

***Hikikomori* Testimonies: Rise of *Tōjisha* and the Sharing of Narratives**

Noboru Tomonari
Carleton College

Hikikomori “withdrawal” children, youths, and adults have become an acute social issue in twenty-first-century Japan. Hikikomori people range from elementary school children to adults in their fifties, and their symptoms differ. The commonality is that they withdraw selectively or totally from schools, careers, and their families; from sharing their lives with others. People with lighter symptoms stay largely at home, cannot attend school or work, but can go outside their homes and have relationships with others. Many of them in time revert to life in mainstream Japan. People with heavier symptoms remain completely or almost totally withdrawn in their rooms; even their family members who live in the same house do not see them face-to-face for years. The Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, carried out research on hikikomori aged 40 to 64 for the first time in 2019. They found that there are 613,000 such hikikomori, about 1.45% of the total population of that age group in Japan (Cabinet Office, 2019).

The Hikikomori concept was introduced to the English-speaking world in various ways: as an issue that epitomizes the quagmire that Japan has become entrapped in since the recessionary 1990s (Zielenziger, 2006), a subject in psychiatry (Saitō, 2013), and anthropology (Allison, 2013; Horiguchi, 2017). A recent issue regarding hikikomori pertains to the so-called “50-80 issue,” which is that older hikikomori people have by now turned fifty, with their parents in their eighties. The parents can no longer take care of their children as they have become too elderly and are themselves in need of care. The news of a hikikomori person being arrested for having kept the body of a deceased parent in their house (because they were too incapacitated to take the necessary steps to remove the body) appears not infrequently in Japan (Yamada, 2019).

The discourse concerning hikikomori in Japan, however, is notable in that it includes a significant number of first-person narratives. Hikikomori people may have physically withdrawn from an active social life, but not all of them remain silent. A good number of former or current hikikomori people have written memoirs that look back on their own personal history, and they depict how their hikikomori lives started and evolved. There are also hikikomori who write about their predicaments, experiences, and thoughts online. Some professionals involved in helping hikikomori, moreover, argue that such narrating and the sharing of the issues play a significant role in improving the lives of hikikomori people. The aim of this paper is to discuss those first-person narratives and argue that their increase was in part encouraged and enhanced by the rise of the *tōjisha* (the person directly concerned) conception that has been shared by both hikikomori who are *tōjisha* themselves and professionals. *Tōjisha* is a conception that situates hikikomori people or other minorities in Japan vis-à-vis professionals, specialists, and activists who help them from outside. Such testimonies pertaining to hikikomori, especially those that appeared in the late 2000s and after, further subvert the *tōjisha*/patients versus the professional help/specialist dichotomy and moves toward self-help and new community/relationship building on the part of *tōjisha* and professionals alike. In this paper, I argue that such an inclination should be an essential aspect of present and future hikikomori studies. My discussion of hikikomori testimonies demonstrates, moreover, that the conception of *tōjisha* has often been crucial to their appearance and rationale.

The term *tōjisha* was originally a legal term that meant “individuals involved; parties involved.” The term is still in use legally today. Since the 1970s, however, Japanese social movements expanded the word to encompass individuals or groups who were discriminated against by mainstream people (McLelland, 4, 2009). The conception came to be foregrounded and strengthened in 2003, when two influential people, Nakanishi Shōji (1944-; who, after suffering from a cervical cord injury as a young man, became an activist for the physically handicapped) and Ueno Chizuko (1948-; professor emerita at the University of Tokyo), co-authored the book *Tōjisha shuken* [The Sovereignty of the Tōjisha]. The authors proclaimed the need to develop and establish *tōjisha gaku/kenkyū* (*tōjisha* studies), which is a new academic field that also aims at transforming conventional academic disciplines. Nakanishi and Ueno write:

The main difference between conventional academic studies of a particular discipline and *tōjisha* studies is the difference in perspective. The former is a process in which a non-*tōjisha* makes a *tōjisha* into an object and studies them objectively. The latter, in contrast, involves a practical process through which *tōjisha* develop conceptions and theories from their own experiences and use them as the means toward changing societies (Nakanishi and Ueno, 2003, 16; this and all other English translations from the texts in Japanese including hikikomori memoirs are mine).

The two authors also state that such *tōjisha gaku/kenkyū* are based on or can be applied to a multitude of subjects, practices, and activism that include feminism, LGBT, mentally or physically handicapped, and “*futōkō*” (school refusal). There, they situate hikikomori as an extension of *futōkō* and discuss the two together in the same category (Nakanishi and Ueno, 2003, 201-2). *Futōkō* is a conception that has an earlier history than hikikomori and is still used today. The term appeared widely starting in the 1970s, when some students could not attend their schools and stayed at home. Those students appeared to be in a different category from the truants and delinquents of old, who dropped out of school but ventured outside their homes. The initial understanding in the first few decades was that *futōkō* students gradually rejoined society by getting back to school or finding a job. The phenomena of hikikomori had shown that this was not necessarily the case.

In their above section, Nakanishi and Ueno write that the beginning of *tōjisha kenkyū* can be attributed to the practices of a social worker named Mukaiyachi Ikuyoshi (1955-), who worked with Urakawa Beteru no Ie (Urakawa Bethel House), a psychiatric care community in Hokkaido. The house takes care of predominantly schizophrenic patients; the patients help each other through communication (Nakanishi and Ueno, 2003, 197-200; Kido, 2016, 104-5). Karen Nakamura published a monograph on Mukaiyachi and Urakawa Bethel House, in which she translated *tōjisha kenkyū* as “Self-Directed Research” and discussed the practice at the care community. This had become an “acclaimed aspect of treatment at Bethel” by the early 2000s (Nakamura, 2013, 172).

