

Japanese Children and their Community

— Socio-Environmental fluctuation and Stress of Children —

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Abstract: The socio-economic change in many Japanese communities caused by economic development and industrialization can be clearly observed. This phenomenon has been altering social circumstance in both large cities and small towns throughout Japan. Urbanization has been obviously significant, but creating community problems, which induce various societal stresses and pressures to many families and their children.

The living environment surrounding children in their communities has also been changing. Thus, environmental destruction and pollution are obvious and serious. They have been endangering or disturbing, children's healthy living circumstances. In this paper, the socio-environmental change in the Japanese communities and its effects on children's daily life in their school and neighborhood systems will be explored, and their needs and the in-availability of social resources that prevent social maladjustment problems will be discussed.

Keywords: societal change, community issues, helping resource systems, drug issues, loss of community

1. Transformation of Japanese Communities

Every child needs a safe and decent living circumstance to enjoy his or her healthy well-being in the current community. However, Japan has been destructive toward its beautiful scenery or gifts from a nature due to its extreme development in its economic policy. In the consequences of the extreme-economic-development-policy, Japan has created various environmental destruction or pollution, such as air/chemical pollution, water or river contamination, and massive destruction of forests and mountains. As a result it has been wasting many significant environmental and natural resources on earth. The Japanese children and their families are experiencing different types of difficulties in these hazardous circumstances.

A culture which is based on or seeking only materialistic pleasure or an epicurean life will ignore the values for keeping an adequate natural ecological balance in its economic or industrial development policy and consequently will create an inhumane society. Japan is now facing and experiencing significant difficulties losing its solid, healthy nature oriented community environment for families and their children. Japanese society, which values were once based on the strong and intimate community ties in the last century, should revitalize or recreate their unique community bond to newly emerging, various life styles of people in the new century. Thus, it will provide people and their children with the important opportunities to heal their damaged mind and heart in this stressful Japanese society where has been experiencing severe socio-economic changes.

(1) Societal Change and Community Issues in Japan

Japan has achieved her economic development in the last century at astonishing speed. This abrupt economic prosperity has created serious problems: on one hand, extreme urbanization with over-population issues in the big cities and high costs of living expenses, especially housing cost; and on the other hand,

depopulation problems in the rural or small towns and villages. In this industrialized society, we are observing different types of struggles such as environmental problems including air/car or chemical pollution, housing shortage in urban cities, and lack of safe play-grounds, which effect negative influence on children's overall life, health, and psycho-social development.

We are concerned with environmental pollution, photochemical smog especially every summer. They are threat to Japanese infants and children. Both then significant causes and effects on children are unknown, but they are suspected to be one of the inducing/assisting causal factors of asthma and atopic dermatitis. The number of children who are suffering from those health related difficulties is increasing in Japan. The other type of air pollution from detrimental automobile exhaust and noise pollution from cars or airplanes are also inevitable issues for most parents, especially those currently taking care of children in their polluted communities.

Chemical pollution and drug poisoning problems have been complicated as factors but it is unclear or varied. Historically, Japan once witnessed these types of toxic drugs such as chionoform, which caused SMON disease or myelo-optico-neuropathy, and the thalidomide drugs, which are causes of the birth defect of many thalidomide babies. In Japan, many hemophiliac patients or children have been suffering from AIDS by medical malpractice by using blood transfusion liquid contaminated by AIDS patient's blood. Many hemophiliac children/patients with AIDS are now facing their future with not only with an incurable disease but also with legal allegations forcing them to fight for human rights for their future life in their school, workplaces and communities.

One of the most crucial and sad incidents is a traffic and motorcycle accidents. There are no days without news in TV or newspapers reporting children's death or injury by those traffic accidents. We are apprehending the growing number of accidents; specifically a rate of accidents involved with high school or senior high school students is significantly increasing year after year. The rate of death caused by those traffic/motorcycle accidents will be growing and is one of the leading fatalities among all accidents. These children's deaths are cruel and heart wrenching for their families and the psychological damage for them will be beyond our imagination. Japan will need to make an effort to offer safer circumstance or traffic environment for children and students as well as to create new measures or services for the families experiencing and suffering from their children's death not only by the traffic accidents but also by the many other tragic incidents.

Nowadays, the living space that children are enjoying in their communities is one of the most significant discussion targets. The level of the life space including playgrounds and housing condition of many Japanese children is not good or worse than any other Euro-American countries. Japanese children are witnessing an increase in their growing life stressors from their living environment during the most important period of their physio-psycho-social development, especially those children who have to reside in small-squeezed Japanese housing in metropolitan areas. Children need to be raised or nurtured with the fullness of nature. In Japan, they are especially losing this important encounter to these natural surroundings more than any other era. In the urban areas in the Japanese big cities, providing safe playgrounds for teens and children is desperately necessary.

