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## HIKIKOMORI IN JAPANESE YOUTH: SOME POSSIBLE PATHWAYS FOR ALLEVIATING THIS PROBLEM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DYNAMIC SYSTEMS THEORY

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In this paper, we will discuss the problem of *hikikomori*, in which an individual remains at home, typically isolated in the bedroom, with limited contact to the outside world. *Hikikomori* has been discussed primarily from a psychological perspective in Japan. In this paper, we take dynamic systems perspective, incorporating historical and cultural points of view. We address the question: "Is this a psychological (clinical) phenomena or a cultural-societal one?"

The first author, Alan Fogel, has been doing research in the area of social and emotional development for more than 30 years. He worked at the University of Nagoya in 1983-84 as a Fulbright senior research scholar, where he conducted research on mother-infant communication and early childhood development with Professors Masatoshi Kawai and Hideo Kojima. During this period, Professor Fogel made several trips to visit the Research Center at Hokkaido University for discussions with Professors Kazuo Miyake and Shing-Jen Chen. Professor Fogel has made regular visits to Japan since that time. His perspective is that of an American developmental psychologist and educator who has some knowledge of Japanese history and culture.

The second author, Masatoshi Kawai is the director of the Center for the Study of Child Development, MWU. He is interested in the mechanism of developmental change from the point of view of systems theory and has been doing research in the field of infant development. Both authors are not in the field of clinical psychology but rather in developmental psychology, which allows us to take a more theoretical perspective on these two current problems.

*Hikikomori* in Japan is a widespread social problem. From a psychological perspective, it could be classified in DSM IV as something like social withdrawal or apathy, but this reflects only some outward symptoms which may make *hikikomori* appear to be similar to these disorders in western cultures. Before the academic term "*hikikomori*" appeared, Inamura (1983) used the term "Adolescent setback symptom" for school phobia, student apathy and work phobia. He suggested that this is a uniquely Japanese phenomena and national disease. Kasahara (1988) described what he called "retreat (withdrawal) neurosis" for a people who leave school or work for long periods. These people are

adapting to society except in the area of their main occupation and are not schizophrenic/depressive.

After these descriptions, many researchers attempted to find a model for explaining *hikikomori*. Saitou (1998) stressed a breakdown in relationships with the community, while Kondo (2001) and Yoshikawa and Murakami (2001) stressed problems in the family. Recently, Chronic Fatigue Immune Dysfunction Syndrome is one factor suspected to be related to *hikikomori*. Miike (2002) proposed that there may be relations between *hikikomori* and brain function (metabolic function for day-night rhythm).

In spite of these attempts to explain the problem, the number of *hikikomori* are increasing gradually and in fact are expanding for all age groups. Figure 1 shows the proportion of *hikikomori* by age. Although it is difficult to find accurate statistics, it is said that the number of *hikikomori* is now over 1.6 million people. Although we do not have enough research evidence for discussing these problems, it is nevertheless worthwhile to consider them from different theoretical perspectives.

As mentioned earlier, the conventional way of understanding these problems is to assume that the problem resides within the person, and that to alleviate the problem we need to find a way to change the person to fit in more with social expectations. From our point of view, however, the person is embedded in a network of social relationships in the family and school, and those institutions are embedded in the history and current conditions of Japanese society and culture.

We will address this problem from the perspective of Dynamic System Theory as applied to interpersonal communication and relationships (Fogel, 1993; Fogel, Garvey, Hsu, and West-Stroming, 2006). In this perspective, stable patterns of social behavior (called *consensual frames*) emerge from the mutual relationship between the person, the family, and the society.

Thinking from the DST perspective, then, we can locate the problem in the *consensual frame* in a dynamic system of relationships. The means that the problems of young boys and girls in Japan reflect an implicit consensual relationship between the child, family, and society that permits the problem to be maintained as a stable frame in the society (see

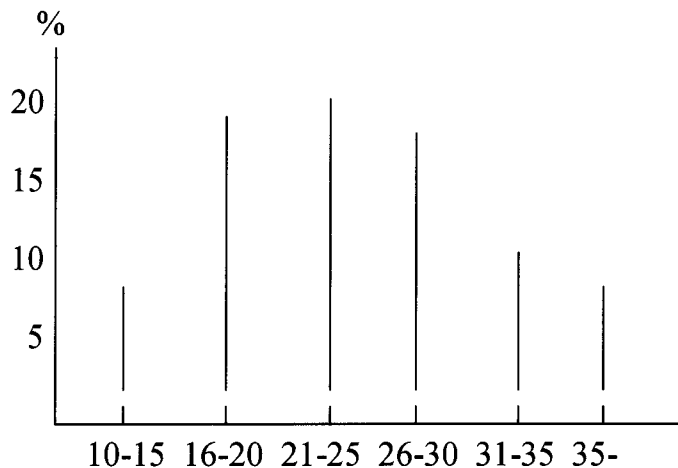


Figure 1 The percentage of *hikikomori* in each age group in 2001.

