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2018

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Not Working, Working from Home: The Work of Hikikomori

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Anthropology

by

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2018
The Thesis of Ramsey Ismail is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California San Diego

2018
DEDICATION

To all who have cared for me.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has come to fruition through the generosity of many individuals. To those individuals, thank you for the time, support, and opportunities you have availed me. First, I owe many thanks to my advisor and mentor, Professor Joseph Hankins, who believed a two-page proposal could be made into a future of research. He has offered me constant encouragement and a firm challenge along the way. I am grateful to Professor Saiba Varma for showing me how to challenge my positionality as an anthropologist and her willingness to make one-on-one time to push my ability to ask questions. Additionally, I thank Professor Stefan Tanaka for reading draft after draft of the research proposal for the grant that made this work possible. I thank also Professor Anne Allison whose scholarship not only inspired me to do anthropology in the first place, but whose conversation gems keep me thinking long after. Lastly, the encouragement of my mentors at University of Rochester, John Osburg, Eleana Kim, and Mariko Tamate for making the prelude to this future possible.

Research for this project was made possible by the University of California, San Diego’s Japanese Studies Department through the Joseph Naiman Fellowship for Japanese Studies. Additionally, I thank the Department of Anthropology at UC San Diego, as well as Gary and Jerri Ann. Jacobs, for providing the yearly support that made thinking through and writing up this data possible. I thank my Japanese teacher while pursuing a Critical Language Scholarship at Shiga Prefectural University, Professor Yosei Sugawara, for his training, encouragement, and patience.

I am eternally grateful to those who I met and who helped me during my time doing fieldwork, both in 2012 and 2017. Mariko Ishikawa, the field placement and now also homestay coordinator at IES Abroad Tokyo, for her valuable insight and aid in fieldsite placement on both
trips to Japan. Daiji Shin has also constantly pushed me to look beyond the surface when thinking about research in Japan. My homestay families, first the Suzukis, and then the Yamadas, for patiently welcoming me into yours and broader life in Japan.

To my interlocutors at New Start and across Japan: I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your openness, your care, and your curiosity. You inspire me and my work, and I take your stories and your strength with me, and I hope that I’ve turned it into a meaningful medium. Though this work is imperfect, I hope it does justice to your lives and experiences.

In addition, I want to thank my friends and colleagues at UCSD, in particular Ellen Kozelka, Lauren Nippoldt, and Morgen Chalmiers in the anthropology department, and Rachel Fox, Angelo Haidaris, and Alanna Reyes in the Science Studies Program, for their resources, encouragement, conversation, and feedback on this project. To Mikey, Soren, and Angel, thank you for amazing friendship and for providing me a respite from the work. I thank also my dad, whose sixteen hour shifts at the restaurant have taught me to appreciate the wonderful opportunity in front of me. And most importantly, I want to thank my husband, my reason to do be even just a little better, every single day.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Not Working, Working From Home: The Work of Hikikomori

by

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Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California San Diego, 2018

Professor Joseph D. Hankins, Chair

Defined as a period of social isolation in the absence of any other clear mental health issues for a period of six months of longer and loosely translated as "social withdrawal", hikikomori emerged as a condition among Japanese youth in the late 1980’s, immediately capturing the attention of the Japanese and international public. Current numbers stand at an estimated population of 700,000, with different stakeholders, such as parents and politicians attributing it to individual psychopathology, poor parenting, and or/a lack of social support structure. Adding to the confusion, though the definition of hikikomori argues to be in the
absence of clear mental health explanations, *hikikomori* often cope with psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. This is a nuance generally unavailable to the public, who often confuse the mental health implicated *hikikomori* with labor refusing NEET (not educating, employed, or in training). Treatment thus often takes the form of ameliorating the patients’ own tensions and anxieties and coaxing them back to work. Within this space, *hikikomori* navigate the uncertainty surrounding them in various ways. This raises key questions. What do we consider to be mental health issue in Japan? How are notions of health imbricated in larger concerns of economic productivity? And the case of *hikikomori*, amongst constant pressure to succeed in an economy that does not support it, how do you navigate in the meantime?
Introduction: Not Quite a Hikikomori

