



**HAL**  
open science

## Japan's 'Socially Withdrawn Youths' and Time Constraints in Japanese Society

Sachiko Kaneko

► **To cite this version:**

Sachiko Kaneko. Japan's 'Socially Withdrawn Youths' and Time Constraints in Japanese Society. *Time & Society*, 2006, 15 (2-3), pp.233-249. 10.1177/0961463X06067034 . hal-00571018

**HAL Id: hal-00571018**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00571018>**

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Japan's 'Socially Withdrawn Youths' and Time Constraints in Japanese Society

## Management and conceptualization of time in a support group for '*hikikomori*'

Sachiko Kaneko

---

**ABSTRACT.** This article discusses how time is conceptualized among *hikikomori*, or Japan's so called 'socially withdrawn youth', through the narratives of *hikikomori keikensha* (those who experienced *hikikomori*) and also examines time and space management in *hikikomori* support context based on ethnographic data. *Hikikomori* is an act of retreat from time and space constraints in society. *Hikikomori* support groups provide a place for them to be without feeling such time constraints, but this is not considered sufficient to get *hikikomori* back into society. *Hikikomori*, which challenges the usual coordinates of time and space, may be understood as a kind of reaction to time pressures and role performances in Japanese society. **KEY WORDS** • ethnography • Japanese youth • narrative • social withdrawal • time constraints

### Introduction

*Hikikomori*, which literally means 'withdrawal', generally refers to those who stay at home for a long period without taking part in any social activities, such as attending school, working, or socializing with friends. It refers to the

condition of withdrawal as well as to the person/people experiencing the condition (Shiokura, 2000: 205). The common feature of *hikikomori* is said to be in the lack of interaction with other people and problems with communicating with others (Shiokura, 2002: 23). *Hikikomori* has been considered a social problem in Japan since the late 1990s. The leading figure in the *hikikomori* debates, psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki (1998), coined the term *hikikomori*. *Hikikomori* came to be known to the public as a social problem after mass media coverage of three crimes allegedly committed by *hikikomori* in early 2000 (Saitō, 2002: 37). Saitō (2000: 680, 2002: 28) estimates that there are one million *hikikomori* in Japan, which accounts for roughly one per cent of the Japanese population. This has led to the emergence of what is sometimes called the '*hikikomori* industry', which involves over 100 support groups dealing with the afflicted youth and their struggling families (see Moriguchi et al., 2002).

It has been generally believed that *hikikomori* is unique to contemporary Japanese society (Saitō, 2000: 124–33), due to its particular characteristics. These characteristics include issues related to late capitalism, such as educational background society (Kondō, 1999b: 84–5; Aizawa, 2001: 113–4), extended youthhood due to increasing years spent in education (Kondō, 1999a: 51), technological advances in relation to individualization (Hashizume, 2001: 8; Kuramoto, 2001: 83), and nuclearization of the Japanese family (see Lock, 1988: 53). They also include what are seen as uniquely Japanese social values, such as the emphasis on dependency/indulgence (*amae*) (Saitō, 2001: 124–33) and collectivism (Machizawa, 2003: 38–9) in Japanese social relationships. The cultural emphasis on dependency in the Japanese family, in addition to the affluence of the Japanese families, partly account for the tendency for youth to live with their parents even after finishing schooling.

The Japanese government (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2003) defines *hikikomori* as follows:

1. He/she continues not to take part in society and is withdrawn at home for six months and over;
2. It is distinguished from a mental disease, such as schizophrenia.

Note that not taking part in society includes 'not attending school' and 'not working'.

Here, the length of the *hikikomori* period is defined as six months and over, but among those labelled or self-labelled as *hikikomori*, the length of the *hikikomori* period ranges from a few months up to decades (Naruse, 2003: 147). As the above definition shows, *hikikomori* is not a label for a mental disease, but is simply a term for a condition (Saitō, 2002: 68). *Hikikomori* occurs among teenagers up to the age of 35 (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2003), but when it occurs among those under the age of 18, it is usually categorized as '*futōkō*' (school refusal), as

over 95 per cent of Japanese children attend schooling until the age of 18 (Monbu kagakushō 2005). *Hikikomori* has been said to be a 'middle-class phenomenon' and since most Japanese see themselves as middle class, the rhetoric used in mass media coverage is often that *hikikomori* may be a potential problem for most families across Japan (Shiokura, 2000: 239–40). During the *hikikomori* period, until the *hikikomori* finds ways to support himself/herself economically, the parents usually provide housing and food for him/her (see Saitō, 2002: 53). There is often stigma attached to not only *hikikomori* but also to their families, which is considered as one of the causes for prolonged *hikikomori* period (Saitō, 1998: 101). The governmental survey (Kōsei rōdōshō, 2003) shows that it is usually the parents who seek help with their children. Being at a loss about how they can encourage their children to venture out into society, they visit psychiatrists, psychologists, local health centres, or self-help groups for families of *hikikomori*. Based on findings from field research in *hikikomori* support groups and literature on *hikikomori* and on time conceptions, this article discusses how time is managed and conceptualized in the context of supporting youths who have experienced withdrawal from society, or *hikikomori keikensha*.