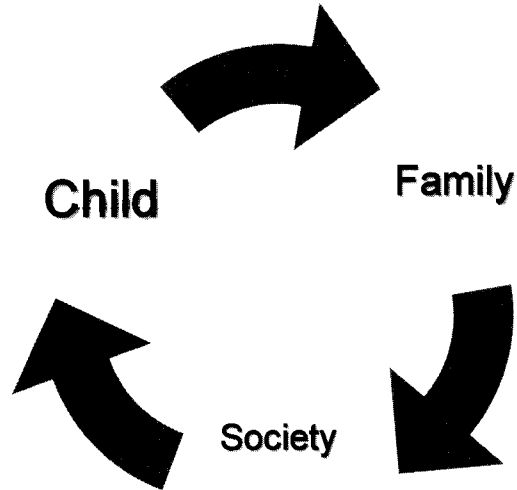


Figure 2 The dynamic system of child, family, and society.

Figure 2). In the case of *hikikomori*, for example, the child only has the possibility to remain in his bedroom because the parents are a consistent and reliable source of money, food, and an internet connection. Therefore, both parent and family play a role in supporting and maintaining the problem.

Can these problematic consensual frames be changed? Yes, but there must be a corresponding change in the family and society: the system of relationships must change. This means that the parents will need to change their behavior in order for the child to change his behavior. Because parents are often reluctant to change, this is not so easy but it is also not impossible.

#### PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMS CHANGE

If, as we suppose, *hikikomori* cannot be treated effectively by an individual-based approach, we must turn our attention to changing the system of consensual frames. In order to understand how to facilitate alleviation of *hikikomori*, it is helpful to examine the principles of how social systems change over time. We will first explain these principles of change and then apply them to the current problems. Recent research (Fogel et al., 2006) has shown that as the existing consensual frames in a relationship begin to change, a variety of additional frames are spontaneously generated in order to assist the relationship through potentially difficult and chaotic times of change. These are listed in Table 1.

Bridging frames are useful to help make a developmental transition between existing and emerging frames. Typically, bridging frames contain elements of both the existing

Table 1 Frames that are created during a change process

Bridging frames	Links existing and emerging frames
Breakdown of existing frames	Disruption of existing patterns, feels chaotic
Recapitulation frames	Return of historical frames that were dormant
Re-organized emergent frames	New relationship patterns emerge and grow

Table 2 Bridging frames in a developmental sequence

EXISTING FRAME	→	BRIDGING FRAME	→	EMERGING FRAME
Courtship	→	Engagement	→	Marriage
Married Couple	→	Pregnancy	→	Parenting

and emerging frames (see Table 2). In the case of romantic relationships, for example, there is typically a betrothal or engagement period in between courtship and marriage. The bridging frame of engagement contains some elements or components of the courtship frame, for example, the couple goes out together for enjoyment, play, and without family responsibilities. On the other hand, the bridging frame of engagement contains some components of the marriage frame because the couple begins talking about their future family life and the in-laws and other family members become more involved in the couples' life. Thus engagement is a bridge between courtship and marriage by combining components of both together.

Bridging frames can come from different sources. They can arise spontaneously in relationships as they change. They can be provided by culture or biology, as with engagement and pregnancy, or they can be imposed from outside the relationship as in therapeutic or educational interventions meant to lead to a developmental change. In this paper, we will suggest how parents, teachers and other people may provide ways to create bridging frames with troubled youth to solve problems such as *hikikomori*.

No matter the source of bridging frames, they seem to have the purpose of allowing people in a relationship to "try out" new ways of relating before committing themselves to embark on a newly emergent frame. Engaged couples, for example, can "try out" what it feels like to be married before the wedding. Bridging is a way of making developmental transitions more smoothly and with less fear or trauma resulting from the change.

