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Hikikomori as a Gendered Issue
Analysis on the discourse of acute social withdrawal in
contemporary Japan.

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Hikikomori, an Introduction.

In the year 2000, a new social malady apparently unique to Japan came into the public awareness through various news reports by media outlets in Japan. A new term, *hikikomori*, was coined for this social phenomenon by Japanese psychologist Tamaki Saito to describe a disturbing behavioral trend towards complete social withdrawal among Japanese youths. This new social label, *hikikomori*, began to spread in an almost viral fashion throughout the Japanese consciousness gaining ever-higher visibility through media coverage associating sensational acts of violence to those suffering from the *hikikomori* 'malady'. It was not long until the definition of '*hikikomori*' was co-opted by public health professionals to officially classify reclusive youths who exhibited deviance by refusing to participate in socially established norms. From the mouths of institutional and governmental spokesmen, the classification of '*hikikomori*' was accompanied by an air of legitimacy and so accepted by the public as fact; an affliction which media sources proclaimed as a distinctively Japanese illness with no Western equivalent in circumstance or scope:

Hikikomori noun, 1. a near-total social withdrawal on the part of some Japanese young people, chiefly teenage boys and young men [emphasis mine]: "Linked to the upsurge in child violence is the phenomenon of *hikikomori* . . . in which young people sever contact as far as possible with the outside world" (*Scotland on Sunday*). 2. a young Japanese who has chosen such a withdrawal: "I didn't want anyone to see me, and I didn't want to see anyone," says a *hikikomori*, 23, who finally came out of his reclusive world a year ago"

(*Time*). (The Atlantic Online, December 2000)

Two primary points of view of *hikikomori*, that of a social problem versus a psychological one, would eventually emerge in the public eye on the *hikikomori* label. However, in relation to the utility of describing people the label purports to classify, it is interesting to note the speed at which the term of '*hikikomori*' spread through the social consciousness of Japan and, by extension, the media outlets around the world. Further, the straightforward acceptance by the populace of the blanket *hikikomori* 'diagnosis' as sole explanation for non-normative social behaviors among some of Japan's youth in recent years is disturbing. Those people clumped together as sufferers of 'acute social withdrawal syndrome' in the media under the simplified moniker of '*hikikomori*' appear to be in actuality a heterogeneous group with

largely disparate personal reasons for their social withdrawal (Dzieszinski 2004). Despite the spread of the term '*hikikomori*' into the social consciousness and the questions surrounding the term's validity, the controversy surrounding the *hikikomori* issue represents a tangible and complex social phenomenon; it encompasses marginalizing the 'labeled' as deviant (Lofland 2002), reifying a supposition by the 'labelers', and passive acceptance of a possibly arbitrary social definition by the 'majority'.

It was only months after the word *hikikomori* appeared in the Japanese media that English language news stories, authored by Japanese media outlets and foreign correspondents, began to disseminate the new expression of *hikikomori* to the rest of the world. Attached to the news clippings about *hikikomori* was the subtle implication that *hikikomori* was indigenous to the cultural environment of Japan serving to further perpetuate the *nihonjin-ron* stereotype of Japanese uniqueness; a debatable proposition considering many social factors that are thought to 'cause' social withdrawal in Japanese society are found elsewhere in other information-based societies around the world. Some Western observers were quick to point out the 'utility' of the term *hikikomori* by those in positions of power in Japanese society and cynically questioned motivations for its usage as,

"*Hikikomori man* [emphasis mine] could have been tailor-made for a government needing an official label, and a ravenous press seeking a human face for a national ennui. Cameras rolled, Web sites were made and printing presses went hyperactive, churning out almost 30 *hikikomori*-related books in the past three years."

(Benjamin Secher, 2002)

The questions surrounding the conceptual term, '*hikikomori*,' in Japan presents a wealth of sociological opportunity deserving thorough critical examination as it is an issue that goes beyond those individuals defined as afflicted; it also acts as a mirror which reveals those behind the looking glass, those who initially found the necessity to coin the term and apply it to a segment of the next generation that does not fit within old social norms. The *hikikomori* topic exposes a whole range of intriguing social issues and processes in Japan to investigation and may even indicate that *the genesis of the hikikomori problem is not found within the individual but within the institutions of society*. Despite the initial media definition by *The Atlantic*, the question is what *exactly* encompasses the term '*hikikomori*'? How

pervasive is the phenomenon of **young Japanese males** who 'tune out' and shut themselves into their rooms? What are the societal factors that induce *hikikomori behavior* in an otherwise 'normal' person? Three of the most persistent issues surrounding the *hikikomori* phenomenon for this researcher is the possible medicalization of perceived social deviance (Lofland 2002), the all too eager application of the *Nihonjin-ron* classification to the phenomenon (Saito 2002), and the *overwhelming one gendered-ness of acute social withdraw in the perception of the Japanese public* (Arita 2001, Ashby 2002, Murakami 2000, Rees 2002, Reuters 2001, Saito 2002, Tolbert 2002).

Is the usage of the word *hikikomori* by institutional professionals the 'medicalization' of an anti-social behavior into a psychological illness? Could not this 'medicalization' be wielded as a means of social control on a population segment of youngsters that, in their withdrawal, are also conspicuously absent from traditional social institutional influences such as school, work, and peers? Is it necessary or appropriate for Japanese psychologists and health professionals to 'medicalize' an anti-social behavior pattern as a condition seriously deviant from the 'norm' and thus requiring psychological treatment as well as institutionalized control (Lofland 2002)? Is the avoidance of social interaction in Japanese society, currently dubbed *hikikomori*, a legitimately 'new' phenomenon or is it merely a new label for an older social phenomenon in Japanese culture such as *tôkôkyôhi*, school refusal, or *otakuzoku*, obsessive *anime* and *manga* fans? What of the elevation of the term *hikikomori* in public awareness by media-induced saturation into a prevailing public discourse? What role does the media play in exacerbating the *hikikomori* problem and promoting affinity or enthusiasm for the *hikikomori* 'lifestyle'? Finally, is it reasonable to attribute *hikikomori* as a cultural malady unique to Japan society and Japanese youth or is this supposition perpetuation of the *nihonjin-ron* myth of Japanese cultural uniqueness?

The prevailing discourse on *hikikomori*, both within Japan and without, is that acute social withdraw is a malady that afflicts **young Japanese males**. The focus of this research paper is to investigate why this is believed to be case within the public discourse and is this 'common wisdom' necessarily a true reflection of the *hikikomori* phenomenon? Most of the literature cited on *hikikomori*, such as the BBC report, "Japan: The Missing Million" (Rees 2002), which originally brought the issue to

Western awareness, indicates that it's **one million young men** who are the crux of this social crisis in Japan; its *young males who are cause for concern*: 'why are they hiding in their rooms?' From the viewpoint of a Western observer, conspicuous absence of reportage on female *hikikomori* begs the question: **Are there female hikikomori?** And if there are in fact females suffering from acute social withdraw, *why is there no vocal concern by the Japanese public for their plight?* If the stresses of similar school systems and family structures in Taiwan, Singapore and Korea are reportedly producing phenomenon of social withdraw in those countries similar to *hikikomori*, thus disproving the *nihonjin-ron* argument, are not the stresses of school and family the also same for both genders of youth in Japan?