Nakanishi and Ueno have since argued for the need to conceive of *tōjisha* as forming the basis of a future welfare system in Japan (Nakanishi and Ueno, 2008). The mantle of *tōjisha kenkyū* has, moreover, also been carried by others, including scholars such as Ayaya Satsuki (1974-), who has Asperger’s syndrome, and Kumagaya Shinichirō (1977-). Kumagaya studied at a medical school and worked as a pediatrician but now does research on mental disorders such as autism at the University of Tokyo. Kumagaya writes that “In a nutshell, ‘*Tōjisha kenkyū*’ is studying oneself through communication with others who share similar experiences” Kumagaya,

2015, 27). In another context he and his co-author stated that “Setting ourselves as the research subject and together with our peers, unraveling the issues that we face; that’s the core of tojisha-kenkyu” (Kumagaya and Aono, 2019). Moreover, they add that:

Within Tojisha-kenkyu lies the potential of rearranging the relationship between the tojisha (the person being studied) and the specialist—in other words, between experienced knowledge and specialized knowledge. . . . The mutual respect from the tojisha and the specialist for each other’s knowledge, along with the collaborative efforts between the two sides, will surely help restore trust to academic knowledge (Kumagaya and Aono, 2019).

What they are suggesting is that an objective “birds-eye-view” needs to be developed through respecting the subjective experiences of the insiders. Kumagaya himself has suffered from cerebral palsy since birth, and as a student in medicine and later as a hospital intern, he struggled with his disability. When an issue involves comprehending relatively unclear disabilities such as cerebral palsy or autism, Kumagaya deems that tōjisha kenkyū is the most useful method. With that, he came to reflect on his own disability and professional life through his part-memoir *Rihabiri no yoru* (A Night of Rehabilitation, 2009) and co-authored papers on autism with autistic tōjisha/scholar such as Ayaya.

According to some hikikomori studies, hikikomori emerged as an issue in the 1990s, when some futōkō people were unable to resume a social life even after they had become adults, or returned to their life as a recluse after they finished school. Some became hikikomori for the first time after quitting work, this without showing any symptoms earlier in school (Ishikawa Ryōko, 2007, 49-60). A book by psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki (1961-), *Shakai teki hikikomori* (Social Hikikomori: Adolescence without End), appeared in 1998 (English translation in 2013) and immediately became a seminal reading in Japan for that reason. Pertaining to futōkō, the main debate that was initially debated was whether being unable to attend school was an illness or a matter of choice. The people who advocated for the former recognized futōkō children as solely having mental illnesses, often blaming the children themselves or the way that their parents raised them as the cause of their illnesses. Starting in the late 1970s, a number of the parents of futōkō children gathered to raise objections to that thesis. Among them was Okuchi Keiko (1941-). In order to make her objections heard, she founded Tokyo Schule (“schule” is “school” in German) in 1985. Tokyo Schule was an alternative school, a community, and a self-help group for futōkō children and their parents. Okuchi and her supporters essentially viewed futōkō not as an illness but as a matter of choice. Several psychiatrists concurred with Okuchi’s views, and they worked together as a group. They proclaimed that the schools and the current educational systems are the main culprits with the futōkō children being the victims. With this, they argued that neither the futōkō children nor their parents should be blamed for futōkō. They advocated that rather than solely seeking mental health professionals “to treat” (chiryō suru) the children or coercing the children with problems to attend school, the children should be left on their own and/or attend alternative schools that suit them better. In due time, their argument went, futōkō children will recover on their own and assimilate with mainstream society. As an extension of Tokyo Schule, Okuchi, the current students, and alums of the Schule also founded a newspaper, *Zenkoku Futōkō Shimbun* (National School Refusal Shimbun), in 1998. The instances of futōkō and hikikomori

show that what Andrea Gevurtz Arai discusses as “the child problem” in Japan cannot be reduced exclusively to the moral panic about children (Arai, 2016, 14).

Okuchi’s argument pertaining to futōkō continues to resonate and be shared into twenty-first-century Japan. As futōkō children are akin to young hikikomori, their views have been extended into the discussion of hikikomori too. Some overseas scholars today have also criticized the views of hikikomori that are largely advocated by the Japanese government and mental health professionals, claiming it is a perspective that is too medicalized (Rosenthal and Zimmerman, 2012; Overell, 2018). In Japan and elsewhere, then, there have been attempts to counter the view of “futōkō/hikikomori as an illness” of an individual or a family. Some recent futōkō first-person narratives still identify largely with the Tokyo Schule view (Suetomi, 2018; Asami, 2018). Such memoirs imply that futōkō is in actuality a short-term problem and that the life course of the authors and many others demonstrate that futōkō is akin to a glitch that will be resolved in the long term. The memoirs of both Suetomi and Asami are happy-ending narratives in which the authors, after having refused school and spent years outside the school system, gradually reinsert themselves into mainstream Japanese society. Hikikomori first-person narratives tend to differ in that the authors remain more or less reclusive into their adult years, but as in futōkō memoirs, they also endow their authors with an agency. The way that hikikomori maintain themselves varies. If their problems started as futōkō, they live with their parents or are financially supported by them. Many hikikomori (including the authors of memoirs described below) who visit mental health clinics are recognized as carrying medical conditions and receive social welfare benefits.