### BREAKDOWN OF EXISTING FRAMES

In the example of romantic relationships, as the engagement period draws to a close and marriage is ready to begin, the courtship frame is reaching a state of breakdown. In this case, that existing frame has reached the end of its useful life and will cease to exist, except in memory. In the case of the end of the courtship period, the idea of breakdown need not have a negative significance if the couple truly wants to get married. The couple and family may greet the end of courtship and the beginning of marriage with a celebration.

In other cases, however, the breakdown of the existing system may be unwanted and undesired. It may be seen as threatening. *Hikikomori* may be seen by some people in Japanese society as a loss of the existing frame of mutual social responsibility and a threat to the historical cultural fabric of Japanese society.

### RECAPITULATION FRAMES

Once the change process has begun, in addition to bridging frames, there may occur a brief return (recapitulation) of historical frames in the relationship. These are frames that had been well established for some period of time and then went through a process of breakdown and loss. Often these recapitulated frames seem to have been "forgotten" by

the system. Yet somehow, the system retains a memory of its past and may bring back this older way of relating for a short period of time to help in the current developmental change process.

The recapitulated historical frame is “safe” and “familiar” even though it is not a long-term solution. It is brought back because the participants feel the need for some security in the face of the uncertainty of the impending change. For example, young children under stress will “regress” to become more “dependent” under conditions of stress. A child of 6 years may seem rather happy and independently self-regulated. When that child begins elementary school, however, there must be a developmental change from relating primarily to the family to expanding into a much larger frame of peer and teacher relationships. This may make children fearful in which case they may recapitulate an early frame for relating to mother or father. The child may suddenly and unexpectedly show more infant-like behavior such as clinging, having sleep problems, crying, or not eating. These behaviors which constitute a recapitulated frame will typically disappear once the child has made a successful adaptation to school and the newly emerging school frame is well established. Like bridging frames, recapitulated frames are temporary, constructed in the service of facilitating change.

#### PREVIOUSLY EXISTING CONSENSUAL FRAME IN JAPAN DURING THE PAST ~50 YEARS

Of course, at this moment, we do not know what the newly emerging frame for Japanese society and culture will be, which puts us in a period of uncertainty as we watch the existing system break down and new problems arise. Using the theory of dynamic systems applied to relationship change, however, Japanese people may be able to introduce appropriate bridging frames in order to regulate and guide the social change process.

This change process begins with an understanding of the existing frames for family communication in Japanese society since the end of WWII. An outline of this existing frame is shown in Table 3. In this frame, parents, especially mothers, were expected to be responsible for nurturing children and children were responsible for respecting parents (Rothbaum, 2002). The first-born son and his wife had the further responsibility of taking care of his parents as they became older. Embedded in all these family relationships was a sense of reciprocal *amae*, in which each person could expect care and indulgence from the other (Doi, 2004; Smith & Nomi, 2000).

*Amae*, as well as other patterns of emotional communication in the family, was primarily implicit, that is, communicated non-verbally and without the need for verbal requests or explanations. In order to avoid conflict in the family, negative feelings are

Table 3 Existing consensual frames in Japan for the past 50 years.

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Family factors:
Nurture of children
Filial piety by children and responsibility to parents of first-born sons
Reciprocal <i>amae</i> relationships and implicit emotional communication
School factors:
Conformity pressure, rejection if different
Fear of failure

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typically not directly expressed. People are admonished to “be happy” with the result that negative feelings become further suppressed.

Unlike the home in which children could expect to be taken care of within the *amae* relationship, in the school setting expectations became imposed on the child. These expectations included conformity and encouragement of academic success. Children were expected to follow the group and regulate their level of achievement toward the mean. Over or under-achievers were taught to stay with the group and not stand apart from it. Children and their parents were also under intense stress during times of entrance examinations, in which a child’s identity depended upon passing or failing.

#### SOCIETAL CHANGES IN THE PREVIOUS 10 - 15 YEARS: BREAKDOWN

Up until about 10 years ago, this existing frame was relatively stable. Even though the expectations and responsibilities caused stress for young people in school and beginning their families, the level of stress was somehow manageable. This network of mutual expectations, the consensual frame, was dynamically maintained in the society for many years.

During the past 10 years, however, Japan has seen major changes, the result of which is to raise the level of emotional stress and personal threat to intolerable levels. When this happens in any social system, it can lead to the breakdown of existing frames. Many factors have contributed to this change, some of which are outlined in Table 4.

