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4-2. Difficulties faced by *hikikomori*

: From the life history in autobiographies and private papers

Kohki ITOH

Summary

In Japan, the withdrawal of youth from society, known as *hikikomori*, has been a problem since the 1990s. This report describes the difficulties in life that the *hikikomori* face using life history analysis of autobiographies and private papers written by *hikikomori*. Plummer (1983) has emphasized the contribution of life history analysis in understanding human phenomena, especially the subjective realities of individuals or perspectives of totality. Using Plummer’s perspective, I present the results of life history analysis of the autobiographies and private papers written by *hikikomori*. For analysis I have used published autobiographies and private papers (Ueyama, 2001; Katsuyama, 2001; Hayashi, 2003; Moroboshi, 2003; and Itoh, 2010).

1 Introduction

1-1. *Hikikomori* phenomenon in Japan

In Japan, the withdrawal of youth from society, known as *hikikomori*, has been a problem since the 1990s. According to research conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2010, the population of *hikikomori* [age range 15-39], is an estimated 696 thousand [comprising 1.79% of the total population of Japan]. In this survey, *hikikomori* is defined as “people who predominantly stay at home for more than six months, other than for household work, child-care, schizophrenia or physical illness.”

Because *hikikomori* usually have no income, their parents must financially support them. Many *Hikikomori* get older with little social involvement and their parents are often unable to support them financially, especially after retirement. Therefore, there is concern about the life security of *hikikomori* after the parents’ death. There is concern that such *hikikomori* have a high risk of becoming homeless or committing suicide.

However, the financial difficulties faced by *hikikomori* are also linked to other problems. When their parents are alive, their financial difficulties are not usually considered urgent. Generally, most of social programs for *hikikomori* are designed to enhance their social participation. Such programs include the support to improve their communication and social skills, mental
therapy directed at mental illnesses such as depression, and work training and job assistance.

These programs are generally carried out by both the public and private sector organizations such as NPOs, mental health centers, clinics, and schools. I think this support is a makeshift solution. Thus, in the short-term, the support may help *hikikomori* to become socially engaged. Although, in the mid-and-long term the fundamental troubles they face would not be solved.

In order to deepen understanding of the social implications of *hikikomori* issues in Japan, this presentation focuses on the difficulties of *hikikomori* life by referring to the autobiographies and private papers written by *hikikomori*.

1-2. Approach

- Autobiographies and private papers written by *hikikomori* (Ueyama, 2001; Katsuyama, 2001; Hayashi, 2003; Moroboshi, 2004; and Itoh, 2010)

This presentation uses autobiographies and private papers written by *hikikomori*. Plummer (1983) [sociologist in England] has emphasized the contribution of life history analysis in understanding human phenomena, especially the subjective realities of individuals or perspectives of social totality. Using Plummer’s perspective, I present the results of life history analysis of the autobiographies and private papers written by five *hikikomori*.

First is Kazuki Ueyama, who was born in 1968. He refused to go to junior high school. After dropping out from senior high school, he went to university, but he couldn’t continue to attend classes and took time off from school several times. After his father died, he struggled and eventually managed to graduate from university. After graduating from university, he worked part-time at several places but at each place did not last long. Eventually, he became a *hikikomori* again. However, as he joined a self-help support group for *hikikomori* and shared his own experiences with others, he came to support other *hikikomori*.

The second person, Minoru Katsuyama was born in 1971. He suffered from an emotional disorder since junior high school. He entered high school, but eventually refused to go to high school. Finally he dropped out and became *hikikomori*. Except to go to the library, he did not go out. After going to a to mental clinic, he started to work part-time at the post office.

Next, Naomi Hayashi was born in 1973. She refused to go to junior high school in her second year. After that, she was a hikikomori for the next six years. After she developed relationships with people at a local church, she decided to go to a mental clinic. Eventually, she passed the high school equivalency exam, went to university in Japan, and studied in graduate school in the United States.

Fourth, Noa Moroboshi was born in 1968, became *hikikomori* after the graduation from university. At the age of 29, he went to the professional training college specialized in design. Two years later, he graduated and found a job. However, he could not adjust to the working environment and other colleagues. He quitted the job and became a *hikikomori* again.

Finally, it is about myself. Kohki Itoh was born in 1984. I have had an emotional disorder since high school. I dropped out of high school and passed a high school equivalency exam. In
order to prepare for the university entrance exams, I left home and went to prep school in Osaka. However, I became hikikomori during this time. Two years later, I went to evening high school, and graduated. After graduation, I went to university, and now study graduate school.

2 Focusing on the characterization of hikikomori

What are the difficulties faced by hikikomori? By focusing on autobiographies and private papers of the five hikikomori mentioned above, I would like to focus on two typical issues of hikikomori; age and sexuality.