Ronald Loftus (2017, 148) describes postwar autobiographies by two Japanese women as “a revealing portrait of how women reconstituted their identity and constructed their subjectivity.” The two women authors needed to do so as prewar and wartime law in Japan deprived Japanese women of suffrage and agency. It is possible to recognize hikikomori memoirs as depicting a similar process of identity and agency building. Hikikomori and futōkō people initially lose a stereotypical selfhood and identity in Japan by becoming a drop out from the mainstream society. With time, however, they gradually come to acknowledge and accept themselves as such and start rebuilding their lives little by little. Their self-narratives and memoirs, published or spoken, empowered the hikikomori, as they did the Japanese women authors of the 20th century who found themselves to be in the margins of a sexist society. Also observed in hikikomori narratives is how often they rely on the tōjisha conception to build and to assert their selfhood and identity.

I

Early Hikikomori Testimonies

This section deals with the early hikikomori memoirs that appeared in the early 2000s. With Saitō Tamaki’s 1998 study as something of an impetus, several hikikomori memoirs appeared immediately following, although his study itself does not bring up the tōjisha conception nor see the first-person narratives as necessarily important. Saitō liked the draft of Katsuyama Minoru (1971-)’s memoir, *Hikikomori kalendā* (Hikikomori Calendar, 2001), however, to the extent that he engaged in a conversation with Katsuyama that appeared at the end of the published memoir (Katsuyama, 2001, 167-94). There, Saitō is strongly supportive of Katsuyama’s sense of things and his sharing of his experiences as a hikikomori. Saitō says that Katsuyama’s narrating of his life provides an important role model and an encouragement to other hikikomori people. At thirty years old when he published his first memoir, Katsuyama refused school when he was in high

school and has remained largely in his home ever since. Katsuyama describes his motivation for his book as prompted from an interview with the journalist Tanabe Yutaka (1971-) for the book *Watashi ga hikikomotta riyū* (The Reason I Became a Hikikomori, 2000) (Katsuyama, 2001, 87-88). Tanabe's book consists of interviews of 15 hikikomori people and served as a harbinger of adult hikikomori testimonies in print. Earlier in his life, Katsuyama remained unsatisfied when reading discussions of hikikomori by professionals:

Most of those books on hikikomori were the psychiatrists' observations of their patients. Academic papers that dissected them. Probably this would sound arrogant, but I felt that their words were akin to someone who is not a runner discussing the merits of barefoot running. When psychiatrists or other specialists discuss hikikomori, they are discussing other people's problems. Reading their works, I developed a strong sense of dissatisfaction. Some important things were missing (Katsuyama, 2001, 37).

Katsuyama's book begins with his sense of shock at having become a hikikomori. He describes how he initially felt in transition:

My life has been utterly disastrous. I lived the way my parents ordered me to. As a result I became apathetic, depressed, and ultimately a hikikomori. I had a nervous breakdown and then was diagnosed as having depression. I studied all I could at school, faithfully carrying out what I was told to do by other people; but I crash-landed as a result. This was the most disastrous. Am I the only person like this? (Katsuyama, 2001, 12).

Gradually, however, he starts accepting his lot in life and through time passing and reflecting on his status quo, comes to shoulder it. Mukaiyachi Ikuyoshi attributes his tōjisha-focused practice at Urakawa Bethel House in part to Victor E. Frankl's existential therapy, which he sees as "to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances" as its basis (Ishihara, 2013, 32-33). Katsuyama's sense of serenity was the result of the author similarly adapting to and accepting his impaired, hikikomori condition. He gradually makes a transition from seeing his condition not as a shortcoming of his character or lack of willpower but as a disability. That sense becomes more acute in his second memoir, *Anshin hikikomori laifu* (A Happy Hikikomori Life, 2011). There, Katsuyama, with tongue in cheek, describes himself as an "enlightened" Hikikomori Master (meijin) akin to Buddha (Katsuyama, 2011, 2-3). His sense of humor and his gradual shift in accepting and seeing some positives in being a hikikomori already appear in his earlier memoir. In his narrative of 2001, Katsuyama frequently shifts between a singular and a plural first person. He is also speaking for other hikikomori as he describes his own experiences and feelings:

Other people tend to think of hikikomori people as constantly harboring suicidal thoughts. The common understanding is that we are lonely, troubled, suffering people. But being alone in one's room is accompanied by an unexpected sense of comfort. It can actually be a relief to detach oneself from school and society, and become a recluse in one's own room. As long as I can disregard the future, I want to live long into the future as a hikikomori. In contrast, I think of suicide only when I feel isolated and alienated in the midst of others (Katsuyama, 2001, 130).

He continues to describe his feelings:

I want to be alone. A hikikomori person wants to be alone. We need a world of our own. Ours is a desperate circumstance. We need a space where we are free; a space in which no one else interferes. Lacking such freedom, we perish. That's the way that our thinking goes (Katsuyama, 2001, 141).

His critique of himself continues but he also gradually starts to accept himself living his ways:

I currently take prescribed tablets and work only very short hours. I am already 29 years old. It is tough to admit that "I am a part-timer" as my age. But my only path is to bear that and do the best possible I can. I will not compare myself with anybody. It is too late otherwise. I don't have an education nor a career. I have zero qualifications. I have never written a CV and I don't know what working full time is like. I can imagine easily though that I cannot stand working that way. The society continues to pressure me to persevere, to a suffocating degree. Others tell me: That is the way things are. I came to an understanding, however, that to live like that is impossible for me. No way. I feel a little easier now having accepted that. Many people say that I should not give up as I am still young, but I am beginning to feel okay with myself being a hikikomori. I have thrown in the towel (Katsuyama, 2001, 150).