I conducted field research from July 2003 to July 2004 with a number of support groups for *hikikomori keikensha* around the Tokyo area. The field research mainly involved participant observation at the support groups, including Group A, which will be discussed in detail in this article, though I also conducted structured interviews with those engaged in the '*hikikomori* industry'. This study also builds on literature on *hikikomori*, including popular and academic literature, online resources, and mass media reports.

I will first outline the perception of time revealed in narratives of *hikikomori keikensha*. Although the problem of *hikikomori* is generally associated with communication with others, there are numerous *hikikomori keikensha* who are willing to communicate their own experiences. Narratives written by *hikikomori keikensha* about their pasts appear on many websites or in books on *hikikomori* (see Shiokura, 2000; Ueyama, 2001; Moroboshi, 2003; NHK, 2005). Many *hikikomori keikensha* are willing to talk about their past experiences at *hikikomori*-related meetings, to audiences of mostly *hikikomori* supporters, parents of *hikikomori*, and fellow *hikikomori keikensha*, or to send their articles to websites on *hikikomori* or magazines.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, some *hikikomori keikensha* are happy to communicate their experiences through the mass media, such as on TV programmes or to be included in newspaper articles. The narratives in such works or presentations generally follow a set pattern, going through the life course in chronological order. By being *hikikomori*, they not only withdraw from the social space but also free themselves from the pressure of punctuality and of speed and efficiency. In their recovery process from *hikikomori* and becoming an active member of society, it is necessary for them to find their

place in the social sphere and to learn to cope with the gap between their pace and the socially expected punctuality.

Next, the focus is shifted to the *hikikomori* support groups. These provide spaces with few restrictions of time by comparison with 'real' society, so that *hikikomori keikensha* are not pressured. At the same time, during the process of recovery, *hikikomori keikensha* may also be expected to internalize punctuality and socially defined values of time through various programmes. The latter part of this article will discuss the arrangements of time in *hikikomori* support groups and the dilemmas involved in these arrangements.

Studies by Nishimoto (1997: 237–59) and Shimada (1995: 251–60) demonstrate how industrialization in Japan from the late 19th century has led to emphasis being put on unified and standardized notions of time consciousness, efficiency and punctuality in Japan. Nishimoto (1999: 119–40), in another study, further notes Japan's accelerating pace (see also Illich, 1977: 50; Nowotny, 1994: 9) in the post-war period, and how the just-in-time system implemented by Toyota, a globally successful automobile company, which puts workers in all positions to a high level of time coordination and labour intensification by structured under-staffing and overtime work, has put the whole Japanese nation under pressure of time. *Hikikomori*, in this respect, brings attention to youths who cannot accommodate such pressures of time and efficiency in contemporary Japanese society. Through investigation of the assumptions behind the management of time in support groups for the marginalized *hikikomori*, this study aims to highlight how values of time are socially defined in mainstream contemporary Japan.

### **Patterns of Narratives of *Hikikomori Keikensha***

A pattern can be found in many narratives of *hikikomori keikensha*. The narrative may be divided into three parts: the period before becoming *hikikomori*, the period during which they were *hikikomori*, and the recovery period (see Shiokura, 2000; Tanabe, 2000; Ueyama, 2001; Moroboshi, 2003; NHK, 2005 for examples of narratives; see Kawakita, 2005: 261–8 for a sociological study using the pattern). Here, I will illustrate the pattern by using the case of Mr Suzuki (pseudonym). Mr Suzuki is a *hikikomori keikensha* who has talked about his experiences on many occasions and was in his mid-30s at the time of my interview with him in January 2005.

#### **The period before becoming *hikikomori***

From when I was in the third or fourth year of primary school, I have had struggles in life (*ikizurasa*) and could not trust anybody, not even my parents. My parents

always fought against each other, and I could not accept my parents as they were. My mother always complained to me about my father, who had a short temper. Often, after dinner, I would listen to my mother's complaints, and when doing so, I saw myself as playing the 'supporter' role for my mother. But one day, when I suggested to my mother that she should divorce my father, I was completely betrayed by her reply: 'That could be the best solution, but in that case, I will leave you with your father. I won't take you with me – I will take your sister'. I had thought that my mother and my sister never got along well, so I could not believe that she would leave me behind. My parents never got divorced, so this did not become reality. But still, what my mother said became a traumatic experience, and flashed back into my mind time and again in later life. I thought I had always hated my father, but it was after my father passed away that I became *hikikomori*. This happened when I was in my late twenties. I had never wanted to become an adult, because I could not respect my parents. This was why I went to university, so that I could delay becoming an adult for as long as possible. After I finished university, I had no choice but to start a full-time job. This was at a time when there were no such things as *furitā*.<sup>2</sup> When I started working, I felt as if my life was over, and that I was going to hell. I escaped from such feelings by intoxicating myself with alcohol. As I thought that the environment was to blame, rather than myself, I kept on changing jobs, in a continuous, but unsuccessful search for my place of belonging (*ibasho*). After continuing this for a few years, I could no longer find anything to blame, and after my 'virtual enemy' – my father – died, I completely lost vitality and became *hikikomori*.

