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The Impact of Globalization on Post World War II Japan

Phillip Luu, Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Charles Gramlich, Psychology

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the effects of globalization over several generations of the Japanese population, specifically the Japanese baby boomers and subsequent kin. The island nation of Japan was demilitarized by the Allied forces at the end of World War II, and Imperial Japan was abolished under the Treaty of San Francisco (Treaty of peace with Japan, 1951). With civil work becoming the only means of labor available, competition for corporate work became hotly contested, resulting in phenomena known as karoshi (death by overwork) and karo-jisatsu (suicide by overwork). The children of baby boomers rejected the salarymen lifestyle of their parents, leading to the rise of freeters, NEETs, and hikikomoris. This amalgam of young adults does not seek substantial careers or education but rather prefer part-time jobs or reject society altogether. Combined with a steadily declining birthrate, Japan’s future workforce is in peril. Reevaluation and reform is vital if Japan wishes to maintain its position as one of the world’s wealthiest nations.

Key Terms: Freeter, Hikikomori, Karo-jisatsu, Karoshi, NEET

After the end of World War II, the Imperial Island Nation of Japan was no more (Kawanishi, 2008). Under the guidance of the United States, Japan rebuilt itself as a democratic, capitalist nation without an army. Therefore, civil work became the only option for the Japanese. In the last 60 years, globalization has heavily altered the Japanese work culture. Long, unpaid hours and stiff competition on a small, densely populated island gave rise to karoshi (death by overwork) and karo-jisatsu (suicide by overwork) (Kawanishi, 2008). The younger, more recent, generation began to reject the work life of their baby boomer parents. Beginning in the early 1980s, many the baby boomers’ children became freeters (temporary workers) and NEETs (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), terms designated to young adults who neglect receiving higher levels of education and traditional careers (Reiko, 2006). Even the Japanese population took a dive around the early 1980s and the country’s work force is in danger of shrinking significantly (Reiko, 2006). This critical literature review will explore karo-jisatsu and the rise of freeters, NEETs, and hikikomoris (shut-ins) as the result of globalization.

Karoishi and Karo-jisatsu

Many highly industrialized, 1st world countries boast supposed excellent living conditions and longer life expectancies. However, more than a handful of these 1st world countries have among the top suicide rates in the world (Fathers for Life [FFL], 2005). Japan, one of the world’s largest economies, bears the 7th highest suicide rate globally, as of 2005. In a nation where the
population has declined to the point where the elderly and the young are equal in numbers, suicide cannot be ignored.

Japan’s cultural values are deeply rooted in eastern traditions such as Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and only in the last 150 years has Western culture taken root (Abe et al., 2004; Kawanishi, 2008). Unlike many Christianized western nations, Japan has never regarded suicide as strictly taboo. In fact, Shintoism and Buddhism never established punishments for suicides, unlike in Christian countries where suicide is regarded as a grievous sin against God (Abe et al., 2004). Religions such as Christianity and Islam have actually been linked to lower suicide tendencies among those who have a strong religious family and friend support system. This social cohesion is not exhibited among the Japanese (Dervic et al., 2004).

As in many East and Southeastern Asian countries, Japan holds very high social expectancies for its citizens. As Kawanishi (2008) states, the practice of overworking employees has been common within corporate Japan for decades. Workers have engaged with “service overtime,” working past their standard 40 hours a week for no additional pay. Whether at the office or at home, workers are expected to pick up the slack from what employers refer to as “inefficient day laborers.” Employers desire considerate, loyal, selfless, and efficient workers that usually end up being promoted to mid-management level positions. Kawanishi (2008) notes that these favored types of workers make up the majority of all karo-jisatsu-related cases (suicide by overwork) in Japan, due to their willingness to voluntarily take on more work. Males, particularly middle age men, constitute the bulk of these suicides. This is to be expected because women are relatively underrepresented in corporate Japan. Even younger males are prone to suicide in corporate Japan thanks to the new practice of performance-based evaluations, which promotes employees based on both the workload an employee has taken on as well as one’s personality (Kawanishi, 2008).