On a steamy August afternoon, the type where beads of moisture stick to your skin and clothes the second you walk out the door and the only relief is the cool blast of an air conditioner from the open door of a convenience store, Hikari-san and I embarked on a long train ride from Tokyo to the suburbs of Yokohama. We were on our way meet Yuto, a 25-year old male Hikari-san’s organization had been working with for about a year. Passing house after house, we hiked a steep hill to the wealthier part of the suburbs, even our lightest clothes sticking to our skin. Hikari-san explained to me in-between: she had brought me along because the prospect of talking to a foreigner might coax Yuto out of his shell, but the visit came with two rules. Number one, I should tell no one Yuto-san’s address or real name, not that I really knew where I or the address was (“Yuto” is an alias). Number two, absolutely, under no circumstances, should I use the word hikikomori (shut-in) in conversation. Hikari-san was the outreach director (or “rentaru Oneesan”) for New Start, an organization that advocates for withdrawn individuals who don’t work or leave their homes, and she was in charge of engaging people like Yuto, who could benefit from New Start’s services. After being contacted by Yuto’s mother, Hikari-san began writing letters reaching out to Yuto, introducing herself, her organization, and expressing interest in being his friend. These messages were ignored for months, and only after multiple attempts did she receive a response. After a few rounds of letters back and forth she began reaching out via telephone and was also ignored. Hikari-san explained that hers was a process of gradual social wear-down; phone conversation and in-person contact were far too much to expect from a social recluse right from the beginning. One had to gradually build familiarity to increasingly intimate forms of communication. One lucky afternoon, after a couple of months of calling and no letters, Yuto answered the phone and agreed to a short conversation with Hikari-san, ending with the promise
that she could call back in a couple of weeks. A few phone calls later, he agreed to meet in person, at his home with his mother present. Six months later, Hikari-san and I had been invited to come meet him for the third visit.

Upon arrival, Yuto greeted us dressed in a sports t-shirt and jogger pants, conversant, hospitable, and perhaps most importantly, nowhere near his bedroom, from where we were to believe he only rarely emerged. The three of us sat at a small table in the living room drinking tea while we discussed soccer, video games, and Yuto’s plans for the future. Yuto was finally preparing to get his driver’s license and hoped to become a game designer after finishing school. He had stayed up until 4am that night to watch the Japanese world cup match. After, he spent the morning playing the Sims, a popular American-made real-life simulator videogame, in which one guides a created character through their life course of birth, youth, employment, and death. This seemed an apparent irony in the case of hikikomori, who are often assumed to have given up on social life. To generate interest, we asked Yuto to show us what he had been up to in the Sims, and he explained. He had turned his character into a vampire, which he showed us eagerly, allowing the character to play on auto-script, and terrorize the poor other people of Simsland freely, as vampires do. Things changed however, when we encouraged Yuto to make his created character do things. Make him turn a new person into vampire. Make the vampire go for a walk. Make the vampire go to sleep. Yuto quickly and repeatedly rebuffed each urging and said he was content simply to watch the characters live their own lives. It was more fun, he argued, to sit and watch what they would do on their own than make them do anything.

Apparently, Yuto was not a person that could be made to do anything. As a child, he attended school regularly. Though quiet, he had not had any bouts of clear antisocialism that stood out to him and his mother. However, toward the end of high school, as college entrance exams
loomed closer (a period called *shiken jigoku*, examination hell), Yuto reported feeling lethargic and became unable and unwilling to attend school. After graduating, he refused to enroll in university and spent two years at home playing video games and holding part-time jobs on and off. His mother worried, but when she pushed him to go back to school, he reported severe bouts of depression confirmed by visits to a psychotherapist. Increasingly unsure how to understand or what to do about her son’s behavior, Yuto’s mom made contact with New Start and Hikari-san. Hikari-san had reached out amongst these periods of depression, at some points drawing him out and at others driving him further into quiet and lethargy. Seeing him on an ostensible upswing months before, Hikari-san had asked Yuto to move into New Start’s dorms to make new friends and even convinced him to at least go visit. This however, proved too stressful an experience and drove Yuto back into a severe bout of depression, causing Yuto’s mother to consider stopping Hikari-san’s activities altogether. Hikari-san was then forced to temporarily abandon reaching out to him. Visiting in August of 2017, Yuto was clearly on another upswing.