Considering the shaky ground the public discourse on *hikikomori* in the view that it is unique to Japan, the *nihonjin-ron* argument (Rees 2000, Saito 2002), is it reasonable to assume that *only young males in Japan are becoming hikikomori?* Finally, if female *hikikomori* do indeed exist, where are they? Are they perhaps being labeled as something else in Japanese society? And if they do exist and are being ignored and or relabeled as something else, what does this treatment of female *hikikomori* reveal about Japanese society? By investigating this issue here, it is hoped that it will shed light on the complexity of the *hikikomori* phenomenon and perhaps aid in addressing the wider issues of contemporary youth problems in Japan as they pertain to young women. The greatest focus of this paper will be on the social discourse and social expectations on Japanese women since the post-bubble period of the 1980's as I feel those perspectives may prove the most constructive to the relationship of females with the *hikikomori* issue.

Statistical data: Exploring the pervasiveness of the hikikomori condition.

For the time being, the assumption will be made that the *hikikomori* prognosis has a kernel of commonsense truth and condition is, in some respects, legitimate in order to allow an open exploration of the 'affliction', be it teenage depression, agoraphobia, or acute anxiety; some phenomenon is occurring to Japan's young men and women. By remaining within the assumed 'definition' of *hikikomori*, investigation will allow an understanding of the mindset of those imposing the classification as well as

provide a concrete means in which to question the validity of the claims surrounding the phenomenon. When the *hikikomori* problem was first widely publicized, demographics of *hikikomori* victims suggested it to be a youth based 'illness' which also appears to **primarily afflict young males, with no mention of females at all**. Several media resources (Arita 2001, Ashby 2002, Tolbert 2002.) were forwarding psychiatrist Tamaki Saito's theoretical estimates that between 500,000 to over 1,000,000 **Japanese male youths** aged fourteen-to-twenty years were suffering from the *hikikomori* condition as evidenced by their dropping out of active participation in society and sequestering themselves into the social safety of isolation in their rooms (Saito 2002). According BBC's Phil Rees (2002), who uses Saito's estimates, *one in ten Japanese male youth today* suffer from the *hikikomori* syndrome.

Media sources seem to be improperly analyzing the data and the scope of the problem, for if the variously quoted Saito statistics of 500,000 to 1.2 million male *hikikomori* shut-ins from the 14-20 age group is reasonably correct (Larimer 2001, Rees 2002, Secher 2002, Tolbert 2002), then the pervasiveness of *hikikomori* phenomenon in the Japanese population is disquieting; *and this not even taking into consideration that the actual hikikomori population might be double what Saito has stated if female incidents of social withdraw are also taken into account*. Population census data collected by the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunication (2000) provides an illustrated population pyramid of Japan. Adding up *just* the males in the 14-20-age bracket elicits a total population of roughly 4.2 million males in that combined gender and age demographic in Japan; *doubling this to fairly reflect uncounted female hikikomori would put the total population of Japanese youths in that age bracket closer to 8 million*. What this means, is *if over 1 million Japanese males, by Saito's reckoning, aged 14-20 indeed suffer from hikikomori, then the public discourse in Japan is stating that 20 percent of all adolescent males in Japan, and approximately 1 percent of the population, are abstaining from participation in Japanese social institutions!* Calculating in the theoretical population of female *hikikomori* unrecognized or ignored by Japanese experts would make that figure closer to 2 percent of the entire population of Japan; a figure pushing the *hikikomori* issue, based on Saito's and the mass media's claims, even further into the realm of either a national emergency or total implausibility. If

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Saito's number of 500,000 male *hikikomori* is even a remotely accurate appraisal, then Japanese society as a whole is in dire peril in the coming decades for as Saito points out:

"I think it is dangerous for Japanese society because such people never work or pay tax," he said. "We might be able to rescue some, but half a million will stay withdrawn from society for 20 or 30 years. We could end up supporting them for half a century."

(Watts 2000)

If the outside observer were to accept Saito's assessment on the scope of the *hikikomori* problem in Japan today, *it would mean that a notable proportion of the next generation of the Japanese workforce, both male and female, has already dropped out of the system and Japan can expect serious labor shortages as well as verging on a welfare state in order to support over one million non-productive members of society over the next fifty years!*

However, no one is quantitatively confident about the true scale of the *hikikomori* problem in Japanese society; other experts have proposed a much more conservative estimate of a total of only 50,000 people so afflicted as *hikikomori* in Japanese society (Larimer 2000). Between the disparate estimates of 50,000 to 1.2 million lies the actual number of male and female social drop-outs in Japanese society as defined by '*hikikomori*'. Adding to the problem of a more accurate '*hikikomori* census' is the seclusionary nature of the supposed malady: There is no refuting that *some phenomenon* is occurring within Japanese society, but as long as the causes and symptoms of social withdrawal remain poorly defined and media hype puts forward only the most sensational numbers on the shut-in crisis, caution is advised at taking too much stock in the higher estimates of *hikikomori* sufferers. If the questionably higher estimates of one million or more *hikikomori* cases is accurate, only the due passage of time will indicate if such a calculation is the unfortunate case through employment numbers, economic indicators, and other indirect means.

It would appear that the alarmingly high quotes of *hikikomori* numbers by psychiatric experts, as well as high-profile incidents of violence attributed to *hikikomori*, caused the Japanese government to finally take some action on the *hikikomori* question. Their initial action was to undertake the first official survey on the *hikikomori* issue as conducted through the *Japanese Ministry of Health and Labor* and

release the results to the public May 4, 2001 (The Australian 2001, Secher 2002). Conducted over a twelve-month period, the survey revealed 6,151 cases of *hikikomori*, though there is no indication of gender in that report, registered at 697 public health centers across Japan between May 8th and November 30th in 2000; *a concrete number in sharp contrast* with Saito's estimated 1.2 million *hikikomori* nationwide. The criterion in the survey defined '*hikikomori*' as those people who have socially withdrawn from society for six months or more (Secher 2002, Watts 2002).

Results from the *Ministry of Health and Labor* survey indicate that despite popular public perception that the *hikikomori* syndrome is the dominion of *younger Japanese males*, the numbers potentially indicate a much more complex and troubling social issue; possibly a decades-long problem that has been, up to this point, unrecognized by the media and social institutions. In the surveyed 6,151 *hikikomori* cases, the *10-15 age cohort number was 8.4 percent* of the total. The *16-20 age cohort was 19.8 percent*, those aged *21-25 equaled 20.8 percent*, while the *26-30 age cohort equaled 18.2 percent*. After age 30, percentages drop off with the *31-35 age cohort equaling 10.2 percent* and those *36 and above totaling only 8.6 percent*. This would mean that of the reported cases, those over the age of 26 equal 36.8 percent of the group surveyed; if nearly 40 percent of *hikikomori* are in their late twenties or older then the prevailing discourse by the media and the medical establishment are way off base in what actually constitutes a *hikikomori*.