Perhaps the main factor is the collapse of the so-called “bubble economy.” Manufacturing and technology faced increased world competition and personal prosperity declined. Individuals lost their jobs and the promise of lifetime employment vanished in many sectors of the economy. The existing frame relied on an industrial base of manufacturing and technology in which Japanese intelligence, uniformity, and conformity led to high quality products which set world-wide standards for excellence. Now the developed nations are in a post-industrial era in which personal creativity is more valued than uniformity of standards. This demand puts pressure on Japanese people who are used to not being different from others.

Another major change is the rapid increase in the use of the internet and cellular telephones, especially for young people. Those of us who did not grow up with these technologies have learned to use them as tools to get our work done and to stay in touch with the world. For children, however, the internet takes up a much bigger place in their minds and imaginations. It is not just a tool but a whole world in which one can get lost. Some children may take the internet world of chat rooms, blogging and video games as more real than the interactive world of living human beings. On the internet, companions

Table 4 Change factors in the past 10-15 years

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- Collapse of “bubble economy”
  - “Post-industrial” world society marked by individuality and creativity rather than uniformity of standards
  - No guarantee of lifetime employment
  - Internet, TV, cellular telephones
  - *hitorikko mondai* (one-child family)
-

can be found day and night, more available than any real person in their lives. In addition, the internet takes time away from face-to-face interaction, physical play and exercise, reading books, and thinking for oneself.

A final change in the past 10 years is a decline in the birth rate. This no doubt is due to a combination of the other factors. Both husbands and wives may be forced to work outside the home in order to earn an acceptable family income. There is more focus on the self and more fear for the future that may keep people from wanting to bring children into these uncertain times.

## BREAKDOWN OF CONSENSUAL FRAMES IN FAMILY AND SCHOOL: THREAT AND CONFLICT

During times of system breakdown, the psychological experience can shift from normal to extreme. Research on trauma (van der Kolk, 1996) shows that during times of relatively rapid change, there is an increase in a sense of personal threat that can persist for long periods of time. In the case of Japanese society, the reliance in the previously existing consensual frame on implicit communication is likely to lead to an inability to explicitly communicate to others about the depth of one's fears. Conversely, parents and teachers who observe a child's withdrawal may not want to directly confront the child regarding his or her feelings. Said in another way, under the extreme sense of threat that comes with system breakdown, the traditional system of implicit emotional communication may block chances for mutual communication and lead to extreme forms of withdrawal from society.

*Hikikomori*, which occurs primarily in males, is one symptom of this breakdown. In the absence of reliable implicit systems of communication, the adolescent's only perceived option is nearly total withdrawal from school and family. In the case of females, they may fear the commitment required to be a wife and mother, especially as the changes in society and high levels of attained education have led to increased sense of the importance of individual and personal goals. Females may also fear bringing a child into such an uncertain world in which the future is no longer clear.

Why should Japanese males withdraw under stress while females of the same age seek to engage in society in new ways with the goal of self-actualization? The explanation for this difference may have to do with the relationship between male children and their mothers in the previously existing consensual frame. Male children, especially the first-borns, have a special responsibility to parents and mothers may seek to support their sons for success and not engage in any open conflict.

The mother-son relationship has traditionally been governed by implicit communication through *amae*. When the child is under stress and feels threatened, however, *amae* can take increasingly extreme forms as shown in Table 5 (Behrens, 2004). Acceptable forms of *amae* reflect a desire for closeness, for needs to be met, and a wish to be protected. As the child's unexpressed needs become more extreme, however, *amae* behavior becomes increasingly disruptive (Behrens, 2004). In the most extreme cases, it is possible to understand the sometimes violent behavior of *hikikomori* toward their parents as a desperate attempt to achieve emotional closure and relieve a perhaps intolerable sense of personal threat.