While Yuto struggled with depression, anxiety, and general introversion, it was less clear that he struggled with social withdrawal or that he was in any sense separated, withdrawn, or unable to interact with others. He came to the table for dinner, spoke with his parents and siblings, and perhaps most importantly, left the confines of his room to do so. Moreover, in leaving the house to take driver’s education lessons and discussing employment, even as his parents and New Start labeled him *hikikomori* (though never in his presence), he was not currently shutting away from anything. Yuto was just perfectly content to stay home and play video games. Passive and introverted, yes. Socially reclusive, harder to say. In the absence of these behaviors, I wondered, for what reason and to what end had Yuto been labeled a *hikikomori*? Upon leaving his house it became clear, the label *hikikomori* told me less rather than more about Yuto and threatened to erase
the specific issues he struggled with. Rather than one single definition, the term *hikikomori* was flexible. Though at its origin the technical term for a social shut-in, this did not fully apply and thus *hikikomori* also became the category which had allowed Yuto’s mom to gain the attention of New Start. I wondered: how many so-labeled “*hikikomori*” demonstrated hybrid unemployed behavior like Yuto.

Clearly, *hikikomori* did not function just as a diagnosis. Viewed not only as a refusal of economic expectations, not going to work and not going to school (behaviors that are associated with *hikikomori*) are viewed also as refusals of gendered heteronormative expectations for Japanese future reproductivity, where completing school leads to the fulltime employment necessary to marry, purchase a home, and raise children in the future. In being categorized as *hikikomori*, acting *hikikomori*-y, or *hikikomori*-ing, individuals are seen to defy those norms but also given the possibility to recover and return to those norms.

*However*, by labeling Yuto a *hikikomori*, the unique structural conditions that made possible the production of his condition - between his personal psychosocial issues and the social expectations leveled at him to attend college and work full time – risk the possibility of obscurity and replaced with a path to recovery to supposed normalcy. In this paper, I argue that the use of the word *hikikomori* - a term designated to explain an observed trend of withdrawn and detached behavior in youth - largely functions to erase the causes of its defining experiences. Rather than a straightforward diagnosis, *hikikomori* functions as a multilayered social category produced at the frictious intersection of subjectivity and structural social expectations. Here, decontextualized

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1 For an explanation of the various ways in which the word *hikikomori* can be used – as noun, adjective, or verb - please see pages 27-28.
*hikikomori* begins from the position that the social expectations aren’t part of the problem in the first place.

Though often asserted that *hikikomori* mysteriously manifests in the absence of another explanation twenty years ago (Tamaki 2013) - a fact which I contest - Japanese people continue to debate the nature of 'social withdrawal'. This relates to larger conversations about the continued state of youth unemployment as a choice or an inevitability 30 years after Japan’s rapid economic slowdown. The constantly dwindling prospects for Japanese people coming of age is also a topic of daily conversation. As such, this paper is not about *hikikomori* (the socially withdrawn, or social withdrawal) as an object of study. Instead, this work explores the social anxieties that produce the rush to categorize and the limits of that categorizations. In this paper I explore how these limits constitute a form of violence against the individuals they describe, bringing the wrong things such as one’s weakness or inability to keep up to attention while hiding and obscuring its deeper causes. In order to show this, I trace the rise in certain kinds of gendered expectations for productivity and how they are experienced those labeled as *hikikomori*. For example, by casting Yuto’s introversion and anxiety as “social withdrawal,” Yuto was set on a path of prolonged suffering in order to achieve access to narratives for recovery (both affective and material) and publicly accessible notions of *hikikomori*.

