

Re-inventing isolation

Imagining the other in seclusion

Naomi Berman and Flavio Rizzo

Abstract

Late capitalist imaginaries of Japan include characterisations of an insecure political economy with significant alterations to traditional norms, interpersonal relationships, and identities. Since Japan's neoliberal reform in the 1990s an insidious narrative of the hikikomori, characterised by perceived personal failure, social reclusiveness, and mental illness, has become commonplace in the mediascape. This paper offers a discussion on othering as emerging in prevailing cultural and counter-cultural narratives of hikikomori, and in an attempt to challenge traditional orthodoxies around the individual and society, explores the opportunities provided by possible alternatives. In trying to unlock the complexity of self-reclusion, this paper argues that it is impossible to understand this phenomenon in normative terms and highlights the ways in which these manifestations of self as other are being contested and challenged in cultural media texts. In problematising the pre-eminence of a distinct set of narratives that interact to discursively frame hikikomori, our intention is not to add to the existing explanatory claims, but rather to offer alternate approaches for understanding the social location of hikikomori within the public imaginary. Hikikomori exists in a liminal space of public understanding and private experience of self; simultaneously socially integrated yet set apart from society. Its existence, or more specifically the social reactions to its existence, highlights a need for a reconfiguration of traditional notions of the individual and society.

Keywords: Othering, Cultural Studies, Hikikomori, Popular Culture, Isolation, Seclusion

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Introduction

Late capitalist imaginaries of Japan include characterisations of an insecure political economy and unspoken fears and anxieties accompanying the vicissitudes of neoliberalism, significantly altering traditional norms, interpersonal relationships, and individual identities. This is particularly the case for young people where a sense of unease and anxiety has steadily been increasing. According to a global youth survey, Japanese young people are unhappier than most (Varkey Foundation 2017) and consider their lives too stressful (IYF 2017b). Moreover, a sense of apathy and disconnection with government, 76% of Japanese young people feel their government does not care about their wants and needs (IYF 2017a), accompanying Japan's 'silver democracy' has resulted in it being the third-lowest country for youth citizen participation (IYF 2017b). Not long prior, the neoliberal reform that was taking hold of Japan in the 1990s led to the emergence of group of "retreatists"; young people who are unable to conform to the vagaries of post-industrial life (Toivonen, Norasakkunit, and Uchida 2011, 6). Since this time an insidious narrative of the hikikomori, characterised by personal failure, social reclusiveness, and often mental illness, quickly became commonplace in the

mediascape. These depictions were buttressed by pathologising psycho-medical portrayals of individuals who were considered as suffering from acute withdrawal from family and society.

Originating in Japan, hikikomori is a term used to describe a form of extended social withdrawal. While it was first applied to describe a neurotic condition causing a state of acute social withdrawal, it became more popularised by Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saito (1998) when he provided an account emphasising the cultural characteristics contributing to the phenomenon in his book *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*. The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare categorises hikikomori as anyone who has withdrawn from employment and social activities, and not left their room/home for more than six months. There are also suggested co-occurring psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia (Kondo et al. 2013). Hikikomori is now recognised as existing in many parts of the globe (e.g., Spain, South Korea, France, Italy, Australia and the USA) (Kato et al. 2012; Teo et al. 2015)), however it remains a significant issue in Japan.

In a previous paper we argued that psychological explanations of hikikomori privilege reductionist and essentialising models of subjectivity that position the self as a set of ambiguously defined character traits and behavioural patterns (Berman and Rizzo 2019). We problematised the mainstream, largely institutionally ordained, explanations for hikikomori, and the persistent construction of hikikomori as deviant subjects. Indeed, it was only very recently (April 2019), that the Tokyo Metropolitan Government relocated its hikikomori support services away from the jurisdiction of juvenile delinquency and into the more appropriate health and welfare division (McKirdy 2019). The routine and unproblematic constructions of hikikomori include a separation from 'responsibility', isolation from social contacts and interaction, and an abandonment of the public sphere generally (Yong and Kaneko 2016). We argued that such

beliefs disguise the role and significance of discourses shaping broader social relations and normative forms of sociality.