The experiences of *hikikomori keikensha* vary, and the time in which the person started shutting himself/herself from society also depends on the individual cases. Thus, the period before becoming *hikikomori* ranges from childhood up to their 30s. When *hikikomori keikensha* talk about the period before becoming *hikikomori*, they usually talk about the experiences as children/youths, in relation to the family background and kindergarten/school (see Tanabe, 2000; Moroboshi, 2003). This part of the narrative usually provides reasoning and explanations for becoming *hikikomori*. In the case of Mr Suzuki, he talks about his family background and how a traumatic experience in childhood resulted in struggles in his later life. Some *hikikomori keikensha* talk of the pressure for conformity in the educational system and society as a whole, which encourages efficiency. This is symbolized in a comment which appeared in a newspaper article: a youth, with 10 years of *hikikomori* experience, explained, 'I felt as if I was a car driving down a highway at maximum speed. We were expected to "speed up" all the time, both at school and at work' (*Hokkaidō Shinbun*, 7 August 2005).

Another aspect of the narratives of *hikikomori* of the period before becoming *hikikomori* related to conceptions of time is regarding how they make references to past incidents in their life. When *hikikomori keikensha* talk of certain incidents, they refer to which year of education they were in, rather than by referring to the year of age (see Tanabe, 2000). For example, one *hikikomori keikensha*

commented, ‘I started to be bullied soon after I entered junior high school’ (Tanabe, 2000: 71). In Mr Suzuki’s case, he became *hikikomori* after finishing higher education, but studies (Saitō, 1998: 39; Kōsei rōdōshō, 2003) show that most *hikikomori* start withdrawal while in education, which also partly accounts for why there are frequent references made to the year of education in *hikikomori keikensha*’s narratives. Such references to time imply how much the progressive stages in education mean to the person’s understanding of his/her life cycle.

### **The period in which they were *hikikomori***

Mr Suzuki’s story continues:

When I was *hikikomori*, I had plenty of time to think about why I became *hikikomori*. First I spent almost 24 hours in bed, and only went out of bed when I had meals. I did not even take a bath. When I was in the worst condition, I went into the kitchen after my mother went to bed, and had the meal by myself. I lost touch with most friends, though there were a few friends who regularly tried to reach me. The more I failed to respond to them, the more I lost touch with the outside world. But I needed to continue this lifestyle for a while to recharge myself with the energy I had lost through almost 30 years of life. After a year of *hikikomori*, and recharging myself, I could go out and start working. But after a year, my energy ran out, and I became a *hikikomori* again. Life during the second *hikikomori* period was much the same as the first, and I gradually regained my energy.

Although the term *hikikomori* is literally a condition in which the person shuts himself/herself in his/her house and never goes out, the experiences of those who see themselves *hikikomori keikensha* vary in great degree, ranging from total withdrawal in his/her room to going out almost every day though not having friends or jobs. The length of withdrawal also ranges from a few months with intervals to decades. More importantly, as Kuramoto (2001: 61–2) suggests, it is usually difficult to single out one event which triggered the withdrawal. Mr Suzuki avoids clarifying one event which led to his withdrawal. Saitō (1998: 92–108) also points out that the longer the withdrawal period becomes, the more challenging it becomes for the person to venture out of it.

Besides, when *hikikomori keikensha* talk about their experiences during the period in which they were *hikikomori*, the period as a whole is seen as ‘a single phase in life’ (Yoshimoto, 2002: 21). Many talk about sleeping all day, not taking baths/showers, playing computer games, reading books, including *manga* (comics), to escape from the social space, and from realities and anxieties of social life (see Tanabe, 2000: 116, 204–5). They are not constrained by rules of punctuality, as they have no appointments with others, nor are they expected to be in social spheres. One of the features of the *hikikomori* experiences is said to be a reversed day-and-night shift, where the person stays up all night when

society is 'in rest' and falls asleep as the morning starts (see NHK, 2005). Saitō (1998: 46) suggests that the reversed day-and-night shift occurred among 81 per cent of the *hikikomori* cases according to his survey done in 1989, and surveys done by Kōsei rōdōshō (2003) and Sakai et al. (2004: 168–79) also reveal the prevalence of reversed day-and-night shift behaviour among *hikikomori*. As in the case of Mr Suzuki, some talk of having meals at different times of the day from their family, on their own, both to avoid contact with other socially active members of the family and to free themselves from the time constraints of having meals at a fixed time of day (see Tanabe, 2000: 116).

*Hikikomori*, by definition, refers to retreat from social responsibilities. Thus, as Kawakita (2005: 265–6) suggests from his analysis of life stories of *hikikomori keikensha*, during the *hikikomori* period, the person is not expected to fulfil social roles. Such withdrawal from society, in short, is retreat from the social time constraints, and because of the lack of any social events which mark different stages during the period, the withdrawal period as a whole is seen as a single phase in life.

### The recovery period

Mr Suzuki continues his narrative:

With the start of a new year, and after finding places for counselling and self-help groups on the internet, I was able to get out of the second *hikikomori* period. It was in January that I heard of a psychiatrist at a local health centre, and started seeing the psychiatrist who I now see regularly for counselling. I learned about Group A [see the following section] from the psychiatrist – this group happens to be close to where I live. Since then, I have been going to Group A on a regular basis.