In this case, social withdrawal and unemployment are framed as a fault of the individual rather than the natural structure of a competitive economy approaching over thirty years of recession. I argue that *hikikomori* is neither an innate condition nor just the result of the structure

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2 For more work on how social phenomenon become conduits for social debates of class tension, social flux, and inequality see Stuart Hall’s Policing the Crisis (Palgrave Press; 1978). His introduction’s adroit framing of mugging in British society inspired the structure for my framing of *hikikomori* in Japanese society.
of social expectations in Japan being fundamentally flawed. Rather, social phenomena like hikikomori are produced when the subjective process of attempting to fulfill highly gendered social expectations that seek to produce a certain type of Japanese individual comes into conflict with the economic realities that restrict them. Pressured to embody the neoliberal principles of jikousekinin (self-responsibility) and Japanese social reproductivity against a decreasing ability to do so, amidst increasingly privatized markets, and shrinking state influence, and a stagnant economy, Japanese citizens struggle to process their emotions and experiences in a competitive system that leaves no room for such pause. Here, theirs and their onlooker’s use of the word hikikomori reifies both its mismatched definition and the system they struggle to fit into.

Hikikomori behavior is produced in the interstices of ongoing psychological stress over flux in how these structures should ideally manifest versus the reality of Japan’s current economic situation. The common, unproblematized misunderstanding of Japan's recent social history is used to hold families and Japanese citizens to standards often unrealizable in its current economy. This commits continuous acts of violence against its citizens by forcing those who fail to into disparate and stigmatized subject positions such as hikikomori.

This occurs through the theoretical framework of what I term a violent misunderstanding which, in obscuring treatment and understanding, perpetuates misunderstanding as an act of violence against the socially withdrawn. In this case, the perpetual positing of hikikomori as a psychosocial issue in the absence of a clear understanding of its causes (Tamaki 2013), which allows the repetitive interaction of individual subjectivities with an unforgiving system, is a violent misunderstanding. While simultaneously finding access to empathy narratives and social resources, in identifying as hikikomori, individuals expand what counts as hikikomori but risk a flattening of their individual experiences.
Further complicating the matter, Japan has also seen the rise of other labor related categories such as NEET (Not educating employed or in-training), fureeta (flexibly employed), and perhaps the most complicated hybrid, hiki-neet (a loose combination of hikikomori and NEET), which have separate technical definitions, but see confused use among individuals in Japan. Though hikikomori was originally named to describe aberrant behavior, the word’s transformation into a noun and the rise of categories assumed to be agentive refusals of social expectations to work full time demonstrate how categories can become implanted back in the body of the individual. As Jeffrey Angles notes (cited in Tamaki 2013), this situation is similar to the one described in Michele Foucault’s *The Will to Knowledge*, in which categories historically established by psychiatrists as descriptors become nominalized and personified by the individual performing that behavior. Over time these labels become new identities for the patient.

When I first arrived at New Start, I’d felt sure that *hikikomori* was a distinct category, with distinct sets of behaviors. However, residents such as Yuto indexed a flexible range of its applications, and as I met more “*hikikomori,*” it became clear this term was yet another discursive unity, not as clearly applied as defined. Residents and staff also used the term NEET and mobilized both terms depending on the situation. Over time it became clear that rather than the distinction between *hikikomori* and NEET, the mobilization of their multiple distinctions was an important social mechanism. In addition to their technical definitions, the terms *hikikomori* and NEET could be selectively mobilized toward achieving an end. For instance, using the word *hikikomori* provided access to the resources made available by New Start (as in the case of Yuto and his mother) and using the word NEET allowed one to communicate their non-labor as a refusal rather than a psychosocial condition. The structural friction between how the term *hikikomori* (and its paradigmatic pair, NEET) is defined, how it is applied, and later, how *hikikomori* navigate this
friction, are the ethnographic focus of this paper. Rather than being confined to textbook definitions, \textit{hikikomori}/NEET as people make their own pragmatic negotiations within the institutions and in the situations in which they must act. Through these actions, in addition to adhering to preexisting narratives, \textit{hikikomori} reinforce, shape, defer, and transform larger structures of recovery and social expectations.