Whereas our first paper attempted to show how psychology and culture collide through hikikomori imaginaries, this current paper seeks to advance this initial conversation by offering a deeper discussion of prevailing cultural, and counter-cultural, narratives and explores the opportunities provided by possible alternatives. Guy Debord's (1983) depiction of the self as a trajectory from *being* to *having* and from *having* to *appearing*, is of value here, for when applied to hikikomori, the lived experience seems to take a further step from *appearing* to a distant and filtered passive *witnessing*, a passivity that reinvents itself as a dynamic presence when it encounters its cultural reincarnations and online narratives. In trying to unlock the complexity of self-reclusion, this paper argues that it is impossible to understand this phenomenon in normative terms. We seek to move beyond our initial examination of limited and limiting configurations of self that have emerged through the social, cultural and institutional discourses that reduce hikikomori to those who are simply "unable to enter society or adapt to their surroundings" (Suwa and Suzuki 2013, 193), and explore the ways in which these manifestations of self as other are being contested and challenged in cultural media texts.

We previously pointed out how the discursive confines framing our understandings rely on largely orientalist and myopic constructions. Here we ask, what if we remove such orientalist lenses? What would take the place or fill the gap in the constitutive reasoning surrounding this phenomenon? Moreover, the question of how we are to resolve the uneasiness that surrounds hikikomori, or more specifically, those who disconnect from the (offline) social world remains extant. In problematising the pre-eminence of a distinct set of narratives that interact to discursively frame hikikomori, our intention is not to add to the existing explanatory claims, but rather to offer alternate approaches for understanding the

social location of hikikomori within the public imaginary. By reframing narratives of hikikomori beyond normative discourses, we hope to open up new possibilities for concepts such as isolation, at the same time also recognising that this pathway is beset with conflict and tensions. This has important implications for hikikomori as lived-experience. A key dimension of our approach in this paper is the adoption of an interdisciplinary lens bringing together cultural/media analysis with sociological perspectives. Rather than reproducing limiting or constraining notions of self that so many treatments before have done, this linking of disciplinary perspectives attempts to provide a set of analytical coordinates that opens up possibilities for discovering dimensions and expressions of self that are emerging out of hyper contemporary trends, from immersive gaming to notions of audiovisual bingeing.

Mainstream hegemonic cultural portrayals: tensions and contractions

A persistent trope surrounding hikikomori is how it is cast as a culturally specific phenomenon, despite its existence (albeit in smaller numbers) in countries around the world. The label ‘culture-bound syndrome’ emerged out of a silent collusion between psychological fields, media, and the public imaginary (Sakamoto et. al 2005; Slater and Galbraith 2011; Teo and Gaw 2010). This has contributed to various cultural portrayals in popular media such as the perpetual *Nihonjin-ron* myth (social anthropological explanations of Japanese cultural uniqueness) (Hendry 1998) and other supposedly ‘unique’ Japanese cultural practices such as *tokō-kyōhi* (school refusal), or *otaku-zoku* (obsessive anime and manga fans). Although Heinze and Thomas (2014) point out that once *otaku* entered a global stage, the negative image soon shifted, and they become the embodiment of digital vanguards - poster boys and girls for the “postmodernization of culture” in the Japanese imaginary (Azuma 2009, 10) - ultimately elevated to hero status in one particularly popular television series *Densha otoko*. After this point the baton of

social threat had been passed “by the otaku to the hikikomori” (Heinze and Thomas 2014, 154). Such perspectives localise hikikomori with a form of counter-cultural tendency (indeed an adaptive strategy) as a response by young people to the constraints of Japanese society. The social trap that rotates around such forceful adherences to harmony remains an essential social hiccup, the role of mainstream behaviour and Japanese normative social behaviour remains essential.