No comprehensive published figures exist with a quantifiable number of legitimate *hikikomori* cases across Japan; even the prospect of conducting an accurate census is problematic at best for as Benjamin Secher (2002) points out,

" . . . the *hikikomori* sufferer who doesn't leave his room to eat is hardly going to pop down to the local health authority to fill in a questionnaire."

This inability to pin down hard *hikikomori* numbers, and thus the scope of the social problem, has many causes and consequences. One of the most obvious is for those looking to cash in on the issue, the potential sensationalism created by 'one million *hikikomori*' splashed across headlines in media outlets and book titles is tremendous. Another concern is the vague definition of the *hikikomori* condition, both

in terms of actual causes for the condition and social prejudice in public discourse that it is a predominantly male affliction. A diffuse and poorly defined population of people considered to be afflicted with social withdrawal may obscure 'actual' *hikikomori* needing medical treatment, if such a thing exists, from otherwise healthy people emulating the condition for other reasons. Whatever the actual numbers, age range, or gender distribution, *Japanese Ministry of Health* officials " . . . do agree it [*hikikomori*] will increase in the future" (The Australian 2001).

Takeyama Gakkoh; field research at a hikikomori rehabilitation center

From the period of September 2003 to May 2004, this author attempted to resolve the aforementioned problems with the conceptualization of *hikikomori* as put forth in the prevailing media and public discourse on *hikikomori* through direct observation in the form of field research. Staying in residence at a rehabilitation center for *hikikomori* youths for one-week periods over the span of ten months and with a combined observational period of nearly two months, I was able to directly observe both young people being treated for social withdraw and more importantly, the staff and its organizational structure used to rehabilitate these youths.

Due to legal concerns by the University Hawai'i in protecting the anonymity of human research subjects, I conducted my interviews using a coding system that assigned pseudonyms to the individuals and accordingly, I will also fictionalize the names and places where I did my field research. I am cognizant of the fact that fictionalizing peoples names while keeping name and location where they live and work factual makes it very easy to trace them back and therefore jeopardizes the promise I made, not to mention the trust they placed in me as a researcher. Also, in the course of my interviews, the knowledge that I wouldn't be using their real identities made the subjects more likely to answer with sincere *honne* rather than the more guarded *tatemae* that is prevalent in Japanese culture (Doi 1985). Therefore, the Non Profit Organization, NPO, which functions as a rehab center and where I conducted my research will be under the pseudonym *Takeyama Gakkoh*, 竹山学校, and will be abbreviated to *TG* in

discussions in this paper. For the name of TG's proprietor and his wife, who helps him run *Takeyama*, I will use the pseudonym *Mr. Kazu Ishida* and *Mrs. Mizuho Ishida*. In this paper, I will use abridged field observations as well as transcripts from interviews of the staff at TG as source materials.

In the course of conducting my research in the outskirts of Tokyo at TG with my aforementioned concerns about the problems surrounding the hikikomori discourse, I crafted an interview instrument with twenty open-ended questions in order promote candid discussion of the experiences and views of the staff at TG as well as fill gaps of information not presented in books and media about the topic of *hikikomori* (Kudo 2001, Saito 2002). Since I had a limited time in which to interview the busy people on the TG staff, I had to carefully weigh what questions to include that would be the most useful in eliciting responses on various topics. Among the questions on my interview instrument was a question asking if the interviewee felt the *hikikomori* issue was restricted to young males, as the prevailing discourse in the mass media reported, or is social withdraw a problem that equally afflicts both genders:

18) Is Hikikomori a male-only issue? Or do you feel it is an equal problem among both genders?

18) 引きこもりは男子だけの問題ですか。それとも、男子女子同じ問題だと思いますか。

(TG Interview Instrument, Dzieszinski, 2004)

The responses from this question and others on the TG interview instrument, candid discussions with the TG staff, as well as field observations form the basis of my primary data presented in this paper.

The three primary societal pressures that 'encourage' hikikomori behavior in both genders

Whatever the specific figures, a notable segment of the Japanese population numbering between 50,000 to 1.2 million has been classified as being afflicted with 'acute social withdrawal syndrome', as a *hikikomori*. So, what then are the contributing factors to the *hikikomori* condition and how easy is it for a 'normal' youth to slip into *hikikomori* behavior patterns? *Hikikomori* counselor Okawara Yasuo, himself a *hikikomori* for two years, says that ". . . anyone can be a victim." What Okawara may be basing this declaration on could be flaws in Japanese society that have created 'cracks' to fall through for those who can't cope with 'normative' social participation in the culture.

While causes attributed to *hikikomori* behavior are manifold, *there appear to be three primary groupings of social forces, or three levels of pressure, from the broadest to the most intimate, exerted upon the lives of Japanese young people which may drive them into seclusion.* Foremost are the cultural expectations placed upon a young middleclass person to conform to norms and succeed in life, only one acceptable mainstream 'route' in which to accomplish this goal—a prestigious education—and the irreconcilable reality the stagnation of the national Japanese economy has brought to the 'dream' of a prestigious career. The *second factor* is a social institution, education, which is the primary means by which to accomplish a successful middle class life in Japan. Sociologist Kawanishi Yuko of Temple University in Tokyo states that "Academic pressure is so high in Japan, youths are developing many psychological problems" (Morgan 2000). Many aspects surrounding the process of education, from daily participation, the societal importance that is placed upon its acquisition, as well as its ultimate purpose, tend to be the primary conflicts that dominates the time and thoughts of many young peoples' lives in Japan and can cause, in cases of extreme stress, the reaction of social withdraw. The *third social factor* is the role the family plays, specifically the mother-son relationship, as it relates to the other two social pressures and, after withdrawal, how the family serves to promote the child's tendency to stay in the safe cocoon of his room.

