

Applying Culture Bound Theory to Acute Social Withdrawal (Hikikomori)

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Abstract

This paper seeks to identify factors that implicate culture bound theory both in the socio demographic orientation of *hikikomori* and in the physical manifestation of 'opting out' by 'shutting in' and includes a brief comparison of those factors from a control culture with the related social expectation withdrawal of *runaway*. It uses as a baseline for analysis, Japan's position in 3 of the culture value indices defined by Hofstede, (G.Hofstede: 1980) namely the dimensions of:

- individualism; IDV,
- power distance; PDI,
- uncertainty avoidance; UAI,

and seeks to analyse how, in conjunction with educational norms, peer behavioural patterns and employment expectations within a society, cultural values can determine how social withdrawal and 'opting out' will present. *Hikikomori* is not a social situation that is disappearing in Japan, even though it is no longer the hot topic of the previous decade. As interest wanes and media inevitably moves its attention on to the next cult like phenomenon among young people who behave differently, the growing *hikikomori* population of over one million () should not be forgotten. Educators are in a prime position to facilitate change and question teaching styles that may play a critical role in responsibility for such a huge, national, cultural specific, social epidemic that is not vanishing like its members, but is instead rampant and growing.

Introduction

Culture-bound is a term that indicates the native countries culture is trigger for a certain social behaviour or trend. By naming a trend culture-bound, it is easier to trace cause and therefore perhaps to find solutions or appropriate ways to respond or not. However, this paper does not seek to offer solutions to the issue of *hikikomori* or to propose counsel although it does contain opinion. It looks at possible contributing background societal factors and at a juxtapositional social withdrawal phenomenon classified often as 'runaway' in an attempt to identify specific enantiomers that lay claim to the theory herein that *hikikomori* is both Japanese specific and culture bound.

Secher in Watts (2002) explains "When you get large numbers of individuals behaving in similar ways, it is generally a cultural expression of some kind".

Hikikomori is now a well known term. The translation alternatives (apathy syndrome, shut-ins, voluntary seclusion or acute social withdrawal) never caught on for a reason; the Japanese word *hikikomori* is the term that settled and is most widely used around the world for the phenomenon and this indicates implicitly that it is considered to be either Japanese specific or at least found mainly in Japan.

It is interesting to note the leading specialist on hikikomori psychologist Dr. Tamaki Saito coined the buzzword originally as *shakaiteki hikikomori* in 1998 (Saito:1998) acknowledging the intrinsic social (社会) or cultural roots.

Originally considered an extension of truancy (不登候) it was first treated as a medical ailment with copious quantities of drugs (Zielenziger:2006) but is now widely accepted as a pattern of behaviour of young people who have jumped off the train of expected educational and social norms, as happens in many countries but have confined themselves inside their rooms as an escape from that pressure.

The IDV component.

Individualism.

To isolate oneself is a natural escape strategy reaction for a collectivist low IDV society member. In high collectivist cultures like Japan, **context =identity**. A person will feel safe and comfortable belonging to a group. Indeed, without answers from a stranger to establish context with questions like; 'What is your name?' 'How old are you?' and 'Where are you from?' it is difficult to establish a baseline connection with another person. Even on television interviewing random strangers in the street, Japanese television will give a person's age and job details, where in an individualistic culture this would be considered rude, an invasion of privacy or in some cases a human rights issue.

This can be seen in statistics of how trusting people in both culture types are of complete strangers. In a collectivist culture a stranger is not part of a group and so difficult to place or *identify*. They are met with unease because there is no context. This unease is incidentally often misinterpreted as shyness by those from collectivist cultures who interpret how this unease would be identified in their own self oriented

culture. Ignoring outsiders or non members is acceptable because the group must maintain its loyalty above all else and strangers will be met with unease. In an individualist society, a person relates to a stranger as a `self`, valuing their individual and independent status. A whole group however may conversely be met with distrust.

In an individualist culture like America, Australia and the UK, a person feels most comfortable when they are able to make an individual expression of self because **self=identity**. There will be hints and comments pertaining to the self which may appear self centered but are culturally ingrained communicative habits in individualistic societies where people choose what to share and are taught that to be assertive with self-needs and opinions is a highly desirable quality.

Zielenziger (ibid) reports on an experiment with photography where a group of Japanese students (low IDV culture) and a group of American students (high IDV culture) were told to photograph a friend. The Japanese students all photographed their friend in an environment of some kind with the background taking more than 60% of the photograph frame. The American students all took closer up shots of their friend, the person took up most of the `canvas` and the background was blurred or inconsequential. This could denote the importance of **people in context** (typical in Japanese culture) contrasting the importance of **people as self** (typical in American culture).