Arguably what differentiates acute social withdrawal as it occurs in the West from the Japaneseness of hikikomori, lies in the social and institutional reaction to the person’s withdrawal, which is usually accompanied by frantic efforts to remedy this situation through psychological, social and medical interventions (Heinze and Thomas 2014). Often cast as non-conformist behaviour, some have gone so far as to identify a set of ‘risk factors’ for this supposed rejection of dominant cultural ideals around ‘harmony-seeking’ (Norasakkunkit and Uchida 2011, 2014; Saito 2013). Such reductionist notions of risk factors underline the essential unbalance in hikikomori portrayals with its heavy reliance on autism spectrum disorder, emphasising a fundamental bias in favouring a clinical understanding, particularly the harmony-oriented frameworks within which youth are forced to carve out a sense of belonging. Such orientalist depictions are often supported by mainstream media accounts. The ‘shut-in’ or recluse, with an unhealthy obsession with video games or manga trope persists in Japanese cultural media texts. Hikikomori characters such as those found in the popular television and manga examples *Chäos;HEAd* or *Rozen Maiden* paint an image of individuals living in solitude whose only resort is to find comfort in the company of figurines or wind-up dolls that come to life.

The role of changing architectural arrangements and their effect on family dynamics and the ways in which individuals occupy domestic spaces is another key tension often underplayed in hikikomori treatments. Stemming out of the environment of discontinuity and reimagining of the Japanese family unit with a

fundamental shift towards non-authoritarian parenting, the hikikomori generation is the by-product of super-imposed model of family behaviour that had no precedent in Japanese society. These models were borrowed from US sitcoms defining the rising new spirit of “my home-ism” (Hashimoto and Traphagan 2008, 8). This new social order rotated around home ownership, and the space of these ever-shrinking dwellings became a sort of micro-utopia of family life. Family life based on the salaryman model where the husband’s absence is countered by the raising of the professional housewife and accompanying consumption of domestic goods as part of post-war aspirational normativity (Allison 2013). If we fast forward these first signs of artificiality and seeds of alienation to the multiplication of the visuals of super-imposed models of social behaviour of contemporary Japan and juxtapose the basic understanding that isolation itself is embedded in the current economic system, it is as if through the hikikomori phenomenon we are witnessing a further shift in the lived experience as envisioned by Guy Debord (1983). The transition into notions of appearing as the morphing of being. Appearing here seen both as the manufacturing of self-narratives and the psychological short-circuit created by fears of perceptions of self by others. Here transnational audiovisual streaming platforms with their uniform offering across boundaries further problematise the very shift Debord envisioned.

In the modern urban condition, social relations are characterised by a discombobulating of space and location as the self is simultaneously near and distant, connected and separated, included and excluded from others. Importantly, the social ambiguity arising out of the contradiction between being simultaneously inside and outside shapes patterns of sociality. What is crucial to underline here is how ambiguity itself, *aimai* in Japanese, is central to Japanese social relationships and the pursuit of social harmony. By extension it also plays a crucial role when it comes to national identity (Tamamoto 2003). At the one hand there is a unique social landscape, whereby old categories of social relations enter a new foggy era,

and on the other hand there exists shadowy understanding of social relationships that characterise Japanese norms of sociality. The result of these two dynamics is destabilising when it comes to the hikikomori, as ambiguity here becomes the ultimate impenetrable shield. The hikikomori are both victims of *aimai* and perpetrators of its dysfunctional understanding.

Moreover, as Allison (2012) argues, diminishing social ties, support and sense of belonging have contributed to the development of an awareness of a ‘relationless society’ (*muenshakai*) in post Fordist Japan, whereby the aspirational normativity engendered by my-homeism has been replaced by a sense of displacement and ungroundedness. Much of the problematisation stems from (collective) fears around loneliness, isolation and the perceived (or constructed) ‘threat’ to society that solitude poses. This signals key questions regarding expectations that people participate in society in normatively equal ways. Indeed, Chan and Lo (2013) explore social withdrawal in the context of the ‘hidden youth’ of Hong Kong, which is ostensibly a preferred lifestyle for such individuals. The authors assert that there is a correlation between length of withdrawal and improved quality of life (insomuch as social support exists). Other research has concurred by showing evidence of personal growth through self-seeking (Heinze and Thomas 2014).