The recovery process from *hikikomori* is usually painstaking, and becomes a huge challenge for the *hikikomori*. Some find their place in *hikikomori* support groups and make the participation in such groups a step towards 'real' society, while others find their way out without any contact with the '*hikikomori* industry'. Ueyama Kazuki (2001: 89–95), for example, writes in his life story, that he took a step forward towards recovery through getting to know a person to talk to on the internet. For some, occasional visits of once or twice a month to psychiatrists or counsellors, or attending self-help groups, become the first steps of contact with 'real society'. What triggers such visits varies, but as in the case of Mr Suzuki, the time of year plays a part for some *hikikomori*. At the start of a new year, either in January or in April, when the new fiscal and academic year starts in Japan, some feel that they have to make their move.

Most self-help groups hold meetings once or twice a month, though there may be informal events at other times (see Moriguchi et al., 2002). It is apparent from many narratives of *hikikomori keikensha* that such occasional contacts with

society require a huge amount of energy, and that they get so exhausted that they would often spend the next few days, or even weeks, just taking a rest at home. It is common for *hikikomori keikensha* to fail to appear for appointments, as they do not have enough energy to venture out of the house on the day. In their process of recovery, *hikikomori keikensha* often increase their frequency of contact with society, by making friends at support groups or finding other places to go out, but many have ups and downs: it is common for members to stop going to support groups for a few months without notice and coming back again.

Having contact with society in the form of meeting people is not considered full recovery by both the *hikikomori keikensha* and those engaged in *hikikomori* support. For the relatively younger group of *hikikomori*, who are teenagers or in their early 20s, getting back into education becomes a more practical goal, whereas for the older group, gaining employment and becoming economically independent becomes the goal. 'Social participation', for them, is full reintegration into society, which is fulfilling their social roles in society as students or as full-time workers, often referred to as '*shakaijin*', which literally means 'social person', whichever is appropriate for their age group. Gaining employment particularly becomes a struggle for most *hikikomori*, who lack previous social experiences in a society where age limit applies for new recruits.

Overall, the recovery process for *hikikomori keikensha*, which involves increasing contact with society as well as achieving social participation, is not without difficulties.

### **Management and Conceptualization of Time in *Hikikomori* Support Context**

Because of the difficulties involved in the recovery process of *hikikomori keikensha*, there is demand and room for the burgeoning support groups to play their part in assisting with the process. The *hikikomori* support groups provide spaces with few restrictions of time and space compared to 'real' society so that *hikikomori keikensha* are not pressured, as in the case of Group A.

Group A is a *hikikomori* support group located in Tokyo. I conducted participant observation about three to five days a week, and up to seven days a week on some occasions, from July 2003 to July 2004. The information provided here is from this period, and does not reflect changes that have taken place in Group A afterwards.

Mr Takeda (pseudonym), the leader of Group A, is an easygoing person in his late 50s. He used to be an editor for an educational magazine, and from this involvement with educational issues, he set up this group for support of *hikikomori*. This group moved to the present location in eastern Tokyo in 2001, when a preparatory school network for university entrance qualifications offered

Mr Takeda to let Group A use the site free of charge, which was no longer going to be in use because of the closure of the school.

The building where Group A meets has four floors and has a few rooms. The two top floors are used as the storage space of the school network, so are not available to members of the group. On the ground floor is the entrance area, where members change from their shoes into slippers. There is a large room, which functions as the main room for members to socialize. In the room is a large table for members to sit around and chat, as well as a sofa, which is sometimes used by members who want to take a nap, a small tea room, and personal computers. Further down from the large room are two smaller rooms: one is Mr Takeda's office, and the other is a small room, which is often used as a place where members can chat in quiet, small groups, or to take a nap. On the first floor are two large rooms and a small room. One large room is a PC room, where members who do not necessarily want to socialize with others may sit in front of the PCs to maintain solitude and tranquillity. All the computers on the ground floor and the first floor have internet connection, through which members are able to connect to larger society without face-to-face interaction. The other large room is often used for events with many participants, but it also has a TV, video, and TV game equipment, which members are free to make use of. The small room is used as a counselling room, though when there are no counselling sessions, members are free to make use of it. The existence of a few rooms and flexibility of the use of the rooms allows members to be alone when they want to, or avoid being in the same room as those who they cannot get along with, and members are free to move around. Some members choose to stay in rooms where events are not held, for example, to escape from the stress of being in a group of people. Even members sharing one room/space do not necessarily have to join in the same conversations: members may read, take a nap, sit quietly, or listen to music and so on, when others are chatting. The space at the group, therefore, is not strictly defined, as its functions depend on how members choose to make use of it. Such flexible space arrangements are possible, as the members are not expected to perform roles in designated spaces, as in the case of most institutions in society, in particular, in schools and workplaces.

As Mr Takeda wants to make the group as accessible as possible, membership is basically free of charge.<sup>3</sup> Mr Takeda's income is therefore not based on membership fees, but on his publications on *hikikomori* and related issues. From his personal income and some donations, he pays the maintenance costs of Group A. Other than Mr Takeda, there are roughly six counsellors who come on different days of the week to hold counselling sessions with *hikikomori keikensha* members or their families. The counselling sessions are free for the first session with any of the counsellors, but from the second session, a fee of 1000 yen (7 euros) is charged per session. For sessions with families, a fee of 3000 yen (20 euros) is charged for every session. While some counsellors

concentrate on having sessions, others rarely have sessions with members or families and enjoy chatting and taking part in events with members on a voluntary basis.