2-1. Issue concerning age

The first typical issue regarding their worries about age is a seniority.

➢ Seniority

The story about seniority is described as an important one. For example, Hayashi said “I thought that I could not get a job at a regular company, because I entered university late, and I would not be considered as shinsotsu [新卒: fresh college graduate]” (Hayashi, 2003: 138). Here, Hayashi expresses difficulties hikikomori face in the Japanese recruitment system. Under this system, students must graduate from university within the standard time (four years) and be accepted for a job before graduating. In other word, students must not repeat the same grade or have failed a school entrance exam of a particular year, and must have found a full-time job when graduating from university. This recruitment system is called shinsotsu-ikkatsu-saiyo [新卒一括採用: salaried workers hired fresh out of university]. Obviously, most Hikikomori cannot adjust to this system, and thus they generally face difficulties in getting jobs.

While this story about seniority mentions the difficulties faced by hikikomori in Japanese employment system, it also involves more conventional issues in the workplace with other colleagues. Moroboshi said, “I did not fit into the human relationship at office. My senior colleague that I was working with was high-powered and strong-minded and we did not get along. [...] I was a 31 years old new employee and most of my colleagues were young female employees, but in actuality I was older than them. When they did not respect me, my pride often got hurt.” (Moroboshi, 2003: 33) This story indicates how it is difficult for him to escape from the seniority system and social norms associate with it.

➢ Blank periods in work and education history

The second issue concerning age is about blank periods in work and education history.

The anxiety about blank periods in work and education history often appears in hikikomori writings. Ueyama said “I couldn’t tell the truth, so I glossed over my background to others. I couldn’t tell anyone that I hadn’t lived independently for 30 years. It was too shameful” (Ueyama, 2001: 104-5). His narrative indicates an anxiety about the blank periods in work and education history. Hayashi also said “my resume was full of blanks and those
would not be considered positively. Because I refused to go to school, I would be seen as a person who is not cut out for teamwork" (Hayashi, 2003: 155). Hayashi’s narrative reflects the current social convention in Japan that people are ashamed of blank periods in work and education history. Thus, these are regarded as negative factors in conducting human and social relationships in general. Hikikomori often continues for several years [in some cases decades], thus such a Japanese social environment prevents hikikomori from social participation. It is obvious that such Japanese conventions and system are critical to hikikomori, and an issue which hikikomori cannot easily escape.

I also mention this issue in my autobiography, writing “despite already running 2 years late, I have to go to high school for another 2 years. I felt embarrassed about my age.”(Itoh 2010: 40)

2-2. Sexuality

Narratives on love and sexuality

The narrative about love and sexuality often appears in autobiographies and private papers. Those narratives clearly reveal the difficulties which hikikomori have in communications with others. Katsuyama said “people say that you could seek a way out from hikikomori if you find a partner. How can I find a partner?..”(Katsuyama, 2001: 99-101) He writes about this question of finding a partner but concludes “there are more interesting things other than love. I will find a thing to do which I can devote myself to and will continue to do it forever”. . It’s more than probable that Moroboshi has a strong conflict with and complex about his love and sexuality, as he also mentions “I think hikikomori [especially men] want to get a partner” (Moroboshi, 2004: 103). Why are these desires about love and sexuality often expressed in autobiographies or private papers? Ueyama indicated that it is important to look at hikikomori’s love and sexuality in order to reconsider their relationships with other people in general. This approach is important because other views of hikikomori are generally linked to financial issues and family, and often neglect their individual needs and problems.

3 Conclusion and Further Research

Difficulties faced by hikikomori

As I have discussed, seniority is important issue concerning hikikomori. This issue has been researched from the early stages of this study. Long blank periods in work and education history due to hikikomori stand in the way of social participation. Thus, countermeasures that make periods of hikikomori short have been discussed. Through the issue of seniority and hikikomori we can understand the difficulties concerning age in Japan. In reconsidering this matter, we must seek how to link the hikikomori’s narrative on seniority and general human and social relationships in Japan.
Second, I have looked at the narrative on love and sexuality in the autobiographies and private papers. But this topic has not been focused on in early studies. However, I think that understanding the love and sexuality of *hikikomori* can also give us a picture of general human and social relationships in Japan.

Difficulties faced by *hikikomori* are expressed as anxiety about social and human relationships. His or her narratives seem to reflect not only their difficulties but also social conditions in Japan. I believe this perspective of seeking social change from the *hikikomori* issue is a very important one. In continuing this study for the future, I would like to stick to very simple and sometimes naïve narratives of *hikikomori*.

References


Video