Part of the tension surrounding hikikomori can be located in traditional humanist orthodoxy that views social and individual aims as inherently incommensurable (Rousseau 1997, 1979); Mill 1999). Rousseau (1979) for example, was concerned with how society constrains the individual, and is a threat to individual liberties through institutional arrangements, such as education, that privilege the production of citizens and thwart individuality. Such processes are assisted by idealised notions of community and social belonging, and the types of interactions and ways of being that these forms give rise to. In an examination of “communal being-ness as the source of ontological meaning” Studdert describes

‘communing’ as the being-ness arising out of ongoing action held in common with others (2016, 622). Borrowing from Hannah Arendt (1958), he posits that this action, sociality, is the totality of day-to-day interactions with others, occurring everywhere and between everything, whereby identity is borne moment-to-moment and is, crucially, both a temporary and shared outcome. Through actions our human being-ness is revealed; we simultaneously show ourselves and are seen by others in the public arena. “As we act in public, our being-ness emerges through these actions and is recognized and sustained as ‘who we are’ and ‘who you are’” (Studdert 2016, 626). In the case of hikikomori, the removal of oneself from the public arena not only stymies the fulfillment of these common (civil) expectations around sociality, but in the nexus of communing and the social world hikikomori remain perpetually unseen.

‘The stranger’ and forms of non-belonging

In an examination of the techniques for social survival individuals deploy to cope with post-modern urbanity, Simmel describes how, in order to preserve the self in the face of over stimulating urban conditions, an individual cultivates a veneer of indifference; a blasé attitude (Wolff 1950). Such an adaptation strategy militates against the loss of individuality and autonomy attenuated to city dwelling (Frisby and Featherstone 1997). Over time this gives rise to a form of psychological detachment from the social world, which is at the heart of psychic survival in metropolitan life. This process of self-differentiation (as well as other processes) throws into question our taken-for-granted assumptions around concepts such as detachment and highlights a need to reconceptualise it. For Simmel the types of relationships and emotional connections formed in the metropolis are largely tied to the money economy and are embodied in the concept of “the stranger”, an individual who is fixed to a particular spatial group, but at the same time does not belong (Wolff 1950, 402). The stranger insinuates that at the heart of modernity is

a confluence of remoteness and proximity; one who is simultaneously inside and outside society (Wolff 1950). The supposed ‘detachment’ of hikikomori from broader social ties results in a state of non-belonging whilst maintaining a presence. That is, whilst still being a member of a household, community and nation, hikikomori are simultaneously near and far, yet the tension between nearness and distance only serves to reinforce that which is not common.

Following Simmel, another symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman (1963) further explored strategies for coping with what he identified as the anxiety and fear engendered in interactions with others. He examined how strategies of adaptation, or managing encounters with strangers, are enacted in everyday cosmopolitan life. Goffman describes an embodied strategy of ‘civil inattention’, manifest as avoiding eye contact, which is intended to create space for strangers in public spaces. The ultimate act of avoiding responsibility and by extension ‘othering’, the individual does not look and does not see the other. Similarly, hikikomori could be seen as a form of civil inattention, but the management of proximity is symbolic, and in many cases coexists with online engagement with others. The chosen anonymity does not occur in public and therefore gives rise to a different set of rituals. While Simmel’s stranger embodies a form of sociality brought about by the increased demands for social interaction coupled with greater anonymity in metropolis living, Goffman’s constellation of norms and rituals that amount to civil inattention serve to create and sustain social order.

The conflicts and contradictions between inside and outside engendered in both Simmel’s and Goffman’s concepts are particularly salient for hikikomori. A common descriptor applied to hikikomori is to call it *tatemaie / honne* whereby the individual is seen to fail at successfully integrating their social identity (outside face) with their personal (inside) desires. As a cornerstone of the system of classification in Japan, Hendry (1987) shows how this movement between multiple selves in everyday social practice (speech forms) is an entrenched aspect of

socialisation and thus mechanism for social control. However, whereas civil inattention relies on a consensus or mutual agreement between interactants (to ignore one another), in the case of hikikomori this consensus is ostensibly absent. This is because civil inattention necessarily arises out of direct interactions between individuals who are compelled by the immediacy of the encounter to manage it. The ‘non-encounter’ in hikikomori, while removing the consensual attribute of civil inattention, is no less an ‘averted gaze’.