Karo-jisatsu is not the only “epidemic” that appeared after World War II. Karoshi, or death by overwork, first known as “occupational sudden death,” was described in 1969 (Kawanishi, 2008). The term “occupational sudden death” gained popularity after a 29 year old man died from a stroke while working for a Japanese newspaper company. From a medical standpoint, Karoshi victims often die of strokes, heart attacks, and a few forms of hemorrhaging. During the bubble economy of the late 1980s, karoshi became a major public concern after several high profile executives died of occupational sudden death (Abe et al., 2004). Newspapers and reporters quickly adopted the term karoshi, raving of this new “epidemic.” Soon after, the Japanese government established karoshi hotlines and karoshi counseling centers. Many other companies followed suit and even set limits on overtime hours. As of today, the government has not investigated the epidemiology of karoshi in regards to the entire Japanese population. Less than 60 karoshi cases are compensated by the Ministry of Labor annually. However, experts argue that at least 10,000 legitimate karoshi cases surface every year (Kawanishi, 2008).

Suicide may not be just the result of maintaining burdening occupations, but may also be the result of job loss. The early 1990s bubble-economy burst marked the beginning of high unemployment and a 40% suicide increase. Hanging became the suicide method of choice in Japan (Abe et al., 2004). The loss of occupation produced a critical identity crisis for many middle age men, who had thought they would work for their companies for the rest of their lives.
Laid off employees, confused and terrified by their predicament, fell into severe depression, followed by suicide or further health deterioration (Kawanishi, 2008).

Post World War II Japan, much like today, was a work oriented nation. The 1950s were extremely chaotic, changing times that subjected the Japanese populace to shifts in beliefs and alterations in old ideals. The once proud warrior class disbanded as the Japanese military became no more, while the loathed merchant classes catapulted into the upper echelons of Japanese society. Kawanishi (2008) describes the post World War II period to be so tumultuous that many young adults could no longer cope with the frenzy and committed suicide. This is the very same generation of the middle age men who were victims of karo-jisatsu, the same men that were called “corporate warriors” and died in the name of their companies. This behavior can be traced back to medieval Japan, where the samurai warrior nobility committed seppuku, ritualistically disemboweling themselves or begging for euthanasia by means of decapitation out of shame for failing an important cause (Kawanishi, 2008). Suicide notes are often found in karo-jisatsu cases. Victims usually apologize for the trouble they have caused others and for failing to live up to their companies’ goals or missions. To the Japanese, suicide is the ultimate apology that atones for all grievous sins, failures, and mistakes (Kawanishi, 2008).

**Hikikomoris, Freeters, and NEETs**

After decades of combating karo-jisatsu and karoshi, the Japanese public now faces a new social problem known as hikikomori, or hikikomorism, as it is called in the West. Categorized as severe social recluses, hikikomoris are generally shut-ins ranging from 16 years of age to 30 (Watts, 2002). Hikikomoris tend to be high school or college dropouts that have left their academic careers due to a confluence of factors. As social recluses, hikikomoris usually do not hold any jobs or training positions. Some see hikikomorism as a reaction to the prevalence of entertainment, technology, parental leniency, and wealth (Watts, 2002). Whatever the causes may be, hikikomorism poses yet another threat to the future work force of Japan, as well as a problematic psychological issue.

In the late 1980s, Japanese psychologists coined the term freeter to describe a young adult, excluding homemakers, who was neither pursuing an academic career nor working a fulltime job nor searching for one (Reiko 2006). The term freeter is derived from the English word free and the German word for worker, arbeiter (Haghirian, 2009). Freeters surfaced at a time when Japanese pop culture began to emerge as an international sensation (Reiko, 2006). Many freeters have chased a lifelong dream of working in the entertainment business, especially in music and film. Freeters are often romanticized as individualistic dream chasers, rebelling against the lifestyle of salarymen. These young adults tend to rely on their parents’ income and may even live out on their own with the help of a monthly allowance. Freeters make up about 10 to 20 percent of all young adults in Japan, a heavy blow to a country that has as many young adults as elderly people (Reiko, 2006).

In 2000, the media in the United Kingdom coined the term NEET to identify a growing young adult population exhibiting many similar behavioral patterns as freeters (Reiko 2006). NEET, or Not in Employment, Education, or Training, is a distinct classification from freeter, as NEETs are generally not seeking any particular career. Though NEETs tend to hold low wage
and brief menial jobs, a lack of vocational direction classifies NEETs as not in employment. Like freeters, NEETS rely heavily on parental support.