On the institutional level of education, the excessive pressure to pass high school and university exams, get into the right university, and so a successful career, has long been instilled into students as a 'personal dream' to aspire to as well as serving to create an affluent Post-War Japan. However, the 'dream' has lost its *raison d'être* after a decade-long economic recession: the utility of passing competitive exams as well as the stress surrounding them has been called into question by students who increasingly see no point in the practice. Students also lack sympathy from their parents who themselves endured 'exam hell' a generation before their children and therefore see it as a normal rite of passage into adulthood unlike those of the previous generation (White 1994). These realities could be motivating influences for the increasing incidents of *hikikomori* in Japanese schools, places that Dr. Kawanishi declares to be:

"... extremely nasty and dark, the way kids are bullied is both physical and psychological. Many victims just stop going to school, and eventually completely withdraw from society."
(Morgan 2000)

The *Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology* has figures indicating that the number of school refusals, *tôkôkyohi*, by students is twice the figure ten years ago with 134,000 absent for thirty consecutive days or more in the 2000-2001 academic year (Secher 2002, Tolbert 2002). School Refusal was previously defined by the *Ministry of Education* as a student missing fifty plus days but recently, the Ministry reduced the criterion to thirty days in order to catch the delinquent behavior earlier (White 1994). By as early as middle school, Japanese students begin to sense how far they can take themselves within the academic system and thus the types of careers they might look forward to performing. As Merry White states:

"There is no place for the late bloomer in such a system; second chances are available only under special conditions. Limited second chances are provided by taking a year or more out between high school and college for extra study, often in full time cram schools (*yobiko*)."
(White 1994)

Keigo Okonogi, a professor of Psychiatric Medicine at Tokyo International University further supports this sentiment:

"In today's society, with its stress on everyone following the same course and pursuing the same goals, there are so few chances to recover your footing once you've stumbled – if you've been bullied, for example, or if you've failed an entrance exam,"
(Reuters 2001)

This lack of a 'second chance' spells academic suicide for those who have chosen to withdraw; once they have fallen off the rails of the main middle class education track, there is no getting back aboard to fulfill the Japanese dream of attending a prestigious university and getting a good career. This factor may also explain some *hikikomori's* long bouts of seclusion which can span years; the *hikikomori* are reluctant to re-enter society because they have no clear idea of what role they can assume once they do so. *Akibin*, a pseudonym meaning 'empty bottle' is used by a *hikikomori* who states,

"Allowing a blank to appear on your resume is like social suicide. Once you leave your position in this sick society, there is no way back."
(Secher 2002)

If the figure of one million *hikikomori* nationwide is assumed for a moment to be accurate and the fact that the present academic system offers no second-chance apparatus, such as the community college system in the United States, *this means that up to one-fifth of the next generation of the Japanese workforce who were formerly hikikomori may only be qualified for blue collar employment if they can work at all.* On the more conservative side, even with 'only' 50,000 such resume-less *hikikomori*, this is troubling news for a rapidly aging society that will already need to import foreign workers in order to maintain its workforce in the coming decades.

On the topic of educational pressure, of interest is the congruence between study habits and the need for privacy in order to maintain good grades as well as attending both regular school and cram school by 'normal' students in comparison with the typical seclusionary habits of a *hikikomori*. According to Merry White,

"Some Japanese teens—especially boys—manage to create the illusion of private space by using night as day and vice versa."

(White 1994)

Students will arrive at home right after cram school or a school activity usually around six in the evening, bathe, snack and take a nap. They awake at one or two in the morning to eat dinner laid out on the table by their mother as they begin studying until four or five in the morning, they fall asleep to awake for breakfast and go to school at seven or eight. This then is the pattern of routine behavior by a relatively normal and socialized Japanese teen who wishes to get some private space and avoid needling from parents. According to various sources (Barr 2000, Larimer 2000, Murakami 2000, Tolbert 2002) *hikikomori*,

" . . . live in reverse: they sleep all day, wake up in the evening and stay up all night watching television or playing video games. Some own computers or mobile phones, but most have few or no friends."

(Murakami 2000)

Interesting is that *normal student behavior in the home and that of the problem adolescent, the hikikomori, are not that different with the main exception is that one group is doing homework in the late hours during the reversed sleep schedule.*

More broadly, the problem of interaction between the family and the *hikikomori* victim returns again back to the issue of authority as Rohlen states that:

" . . . in sending their children to school, Japanese mothers essentially relinquish their authority [over the child] to the school which then has the responsibility to train the children to be members of society (*shakaijin*)."

(Rohlen 1989)

The repercussions for this 'changing of the guard' in authority as a student enters school is that his parents do not represent any source of authority to him in his daily life; they are more akin to 'friends'. The *hikikomori* has withdrawn *because* he was unable to cope with the conformity demands placed upon him by his school peer-group and more expansively, the expectations of the educational system in general. That the *hikikomori* youth has *already* rejected the normative authority figure from his life as a student, his school peers, means that his parents will most likely hold no sway once he socially withdraws. While the parents put pressure on him to succeed in school, *it is in support of the authority of the controlling institution, and by extension, the peer group*. Parents usually perform the role of providing succor to the child through 'soft' parenting or acting in the capacity of friend rather than an authority figure (White 1994). Merry White adds:

" . . . childrearing customs in Japan are based on the idea that going against the child in any way is counterproductive, adults are not intrinsically seen as oppressive authority figures by children." "Training for adult relationships and responsibilities is actually conducted more in the peer relationships of classroom and activity group, and social ethics are learned . . . in . . . peer groups rather than from adults."

(White 1994)

As the *hikikomori* sufferer lacks an authority figure in his life, the peer group, and parents appear hesitant to reassert authority through 'tough love'—as this is not something that society normally expects of them—parents first seek the advice and counsel of institutional authority figures. Institutions that often have no solutions for the family with a *hikikomori* nor suggestions besides 'waiting it out' until the child voluntarily recovers. Until the last few years, this 'wait and see' advice was a standard response by institutions though has gradually changed with extensive media coverage on the *hikikomori* issue.

With no 'out' offered by a strong authority figure and months of seclusion dragging into years, the *hikikomori* becomes frustrated and sometimes very aggressive towards their only remaining source of

social interaction, their family. Even this communication is often limited to an exchange of notes on the kitchen table. This lack of social bonds with their live-in *hikikomori* could also explain why many parents feel terrorized by their own children: in the most extreme cases, families have been physically attacked by their own children and forced to live at a relative's house, sleep in their car, or even a closet in the home (Rees 2002).

Social withdraw is not just for boys: hikikomori as a gendered issue

As stated before, the interview instrument questions at TG were open-ended and so during the course of interviews sessions with the TG staff, I often asked unscripted follow-up questions based upon the interviewees initial response. The general consensus of responses by the staff in the interviews was that they had observed firsthand over the years at TG that the problem of social withdraw afflicts both genders in Japan equally based upon the youth who end up at the Takeyama Gakkoh rehabilitation center:

Though there was no thought about whether *hikikomori* was only male or female ten years ago, eventually society took a fixed viewpoint toward the (*hikikomori*) issue to that extent that young men were seen to be the biggest problem. However, I have observed that young men and women are the same (in regards to the distribution of *hikikomori*) currently.

(Translation of TG Interview transcript # TG050104003, Dzieszinski, 2004)

Even Takeyama Gakko's head, Mr. Kazu Ishida, when relating his eighteen-year involvement since he first began helping socially withdrawn youth at TG, states that long before it was labeled '*hikikomori*' by popular discourse society, the TG facility had functioned as a center to help troublesome children of all stripes, be they delinquents or even violent in nature. Mr. Ishida casually mentions the fact that one of the first 'cases' of *hikikomori* he encountered in his job was in fact a female:

(Back then) *hikikomori* students just began to appear in front of me (as new TG cases), (there was) a female student who would not take even one step outside of her house. I would say that I first became interested (in *hikikomori*) with that female student's reasons why she wouldn't go to school nor go outside of her house. Clearly, my interest was that I didn't understand this young person standing right in front of me, and I asked myself 'why?' is this happening? My (initial) interest in *hikikomori* was that I wanted to see (what is was all about). That was how I first became interested in (the *hikikomori* issue).