In this paper, I argue that there are multiple uses of the word \textit{hikikomori}: First, its technical definition (as defined by Saito); second, its instrumental use (which allowed Yuto’s mom to reach out to New Start); third, the confused, misunderstood use of the word \textit{hikikomori} produced in the friction between the first and the second (which allows it to be confused for other terms such as NEET). Though a similar argument can be made for the term NEET, the point of this paper is to map how these different layers occur, interact, and ultimately recreate the circumstances for \textit{hikikomori} experiences. For the sake of the space and argument of this paper, I allow the term \textit{hikikomori} to occupy the majority of my analysis, though I will also discuss NEET where necessary and effective.

In the next section, I provide the recent historical context for how \textit{hikikomori} and other social phenomenon such as group suicide and death by overwork have been made possible. I show how common understandings of Japanese history, at one point a prosperous and utopic economic success story, and now suffering a long recessed social breakdown, belied documented social issues such as \textit{hikikomori} that came to public attention when Japan’s economic bubble burst. The third section details New Start’s founding and services in these circumstances and shows how its residents engage with and navigate the term \textit{hikikomori}. Slippage between the technical definition and instrumental uses of the word \textit{hikikomori} by the Japanese public and New Start residents causes further confusion between similar terms such as NEET. I argue that this misuse hides issues
with employment at large even as it provides jobless Japanese citizens access to material resources and recovery narratives. In the fourth section, I engage with the work of Hannah Arendt and argue that *hikikomori* is not just a refusal to work, but a refusal of labor without action as Arendt defines those terms. Through the ethnographic account of a job training class at New Start, I show how through the obscuring of problems *with* work cause and driven by material necessity, residents at New Start come to desire precarious labor positions and a space in a labor system they explicitly rejected in the first place. Cautioning against critiques of just personal weakness or the economic, here broadly defined, I contend that the ultimate violence of the word *hikikomori* is its ability to coerce non-workers back to work under the guise of choice.

The final section critically evaluates various solutions that have been put forth for *hikikomori*, such as increased family support and the use of psychopharmaceuticals. I analyze each solution’s underlying presumptions and exactly what about those presumptions makes each ineffective. I argue that while each on its own is insufficient, each of these solutions placed in dialogue with the other, with attention to individual’s unique circumstances can better work toward helping Japan’s “adolescents without end” (Tamaki 2013), for whom I can see no easy solution. I contend that although New Start does not fix or address the social issues at fault for *hikikomori*, in providing existential relief for its residents after years of uncertainty, it performs some form of social good. I conclude that in capitalism’s foreseeable future, more solutions should look like a blend of New Start’s efforts and the aforementioned solutions. Rather than a non-capitalist utopia, thoughtful preparation for Japan’s harsh economic realities, and attention to the structural as well

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3 Here and going forward, I define capitalism broadly as the economic system of extracting monetary value from labor.
as individual circumstances at play for *hikikomori* is the way forward, since misunderstanding and unfair expectations are the problem in the first place.
Chapter 1 – Post-War Japanese History: A Violent Misunderstanding