Table 5 Four Levels of *Amae* (from Behrens, 2004)

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<i>Emotional (Acceptable)</i>
1. Desire for closeness, intimacy, “childish” behavior
<i>Instrumental (Disruptive)</i>
2. selfish, clingy, helpless
3. acting desperate, making deals
4. violent, abusive, unreasonable demands

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## RECAPITULATION OF HISTORICAL FRAMES: *HIKIKOMORI* AS A UNIQUELY JAPANESE RESPONSE TO THREAT

Even if we agree that male *hikikomori* can be explained in part by extremes of mother-son *amae* in the face of a perceived threat, there is still a missing part of the picture. If one looks at school refusal in the US and other western countries, the pattern of withdrawal from school is not the same. School refusal in the US affects both boys and girls equally, occurs at all ages and in all social classes. In Japan, school refusal affects primarily males from relatively affluent families who are liberal and overprotective so that children can expect parental indulgence and financial support. Japanese *hikikomori* are typically adolescents who are shy, sensitive and intelligent. In both Japan and the US, the child may withdraw from school because of being teased or bullied about being different from the norm. In the US, however, school refusal is not persistent like it is in Japan: the child attends school but irregularly. Finally, unlike Japan where the child becomes isolated from family as well as school, in the US the family is seen as a source of support and helps to actively encourage school return.

Perhaps one way to understand why *hikikomori* is uniquely Japanese is to see it as a recapitulation of a “forgotten” historical frame during the Edo period. During this period, Japanese were forbidden to leave the country and foreigners were rejected (see Table 6). There was, however, only one place of transaction with the outside world at the port of Nagasaki (Reischauer, 1979). This point of transaction can be considered a bridging frame. In the same way, *hikikomori* is a closing of the border of the child’s world to outsiders with a small bridge to that outside world via the internet (Rees, 2002). One can also consider *hikikomori* as a recapitulation of an historical frame of Japanese traditional poetry and music that reveres solitude as noble. According to Yuichi Hattori, a psychotherapist who works with *hikikomori* in Saitama Prefecture, it is a “problem caused by

Table 6 *Hikikomori* as recapitulation of Edo period historical frame

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<i>Withdrawal</i>
Historical frame: 1636 - 1854: No Japanese could leave the country, no Japanese resident abroad could return to Japan, foreigners expelled or killed
Recapitulated historical frame: <i>Hikikomori</i> as withdrawal into the “safe” borders of the bedroom
<i>Bridging</i>
Historical bridging frame: Port at Nagasaki remained open to controlled and limited foreign trade
Recapitulated bridging frame: The internet

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traditional Japanese culture” (Shimoyachi, 2003).

### POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR HIKIKOMORI: JAPANESE BRIDGING FRAMES

The use of the internet by withdrawn children is a means of bridging between the bedroom and the outside world. In order to encourage a return to normal social functioning at work or school, parents, teachers, and others can seek to expand the bridging frame in specific ways leading to the end of withdrawal. In this section, we present some possible bridging frames that are based in Japanese forms of emotional communication. This means that communication with the child is implicit and need not address explicitly or directly the child’s fears or concerns. Traditionally Japanese forms of communication avoid conflict, support nurture and good feelings, and a return to appropriate forms of *amae*. Because the child feels threatened, it is essential in all these suggested forms of bridging to make the child feel safe and protected. In the next section, we suggest some possible bridging frames based on Western forms of explicit communication.

At the *first phase of Japanese bridging*, communication via the internet can be used but in this case with parents, teachers, or peer counselors (children from school who are especially trained to reach out to the withdrawn children). The internet is used as a bridge to re-establish safe and enjoyable forms of communication with people close to the child. Parents and teachers can send messages of greeting or news, without talking about the “problem.” They can also engage in playing video games with the child via the internet.

Although this is not typical adult behavior, we are arguing that the “problem” is not “in” the children but rather “in” the system of communication and relationships which has broken down for the reasons given above. Thus, in order for the child to change, in a dynamic systems perspective, the adults must also change.

At the *second phase of Japanese bridging*, parents, teachers or peers can seek to engage in face-to-face communication with the child. We suggest that this communication take place in a safe area within the child’s home which can be negotiated via the internet at first. This can be a particular room of the house, or there can be a temporary shelter built with fabric or the use of a camping tent. The child should be allowed freedom to choose when to enter and leave, and the communication in the safe space should be for play and enjoyment.

As one example, Masahisa Okuyama, with the backing of the Saitama Prefectural Government, has created a written manual for training of *hikikomori* support workers who go into the home to help create bridges between the *hikikomori* and the parents. These support workers are able to establish communication in a way that the parents had been unable to do on their own (Shimoyachi, 2003).