Membership to Group A is fluid, as Mr Takeda has the policy of welcoming anyone who call themselves *hikikomori*. Anybody can show up at Group A, though on his/her first visit, he/she signs up as a member with a membership application form. Most members find out about Group A through media reports and books or at local health centres, and decide to come to the group by themselves. Mr Takeda suggests that it takes time for *hikikomori* to actually pay a visit, after contemplating it for the first time. It is not rare to find new members who come to the group for the first time, one or two years after they made their initial enquiries on the telephone, saying that they called about the group 'recently'. The average age of the members is late 20s, and there are more male members than female members. Some members find it difficult to make friends, while others may succeed in making friends, but find Group A so comfortable that they have not been able to step out of the Group A community and gain confidence to interact with non-*hikikomori* people outside and take steps to find jobs. There exists no system to 'push out' the members of the group into 'real society', and long-time members would have been coming to the group for three to five years.

Group A is open from 10:00 to around 22:00 every day, though officially, it is closed at 18:00. There are usually very few people in the morning, due to the late hours *hikikomori* tend to keep, and most come in the afternoon, while others may pop in during the evening. Every day, roughly 10 to 20 members come to the group, and the number decreases on the day after an event at the group, as most members get exhausted after an event. Often, the members are not conscious about the day of the week, as one member said to me, Mr Takeda, and others in one conversation, 'Holidays do not mean much to us. We *hikikomori* are like having 1000 consecutive holidays'. Nevertheless, there are differences of the average number of members depending on the day of the week. Originally, members used to meet only on Wednesdays, so it is common to find a large number of members on Wednesdays. The most popular counsellor at the group also comes every Wednesday, and her presence also partly accounts for the larger number of participants. The following day, on Thursdays, not many members apparently have the energy or find reasons for coming to the group. Monday is thought to be a day when members take a 'day off': it is easier for members to go out into town and enjoy themselves during daytime on weekends, rather than on weekdays when people their age are normally off to work, as they do not have to care about how passers-by may see them. In other words, during the weekends, it is not difficult for members to find places to go to other than the group. Thus, although the members are not particularly aware of the day of the week, in reality, there are differences in the turn-up rate at the group.

The time of year also affects the attendance and atmosphere of the group. In January, at the start of a new calendar year, and in April, at the start of the new academic year, there are fewer members, and as one member said, many members are 'in bad condition' (*chōshi ga warui*) around January. With more members in worse condition than usual, the group as a whole loses its vitality around the time. This is in sharp contrast to the lively atmosphere found in November or December, when many events, including a Halloween Party, walking excursions, and the Christmas Party – which all attract many participants – are held. As seen in the case of Mr Suzuki's recovery process from *hikikomori*, the start of a year is a time for people to feel that they have to move on. This, however, could also become a pressure on *hikikomori* and make them feel depressed that they cannot move on. At the New Year in January, in particular, there is another pressure put on *hikikomori* from their relatives, with Japanese spending time with their extended family. One *hikikomori keikensha* said to me that he prefers to hide himself from such occasions, as he himself knows too well that he has nothing to say about what he has done during the past year and that his current state is a shame for his family.

Related to this, the weather is seen as influencing the attendance rate of members. There tend to be less members on rainy days, and often, the members as well as the staff members say, 'There are few members today because of the rain' on such days. One explanation for this phenomenon may be that, as Tanaka-Matsumi and Marsella (1976: 379–96) demonstrate, the Japanese tend to associate feelings of depression with rain, clouds, and the dark.

The nature of Group A is, as Mr Takeda calls it, '*freespace*', where members are encouraged to drop by at anytime they like, and spend time as they like at their own pace. It is also a self-help group, as much of what is done is left to members themselves, and provides a place to stay for members who do not feel comfortable at home or in 'real society'.

Mr Takeda normally does not organize events at the group, except for seasonal events such as cherry blossom viewing (*hanami*) in early spring. Some members and counsellors organize events – camping, tennis, films, '*hikikomori*-related forums', going out for drinks, fireworks festival, Halloween party, Christmas party and so on – for members to join in. These events allow members to experience things that they may have missed out on during their *hikikomori* years, but which most youths would be likely to experience. Whereas full-time workers tend to have such events on Friday evenings or on weekends when they do not have to work, the day of the week does not matter for the *hikikomori* members. They can turn up whatever the day of the week, and most events at this group are held on weekdays.

Mr Takeda distributes a monthly calendar which summarizes the events and meetings held at Group A. Ambiguity is maintained here, as the time is usually not specified in the calendar. Punctuality is required for meeting up for outing

events, but members will not be punished for failing to appear at the meeting point even if they had said that they would join in the event. Once, a member did not appear for an outing event, but other members were not frustrated with this, and said sympathetically, 'maybe he does not feel well today'. In addition, I found that many events are organized after the calendar is distributed, sometimes spontaneously planned on the day, and it is common to find meetings or events being cancelled because no one came. There used to be a number of meetings held in the group, such as 'thirties group' for those in their 30s, but most of them had stopped because attendance of members was very unstable.