Contrary to popular views of hikikomori, Katsuyama's reflections here describe the positive gains through his way of life. The first two quotes show that he had carved out a comfortable, individual space for himself in his own room: something of a safe haven. To create and to develop "a room of one's own" appears to be a crucial incentive to this hikikomori *tōjisha*. His final quote shows that hikikomori is not only a mental health issue but also something of a counterculture. After the season of politics, rebelling, and university and high school closures by the protesting students in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the majority of young people in Japan went back to school, took classes, and identified with a further expanding consumerist culture. Katsuyama's sense of "thrown in the towel" is not just a sign of giving up, but signifies a detachment towards and a rejection of the norms as such. Hikikomori and *futōkō* are also versions of an individualized counterculture that emerged in an era when the mainstream Japanese youth culture largely came to be depoliticized and materialistic.

Saitō Tamaki has also provided an afterword for Tanabe's 2000 book of hikikomori interviews, implying his support for the sharing of hikikomori testimonies as he does with Katsuyama's memoir. While Saitō does not include any *tōjisha* memoirs in the revised bibliography for the 2013 English translation of his 1998 study, the psychiatrist has been selectively invested in first-person narratives. Already in 2001, then, some specialists were promoting hikikomori's first-person narratives and encouraging that they write them.

Another hikikomori published his memoir in the same year: "*Hikikomori*" *datta boku kara* (Starting from a Hikikomori Self, 2001) by Ueyama Kazuki (1968-). Ueyama carried out *futōkō* on and off from his middle school years to college and then became a hikikomori as an adult. The first half of his book consists mostly of his diaries as a *futōkō* person and later a hikikomori. Ironically, however, his coming out as a hikikomori and sharing his own experiences at a meeting of the parents of hikikomori people provided a pivotal experience in his life.

Being a hikikomori was the worst thing that ever happened to me. It categorically took away from me everything that was precious to me. It was my impulse that remained, I myself only knew, that kept me away from facing reality. It was my darkness as such that the bright day world wanted to see; they [the parents of hikikomori] wanted me to expose to them that dark side of my life. This was initially difficult to believe, but what in fact happened. I felt that I could not reject their invitation but had to respond to it in earnest. I felt compelled to do so from the bottom of my heart (Ueyama, 2001, 108-9).

The second half of Ueyama's memoir looks back on his talks at hikikomori meetings and what he took away from the experience. Ueyama repeatedly uses the word *tōjisha* in that section, designates himself as one, and elaborates on his own hikikomori experiences as such. While such meetings at the turn of the century consisted mostly of parents rather than hikikomori *tōjisha* themselves, they provided great opportunities for Ueyama to enter into a relationship with other people.

What I felt initially was expected of me at hikikomori meetings by the parents was to play the role of an interpreter. They said that their children who stay at home, the actual hikikomori *tōjisha*, rarely communicate. With that the parents had no recourse but to try to interpret a gesture or the few words that their children utter. The parents asked me: "Tell us what their gestures and words mean." They were simply unable to hear or recognize the voice of their son or daughter. That sense, actually, is also shared by hikikomori *tōjisha* themselves. They feel tortured and burdened for the same reason. They ponder and suffer: "I cannot not hear any 'human' voices." The children themselves are straining to hear such words but everyone talks down to them in standardized phrases. The words of their family members are all cut from the same cloth and their voices do not sound authentically their own (Ueyama, 2001, 141).

There was, then, an evolution in how Ueyama saw himself. After experiencing the collapse of his earlier way of life, the author describes a process in which he had gradually put together a new self and an identity. In his case, such recovery also hinged on reinterpretation of living as a hikikomori itself. Ueyama, in the process, contrasts himself and other hikikomori with the family members of hikikomori. The former, he argues, are in the process of discovering their own, authentic "human" voices, while the latter are only mimicking the voices of the Japanese majority. Their voices their own had withered and disappeared through living typical everyday lives in Japan.

Pertaining to hikikomori, professionals and specialists should try to learn from self-help efforts made by *tōjisha*. At least they should aim toward that. . . . There is a gulf separating the *tōjisha* from specialists pertaining to hikikomori . . . Hikikomori *tōjisha* tend to have been traumatized in the past in schools and education, so they often react aversely to authorities. That is a basic, essential characteristic of hikikomori. . . . There are specialists who lack a particular knowledge on hikikomori, and paying them a visit actually worsens the situation. I have become aware of many such instances. Hikikomori become traumatized for the second time at hospitals where they are supposedly treated. The conception "to treat" itself can carry some degree of hierarchical sense too, and one should be mindful of that (Ueyama, 2001, 222-23).

In this quote, Ueyama is critical of specialists who are reluctant to listen to the voices of hikikomori tōjisha. He recognizes that tōjisha can feel averse to specialists as such, but a different, improved relationship between two parties is theoretically possible. Ueyama is well-read and able to clearly articulate his thoughts in abstractions. Compared with most other hikikomori memoirs, his is the most intellectual narrative. His memoir also makes it clear that prior to the publication of *Tōjisha Shuken* by Nakanishi and Ueno in 2003, some discourse pertaining to hikikomori already hinged on the conception of tōjisha. Such practices, then, also have provided the basic thrust of Nakanishi and Ueno's book. Ueyama argues in his book, moreover, that tōjisha themselves need to learn from the hikikomori specialists in medicine and psychology, and to develop their own narratives and thoughts on this basis. He describes tōjisha needing to do so in terms of improving both their “scholarship and martial arts” (bunbu ryōdō); in this case “scholarship” indicates studying the works published by the professionals, while the “martial arts” signifies the hikikomori's real-life struggles and experiences of being a recluse. The two paths should intersect, says Ueyama (2001, 225).