As the story goes, after its defeat at the end of World War II, Japan achieved a stunning transformation from defeated imperial nation to economic superpower by the late 1970s. Economic prosperity, measured by double-digit gross domestic product growth, rose through the 1980s. During this period, a social institution triumvirate of work, school, and home became the primary mechanisms for the production of goods, a well-disciplined labor force, and the physical bodies for said labor force respectively (Harootunian and Yoda 2006). Japanese people were born, raised in the home, sent to school, and guaranteed a lifetime of work upon graduation, through which they were granted the economic means to create and support a family structure of their own. As Yoda and Allison discuss (2006: 2013), the family became an economic unit, the central unit of production of Japanese product-buying bodies, and thus Japanese futures, which William Kelly calls the "my-homeism" of Japan (1993). Having a secure domestic sphere was essential for the socially productive labor that secured a Japanese national future. The acts of waged labor, producing bodies, and purchasing goods are tacitly accepted as the basic building blocks for sociality in Japan today. However, salarymen have historically received a disproportionate amount of credit for Japan’s economic success.

The oft invisible domestic labor of wives at home enabled men to pledge lifelong contracts to companies for the wages necessary to support the consumptive habits of creating Japanese families. That women supported the efforts of men outside the home was no accident either. Women as housewives, what Mies terms “housewifization,” was a crucial and doubly-convenient shift in global capitalist modernity, beginning in the European and US colonial projects of the early

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4 As Emile Durkheim establishes in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* discussing totemism, “What is constitutively immaterial, requires material to become social.” (1912: 155)
In addition to their domestic labor, with access to money created by the my-homeism system, housewives, in their conspicuous consumption, created the market that demanded bubble-era capitalism in Japan. Youth attended school during the day and tutorial cram schools at night to pass wildly competitive entrance exams to prestigious Japanese universities. This is known as "shiken jigoku" (examination hell), indicative of the massive psychological toll the system takes on both students and their families. In this aspirational but often unattainable social structure, success of one person in one sphere is defined by the others in their own. Mothers often took the burden of this responsibility good mothers were those whose efforts enabled their husbands to get promoted at work and whose children got good grades at school. Japanese people today still recall the golden era of the economic bubble, a valuable part of the present labor to produce a nostalgic “past” Japan in which homelessness, poverty, and social abandonment were social non-issues.

However, as much scholarship has shown (Allison 1994; White 2005) this model of productivity was fraught with contradiction. Rather than utopic by definition, during Japan’s economic boom in the 70s and 80s massive personal sacrifices were made, and personal needs were ignored in order for the "my-homeism" model to function. Hardworking salarymen have long been aware that they were sacrificing precious personal time, time with family, and elements of self to achieve middle-class nuclear family success (Allison 1994). Indeed, though the nuclear family model (one working father, one stay at home mother, two children) was touted as the model of success, this too has also long been in flux, and even at the peak of Japan’s economic boom, was never the statistical majority (Osawa 2002). For a long time, various forms of extended and patchwork families accompanied Japan’s rapid industrialization. Merry White argues, speaking of the 1990s, that
In the past decade... both public and private versions of the family have had to confront the fallout of real social and economic changes. The majority of housewives now take part in wage labor, families are split by job relocation or informal within-the-house divorce, and workers are displaced by restructuring and forced into early retirement or unemployment with the collapse of the bubble economy. In apparent reaction, more stridently asserted versions of the normative images of family have appeared. As policy and practices in the official sector find it hard to accommodate these demographic and social changes that make existing expectations and provisions at best outmoded, at worst tragically unfit to support families... The time has come to talk about families as viable entities in contrast to the organic, singular, homogenously experienced Family that we might have attempted to describe in the earlier postwar years and that some Japanese scholars and Western observers continue to maintain as a model. (2002: 12)

Above, White indicates the need to reconcile dogmatic ideology with historical and continuously evolving flux in Japanese sociohistorical models. Where such models appeared “stable” on the surface, they often belie invisibilized experiences of precariousness and adjustment. Rather than nonexistent, in the interest of double-digit year over year GDP growth, these issues were perpetually deferred. For the sake of a better Japan, for the sake of oneself, personal hardship was met with cries of "ganbarimashou" (let's do our best). If one endured, one could succeed at their expected social role.