(Translation of conversation with Kazu Ishida, Dzieszinski, 2004)

Most of the staff of eighteen at TG are part-time or volunteer positions. However, about a half dozen of the administrators at TG are full time and have been treating youth exhibiting the symptoms of acute

social withdraw, later to be labeled as *hikikomori*, for periods approaching nearly two decades, as is the case with Mr. and Mrs. Ishida. In various conversations with them during the course of my two months of field research, it became clear that in their long experience treating *hikikomori*, the prevailing attitude of the TG staff was that the number of cases of female *hikikomori* that they had encountered pretty much followed the population distribution of both genders in Japan, meaning that the incidence of social withdraw among young females was roughly even to young males.

However, considering the student population at TG during the time of my field research, of the sixty students I encountered at the main TG complex, I only ever witnessed seven female students, and of these, one was a recovered *hikikomori* who stayed on to help out with the center. I asked the TG staff both in interviews and in casual discussions about disparity in the number of male to female *hikikomori* at their facility: with nearly eight-to-one ratio of TG students being male, did this fact strike them as odd, especially with their previous statements that the occurrences of male and female *hikikomori* in Japanese society are pretty much equal. To explain why the student population at TG was mostly male, the TG staff commented that the parents of sons consistently seek outside help for their child; socially withdrawn females are viewed with less urgency by Japanese parents. Several of the staff stated that the reasoning for this is that most parents with daughters do not feel that girls staying in the home as a recluse is problematic:

In Japan, boys go outside; girls (stay) in the house. Therefore, boys who don't go outside are a problem. Because girls who stay inside the home come outside for the purpose of marriage, the parents don't (see) a problem.

So, a girl becomes a little withdrawn, a *hikikomori*. But, the parents don't yet understand this: "Ah, you are staying in the home, that's fine", they think.

(Translation of TG Interview transcript # TG50104001, Dzieszinski, 2004)

What my field research at Takeyama Gakkoh appears to indicate is that, in so far as raw numbers, the phenomenon of *hikikomori*, acute social withdraw, is something afflicts both genders of youth in Japan in equal measure. The social pressures are the same, the reaction of youth to those social expectations are similar, whether they are male or female. However Japanese society, either due to the prevailing discourse

on *hikikomori* or the some other factor, does not seem to acknowledge that its sisters and daughters who choose a life of seclusion in their rooms as something meriting attention or alarm.

Amae: The mother-son relationship in the Japanese family.

Despite the aforementioned three types of social pressure which act upon both male and female youth equally in Japanese society, one additional factor that may explain why young men are more susceptible to social withdraw, or at least explain why they might be more readily recognized as doing so by Japanese parents, is the tight mother-son relationship of co-dependency in Japanese society termed as *amae* (Doi 1971). In the process of raising her children, an intimate bond forms between mother and child, often the son, within the cramped intensity of the Japanese home environment. Takeo Doi states that this co-dependency between mother and son, combined with the near total absence of a father-figure in young children's lives due to the salaryman ethic in Japan, was a major factor for school refusal, *tôkôkyohi*, back in the 1970s and 1980s. The cultural phenomenon of *amae* may also be a contributor to the more extreme behavior of total seclusion by *hikikomori* in this decade. The predominately *mother-son* bonding of *amae* may explain, in part, why female *hikikomori* in Japan go unrecognized.

Since the Postwar Era, education has become a primary means of ensuring social mobility in Japanese society. As a consequence, many Japanese mothers end up overseeing nearly every aspect of a son's life in order to ensure his success in school. This zealously to succeed, is in many cases, further wrapped within the social relationship of *amae*, a phenomenon that came to be termed 'education mama', *kyohiku mama*, back in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to this day (Condon 1991, White 1993). These 'education mothers' are so heavily invested in the future success of their son's academic careers, that its pursuit often subsumes all other aspects of the mother's life; it should come as no surprise that as the first generation of young men raised by *kyohiku mama* became adults themselves, they continued to identify heavily with their mothers in what Doi calls "the fatherless society" of Japan (Doi 1971). The 's-mothering' of a Japanese son in the *amae* relationship, within the cramped quarters of a Japanese household, forms a strong co-dependency bond between mother and son that doesn't end with the

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business of school (Doi 1971); the son comes to associate females in his life with that over-nurturing aspect of his mother, and he comes to expect being waited on hand and foot— on being dependent. Conversely, what the mother might hope to gain from the *kyohiku mama* relationship, perhaps if even only on a subconscious level, is that all of the time invested will lead to care in her old age (Doi 1971).

The *amae* relationship has an influence even after the son leaves the nest, one form is the co-dependency of the *sempai-kohai* relationship in the workplace mirroring that of school and home life with the mother. Another aspect of *amae* might possibly be seen in the cultural currency of *on/giri and ninjoh*, social debt/repayment and human feeling, which undergoes continual trade amongst Japanese in every aspect of social relationships (Doi 1975). In addition, young men who have been pampered by their mothers tend to look for similar treatment in girlfriends and spouses, which lead to all types of dating problems in adulthood. In fact, the stress of these male expectations on women may be seeing a backlash in Japanese society, as recently, there is a phenomenon in Japan which appears to be a wholesale rejection of young men by the opposite sex in the form of *Parasite Singles*; young women who continue to live at home and refuse to give up the easy affluent lifestyle they currently enjoy only to marry young men and become the ‘new mothers’ and personal servants of their young husbands (Naito 2000, Tolbert 2000, Zielenziger 2002)).

In fact, the social structures and cultural expectations in Japan experts like Doi were commenting on three decades ago in relation to the problem of school refusal, *tōkōkyōhi*, have echoes in the present day by Psychologist Saito Tamaki and other modern experts when discussing the causes and problems surrounding the current issue of *hikikomori*. In what appears to be an agreement of Doi’s older assessment in the 1970s of Japan’s ‘fatherless society’, Saito asserts that in Post-War Japan, men are not a presence in the home as they dedicate themselves to work and that " . . . women (are) expected to stay home and dedicate themselves to their children's education" (Barr 2000). Saito's criticism with this social development in Japan is that " . . . mothers spoil their children and later on 'these families support grown-ups with no conditions.'" (Barr 2000). And that:

"In Japan, mothers and sons often have a symbiotic, co-dependent relationship. Mothers will care for their sons until they are 30 or 40 years old."

