New Starts at New Start: Recovery and the Work of Hikikomori

Ramsey Ismail
PhD Student, Department of Anthropology, UCSD

Defined by psychologist Tamaki Saito as a period of social isolation in the absence of any other clear mental health issues for a period of six months or longer, hikikomori (social withdrawal) emerged as a condition among Japanese youth in the late 1980s and immediately captured the attention of the Japanese and international public.

According to various government and third-party surveys, hikikomori number from approximately 500,000 to two million people (Kiyota et al, 2008; Furlong, 2008; Hairston, 2010). Thus, while hikikomori are understood to struggle with long bouts of loneliness and isolation from their peers and parents, due to constant anxiety over their inability to perform among Japan’s competitive capitalist-oriented social expectations, both academics and professionals continue to struggle to comprehend exactly who hikikomori are and how to help them.

Based on fieldwork at New Start, a non-profit organization that helps hikikomori recover, this paper examines the ways residents at New Start navigate this uncertainty and gain moral agency (Myers, 2016). Compiled from over a dozen interviews, I focus on three representative trajectories that demonstrate how residents navigate the competing discourses surrounding the competing clinical and social categories of hikikomori and NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), through which they embark on a journey from economically unproductive recluses, to productive capitalist citizens pursuing their own version of a “nearly normal” (Berlant, 2013) life. The various effects accomplished by hikikomori both as individuals and as a social category, I conclude as “the work of hikikomori.”

Ramsey Ismail is a 4th-year Psychological/Medical Anthropology student in UCSD who is interested in the intersections between gender, labor, and mental health in Japan.

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