Part of the negative portrayal of hikikomori in medical and popular media discourses is predicated on the idea of ‘choice’, or as Overell (2018) states their construction as willful subjects.¹ This notion is drawn from Sara Ahmed’s (2011) exploration of the moral distinction between will and willfulness in 17th century literature whereby willfulness was depicted as a perversion of the promise of will:

The willful character insists on willing their own way, without reference to reason or command. Willfulness could be described as a character perversion: to be willful is to deviate, to will one’s own way is to will the wrong way. (Ahmed 2011, 240)

In literature this willfulness is embodied in the willful child, which threatens the continuity of the family. For hikikomori, this willfulness extends beyond the spoilt child trope and the family unit out to the national familial imaginary threatening social order (Overell 2018). Rather than submitting to national power and governance whereby individuals identify their will with “what is already willed” (Ahmed 2011, 245), the will of hikikomori does not align with the collective will of the family, community, and society. Yet for Overell, the willfulness of hikikomori is not passive, they should be seen as active willful subjects. Moreover, she argues that to construct hikikomori as a mode of “willful refusal” both sustains the deviant subjectivity, whilst simultaneously acting as a form of Queering in its

¹ This spelling is consistent with Ahmed’s intention of highlighting the presence of ‘will.’

resistance to dominant values (Overell 2018, 206-207). Through their (perceived) rejection or failure at fulfilling Japanese notions of hetero-masculinity, namely expectations of becoming a salaryman and a husband, hikikomori can be understood as an act that serves as a signifier of the fractures in contemporary Japanese heteronormative neoliberalism (Overell 2018).

This “productivity principle” and pursuit of private ends is not peculiar to Japan but is a dominant part of the modern West (Brown 2015, 41). Brown coins the term *homo oeconomicus* to describe a process of entrepreneurialising of the self, where the self is configured in economic rather than political and civil terms. Within the context of neoliberal values as individuals and families become responsabilised, notions of citizenship, that previously corresponded with a concern for the public good, are replaced with a notion of the citizen as *homo oeconomicus* (Brown 2015). Correspondingly, neoliberalism co-opts peoples’ need for achievement, power and self-esteem, which are granted in exchange for industriousness. As Nandy argues:

The mythology of modernity rests on the belief that these needs can be satisfied if only an individual works hard, is adaptable and psychologically healthy. That is, there is no insurmountable institutional constraint on anyone having a sense of achievement, potency and personal worth; all failures in this respect, the modern belief goes, are actually failures of culpable individuals, not of structures (Nandy 1987, 66).

This pervasive culture of productive work configures those who exist outside of it as less or non-productive, lacking in social utility, and thus to be managed.

Such sociological insights outlined above assist in illuminating the complex interplay between the self, the other and social and cultural practice, as well as offering a fresh perspective on a topic that up to now has been beset by incongruous and dispiriting debates. With our work we seek to share alternate ways of understanding the hikikomori experience, and the conditions of possibility that are presented when persisting and limiting portrayals are cracked open. The interdisciplinary framework helps us look beyond normative psychological

explanations while also avoiding wholly culturally deterministic narratives perpetuated in the media and institutional discourses. Thus, an interdisciplinary exploration of this issue feels both urgent and overdue in highlighting the sociological significance and critical cultural analysis of hikikomori narratives.

Hikikomori as a form of resistance

More recently there has been an emergence in the mediascape of texts designed to resist mainstream negative portrayals of hikikomori. Notably, in 2016 *hikikomori shinbum* ('newspaper') was founded by an ex-hikikomori, originally as a protest against the rising number of support groups who were using force to bring hikikomori out of their rooms: a popular interventionist action that some critics argue ignores human rights (McKirdy 2019). The bi-monthly hard copy and digital circulation's key mission is to provide a counter-narrative to the often sensationalised and inaccurate depictions of hikikomori reported by the media. It includes a collection of essays by and interviews with hikikomori and experts, as well as information and events for supporting families with hikikomori members. Another online magazine, also produced by hikikomori, called *hikipos* also advocates for the empowerment of hikikomori by providing a platform for their perspectives to be heard. These attempts to give a 'voice' to hikikomori offer a symbolic emancipation from the media-driven negative portrayals and treatment of hikikomori by Japanese society. Further unpacking these negative projections is key to opening up a crack into these normative hiccups.