(Rees 2002)

Of course, the *kyohiku mama/amae* relationship can backfire in the worst of ways if the son rebels from this 's-mothering' treatment. The cultural mechanism of *amae* may serve as one of the catalysts for young males who want to rebel from this so-dependency with their mothers as noted in the 1970s by Doi (1971) with *tôkôkyohi* and now in the present day with Saito's *hikikomori* (Rees 2000). Rebellious, these young males shut themselves in their rooms and become *hikikomori*—however, the original problem doesn't go away as the young man continues to live under the same roof as their mother. Saito feels one of the primary problems with any rehabilitation as well as the long stretches of isolation by *hikikomori* youth can be blamed on the affluence of Japanese families today, and especially on Japanese mothers who smother their child and allow them to stay withdrawn in a nurturing environment of the home awash in *amae* (Rees 2002).

So the question is, where do daughters fit into the *amae* relationship? What is the role of a daughter in a Japanese family that also has a son? One of the problems with the label of *hikikomori* is that it is a descriptor for a final observed behavior of a person, *acute social withdraw*, not of the factors which pushed a young person into the act. While *amae* may indeed be one primary factor that pushes young boys into becoming *hikikomori*, that does not mean that young females do not also feel the stresses of the *amae* relationship in similar ways to their male counterparts, nor does it mean that most males or females who become *hikikomori* do so due to *amae*. And as stated before, *hikikomori* is a 'catch-all' label, so equal numbers of *hikikomori* who are female exist, though the emphasis on the causes for their rejection of society may be subtly different from males; females may become *hikikomori* more often due to school pressures, depression, or the neglect of attention by Japanese mothers, but whatever the causes it results in a population of female *hikikomori* roughly equal to males. Alternatively, Japanese daughters may turn into *hikikomori* for the very same reasons as young men, *amae* or school, but Japanese mothers are simply too engrossed in their son's lives to notice, or the cultural expectations on a female's role in society does not flag the behavior of acute social withdraw as alarming.

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Family expectations for sons and daughters in Japanese society

The Takeyama Gakko staff, people who actually work and interact daily in the *hikikomori* support industry daily with these troubled youths, believe that the distribution of *hikikomori* is equal amongst young males and females. As previously discussed, the three primary societal pressures of middle-class expectations, the institution of education in Japan, and those of the family tend to tip Japanese youth of both genders into social withdraw labeled as '*hikikomori*' today in Japan. However, based upon the direct observations by the TG staff as stated previously, social withdraw afflicts equal numbers of young females and males. What then might be the factor in Japanese society that causes a differing treatment of hikikomori girls over *hikikomori* boys?

Q: ...At Takeyama Gakko, there are students who are female. So, why did the parents of those girls bring their children to this place for help? Currently, seven of your students are females. Why did they come?

A: *Although they are girls* [Emphasis mine], their parents felt there was a problem so they brought them here (to TG).

A: The girls wouldn't take even one step to go outside, they couldn't make friends, *it wasn't that they weren't obedient/docile girls, the girls were far TOO docile and quiet*. [Emphasis mine], The parents for those girl's who are here at TG didn't think (the girls) wanted to work at a job like boys. What's more, though they are girls, (the parents) I think, wanted their daughters to become energetic and healthy.

(Translation of TG Interview transcript # TG50104001, Dziesinski, 2004)

Here is the experience of a now adult female recovered *hikikomori* that I interviewed in explaining her experiences with her parents before being brought to Takeyama Gakkoh for help:

Q: At your home during the interval (you were *hikikomori*) what did you do?

A: At that time, I watched TV, although from the beginning to around the end (of my seclusion), it changed. Around the beginning (of my withdraw), I watched TV and the like. Because whatever I did I was still depressed, I would end up only staring at the wall (in my room) like "this" [shows a blank expression].

Q: During the time you were a *hikikomori*, speaking of your family, what was the feeling of your parents? What was their thinking?

A: At that time, (they) did bully/harass me a about (the problem) a little. At that time, although at home, I had my feelings hurt because my parents didn't offer me any kind words, and although not at school, I (also) had my feelings hurt by my parents (in addition to those at school); against my will, I was made to do class lessons (at home).

Q: From seventeen years until nineteen years old, you were socially withdrawn, how did you come to Takeyama Gakkoh? Why did your family contact Takeyama?

A: Well, they saw an ad on TV about Takeyama...on a TV program. My parents saw that and called the television station to contact Takeyama.

(Translation of TG Interview transcript # TG50104008, Dzieszinski, 2004)

Note that the parents of this female *hikikomori* appeared to be less sympathetic to her plight than the aforementioned examples cited on male *hikikomori*; would her treatment be different as a son with the *amae* of a mother either refusing to acknowledge or push her male child too far?

What the TG interviews suggest is that the social expectation in Japanese society for girls by parents appears to be in accordance with lingering traditional values in relation to social hierarchy and the role of females in Japanese society: young females are expected to eventually marry, move into their husband's home in the tradition of the old IE system and then become the perfect mother to raise her spouse's children (Lebra 1984, Hendry 1987, Rosenburger 2001). Responses in the interviews such as the one cited above from the members of the TG staff over thirty were very matter-of-fact in this attitude about young females. It might be a fair assessment to conclude that such conservative sentiments are also held by a sizable majority of parents in Japanese society with children.

During the course of my field research at Takeyama Gakko, conversations with the staff indicated the following common attitudes by Japanese families in terms of their children's behaviors: When young men refuse to go outside, be active, mingle with friends, or find a job, then Japanese parents become anxious and worried about their male child. In the longer term *hikikomori* cases, the fact that the young man doesn't seek gainful employment upon reaching eighteen years of age really alarms parents as the young man is obviously not fulfilling his culturally defined role in society. In contrast, interviews with the TG staff about the female *hikikomori* seem to indicate that parents with daughters are less likely to seek out intervention or aid for their *hikikomori* daughters as they may not see the behavior of a withdrawn girl as overly alarming. The crux of the problem for the recognition of social withdraw of young women in Japan appears to center around the different social expectations by parents for their sons and daughters. Might not the expectations Japanese parents hold for sons be different in such a way from

those they hold for daughters? Could it be different in Japanese society to the point that it skews the perception of who is suffering from *hikikomori* and who is not, for

“Japan’s cultural traditions also encourage certain specific qualities as part of the feminine mystique. Women are expected to be submissive, passive, patient, humble, tactful, and consciously adept in the nuances of the interpersonal relationships in the social world.”