Japanese are now enjoying a high technological information industry or advanced computerized culture as much as other people in the world, but this computerized culture or the development of personal computers effects enormously on children's social life or even regulate or control their individual time. This phenomenon results in keeping them shut out from the outside society. Depopulating outside playing among

children will induce serious causes for them providing less contact with other children or friends and people in different communities. Thus a level of communication and quality of their social encountering for themselves has been fluctuated. On the other hand, a new type of communication has been emerging through e-mail cultures among children. In consequence, a new word, so-called "mail-friends", has been everywhere and developing totally different communication cultures from the one in the last decade. As we are observing a typical concurrent youth culture based on the high-technology-informational-industry, we should notice or acknowledge the negative part of that culture; Enjo Kosai in Japanese is a new emerging word indicating some actions or behaviors that young children or teens are involved in themselves in order to earn quick or easy money from male counterparts by having dating or escort service, eventually having sex by special mediating agents who use a new type of telephone services or sometimes their own mobile telephone. Boryoku Dan, Japanese Mafia, mostly organizes and runs these agents. A new type of inventions or the internet-sex-industries which will be causes of rapes or sex crimes and related to homicides in Japan gives impact on youth cultures. Socio-environmental surroundings for the youth in Japan are now facing a critical situation, not only in their family, but also in the residing communities that require Japan to create new strategies to effectively reduce its risk of various problems and crimes.

(2) Loss of Communities where people are able to communicate

Historically, the neighborhood mutual support in Japan is very important for enhancing good or qualitative childrearing. However, we are not able to expect warm-hearted supportive relationships anymore in the concurrent stressful community situation like "Who cares others or whatever the others do". The Ministry of Health and Welfare (The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare) reported a very interesting date in terms of the current phenomenon losing strong community ties from the research on children and families in Japan (Kodomo to Katei ni kansuru Jittai Chosa) in 1988: the rate of community companionship or contact on a very intimate level is 26% of the total research population, which shows relatively less contact in their neighborhood; over the 73% of the sample is expecting moderate neighborhood interaction (The Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1988; Kashiwame, 1995).

Unfortunately, we are witnessing that this type of mutual support or helping attitudes and values among community people disappeared: prevalence of weakening of community tie is phenomenal in current Japan. These community issues, being vulnerable or weak relationships in "families to families mutual support cords", seem to be closely connected with serious family problems such as childrearing related stress or pressure and domestic violence including child abuse. Not only creating effective service programs for the parents raising children, but also enhancing supportive social networks among those families struggling with parenting issues are desperately provided by comprehensive community planning or the related social policy.

2. Helping Resource Systems are needed in Japanese Communities

What the acute task to be achieved by Japanese government is to develop or create a safe and solid circumstance for childrearing and parenting. Concurrent childrearing surroundings or resources in the Japanese communities are not enough and do not effectively respond to many parents, especially who face marital instability and their children's socio-psycho-developmental problems. In addition to these problems, various social problems are explicitly observed in Japanese school systems: school bullying, school refusal or school phobia, and a newly emerging phenomenon, difficulties in keeping class in order or in handling pupils learning because of some hyper-active children or other reasons. Those problems are serious and

beyond the abilities of the schoolteachers.

These problems are very natural or proper messages to the uncertain adult society where many people are suffering from concurrent socio-economic challenges in Japan. Considering the future in Japan, many Japanese communities, either in big cities or small towns, are seeking concrete service programs targeted on the troubles of children who are experiencing different types of concurrent societal problems as well as their parents who are struggling with their stressful childrearing tasks.

(1) Enhancing the Best Environment for Childrearing and their Well-being

Juvenile delinquency has been one of the concerns of our society. Many young children and adolescents are in various dangers. Big cities are full of allurements through the extreme consumerism and concurrent materialistic values, which induce many casual factors of juvenile delinquency. The motivations of misdemeanor among children are diversified and intricate such as those delinquencies involving telephone-dating services related to sex or pornographic industries.

As mobile telephone and Internet services in Japan are also becoming very popular among young people, we are extremely anxious about emerging new types of homicides or rape incidents because of the easy and anonymous access by those contemporary new technologies. Not only the numbers of those delinquencies are increasing and phenomenal, but also robbery and pickpockets, and homicide among homeless adults who are less powerful and socially disadvantaged or weak people, so-called "OYAJIGARI" is becoming our current apprehension.

Japanese culture based on the ideas that the weak or the disadvantaged would be cared or even respected by their counterparts is missing and disappearing. It is easily assumed that these young people are trying to alleviate their strong societal pressure or stress through these anti-social behaviors.