Re-imagining isolation – the 'postmodern hermit'

Much of the mainstream cultural discourse on hikikomori disguises an alternate narrative that is rendered through social media, chat lines and counter-popular culture reshaping and to some extent creating a hikikomori mythology. Within these boundaries it is interesting to understand the role of 'the unperceived'. The idea of

being self-reclusive by extension unlocks a large space left open by situations that one will never get to witness. This simple subtraction of direct experience (being locked at home) initiates a sort of mythical encounter, an imagining, that intersects with, and transforms, the pragmatic space of a tangible experience. Moving beyond the idea of a common ground of shared knowledge, we go towards a dynamic in which the particular and the subjective are at the center. This hazy knowledge that arises from self-reclusion becomes a crucial seed for further imagining. What elements go into the creation of mytho-poetic spaces and experiences and how are those interpreted and transmitted across different cultural, linguistic, and formal boundaries is a question that needs exploration. The act of rising up against an imposed reality builds identity and the act of severing contact with the outside has to be considered both as a propulsive force just as much as a refraining impulse; this is a nodal point.

Conclusion

A central theme throughout this paper has been to show that there is a need to reconceptualise agency and experience in hikikomori imaginaries. Using an interdisciplinary framework, we have attempted to argue that agency here is not merely the subversion of expectations and traditional norms. Indeed, Nandy in describing Ghandi's theory of non-violent conflict resolution, argues that the oppressed victim, "... becomes a nonplayer for the existing system—one now plays another game, refusing to be either a player or a counter-player" (Nandy 1987, 34). This involves not just freedom from the conditioning influence of ideal norms, but to not be configured by them at all. In this way, hikikomori can be seen as an emancipatory practice. Glynos takes this one step further, in an exploration of self-transgression as psychoanalytic freedom, by asserting that "... a condition of freedom is the uncoupling of transgressive enjoyment and the desire to conform to an ideal. One way of accomplishing this uncoupling would be to eliminate the

desire to conform to the above ideal” (2003, 15). The notion of extinguishing the desire to conform to an ideal is what enhances freedom, yet the web of audiovisual materials create the friction out of which conforming itself becomes a liminal space of constant and fluid change.

This paper has offered an exploration of the conflicts and contradictions in the realm of the social world. In its most sinister incarnation, hikikomori embodies public anxiety around social disintegration and fragmentation. In its most benign form, it is merely “social ineptness” (Heinze and Thomas 2014, 158). Hikikomori exists in a liminal space of public understanding and private experience of self; simultaneously socially integrated yet set apart from society. There is a need to problematise the (reverse) orientalist impulse to clump hikikomori along with *tokō-kyōhi* or *otaku-zoku* in a cultural fetishisation process. Sociologist Ishikawa Ryōko (2007) underlines the importance of a rethinking of the phenomenon as a long-term process where self-inquiry is central. Hikikomori’s existence, or more specifically the social reactions to its existence, highlights a need for a reconfiguration of traditional notions of the individual and society.

Up until now, hikikomori exists in the public imaginary as an overdetermined concept, and the existing definitions and explanations fail to fully account for the ways in which hikikomori themselves challenge prevailing narratives of self. bell hooks (1996) argues that media is a form of ‘informal pedagogy’ and in this way it is powerful in shaping popular public discourses in the domains of race, sex, and class. However, the ‘teachings’ she refers to equally apply to hikikomori and thus need to be identified and understood, including the tensions existing in the relationship between psychology and culture whereby various media sources perpetuate a set of misleading representations of hikikomori that highlight the importance of popular culture as a source of knowledge of social issues. Here there are crucial implications for how we understand the ‘isolation’ part of hikikomori and our ontological boundaries in social life. In cultivating a separate

existence from the outside world hikikomori forces us to re-examine boundariness in contemporary social life, particularly an ostensible artificial distinction between inside and outside, thus reframing the social location of hikikomori in the public imaginary.

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