Thus, when the Japanese economic bubble burst in the late 1980s, latent issues such as suicide, depression, hikikomori, long brewing but hidden behind the veil of economic success, only needed come to the fore. It is through the tinted lens of nostalgia for these golden days that behaviors such as hikikomori are now interpreted as modern. Despite a plethora of attention and multitude of explanations about these bodies, alienated youth, now adults, are left to negotiate constantly shifting terrains of social expectations on their own. The common social image is of suffering youth, often bullied, truant, and quiet to begin with, collapsing under the weight of social expectations.

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5 In Japanese Workers in Protest: An Ethnography of Consciousness, Christena Turner argues that this economic slowdown began as early as the 1970’s, which created the conditions and necessity for union worker activism in her ethnography.
These social expectations are maintained despite shifting ideologies of labor in the aftermath of Japan’s burst bubble economy. As Japan has shifted away from Fordism - the de-skilled, repetitive, and rationalized but consistent industrial production that also produced a way of life to flexibilization - the restructuring of the labor market into more flexible and less dependable forms (Harvey 1978: 124) has allowed an entire generation of youth has come of age with few or no prospects for viable employment. Anne Allison notes, “this 'lost generation' has been crippled in their hopes for the future, such as the ability to get married and have children themselves, something that over 90 percent claim they desire… often stranded at home or becoming homeless, Japanese youth - a category that is stretching later or becoming indeterminate - feel stuck.” (2013) This “stuckness” has clear resonances with hikikomori. Japanese youth who cannot find the employment necessary to perform these expectations, working poor termed “precariats” by activist Karen Amamiya, have become a social norm. Even as the inability to find employment has become a commonly acknowledged social reality, Japanese youth are publicly stigmatized for not finding a job; they fight the prospect of a “no-future”, a denied sociality that results when an individual defies heteronormative expectations (Munoz 2007). For young Japanese men, this means never securing the stable employment key to financially support a family. And for Japanese women, this entails rapidly diminishing possibilities for marriable men, and an intensifying balance of both domestic labor and a career outside the home in an attempt to meet the rising costs of education and family-making amongst stagnant wages. Desiring access to but excluded from avenues for social success, precariats are the social foil of hikikomori, who are viewed to have abandoned or lost hope in society. Left to navigate the possibility that there is no future, yet expected to charge on as if there was, Japanese youth just starting out are caught in an existential bind. This bind threatens to extend well into middle age, as demonstrated by the
residents of New Start, many of whom are over thirty years old. Forcing Japanese youth into this indefinite and often stigmatized liminal state with ramifications such as suicide by overwork, social withdrawal, and poverty, the unquestioned acceptance of these pathways and Japan’s history constitutes a violent misunderstanding.

Defined in 1998 by the famous psychologist Tamaki Saito, hikikomori is defined “as a period of total isolation, for a period of six months or more, in the absence of other clear mental health issues” (2013: 24). Estimated at around 700,000 to 1 million people, hikikomori constitute just under one percent of Japan’s population of 127 million (12). For Saito, hikikomori is “not exactly an illness or a typology…. it is a state that arises in response to perceived setbacks on the path to emotional maturity and independence” (xii). Seen as a temporary state of defiance of social norms, or at least giving up, the hikikomori state is often considered cured once one has begun socializing and returns to work.

Etymologically, the word hikikomori has a long history. When Saito first published his book in 1998, hikikomori referred to a state of being. Japanese people avoided labeling individuals hikikomori in order to avoid attaching the shame of withdrawn behavior directly to a person. The word was used as a descriptor, as in the phrase hikikomori no seinen (withdrawn young men) in whom the behavior was originally observed (Angles in Tamaki 2013; xi). However, over the next ten years, in no small part due to the attention Tamaki drew to hikikomori, the word also came to be used as a noun to describe a withdrawn person. It is now not uncommon to hear people say, “I am a hikikomori” or “I have been living the life of a hikikomori.” In both sentences hikikomori refers to a relatively fixed and widely understood set of antisocial behaviors. It can also be used as
a verb. For example, residents at New Start also often said, “Sono toki ni hikikomotteita” (At that time, I was being socially withdrawn). 6