While tending to have less to do with tōjisha studies, two other hikikomori memoirs from the early 2000s also see their own first-person narratives as a constitutive part of the polyphony of voices pertaining to hikikomori. *Hikikomori sekira-ra-ra* (Naked Truths of Hikikomori, 2003) is an accessible memoir by Moroboshi Noa (1968-), who remained a hikikomori for six years after he graduated from college. He later attended arts vocational college for two years, worked for a year at a company, but again became mentally impaired and entered his second hikikomori phase. Using his training in studio art, Moroboshi inserts several manga and illustrations of his own that visually show his experiences as a hikikomori. His memoir claims that futōkō/hikikomori self-help communities, pen pals, and fellow hobby enthusiasts constitute vital components of the author's social life. Remaining connected with other people that way, despite his inability to work, kept him sane and prevented him from giving up hope. Moroboshi's major for his BA was clinical psychology, on which he wrote a senior thesis. His mentor at college was a clinical psychologist who started therapies with Moroboshi after he finished college; this counseling continued for eight years. Moroboshi (2003, 185-86) deems that he benefitted from his university studies and mentor's intervention throughout his twenties. Knowledge of clinical psychology, then, is part of the conceptual framework on which Moroboshi has written and published his first-person narrative: he was a tōjisha with specialized knowledge.

The memoir of Hayashi Naomi (1973-), *Hikikomori nante, shitaku nakatta* (I Didn't Want to Become a Hikikomori, 2003), differs somewhat from the previously mentioned three memoirs as Hayashi, at the point of the book's publication, had already started to work full time. She had become a futōkō person in middle school and was put in a special education institution (yōgo gakkō) located in rural Japan as a young girl. She describes her futōkō as largely based on the sense of disappointment and contempt toward one authoritarian teacher she had in her middle school. She had also found it difficult to communicate with her parents, both of them elitists and emotionally detached from her. Her father also appears to have suffered from alcoholism. Hayashi found that the special education institution operated on the same authoritarian mindset that she saw in her middle school teacher. The institution's rule to punish runaways severely was particularly repellent to Hayashi; she only stayed there for two months. Her parents later identified with Tokyo Schule (“futōkō as a choice”) activists but Hayashi remained largely alienated from them and their ways of interacting with her. She found help from other adults, however, including a Christian pastor, a piano instructor, a psychologist, same-age friends, and gradually gained

confidence with that to enter and study in college. She also finished her MA in education in the United States, and while sympathetic to her friends who remained hikikomori, she thinks that she has largely departed from that earlier phase in her life. She looks back on that time in her memoir as a dark moment in her life during which she “did not exist [sonzai shite nakatta]” (Hayashi, 2003, 163). She does not use the term *tōjisha* and sees her hikikomori phase largely as a negative period in her life. She also, nevertheless, depicts herself as an autonomous self, who, even during a dark period, refused steadfastly to be coerced, a girl who had been capable of building and maintaining her own criticism of the adults around her such as her parents, teachers, and mental health professionals. While receiving positive influence from some adults who are professionals, she comes to develop a subjectivity that remains firmly independent and apart from any children and adults around her.

II

Evolution of Hikikomori Testimonies

Hikikomori first-person narratives in print have further evolved after the above memoirs appeared in the early 2000s. In 2005, the first version of *Futōko eranda wake janaidaze!* (Futōko: It was Not My Choice) was published. The book, largely a memoir was revised by the two authors and republished by another publisher in 2012. The book was co-authored by sociologist Kido Rie (1978-), faculty at Kwansei Gakuin University, and Tsuneno Yujirō (1977-2018). Both the 2005 and 2012 versions of the book are aimed at a young adult readership. Tsuneno passed away at the tender age of forty, and an English translation of his section on futōkō in the book appeared that year with Kido’s introduction. Tsuneno writes on futōkō *tōjisha* like himself who remain impaired with their continuing mental health issues after becoming adults. Tsuneno, with this, criticizes “happy ending” futōkō/hikikomori narratives, while admitting that he was Tokyo Schule’s poster boy earlier in his life; he completed his BA at Lancaster University in UK. He indicts and condemns the “futōkō as a choice” school, writing that they neglect the *tōjisha* minority who as adults remain unable to assimilate with mainstream society. What Kido’s introduction in the English article does not disclose is that, like Tsuneno, Kido herself was a *tōjisha*. This disclosure was probably the case here as she followed the dictates of her discipline in keeping her research separate from private life. Kido did futōkō as an elementary pupil by dropping out of school when she was in first grade. She refused to return to elementary school afterward, but suddenly started going to middle school (seventh grade in Japan) six years later, finished college, and studied at a graduate school at the University of Tokyo. Her section of the 2005/2012 book in reality consists of a large segment of her own futōkō experiences. Her *tōjisha* experience is similar to Tsuneno’s, and her view is similar to his in that she also is critical of the “futōkō as a choice” narrative together with the specialists’ disregard of *tōjisha* voices. Based on her own experience, Kido writes:

I always had a sense of dissatisfaction with every academic and other work on futōkō that I came across in college. All conventional studies discussed futōkō from the perspectives of parents, teachers, and specialists. With that, I wanted to think through what futōkō meant for myself (Kido and Tsuneno, 2012, 76).

[Earlier studies on futōkō and so on] excluded someone like myself. They are supposedly about people such as myself but I found myself nowhere in them. I did not count. They instead transformed futōkō into something that I could not at all identify with. My sense of discomfort largely stemmed not from futōkō being seen

as a problem. Rather it stemmed from other people judging and evaluating my own self as this and that. . . . [Bearing those things in mind,] [w]hat does futōkō mean for those of us who actually experienced it? Who carried out the discussion of futōkō that appeared earlier; who are the intended audience of such discussions? (Kido and Tsuneno, 2012, 94-95).