The term NEET was later adopted by many East Asian countries, including Japan. Despite the potential future problems freeters and NEETs might have presented, initially the Japanese government largely ignored the situation. However, in 2002, government statistics discovered that about 2.5 million freeters and more than 650,000 NEETs lived in Japan, and that population continued to grow. Reiko (2006) hypothesized that the new globalized economy destabilized occupations available in Japan, which not only resulted in the rise of karo-jisatsu, but also the increasing number of freeters and NEETs. Without having sufficient training or higher education, these young adults are left out of Japan’s labor force and may even find suicide a viable option once they no longer receive parental funding (Reiko, 2006).

According to Ogino (2004), the Itou group concluded in 2003 that hikikomorism is not a psychological disease or disorder and that individuals must seclude themselves for at least six months before they may be referred to as hikikomoris. The Itou group also claims that hikikomoris do not display any signs of mental retardation or mental illnesses, despite the prevalent depression symptoms they exhibit. Hattori (2005) found that hikikomoris come from mostly affluent or middle class families with usually no history of physical or sexual abuse. However, hikikomoris tend not to relate well to others, including family members. The majority of Hikikomoris are young male adults. Hikikomoris have displayed violent behaviors and minor acts of aggression toward family members on occasion. Hattori’s (2005) patients have reported emotional abuses from parents despite the appearance of stability among their families. Patients also reported that their parents were often too busy with work to have any familial communication and often failed to provide emotional support to their children. Patients would describe their emotional state to be abandonment at best, as even the act of making eye contact was often avoided by many parents.

Hattori’s (2005) patients even learned to stay quiet and/or invisible to avoid bothering parents. Over half of patients reported that their mothers had punished them in the form of mushi, in which the mother would intentionally avoid contact with her child and often never explained her behavior. Half of the patients even reported that they were victims of ijime, a school yard practice involving groups shunning individuals for no apparent reason, which often resulted in physically and emotional bullying. In Japan, such bullying is highly detrimental to individuals, largely due to the Japanese collectivist culture in which the group is emphasized over the individual (Hattori, 2005).

The term hikikomorism has been popularized and stigmatized since 2000 due to reports of socially-withdrawn individuals committing murders and kidnappings. Media coverage portrays hikikomoris as spoiled, lazy kids unwilling to pursue careers, as well as psychotic recluses who are ready to snap at the drop of a hat (Reiko, 2006). It can be interpreted that hikikomoris are the result of emotional neglect from a society that has initially dismissed their situation. Only when 1.4 million hikikomori cases were reported in 2005 were actions taken by bureaucratic and academic institutions to ensure a healthy future work force (Hattori, 2005).
**Conclusion**

Post World War II Japan experienced great social changes as a result of globalization. The rapid rebuilding and commercialization of Japan put heavy strains on corporate workers (Kawanishi, 2008). In order to gain a stable foothold in the global market, Japanese workers were often asked to perform service overtime. Workers would work unpaid hours at the office or at home (cloaked overtime). Previous Japanese laws did not place a limit on overtime hours that workers could accumulate, often leading to corrupt corporate practices and service overtime abuse. Many of these corporate warriors died as the result of karoshi or karo-jisatsu. Karo-jisatsu became more prevalent during the bubble-economy burst of the 1990s. During the 1990s and early 21st century, jobs became increasingly scarce (Reiko, 2006).

Traditionally, the Japanese were able to immediately get jobs after graduation. However, outsourcing in South Korea, China, and parts of Southeast Asia limited employment. As a result, the younger generation began to reject the traditional life of salarymen. Terrified of corporate abuses and unemployment, many young adults chose to live life as freeters, NEETs, and hikikomoris. Hikikomoris, perhaps the most severe alternative life style of the three, may have also been the result of being raised by emotionally detached salarymen parents (Hattori, 2005).

Considering the number of karoshi and karo-jisatsu cases, the rising population of freeters, NEETs, and hikikomoris, and a steadily declining population, Japan’s future workforce is in danger. Japan must assess and reform its post World War II culture to secure its position as a global economic powerhouse. Some possible government interventions could include educating the public about freeters, NEETs, and hikikomoris, enforcing labor policies such as work hour restrictions, and providing therapy funding for hikikomoris and their families. Increasing government-controlled occupations and training programs targeting young adults may also ameliorate the growing population of freeters and NEETs. One final reform should target families, allowing mothers to take properly paid maternity leaves and provide on-site day care facilities for working families. These reforms can only be enacted given that there is enough support from grass-root organizations and the government.
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