(Rene Peritz, 1986)

In Japan the traditional Confucian social hierarchy model blended with the native Japanese concept of the IE, the perpetuation of the structural continuity of family organization over time (Hamada 1998) where sons, especially firstborn sons, are expected to take the role as head of the household when their fathers are unable. Despite the nuclear composition of the family in modern day Japan, the onus is still upon the son in a Japanese family to succeed so that he can support his parents in their old age. Therefore, the ‘education mama’ in the mother-son relationship invests a great deal for social capital in her son, coddles him to the point of waiting on him hand and foot, so that nothing in the hardships of daily life may distract him from focusing on his schoolwork and fulfilling his future role as caregiver in old age (Condon 1991, Nakane 1970, Imamura 1990). Still following the with the traditional IE-Confucian model in Japan, for young daughters the expectation is that they will eventually marry and move in with their husband, raise his children act as the repository for Japanese tradition and cultural transmission for the *husband’s family* (Imamura 1990), hence the constant friction in Japanese society between the wife and the mother-in-law. The pragmatic ‘education mama’ will invest enough personal time to ensure that her daughters are appealing and educated enough to gain some upward mobility for the family, but as the daughter will move in with the husband’s family and will ultimately take care of her husband’s parents in infirmity, a *kyohiku mama*’s best investment is in her son who promises the best upward mobility for her and her husband in old age. In this line of conservative ‘traditional’ Japanese thinking, the role of the man is outside of the home earning a living to support the household, while the role of the woman is in the home maintaining the household and raising the children. While this may seem extraordinarily old-fashioned to Western perspectives, such views on family structure are still in practice and easily observable in mainstream Japanese society. However, Japan is not cut from the uniform homogeneous

cloth it portrays itself as pragmatism is the rule in real life: divorce, young mothers who see marriage and children as a burden, as well as unconventional families can all be observed firsthand in opposition to the monolithic view from the outside that all Japanese men are salaryman and all women are education mama.

Shyness can be seen as a feminine trait in Japan, and a girl who hides in her room and refuses to leave the house is not necessarily acting too far outside of the expected social norms. While there may be a long period of denial by a mother before she faces the fact her son is a *hikikomori*, the family will seek outside intervention in most cases for their son now that public awareness is so high about *hikikomori* with Japanese television shows and newspapers providing coverage on the topic. In the last few years, an entire support network for *hikikomori* has also sprung up in Japan, so parents now have many avenues to redress a socially withdrawn son. Only the future will tell if the same can be said for female *hikikomori*.

Parallels between hikikomori and parasite singles

‘Parasite Single’, a word coined in 1997 in the book, *Parasaito Shinguru no Jidai*, ‘Era of the “Parasite” Singles’, by Yamada Masahiro, became a watchword in the media about the same period as *hikikomori* in the year 2000. Yamada defines *parasite singles* as “young men and women who continue living with their parents even after they become adults, enjoying a carefree and well-to-do life as singles” (JEI 2000). Yamada, basing his estimates on 1995 census data in Japan, states that the total number of *parasite singles* of both genders is around 10 million individuals. The estimated numbers of *parasite singles* presented in the JEI article show a nearly even ratio of males-to-females aged 24-34, with 41.6 percent of the *parasite single* population in Japan being male and 39.4 percent being female (JEI 2000). However, what is interesting is that much of the media attention available on the topic of *parasite singles* appears focused upon those *parasite singles* of the female gender (Ashby 2000, Naito 2000, Tolbert 2000, Zielenziger 2002). This ‘media bias’ on female *parasite singles* is an interesting contrast with the laser beam focus on young Japanese males as the core of the ‘*hikikomori* crisis’ in much of the press on that topic over last few years. According to reports on the topic of *parasite singles* in the media, this group

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consists of young people, mostly women, who prefer the cozy nest of home and financial support by parents to marriage and child rearing: A choice which often results in a lower standard of living than remaining at home with mom and dad. Parallels between the two phenomenon of *parasite singles* and *hikikomori* raises the question: are the two phenomenon of related in some way? Might not a fair percentage of female '*parasite singles*' actually be misclassified female *hikikomori*?

One writer, JT Brown (2003), puts forth the theory that the population of *parasite singles* is actually comprised of three sub-groups: the first group are young people of both genders who are relatively well off, either due to parents or working a cushy job while living at home, and who are actively involved in society and have normal friendships and relations. The second subgroup are *freeta*, a word which is a combination of the English 'free' and 'time' as well as the German concept '*arubeiter*' rendered as '*arubaita*' in *Japanese*. *Freeta* are young people who drift from one dead end part-time job to another, earning just enough money to have fun while leaving the cost-of-living bills to their parents with whom they live at home with. According to the Asahi Shinbun (Brown 2003), there are 2 million *freeta* in Japan today. The third group of is considered the most severe subgroup of *parasite single*, the *hikikomori*, who neither work nor even leave the house, and are totally reliant on their parents for all support. If Brown's categorizations hold, then it's very interesting the focus the media has taken on each subgroup and the gender they associate with each issue, for as it has been pointed out previously in this paper, the numbers of both genders would appear relatively equal for each sub-group in what appears to be part of a greater a society-wide crisis in Japan.

Analysis of media criticism on young males who become *hikikomori* and don't participate in the workforce, as well as young females as *parasite singles* who *do participate* in the workforce but put off marriage and children until later in their lives, seems to indicate an attempt by media to shape public opinion on what activities are considered acceptable traditional Japanese life patterns to the public consumer (Peritz 1998). Public discourse is no doubt influenced by media coverage that brings the *hikikomori* and *parasite single* issues to high profile visibility in the public eye accompanied by subtle criticisms and scorn on these groups who are deviating from the accepted traditional roles set forth in

Japanese society. Social criticisms are proffered through the very process of attention itself that the media spotlight in Japan places upon the issues of *hikikomori* and *parasite singles*, not to mention the way that attention is focused. From a simplistic perspective, one primary criticism for *hikikomori* males, it's that they don't work nor live on their own. For *parasite single* females, the social criticism is that they don't marry and raise families. In both cases, there also seems to be a trend of 'blame the victim' piled upon the members of these two groups by the Japanese media (Ashby 2000). Flip the gender in relation these two issues and there appears to be little or no public discourse on them: where is the outcry on male *parasite singles*, or to a larger extent, on female *hikikomori*? The reason for the relative silence would appear to be that these groups are not seen as so deviant from norms as their counterparts belonging to the opposite sex in each respective group.

Societal factors in Japan today that prod young women into choosing the lifestyle of the *parasite single* or the more drastic retreat of the *hikikomori* appear to be parallel impetuses or even the same forces exerted upon each group leading to different reactions based upon the individual person. One factor is the aforementioned economic affluence of the home in Japan, with parents willing and able to support a child into their 20s or even late 30s, sons and daughters have less urgency to start their own lives and as a consequence, serves to delay their own social growth and family formation. Yamada points out a new word in Japanese discourse, that of 'wedding poverty', for he says "...when you marry, you become poor." (Zielenziger 2002), and many young women have the easy life at home with family financial support and find the idea of the 'stepping down' of their lifestyle as undesirable. The effects of affluence are even more pronounced with *hikikomori* as they do not help in any way with the financial maintenance of the household due to their condition, while *parasite singles* and *freeta* in a minimal sense go out and get jobs for personal entertainment money.

Then there is the factor of *amae sentiment* that affects both genders and of *hikikomori* and *parasite singles*, though for differing reasons. For *parasite singles*, *amae*-afflicted adult men are one of their stated reasons for delaying marriage and children. One woman, Yuriko Hirose aged 35, opines on the modern dating scene in Japan, "...single men seem so helpless; they are really parasites who depend

on their mothers” (Naito 2000). On the other side of the coin is the statement by a 36 year old Japanese man who laments:

“When I come home from work in the evening, my room is dark, and in winter it’s cold. At these times I always wish I had a wife waiting for me, with a hot meal...I’m thinking of joining an *omiai* (matchmaking) service.”