As had been the case with earlier hikikomori testimonies, Kido becomes aware of the discrepancy between what is being discussed about futōkō and how she experienced futōkō first-hand:

“A despairingly different mindset on the issue (*Zetsubōtekina ishiki no sa*.)” Such is a sense of discomfort, almost a fury that some tōjisha feel towards others who discuss hikikomori. This happens when those others take leeway by constraining hikikomori with their narratives that claim to comprehend tōjisha. “That, though, is not my own experience of having been a hikikomori” (Kido and Tsuneno, 2012, 172).

The above quotes show Kido’s sense of resentment regarding the futōkō and hikikomori studies of the late 1990s when she was an undergraduate. She felt that the specialists were condescending towards futōkō and hikikomori children. While the specialists made tōjisha their object of research and purported care, Kido felt her own experiences were neglected or discounted in the process. She felt that the specialists as such were not fully capable of representing tōjisha like her. While she writes that she herself cannot speak for all tōjisha, she still admonishes us that their polyphonic voices needed to be heard:

There are a variety of tōjisha. Ten tōjisha can tell ten different stories. Every tōjisha can tell their own, unique story, and such stories themselves often carry contradictions within. That will bring the tally to one hundred kinds of futōkō stories that ten people tell. Tōjisha do not necessarily understand each other. . . . Each time tōjisha tell stories about themselves, however, it carries new insights. Such stories reject earlier narratives by professionals that are frequently too transparent, too comprehensible, or both (Kido and Tsuneno, 2012, 181-82).

Kido studied with Ueno Chizuko, the co-author of *Tōjisha shuken*, at the University of Tokyo, and her first-person narratives attest to her identity as both a tōjisha and a scholar. Kido also foregrounds the tōjisha conception in her narrative and, as does Ueno, sees the need to subvert the subjective tōjisha/objective scholar binary that remains in the majority. Kido has been prolific in publishing academic works in Japan, her early publication being *Futōkō wa owaranai: “sentaku” no monogatari kara “tōjisha” no katari e* (Futōkō without an End: From Futōkō as a Choice to the Narratives by Tōjisha, 2004). It is a third-person narrative, a sociological study on futōkō tōjisha that, nevertheless, argues it necessary to situate tōjisha’s subjectivity as the basis of future futōkō studies. She supplemented that book in the following year with her first-person narrative book authored with Tsuneno. Her works are fewer in English but included an article, “The Angst of Youth in Post-Industrial Japan: A Narrative Self-Help Approach” (Kido, 2016). She does not come out as a tōjisha in her 2016 article, akin to her introduction to Tsuneno’s article in English. Her 2016 article specifically discusses the importance of self-narratives for tōjisha at group meetings: tōjisha who are largely carrying out futōkō and hikikomori. The article focuses on a self-help group (SHG) in Osaka called “Generative Garden” that the author herself took part in

establishing; she continues to take part in the meetings of this group. There are parallels to SHG elsewhere. In Japan, their obvious role model was the Urakawa Bethel House for people with schizophrenia.

[I]n the SHG, people became more capable of articulating their needs and constructing their sense of help by sharing their narratives with others. . . . [T]hat was made possible, not so much by directly attempting to fix participants' "problems," but indirectly through allowing them to build new kinds of relationships with others based on a sharing of narratives (Kido, 2016, 100).

In SHG, the role that specialists carry out in their programs is further minimized, compared with the Urakawa Bethel House therapies in which Mukaiyachi Ikuyoshi, a social worker, and Kawamura Toshiaki, a psychiatrist, take the lead (Nakamura, 2013, 163-82).

Although the coordinator and moderator play key roles in the SHG, it is emphasized in all meetings that they are there primarily as participants rather than supporters or specialists (Kido, 2016, 106).

Kido's article concludes with two case studies: one a female aged 26 and the other a male aged 27. Each of them became a futōkō and continued to have problems into their late 20s as adults, but their participation in SHG managed to ease their discomfort to a degree (Kido, 2016, 107-9). While Kido wrote her 2005/2012 book in the first person, she wrote the 2016 article in third person throughout. Kido, then, is a tōjisha and a scholar who is capable of writing differently: different styles of narrative for different readerships. Her use of the third person in her 2016 again reflects the dictates of her discipline. Her four pieces discussed here, however, work in tandem as they all foreground the importance of first-person narratives for people having mental health-related issues in Japan today.

The individual "Case 1" of *ikizurasa* (hardships of life) who remains a pseudonym in Kido's 2016 article, came out in Japan in 2017 and became an author of her own book. This was another by-product of SHG. She is Noda Ayaka (1988-), and her book is *Namae no nai ikizurasa* (Indefinable Hardships of Life, 2017), which she authored together with journalist/scholar Yamashita Kōhei (1973-). According to Ishihara Kōji, tōjisha breaking out of anonymity or a pseudonym and "telling about oneself" (*jibun o kataru*) is a fundamental aspect of tōjisha kenkyū (Ishihara, 2013, 20). Noda's first-person narrative is a case in point. She started futōkō when she was in third grade and did not resume school life. She started participating in SHG, however, when she was 19 years old. Encouraged by Kido, Yamashita, and others, Noda wrote columns on her experiences for an independent newspaper from 2014 to 2015, and her book is in part a revised version of her columns. Yamashita himself was not a futōkō tōjisha but experienced something of being a mild hikikomori when he was a young man. After having dropped out of college, he served as an editor in chief of *Zenkoku Futōkō Shimbun*. He still contributes to the newspaper today as well as serving as Kido's colleague at the SHG (Noda and Yamashita, 2017, 188-89). Noda also participated in SHG as well as its subgroup, called *Ikizurasa kara no tōjisha kenkyūkai* (Tōjisha Kenkyū of People Carrying Hardships of Life), for which Kido serves as a coordinator (Noda and Yamashita, 2017, 203). Noda tried to work at the post office and maintenance work at a shopping mall but was too constrained by her disability and could not continue to work. She writes:

I am not a baby nor a child nor an elder, nor do I work nor study nor am I currently married. With that, I am part of the tōjisha minority. Can we also, nevertheless, claim a right to live? We, who are complete outliers to the productivity requirement that society assigns everyone? . . . But why do we have to be judged purely from an economic point of view? Solely evaluated with that criteria; only asked of our value as such as though we are a commodity or an object? Would retreating from such a gaze not make my angst disappear? (Noda and Yamashita, 2017, 26-27).

Noda's profound sense is that she is dissatisfied with labels that others assign to her such as futōkō, hikikomori, and female, and argues that her actual being and suffering continuously transcend and defy categories as such. Yamashita concurs with her views. Noda also makes an indictment of current Japanese society that largely judges people only by their material, economic worth. In his section of the book, Yamashita largely inclines toward an analysis of Japanese society in recent history; a social circumstance that resulted in groups of people who are feeling *ikizurasa* such as Noda increasing. Similar to the case of Kido and Tsuneno discussed above, Yamashita foregrounds the notion of tōjisha through his collaboration with Noda and uses her first-person narrative as the basis of his own social analysis of futōkō/hikikomori. On tōjisha, writes Yamashita:

When even adults involved in free schools and self-help groups tend to be viewed with skepticism and judged negatively by mainstream society, things are even worse for actual futōkō and hikikomori tōjisha. When one carries out futōkō or becomes a hikikomori, other people tend to view them as worthless. Such viewing designates them as people not only of little value, but of zero value. Such viewing is an assault on tōjisha's selfhood. They, too, are irreplaceable human beings (Noda and Yamashita, 2017, 134).

Their book concludes with the conversation between Noda and Yamashita. Yamashita comments show that instead of only treating tōjisha as objects that he is reporting on, he is practicing other ways of relating to them. To do so is also to evade stereotyping or totalizing tōjisha by seeing them solely as people impaired by mental health issues. This will also help futōkō/hikikomori tōjisha to see themselves and their lives more positively:

Ultimately, both futōkō and hikikomori are labels that others attribute to tōjisha. It nevertheless is too frequently the case that tōjisha comprehend themselves only through such a lens, a label, or a gaze. I see it also as the outside society depriving tōjisha of their own words. Tōjisha come to voluntarily self-confine themselves in prison cells that others built for them (Noda and Yamashita, 2017, 226).

And when Yamashita asks Noda if the conception of tōjisha itself might also become a prison of its own kind, Noda responds that it can be avoided by employing the positive in objective, "birds-eye views." She does not think that there is a fundamental contradiction between tōjisha viewpoints and "birds-eye views." Tōjisha can learn from specialists, to work with them collaboratively. To do so will make someone into an educated, enlightened tōjisha. Noda writes:

At our SHG the tōjisha concept is important, but that does not solve everything. What I myself try to bear in mind is to keep my tōjisha identity intact, but also to try to develop an objective, bird's-eye view of things. Developing our own language

that way is also very important. And through developing our own conceptions that way, we proceed toward rebuilding our own practices, strategies, and activism. To carry that out then only becomes possible through collaborating with others. My sense is that *tōjisha* with these bird's-eye views that I envision are still rare (Noda and Yamashita, 2017, 242).

Kido and Tsuneno's 2005/2012 book and Noda and Yamashita's 2017 book mark, then, another phase in the development of *tōjisha* narratives and the subverting of the *tōjisha*/professional binary. Both texts challenge the notion that *tōjisha* and professionals are antonyms, and they carry this out through juxtaposition and dialog. Hikikomori memoirs in the earlier phase were also encouraged by professionals such as Saitō Tamaki, but as we have observed, *tōjisha* narratives still remained largely peripheral or even occasionally excluded from Saitō's own writings on hikikomori. Their memoirs also still largely focus narrowly on the self or the individual. Moroboshi Noa's memoir is a case in point as inserted in his 207-page book is a manga representation of himself (a young man with thinning hair, wearing glasses and casual clothes, frequently looking embarrassed or sad) appearing as many as 88 times. Kido, Tsuneno, Noda, and Yamashita, in contrast, frequently transcend the narrow, conventional categories of themselves as *tōjisha* or former *tōjisha*, and remain mobile as they shift between their *tōjisha* self and their activist/professional self. They forge their own words through keeping various roles and categories fluid and moving between them. The latter group also focuses on the social and the political basis of *tōjisha*, more so than the case with the former. There is also a stronger sense of *tōjisha* community for the later generation. The changing of subjectivity and identifying oneself as a *tōjisha* has also been the case in earlier hikikomori narratives, but a readiness to accept and to employ "the bird's-eye view" in order to understand being a *tōjisha* is more common in hikikomori testimonies that appear in the second phase. The first-person narrators in this second phase, moreover, are far more disinclined to identify themselves strictly as *futōkō* or hikikomori individuals. They are that way in part because of being averse toward stereotyping, seeing themselves only as a *futōkō* or hikikomori person in a conventional sense.