Ignoring outsiders or non members is acceptable in a collectivist culture because the group must maintain its loyalty to each other first and foremost like a mother cat guards her kittens. A complete stranger represents a person that cannot immediately be placed in context or group. The Daily Yomiuri (June 13th :2004) conducted a survey on trust in strangers and 47% of Americans responded saying other people can be trusted despite the far higher crime rate, where only 26% of Japanese responded that they would trust a complete stranger. The implication for hikikomori here is that once the person removes themselves from the group for an extended period they will be shut out and ignored because they no longer belong. Likewise, if an individual within the group behaves in a way contrary to group unwritten rules but accepted behavioural patterns for that group, they will be ignored and shut out to the point where they may voluntarily leave the group. This passive aggressive style of bullying is more common in group-oriented cultures and differs from the more violent and verbally abusive style bullying in self-oriented cultures.

A glimpse at historically rooted traditional collectivist culture

In traditional village society in the Tokugawa period, the government divided each village into 5 units of mutual surveillance to create smaller groups within the village in order to promote mutual dependency and loyalty (⑤人国). The community was divided into these groups and if one person within the group disobeyed rules or rebelled the whole group would be punished or chastised. In this way, it was taught through the generations that responsibility was for one`s own group (only), and that the individual has little power but as a group things can be achieved well.

By relying on this style of group dependency an individual`s ability to think critically **without** consulting others, and the opportunities and incentive to create change (which

happens when one person thinks or does differently; others see, discuss, adopt and accommodate) and the practice of doing so have diminished.

Closed networks known as shigarami within society bind the groups strongly together so that those at the top, treated with utmost respect born from recognition of the huge responsibility they have over the group's well being, must forfeit as much as their lives if one member of their group steps out of line and shames the network. This close knit structure can be compared with Amish societies 'Ordnung' where rules down to exactly what members can wear, and other some religious cult groups in other countries too, but in Japan (and other highly collectivist group cultures too) this sense of responsibility to the group is so intense that any party not within the network or connected to a group cannot possibly get anywhere in life; where in contrast the option to leave the cult or group is a viable one and often first choice escape route in more individual-oriented countries with higher IDV scores.

While there is nothing new in this theory, the role that this imbedded cultural way is intrinsically implicated in the main isolation feature of social withdrawal/hikikomori is clear. Only by completely withdrawing from **all** groups can the individual salvage their desire to be different or to behave differently from **any** group.

By withdrawing from the group they are in turn ignored and outcast and can never again enter a new group in fear of the social stigma trailing and attached to having left one. The final irony however is that the world itself then clumps these individuals into a group and gives them the name 'hikikomori'.

PDI component (Power Distance Indice).

Dependence V Independence.

The fact that hikikomori choose to retreat to their own rooms is a curious one from a Western high power distance country perspective. A young person's room is where we are punished and forced to remain when we have done wrong. It is a punishment 'to be grounded'. Yet, if we look at this choice with Hofstede's cultural dimension of power indice in mind regarding a high PD culture with no similar traditional confining punishment in childhood, it is easily comprehensible.

PDI rating is a country's score for how it values dependency. This is connected closely to the other two components of collectivist and uncertainty avoidance but the focus is on hierarchy of a society and how extensive equality is in terms of power. In a low power distance country people will respect independence and demand it. In a high power distance culture (like Japan) people at the top will have great power and positions and rank will be controlled carefully with leaders consistently treated with great respect and obedience. In low power distance cultures there will be more rebellion for equality and change from those who feel powerless and less resistance to that rebellion from those who have the power.

In both cultures, parents teach differing values to their children. In Japan, traditionally although times are changing, parents have taught children to obey the teacher and all rules. An important mantra is not to cause problems for other people and to fall in line

to save face for the family. In America and lower PD cultures, children are taught to question the teacher, to question everything and to answer back with an opinion when they disagree, to be a `hero` by protecting a stranger and to `think outside the box`. These are basic differences in the way parents bring up their children and as such, reflect how a society shapes its power distance.

So, it is not surprising that opting out for Japanese young people should be to stay at home. Here, their own room is a private sanctuary away from the peer group and world outside that imposes restrictions on them. Here, they can be semi safe from criticism from superiors` or society`s judgement, in a womb like existence with Mother nearby. The core value of power distance is rejected but the symbiotic relationship with Mother is very strong and offers a tiny thread of that instinctive culture born expectancy that is hard to shake- that of dependency.