In terms of job opportunities, it is up to the member if he/she uses the opportunity to gain job experience and some income. Years ago, Mr Takeda tied up with locals, got members to register for job experience, and tried to send members to a few local companies, shops, and farmers. But this ended in failure, with very few members actually trying out the job. Recently, Mr Takeda has started to think that job opportunities should be provided within the group itself. There is a variety of job opportunities offered currently at the group. First, there is delivery of local community papers, which is organized three times a month. There are also duties at the tea room, which mainly serves members themselves, and at the bookshop, which is open to the public. Members also help out at parents' meetings, which are held once a month. Some active members may work as 'visiting supporters', and pay visits to families with *hikikomori* and help other *hikikomori* get connected to society. Members with IT skills make documents and write on websites using PC software for Mr Takeda. Just a few times a year, over 20 members gather to pack envelopes and send off brochures. The nature of the employment support at the group is to give members the jobs and let them do them at their own pace, without pressure of time/speed, and not as part of a training programme. Mr Takeda is of the idea that it is generally mentally too challenging for members to work in 'real society' – seeing so many of the members quitting their part-time job soon after starting one – and he wants to broaden the opportunities for members to work within the stress-free environment here in the group. Work involving more than a few members usually starts at 10:00 am and finishes around 5:00 or 6:00 pm but members are not forced to come at 10:00 and can leave when they want to. After finishing work, most of which is paid for by the hour, members are expected to submit the time that they started and finished on the day, with the exception of delivery and IT-related work which is paid for the output. Mr Takeda does not particularly scold the members who turn up later than they had stated. Even if the members are not doing the tasks efficiently, he does not ask them to do the tasks quickly, and he does not point the finger over every mistake the members may make. Very few members manage to earn more than 10,000 yen (70 euros) per month, and the pay is far from enough to achieve economic independence.

### Discussion of Issues in Group A

As examined in the previous section, Group A arranges its time in a flexible manner, enabling members to do as they like without being anxious about time and space constraints in 'real' society. Within the '*hikikomori* industry' as a whole, some groups have similarly flexible time arrangements. For example, Ogino (2004: 120–33) discusses the flexible time and space arrangements and other features of a dormitory-style *hikikomori* support group, which he calls FSW, and analyses the assumptions behind such arrangements by using the concept of 'managing categorization', which he describes as a tendency to be vague about categories that indicate their social status accompanied by certain roles (Ogino, 2004: 120). Ogino finds that the spaces in the group are not framed, and that there are only loose schedules in FSW, and that these features show that there are few role categories at FSW (pp. 126–7). Mr Takeda of Group A thinks that the pressures of punctuality and efficiency in Japanese society are excessive, and that *hikikomori keikensha* need to be protected from such pressures by finding shelter in groups such as his.

On the other hand, there are other groups which have stricter time arrangements, as in the case of Youth Support Centre (YSC) in Tokyo. The first goal for new members of YSC is to 'acquire the basics of everyday life', which includes doing certain things at certain time of day (NHK, 2003–5). After working in a factory within the site from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm and getting used to regular modes of life, members at YSC experience working for another factory, then at other workplaces (NHK, 2003–5). It is considered at such organizations with stricter time arrangements that, in the process of recovery, *hikikomori keikensha* are expected to internalize punctuality and socially defined values of time, in which people are expected to work from morning to late afternoon, so that they may find employment and become a socially active member. There are other groups which focus on employment support, and such groups may offer training programmes for members to gain practice in business manners and gain work experiences under strict rules. Group B (see Naruse, 2003: 200), for example, is an organization whose primary goal is to put *hikikomori* members back into education or employment, depending on the age. In contrast to Group A, where there is little effort to push members out into 'real society', Group B states that the members are to 'graduate from' the group in two years (*Yomiuri Shinbun*, 20 February 2003), and should not continue to hold membership beyond the two years. The leader of Group B, Naruse (2003: 186–90), writes that one of the hurdles which *hikikomori keikensha* have to overcome is punctuality. She suggests that they should learn not to be late for appointments, and that in fact, some members need some training to acquire punctuality (p. 190).

In sum, there is a variety of ways of time management at *hikikomori* support groups. The *hikikomori* industry as a whole has not agreed to what extent it

should allow *hikikomori keikensha* to free themselves from time constraints in 'real society' and how much it should help them to internalise socially expected conceptions of time and performance of roles.

### Conclusion

This article has discussed how time is conceptualized among *hikikomori* through the narratives of *hikikomori keikensha* and also examined time and space management in the *hikikomori* support context based on ethnographic data. *Hikikomori* is an act of retreat from time and space constraints in society, and once a person becomes *hikikomori*, it is difficult for them to adjust themselves to the pressures of time and fulfilling roles. *Hikikomori* support groups like Group A provide a place for members to be without feeling such time constraints, but there are also groups which help *hikikomori* learn to cope with time constraints so that they may eventually become active members of society.