That sense is somewhat akin to the basis of discord among LGBT *tōjisha*, in particular gay men that Mark McLelland (2009, 1) problematizes in his article when he notes that: "[H]aving to identify and speak as a *tōjisha* has engendered normalizing effects." McLelland argues that some gay activists in Japan have occasionally defined and rigidly policed what being "gay" means in Japan, criticizing views that differed from their own. Some other gay activists and activism opposed this type of "normalizing effect". The second phase of hikikomori testimonies, too, are subverting such effects pertaining to *futōkō*/hikikomori *tōjisha* and their narratives. The hikikomori first-phase narrators (possibly being older and first comers) carry an emphatic sense of identifying themselves as hikikomori. The second-phase authors, as a reaction, express their opposition to what they see as hikikomori essentialism. Tsuneno's strong objections to *futōkō* "happy endings" narratives is one disclaimer to such "normalizing effects" pertaining to *futōkō*/hikikomori *tōjisha* narratives. His disclaimer also appeared because many *futōkō* children grew into adult hikikomori. The author of this paper's sense is that Kido, Noda, and Yamashita are more open to different kinds or generations of hikikomori *tōjisha* existing, narrating, and working collaboratively. That Noda and Yamashita chose "*ikizurasa*" (hardships of life) instead of hikikomori for the title of their book foregrounds their inclination to detach themselves from a conventional notion of hikikomori. An earlier conception of hikikomori does not encompass Noda's current way of life. The term "*ikizurasa*" moreover, foregrounds the shared aspect of Noda

and Yamashita's life experiences. The angst experienced by first group authors through futōkō/hikikomori, nevertheless, are quite similar to the "ikizurasa" sense that the second-phase people hold. The second different generations of tōjisha appear to have a modified understanding; they are arguing that one or two labels will accomplish little. They encourage instead that tōjisha form and develop communities, talk to each other about their similar and different experiences, and collaborate with the professionals as equals.

Postscript

A steady number of hikikomori first-person narratives have appeared in print and online. Their number and significance have only been increasing of late. Whether through the printed word, as are the above texts, or through actual meetings and direct conversations such as those taking place at SHG in Osaka and other self-help groups, such narrating will continue to be significant in the future. It is encouraging therefore that the authors of four hikikomori first-phase testimonies (everyone except Hayashi) are also continuing to speak out, making their thoughts available online or elsewhere today (see the bibliography).

The books, articles, and thoughts on hikikomori in Japan abound, and there still exist today copious books and studies on the subject authored by non-tōjisha. What the rise of tōjisha narratives has resulted in, however, is that their works also frequently make use of tōjisha conceptions and their narratives. The goal of their texts is to serve as a conduit between hikikomori tōjisha and the outside world; between tōjisha they know and the readers who read their works. Such readers include the specialists as well as different kinds of tōjisha such as family members, teachers, and supporters of hikikomori and futōkō people. Some such specialists are involved with heavier cases of hikikomori tōjisha; people who find it difficult to participate in SHG or to reflect with others on their present lives. Journalist and activist Ishikawa Kiyoshi (1964-), for example, has been carrying out his practice of traveling in China or Southeast Asia with a hikikomori person. This is to offer them a glimpse of other people and the world outside the rooms and houses in which tōjisha isolate themselves. Having worked and traveled in Southeast Asia extensively, Ishikawa sees overseas as often more inspiring for Japanese hikikomori who are often ill disposed toward mainstream Japan. Ishikawa's *Dokumento chōki hikikomori no genba kara* (Documentary: What Is Happening to Long-Term Hikikomori People, 2017) is written largely as Uehara's travelogue with hikikomori tōjisha and his interviewing of them. His tōjisha traveling companions are all male mostly in their 30s (Ishikawa does not work with women as his "care" involves twosome weeklong traveling). Yamada Takaaki (1953-) is another activist who writes extensively on hikikomori. His recent publication is *Oya no 'shitai' to ikiru wakamono tachi* (Youths Who Live with Bodies of Their Deceased Parents, 2019). As the horror movie-like title indicates, his activism solely deals with heavier and older cases of hikikomori. He usually supports elderly parents of hikikomori and their children; the children who have been hikikomori for decades and have now entered their forties and fifties. In his 2019 book, Yamada uses a whole chapter to print the voices of seven hikikomori tōjisha; six of them older than 39 (Yamada, 2019, 87-108). In instances in which such middle-aged or older tōjisha find themselves unable to attend the kind of SHG described above, it is up to people like Yamada to visit their houses repeatedly to talk to them and their parents. His activism does not coerce the tōjisha in any way; he is, moreover, not involved simply to generate revenue. Yamada also visits hikikomori tōjisha who were charged or are in prison for having abandoned the bodies of their deceased parents, or in one case in 2004 even taking the lives parents who had become physically incapacitated. The parents despaired and asked

their hikikomori son to kill them; the son carried that out. Yamada also visited that tōjisha and supported his case in court (Yamada, 2019, 41-47).

The kind of activism and research that Kido, Yamashita, and other tōjisha and professionals are carrying out and advocating need to be encouraged, supported, and studied. This applies to other futōkō and hikikomori authors and their activism too. This becomes even more pertinent today when similar kinds of hikikomori tōjisha have been observed and treated also outside Japan, in countries that include Finland and Croatia (Husu and Välimäki, 2016; Silić, Vukojević, Čulo, and Falak, 2019). Hikikomori testimonies show that such testimonies should continue to be widely shared, tōjisha gaku/kenkyū to be further developed; and the reconfiguration of the tōjisha/professional's relationship to be further developed and improved upon in Japan and elsewhere.

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