In low power distant countries, we have the opposite culture reactive phenomenon in young people; that of `runaway`. It is directly related to power distance because it chooses to run from all dependents and strives for complete independence even if that means homelessness. As James Lehman, a Canadian behavioural therapist for teens and young adults writes; “*kids run away from problems they cannot handle. It`s in our culture. Adolescents often see running away as a way to achieve a sense of power and independence.*” (Lehman: 2009).

While both social phenomena are rooted in rebellion or reaction against authority, *hikikomori* is unique because it chooses to place the family as a safer haven than the peer group. This in turn, suggests that bullying and school pressure play a **larger** part in retreat than in the counterpart phenomena of *runaway*, where perhaps young people are fleeing the pressure from family pressure.

Finally, let us take a look at the uncertainty avoidance indice and how it relates to *hikikomori*.

UAI component

Rituals of performance.

Japan`s high value of employment stability and lifetime employment is a mental programming statistic, not necessarily found within individuals but a composite factor within the construct described and researched by Hofstede (Hofstede, 1983: 118-119) under the name of `Uncertainty Avoidance`.

The longitudinal (25 years) research that supports culture bound hypothesis in connection with employment avoidance and social withdrawal is documented in approx. 118 articles published in the `Journal of International Business Studies` between 1983 to 2008 (Au, K.Y, 1999; 799-812).

UAI is a cultural dimension of toleration concerning uncertainty about the future. At the high end of the scale are cultures in which people feel comfortable with rituals and routines that reduce uncertainty in daily life and in the workplace. Low end UAI cultures are those in which people are happier with fewer routines and rituals and are open to much wider individual variation. In countries where UAI is high, and **Japan ranks 92nd out of 100** countries surveyed (Hofstede, 1980) people will demonstrate extreme loyalty to the company or their employer and feel extreme social obligation to participate in group activity.

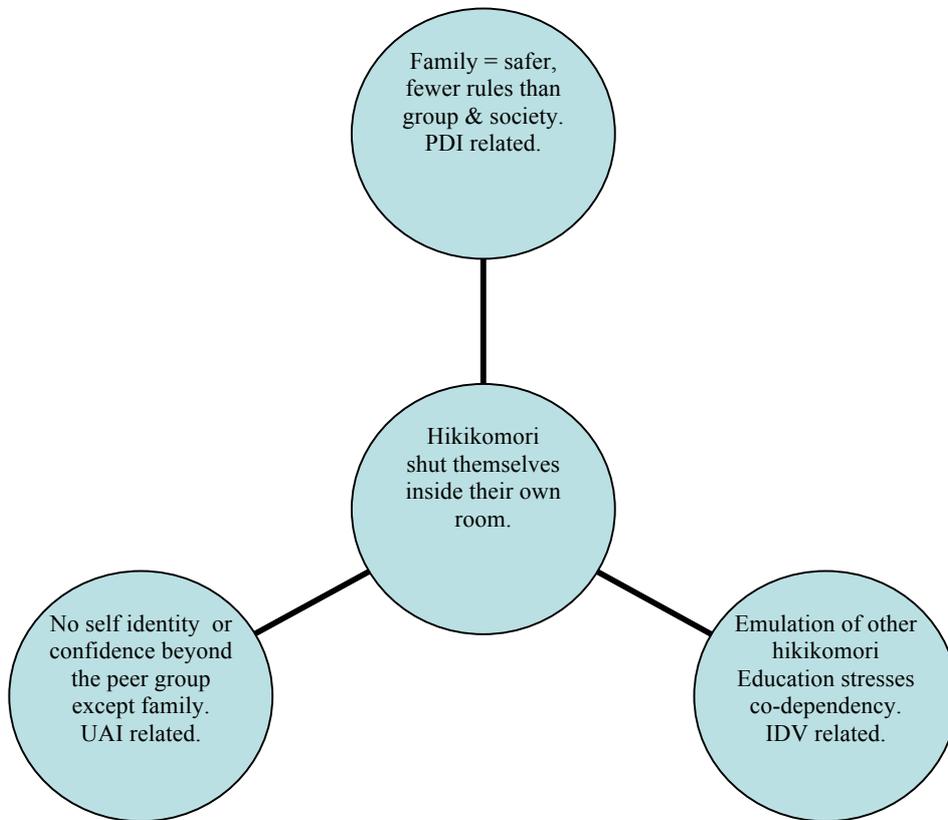
A high UAI score relates to *hikikomori* because 100% of *hikikomori* young adults have opted out of both *work and group* social activity. They are therefore reacting in a culturally adverse mode, mitigating the relevance of the claim `culture bound`.