In this sense, *hikikomori* symbolizes how members of ('real') Japanese society live under pressures of time and role performance in the social sphere. As mentioned earlier, Japan is known to have adopted the western time system, which led to production of a unified time consciousness, in its industrialization processes in the late 19th century, moving on radically from the ideas of time following the rhythms of nature (see Shimada, 1995: 251–60; Nishimoto, 1997: 237–59). *Hikikomori*, in this respect, brings attention to youths who cannot accommodate such pressure of time and efficiency in contemporary Japanese society. Furthermore, as Mr Suzuki's narrative reveals, *hikikomori* may also be seen as an act of rejection of maturity, as sufferers cannot cope with the social expectations as mature adults. *Hikikomori* may therefore be considered a reaction to temporal pressures in relation to both everyday life and biographical time. It may be said that the existence of *hikikomori* threatens the Japanese temporal framework – based on punctuality, deep refusal of wasting time, accelerated rhythms and so on – or more broadly, the mainstream social norms in Japanese society. Since the investigations in this article are limited to the '*hikikomori* industry', examinations of how *hikikomori keikensha* experience and cope with the pressures of time in 'real-society' settings, at schools or at workplaces, will be beneficial for further research.

### Notes

The doctoral research project on which this article is based was supported by the Swire Centenary and Cathay Pacific Scholarship. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Brigitte Steger for organizing this project and for giving me helpful and insightful

comments. Japanese names are written in the order used in East Asia, namely, the surname first followed by the given name.

1. NHK (2003–5, 2005) had a website as part of their *hikikomori* support campaign from spring 2002 until spring 2005, which was an attempt to integrate internet contents with TV programmes. On the website were BBS boards for *hikikomori/hikikomori keikensha* to write about themselves, their expectations, their struggles, as well as web clinics and reports of *hikikomori* support organizations across Japan. Examples of *hikikomori*-related magazines are *IRIS*, edited by *hikikomori keikensha* members of Tokyo Shūre, an organization which holds meetings for *hikikomori keikensha*; and *HikiCom'i*, a magazine which mainly encourages correspondence among *hikikomori* readers.
2. '*Furītā*' is a Japanese expression for people between the age of 15 and 34 who lack full-time employment or are unemployed, excluding housewives and students. They may also be described as underemployed or freelance workers. The word '*furītā*' was first used around 1987 or 1988 and is based on an amalgamation of the English word free and either the German word, *arbeiter* (worker), or the English word 'time'. It is said that the use was coined by the Japanese part-time job magazine *From A*. (Kosugi, 2003: 1–3).
3. From February 2004, Mr Takeda started to charge 500 yen per month, regardless of how many times the member pays a visit, so as to have a better grasp of membership and to get members to buy insurance in case there are injuries or accidents at the group. But Mr Takeda's easygoing-ness has allowed most members to get away with paying the 500 yen monthly fees.

## References

- Aizawa, K. (2001) 'Wakamono no Hikikomori Genshō wa Nihon Dokutoku no Mono dato Iwareteimasu ga, Dōshite nano deshōka?' (It is Said that *Hikikomori* Phenomenon Is Peculiar to Japan, but Why Is That?), in H. Yamada (ed.) *Wakamono-tachi no Hikikomori* (Withdrawal among Youth), pp. 110–14. Tokyo: Nihon Kajo Shuppan.
- Hashizume, D. (2001) "'Hikikomori" no Shakaigaku' (The Sociology of '*Hikikomori*'), in Studio Pot (ed.) *Hikikomori: Shiru Kataru Kangaeru* (*Hikikomori*: Know, Talk and Think), pp. 4–11. Tokyo: Pot Shuppan.
- Hokkaidō Shinbun* (2005) 'Wakamono-tachi naku shite Watashi-tachi no Mirai wa Nai to Itte Yoi' (It May Be Said That There Is No Future Without Youth), 7 August (Sapporo edition).
- Illich, I. (1977) *Energy and Equity*. London: Calder & Boyers.
- Kawakita, M. (2005) 'Sutōri toshite no Hikikomori Taiken' (The Story Analysis of the Experiences of Social Withdrawal [*Hikikomori*]), *Aichi Kyōiku Daigaku Kyōiku Jissen Sōgō Centre Kiyō* (8): 261–8.
- Kondō, N. (1999a) 'Hikikomori no Bunka/Shakaiteki Haikai' (The Social and Cultural Backgrounds of *Hikikomori*), in N. Kondō and T. Hasegawa (eds) *Hikikomori no Rikai to Enjoy* (The Understanding and Support of *Hikikomori*), pp. 46–74. Tokyo: Hōbunsha.
- Kondō, N. (1999b) 'Inteiku to Enjōhōshin no Settei' (Setting the Policies for Intake and

