred private world are commonly witnessed in the lifestyles of young Japanese today.

Seen in this way, it may be that the interpersonal, relationship-based cultural environment described above is a catalyst for the hikikomori phenomenon which is firmly rooted in the intertwining of youth and modern society.

3. Conclusion

Concerning the hikikomori phenomenon in this paper: I compared the psychology of hikikomori with the psychological features of “giri to one's name”, as well as the psychology of taijinkyofusho, and indicated that these traditional Japanese interpersonal and psychological characteristics have influenced the hikikomori phenomenon today. In addition, I described how, in modern Japan, interpersonal relationships are changing with the increased use of the Internet and mobile phones and that, as a consequence, the “orphanism” state of social existence is spreading among young people. It may be that social conflict in modern Japan, set against the background of traditional Japanese interpersonal relationships, can lead to hikikomori.

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