The pressure on young people within the typical *hikikomori* age range of 14 to 30 -to find work ***and to stay in that work*** - or to find a club activity ***and stay in that activity*** and to co-operate correctly within a rigid peer group hierarchical system (侯輩・先輩) within Japanese society are factors that go towards creating pressure to isolate. As unemployment rates rise and the social stigma attached to any kind of so named ***drop out*** continues to prevail, this has created in natural turn a world of *internet cafe hermits, parasites, neats and hikikomori*..

Summary

In the diagrams 1 and 2 below, we can see how the 3 paradigms discussed in this paper centralize themselves in real terms. The polar cultural diversions expressed in the manifestation of opting out in the central circle.

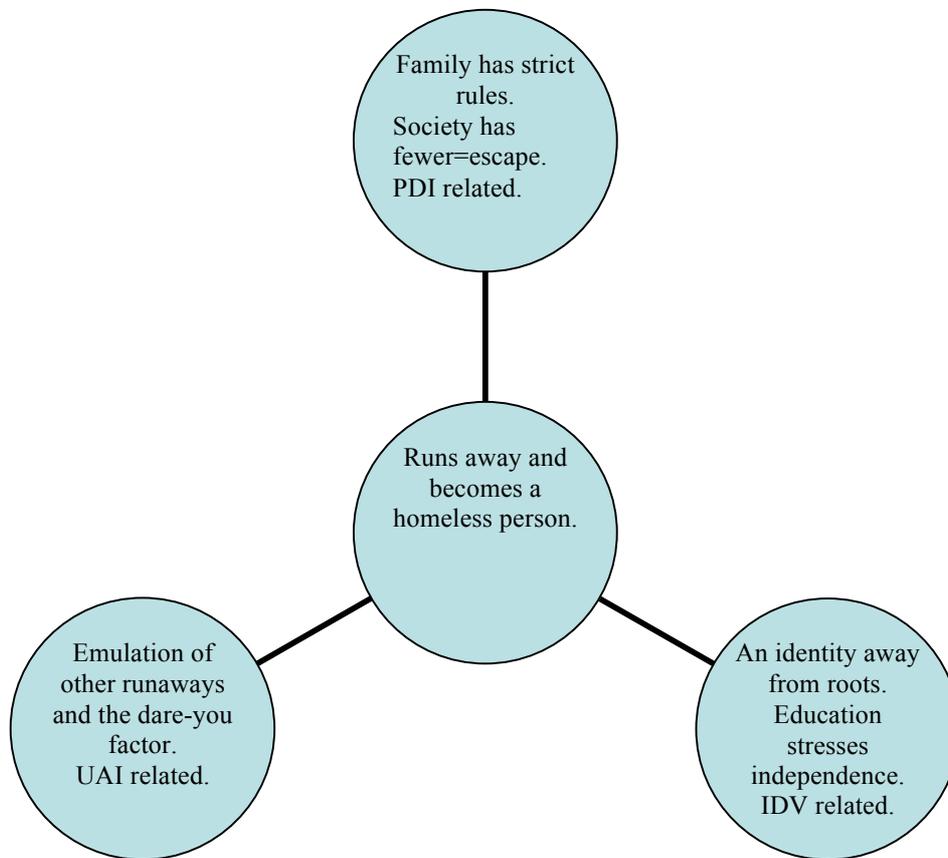
Diagram 1.



Japan: Retreat is inside.

Sugai:2013

Diagram 2.



Retreat is outside: America, U.K, Australia, New Zealand. Sugai 2013

While both social phenomena are rooted in rebellion or reaction against authority, *hikikomori* is unique because it chooses to place the family as a safer haven than the peer group. This in turn, suggests that bullying and school or work pressure play a **larger** part in retreat than in the counterpart phenomena of *runaway*, where perhaps young people are fleeing the pressure from family pressure. Parents in Western cultures usually encourage their children to leave home by 18 where in Japan “*parents are happy to allow their children to remain at home and live from their parents` income until their thirties*” (Suwa et al. 2003).

Conclusion

In America and England, New Zealand, Australia and other individualistic cultures the trend for opting out sees `runaways` leaving the home and seeking an alternative place to be. In this paper I have tried to analyze why Japanese *hikikomori* choose to confine themselves in their rooms within the context of 3 cultural indices as defined by the world famous cultural expert Geert Hofstede. I have tried to confirm my theory that the exact way `opting out` of society manifests itself in Japan is clearly culture reactive. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop further the enormous implications that this theory has on education and where change could be sought, but it is the foundation for further research into such considerations.

References.

Daily Yomiuri