The data is indicating a serious trend in juvenile delinquency. Japan had experienced a third wave in high delinquency numbers since the Second World War, and it is now facing or being in its fourth high trend or wave. According to a report of the National Police Agency, the total number of drug-marijuana and glue sniffing-related crimes is decreasing comparatively, but we are apprehending about the existence of some young people who are still somehow involved themselves in it and their easy going attitudes toward the crimes in heroin and other narcotics which are much more serious problems and related to involvement in detrimental accidents.

The difficulties young people are facing arise from their stressful community, boring daily life in school, or even very high expectancies from their families in the competitive Japanese society. Consequently, dropping out or escaping from the sever pressure and reality by using drugs, acting out anti-social behaviors and/or delinquencies will be their final or last forms of psycho-social adjustment among young people. These circumstances around Japanese youth will require responsible services for themselves as well as comprehensive family service programs for their parents.

(2) School Systems and Children's Problems

What institutes the most important childrearing in society has been the school system. This school system in Japan is taking on significant roles in childrearing and education as well as family systems. Today, we are feeling or observing various problems and incoherence in this school system: bullying, school maladjustment, and violence in school. These school-related-problems are becoming too serious for the system to solve by itself, which requires different types of approaches involving many other related

professions such various fields as community mental health, child guidance clinics, social service agencies, and other community helping resources (Suzuki, 1996).

The troubles of bullying among school students in Japan has been reported and started to deal with the struggles since the beginning of 1980's. The data is a document about school bullying by the Ministry of Education and Science. We can witness a decreasing trend in 1986, but since 1992 this trend has been changed to or has shown the opposite abrupt increasing trend. In 1995, the largest number of bullying, 60,096, was reported, and in the following years, this trend has gradually been decreasing again until the present time (Fukusaki, 1996; Nihon Kodomo Katei Sogo Kenkyusho, 2007). The number of bullying in 2005 was 20,143 cases.

The number of bullying-related-corrective guidance by police is decreasing from 1,950 students who were arrested in 1985, 346 in 1990, 534 in 1995, and 450 in 2000. In 2005, it was reported 326 students (Nihon Kodomo Katei Sogo Kenkyusho, 2007, p.348). Students' bullying motivations are unclear and diversified, but many experts are apprehensive about the reasons for their bullying, "the subject or target seems to be very weak, fragile, or nonresistance and easy to bully", which is the largest number, 49 incidents or 35.8% percentage in the motivation of bullying. We have to pay attention to this type of reason and deal with this psychological stress among students, although there have still existed some difficulties in the statistical methodology or problems of research reporting procedures.

These bullying related issues should be resolved as soon as possible because there has been linking to other serious problems such as suicide and homicide cases, and their victim families are also involved in sever sorrow and the consequent hectic law suites against their counterparts or school systems. Including elaboration of the earlier detective or prevention-oriented systems against bullying, the support systems for not only students who are bullied and are bullying, but also both families and teachers should be refined and developed. School maladjustment of children including school refusal or phobia, and hyper-active-maladjustment of students are reported through the various medias and news. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, we can understand how serious these problems are in the Japanese school system, especially in the junior high schools. The numbers of school maladjusted children in those junior high schools are increasing from 54,174 in 1991 (FY) and 65,022 in 1995 (FY). In 1998 (FY), these numbers are jumping to 101,675 and 104,180 in 1999 (FY), which is almost double of the numbers within the last ten years. We are speculating those numbers to be growing in the near future, while the actual numbers of the school students will be gradually decreasing, which indicates the different or innovative educational needs and tasks of many students and their families (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2006, p.52; Nihon Kodomo Katei Sogo Kenkyusho, 2007, p.350).

The Japanese school systems will be required to develop new types of education to meet these emerging needs. One of the up-coming phenomena in Japan, which is called "free schools" is in the trial stage, which will be an alternative educational system and might be one of the resolutions of school-related-maladjustment among children. We discussed on the problems of education in Japanese school system, focusing on bullying and school maladjustment. The problems surrounding children are becoming very varied and complicated. Therefore, it will take a long time and need very concrete strategies to solve them. Not only school counseling service, but also school social work should be the effective strategy fighting those issues to protect student's educational right. Japan will need to develop further those resources quantitatively and qualitatively in the school system.

3. Conclusion

Our discussion in this paper was focused on the social changes in many Japanese communities influencing on stress and pressure of children who have been facing difficulties of severe social maladjustment in their school and community systems. The living environment surrounding children and their families in Japan has been endangered as aforementioned: the negative effects from environmental destruction and pollution were explored. Japan will need to further enhance or develop its service systems and policies preventing measures to solve social problems in both school systems and neighborhood systems. Prevention-oriented community social work or school social work in Japan has not been developed yet as in the other Euro-American countries. Not only school systems, but also social service systems in Japan have to make further efforts to develop and enhance life, especially those various social resources as soon as possible.

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