(Naito 2000)

Interesting that his concerns about his loneliness echo those maternal things that a mother could provide.

Another overlapping concern for both *hikikomori* and *parasite singles* is the graying of Japanese society and what that means in the economic sector of the future. With thirteen years of economic malaise, unemployment for post-bubble economy adults has been less assured in comparison to their parent’s generation with an unemployment rate of 10 percent for those under age thirty (Genda 2000). The fact is, the older graying generation of Japanese are not giving up their jobs of lifetime employment (Genda 2000), add to this the fact that young women are delaying marriage and child birth which in turn flattens the national birthrate to 1.3 children per mother in Japan (Zielenziger), as well as a large group of young people who either refuse to work full time jobs, *freeta*, or even work at all, *hikikomori*, and you have a future forecast for the Japanese workforce that is particularly grim for the economy of Japan. Where are the females in all of this? They appear to be only a concern in the media when they are not fulfilling the traditional roles of ‘good wife, wise mother’.

So, where are all the female hikikomori?; Its all a matter of media discourse

It seems clear from my field research that female *hikikomori* do in fact exist, and with more research, it might be possible to prove they occur in equal numbers as their male counterparts. However, the media and public are curiously silent on the matter of female *hikikomori*. It almost approaches a collective denial about something plainly observable in the field. The accepted discourse is that it is young males who suffer from social withdraw in Japanese society. Taking the example of the *parasite single* and the media framing it as a female issue, what appears to be occurring is that the focus of public discourse in Japanese society is to ‘blame’ those ‘victims’ of these phenomenon for not behaving in traditional ways that conservative society expects: Males should go out and work upon attaining

adulthood and so the segment of young men classified as *hikikomori* seem to have public scorn and alarm heaped upon them for not fulfilling the expected role in society that is proscribed for them. For young women who socially withdraw, concern only develops when they don't eventually leave the house to marry and raise a family. Parallel concerns are proffered at female *parasite singles* who also choose to delay leaving the nest to raise a family, though are more socially active and actually participate in the national workforce; flip the gender but with the same behavior, and the criticism on a male *parasite singles* appears considerably less. Considering the similarities of the two phenomenon despite the media's gender bias, could not many young women in Japan tagged as '*parasite singles*' in fact be *hikikomori*?

Young women who struggle alongside their male counterparts through the stresses of cram schools, *juku*, and exam hell in order to gain entrance into the universities in Japan can expect acceptance into only two-year universities, lower pay than males in the same job, or even dead-end jobs such as Office Ladies, OL, who are expected to marry within 2-5 years and quit their job in order to raise children. Growing up under the mother-son *amae* co-dependency, their potential spouses have been spoiled from birth by Japanese mothers, so that adult male suitors have come to expect motherly pampering from the opposite sex. Add to this, the fact that living at home, both female *hikikomori* and *parasite singles*, young women who choose to work can buy nice clothes and luxuries for themselves instead suffering 'wedding poverty' and become the personal servant to her husband and children, it is little wonder both groups of young Japanese women seem to be delaying leaving the family home and marriage until much later in life. From the conservative criticism of the *Moga*, or 'modern girl', in the 1920s in Japan to *parasite single* today, Japanese women, no matter what actions they take to adapt to the times they live in, experience a pull in the opposite direction by the public discourse trying to guide them into 'appropriate' traditional norms. While Japanese women have made great strides in the last several decades defining new social roles in Japanese society, Japanese society as a whole still appears to provide the least resistance for women who fulfill the traditional roles of 'good wife, wise mother' of sister, mother, wife; hence the open criticism in the media of *parasite singles* and *hikikomori*. Therefore, who

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can fault some young women in Japan for putting off the ‘social responsibility’ for the traditions of Japan placed upon their shoulders and instead preferring to stay at home and put adulthood on hold?

Even if the reasons involved for social withdraw may be subtly different for a certain percentage of *hikikomori* due to differing *amae* and family expectations for each gender, field data establishes that the ratio of male to female *hikikomori* are roughly equal, despite the prevailing public discourse in the media that *hikikomori* afflicts young males in Japan and is an epidemic one million strong. The label of *hikikomori* would seem to be a dangerously diffuse classification that encompasses many diverse reasons and societal causes for seclusion, and one that ignores females also suffering from the same societal pressures with society classifying these females by a different label, *parasite single*. *Hikikomori* as a definition appears to signify the results of any number of causes for withdrawal as suits those needing it in the public discourse on male behavior in society, but does not address the specific causes such as depression or autism that would further refine its terminological use. The current vague definition of *hikikomori* does present some parameters for classification of those experiencing some type of social withdrawal but appears to ignore females in its diagnosis, or at least parents and society at large do not acknowledge that their daughters are also suffering along with the *hikikomori* males. As a precise definition does not exist, those males grouped as suffering from *hikikomori* are an unnecessarily broad and vague classification and many may suffer unduly from the stigma associated with the sweeping label as a result. Meanwhile, females are hardly even recognized in society as being socially withdrawn, but rather are perceived by parents as merely too ‘shy’.

As indicated by the media flurry on the subject, the inclination for the usage of '*hikikomori*' tends toward sweeping classifications of a large group of Japanese male youth who do not behave in a manner considered the societal norm. This is due in part that male *hikikomori* do not participate in school or the societal order of consensus peer groups, and because they do not seek gainful employment upon reaching adulthood. The popularization of the term '*hikikomori*' and its primary association with male youths in the Japanese public consciousness through the massive media coverage of the phenomenon should not be underestimated. There is *some* sort of social phenomenon occurring, but the attention the mainstream

media gives is that it as a problem primarily with young males in Japan, akin to *parasite singles* being problem with young females. Such media bias only serves to cement each phenomenon as a social label attached to those who behave in a deviant manner and heap scorn upon them for not behaving within expected cultural norms; this, despite the adverse social conditions young people of both genders must endure in Japan today.

The media influence in shaping social perception and discourse on *hikikomori* is strong; neither the young men and women hidden away in their rooms, nor the shamed parents who fear neighbors finding out, are going to step forward to clarify the media's interpretations. With no rigid definition of *hikikomori* even by Japanese health professionals, perhaps the level of influence the media has in defining *hikikomori* is too substantial and the use of it as a bludgeon for expected social norms is a prime indicator of this fact with the total focus on male *hikikomori* and no discourse at all on female social withdraw except in the context of *parasite singles*. With today's realities, the ideal solution is beyond any hope of implementation: that the media should exercise restraint and balance in reporting on the issue to ensure that the phenomenon does not become unnecessarily stereotyped even further. Such a proposition also summons forth the issue of media integrity and responsibility in shaping the public discourse that appears to be lacking today in a social institution fueled solely by competitive commercial realities in many world markets. For the foreseeable future, female *hikikomori* will continue to go unacknowledged by all but those who actually work in the support industry who interact daily with these socially withdrawn young women.

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