- Support), in N. Kondō and T. Hasegawa (eds) *Hikikomori no Rikai to Enjo*, pp. 75–98. Tokyo: Hōbunsha.
- Kōsei rōdōshō (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) (2003) *Jūdai/nijūdai o Chūshin toshita 'Shakaiteki Hikikomori' wo meguru Chiiki Seishin Hoken Katsudō no Gaidorain* (Guidelines for Intervention in Local Mental Health Activities for 'Shakaiteki Hikikomori', Mainly among those 10-years-old and over up to their 20s) (complete version). Available at: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/2003/07/tp0728-1.html>
- Kosugi, R. (2003) *Furītā toiu Ikikata* (Life as a *Furītā*). Tokyo: Keisō Shobō.
- Kuramoto, N. (2001) *Hikikomori to Mukiau* (Facing *Hikikomori*). Tokyo: Kongō Shuppan.
- Lock, M. (1988) 'New Japanese Mythologies: Faltering Discipline and the Ailing Housewife', *American Ethnologist* 15(1): 43–61.
- Machizawa, S. (2003) *Hikikomori Wakamonotachi: Hikikomori no Jittai to Shohōsen* (Withdrawing Youth: The Reality of *Hikikomori* and Its Solutions). Tokyo: Daiwa Shobō.
- Monbu kakagushō (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) (2005) *Gakkō Kihon Chōsa* (Basic Survey of Schools). Available at: [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/001/05122201/index.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/001/05122201/index.htm)
- Moriguchi, H., Naura, N. and Kawaguchi, K. (2002) *Hikikomori Shien Gaido* (*Hikikomori* Support Guide). Tokyo: Shōbunsha.
- Moroboshi, N. (2003) *Hikikomori Sekirarara* (Naked *Hikikomori*). Tokyo: Sōshisha.
- Naruse, E. (2003) *Hikikomori 110-ban Q&A: Fukugaku, Shūshoku eno Michi* (Emergency Help Line for *Hikikomori*, Q&A: The Path towards Returning to Education and Gaining Employment). Tokyo: Arumat.
- NHK (2003–5) 'Hataraku Koto ga Jiritsu da!' (Working Means Independence!), in NHK (ed.) *NHK Hikikomori Jōhō* (*NHK Hikikomori* Information). Available at: [http://www.nhk.or.jp/fnet/hikikomori/file/bangumi/file\\_030527.html](http://www.nhk.or.jp/fnet/hikikomori/file/bangumi/file_030527.html)
- NHK (2005) *NHK Hikikomori Jōhō* (*NHK Hikikomori* Information). Available at: <http://www.nhk.or.jp/fnet/hikikomori/>
- Nishimoto, I. (1997) 'The "Civilization" of Time: Japan and the Adoption of Western Time System', *Time & Society* 6(2/3): 237–59.
- Nishimoto, I. (1999) "'Harmony" as Efficiency: Is "Just-in-Time" a Product of Japanese Uniqueness?', *Time & Society* 8(1): 119–40.
- Nowotny, H. (1994) *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Ogino, T. (2004) 'Managing Categorization and Social Withdrawal in Japan: Rehabilitation Process in a Private Support Group for *Hikikomori*ians', *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 13: 120–33.
- Saitō, T. (1998) *Shakaiteki Hikikomori: Owaranai Shishunki* (Social Withdrawal: Ongoing Adolescence). Tokyo: PHP.
- Saitō, T. (2000) 'Hikikomori Mondai wo Hōchi Suruto, Kondo wa "Hikikomori Otona" ga Gekizō suru' (If the *Hikikomori* Issue Is Left Unattended, There Will Be a Rapid Increase of 'Hikikomori Adults'), in Bungei Shunjū (ed.) *Nihon no Ronten 2001* (Debates in Japan 2001), pp. 678–81. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū.
- Saitō, T. (2001) "'Hikikomori" no Hikaku Bunkaron' (Comparative Cultural Debates from the Perspective of 'Hikikomori'), *Chuō Kōron* 1401: 124–33.
- Saitō, T. (2002) *Hikikomori Kyūshutsu Manual* (How to Rescue Your Child from

- Hikikomori*). Tokyo: PHP.
- Sakai, M., Ishikawa, S., Takizawa, M., Satō, H. and Sakano, Y. (2004) 'Kazoku kara Mita Hikikomori Jōtai: Sono Jittai to Shinriteki Kainyū no Yakuwari' (The State of *Hikikomori* from a Family's Point of View: Statistical Survey and the Role of Psychological Intervention), *Japanese Journal of Counseling Science* 37: 168–79.
- Shimada, S. (1995) 'Social Time and Modernity in Japan: An Exploration of Concepts and a Cultural Comparison', *Time & Society* 4(2): 251–60.
- Shiokura, Y. (2000) *Hikikomori*. Tokyo: Village Center Press.
- Shiokura, Y. (2002) *Hikikomori Wakamono-tachi* (Withdrawing Youth). Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha.
- Tanabe, Y. (2000) *Watashi ga Hikikomotta Riyū* (The Reasons Why I Became *Hikikomori*). Tokyo: Bookmansha.
- Tanaka-Matsumi, J. and Marsella, A. (1976) 'Cross-cultural Variations in the Phenomenological Experience of Depression', *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology* 7: 379–96.
- Ueyama, K. (2001) *Hikikomori datta Boku kara* (From Me, Who Was *Hikikomori*). Tokyo: Kōdansha.
- Yomiuri Shinbun* (2003) 'Futōkō no Wakamono ra ga Garō-unnei tsūji Shakai Fukki Mezasu' (School Refusal Youths Aim at Social Participation through Management of Galleries), 20 February (Chiba edition).
- Yoshimoto, T. (2002) *Hikikomori* (Withdraw). Tokyo: Daiwa Shobō.

SACHIKO KANEKO is finishing her D. Phil. in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford.  
[email: sachiko.kaneko2005@gmail.com]