Assuming these two phases are successful, a *third phase of Japanese bridging* can occur outside the home. This again must involve safe and protected forms of playful or soothing communication. Among other things, this can include:

- Relationships with nature, together with other people
- Relationships with animals (such as pets at home or equine therapy)
- Relationships using Buddhist or Shinto practices (prayer, meditation, pilgrimage)

As one example, 13 *hikikomori* were brought together to take part in “Slow Walk Shikoku 88,” organized by New Start, a nonprofit organization from Urayusa, Chiba

Prefecture. This was a long-distance pilgrimage between 88 different Buddhist temples which brings together *hikikomori* for the purpose of sharing a common experience and re-engaging with the world. According to the organizers, "Walking among the rich nature of Shikoku will revive their bodies, and the *osettai* (gifts) will revive their spirits. The pilgrimage is a kind of hospital that offers the best kind of counseling" (Ihara, 2003).

The *fourth phase of Japanese bridging frames*, the final phase, is the return to school or work. This can occur in different ways. If the child returns to the school that he left, there should be safe areas for relative withdrawal or play within the school. This could include internet game rooms, or "safe" peer counselors who are trained in emotional communication. The school also needs to establish and enforce anti-bullying measures. Another possibility is for the child to attend special "free" schools in which a safe and accepting environment for learning has been established.

Finally, the child can be encouraged to join with face-to-face communities outside the family and school for safe and implicit shared identities of common problems. These could be *hikikomori* support groups, or they could be groups especially for playful and enjoyable activities such as music, art, dance, or athletics.

#### POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS FOR *HIKIKOMORI*: WESTERN BRIDGING FRAMES ("TOUGH LOVE")

Western bridging approaches involve more direct and explicit communication with the child. This is done while still preserving a sense of safety and protection. The goal is for the child to talk about his feeling and eventually to play an active role in solving the problem of withdrawal. In the Japanese solutions proposed in the previous section, it is the family and school that sets the agenda and establishes the bridging frames. In the Western approach, there is more cooperation and more room for the child's autonomy and creativity.

At the *first phase of Western bridging frames*, there is some type of challenge to the child who is withdrawn. Many kinds of challenges may be possible but one is a partial denial by the parents of supplies of food, money, internet links until the child recognizes that he must play an active role to re-establish communication with the parents. At this level, the child may be acting out of self-interest, that is, talking to parents as a way to get the money, food, and internet.

At the *second phase of Western bridging frames*, the parents, teachers, or social workers can encourage explicit emotional communication. The child is asked to articulate his fears, concerns, and anxieties as well as his desires and hopes. Although the challenge to the child may produce some resentment or even anger, what is important is the arousal and mobilization of the child's emotions. While this may seem counter-intuitive within Japanese culture, within Western society, we find that only when the emotions are engaged and made explicit can the child take the next developmental step toward open and reciprocal emotional communication (Greenspan, 1997). This open and reciprocal communication is mutually respectful, accepting, and produces a sense of relief in the child because of being understood at a deep emotional level.

At the *third phase of Western bridging frames*, once the child's emotions are mobilized and the child is engaging with others at a developmentally appropriate level of shared

understanding, children can then engage in cooperative negotiations with parents about ideas for returning to school. In Western culture, if the child is allowed to play a role in developing solutions to such problems, the child is more likely to participate in the eventual resolution.

This sense of personal autonomy, which is one of the traditional distinctions between Japanese and Western cultures, fosters a growing sense of personal responsibility and respect for others in the process of decision making. Again, this may be counter-intuitive from a Japanese perspective in which one might think that too much personal autonomy causes further isolation and separation from the group. In fact, in healthy Western families, autonomy is part of the process of forming mature and mutually respectful relationships with others. Only immature forms of autonomy, such as might be seen in young children or people with developmental delays in self- and other-awareness, are primarily self-centered.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, we have presented two possible pathways for dynamic systems change that may help to alleviate the problem of *hikikomori*: a traditional Japanese approach and one that is based more in Western cultural norms. The success of one or the other pathway for dealing with *hikikomori* depends in part on the commitment of the family and school, and in another part on how parents, teachers and counselors view the educational goals for the next generation of Japanese people. If the goal is to recover and reestablish traditional Japanese consensual frames, the Japanese approach to bridging is the most useful. If, on the other hand, there is a perception of broader social changes in which more explicit communication is valued, then the Western approach may be more beneficial.

In either case, we feel that understanding the principles of dynamic systems change can help to create therapeutic interventions for problems that are genuinely social-relational. In some way, all "individual" problems can be understood in part as reflections of the system of social relationships. Depending upon the problem, then, the alterations in the social system may prove to be the most effective form of treatment.

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