Saito proposes that there are number of cultural factors that shape the production of hikikomori: Confucian notions of family that allow and encourage children to live with families into adulthood, a cultural relationship of dependency (termed amae by Takeo Doi), and socioeconomic standing that allows parents to continue to look after their children well into adulthood. Ultimately, he concludes, these factors work to allow certain children to stay in a suspended state of artificially prolonged adolescence. Hikikomori are in effect, adolescents without end (2013) and being labeled one continues to carry a strong public stigma.

Though Saito’s theory that several cultural factors shape the production of hikikomori is a progressive alternate to only blaming individual psychology, he takes entities such as “the east Asian Family”, what Foucault calls “inherited presumptive unities” (1969), for granted. These “inherited presumptive unities”, groups of statements that seemingly refer to the same object are structurally maintained toward a disparate end for certain social groups. This is key to the sustained emergence (dare I say production) of hikikomori. The same critique Foucault offers to inherited presumptive unities, in his case discussing madness, can be used to critique the notion of the “East Asian Family.” That is, because there is no singular continuous object referred to as madness, madness is not one object, but various different objects that emerge at different points in history, all called the same thing. Foucault continues. Thus, instead of a single consistent definition of madness, there exists a wide range of statements that refer to and thus structure the understanding

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6 These verbal patterns imitate the flexibility of the word depression in Japan, in which people often prefer to use descriptors rather than as labels for an individual to avoid shame. Here, the term utsujou, depressed condition, is often preferred to utsubyou, depression in Japan.
of what madness is. In referring to the “East Asian Family”, a generalized structure of social relations Saito assumes to currently exist, he commits the discursive fallacy that Foucault refers to above and inadvertently subjects *hikikomori* to the ongoing social factors that stressed them in the first place. That is, their inability to reproduce such a neat family structure themselves. Tamaki’s book, widely read by the Japanese public, reinforced a discursive entity, “The East Asian Family” as constant even though it only tenuously existed in the first place.

As Merry White shows in *Perfectly Japanese*, real families have long looked different than the two-parent, two-child nuclear model espoused by the Japanese government. Moreover, they have long had to look different in order meet changing economic realities. For example, amongst dwindling safety nets and state social programs, as lifetime employment and retirement packages once provided by the one’s company continue to retreat, young sons and daughters often feel forced even after marriage to stay home and care for their parents.\(^7\) In the process of caring for their parents, they spend valuable financial resources necessary for childrearing, and may choose to have less or no children as a result. Even without parents to care for, the increasing cost of supplemental tutoring programs designed to help children get into college - which have (among many other factors) forced the two-working parent model to become the standard - is a driving force behind Japan’s critically low birth rate. Additionally, in asserting that *hikikomori* are predominantly men enabled to remain in liminal adolescence by traditional heteronormative expectations (2013: xiii), Saito obscures the inherent difficulties of “coming-of-age” in a social

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\(^7\) As Ayako Kano points out, though the state has attempted to alleviate the burden of family care in an attempt to promote a “gender-equal society” the measures it has passed have not been enough. For example, the 1992 Child Care Leave Law guaranteed up to a year of partially paid child care leave for either the mother or the father. However, the costs of having a child have come to require both parents work full-time, less Japanese families become “working poor”, a common reason cited for choosing not to have children.
landscape that is both constantly changing and reliably intense. I argue that this is a key trend in the production of *hikikomori*: the use of the word obscures the conditions of its very possibility.
Chapter 2 - New Starts at New Start

In large part motivated by the global attention *hikikomori* have received, the Japanese government has attempted to tackle the issue of un/deremployed youth in several ways, such as creating job programs, providing counseling, and contributing funds to non-profit organizations that provide vocational services. New Start is one such organization. Founded in 1995, located just outside the city limits of Tokyo, the part-time and volunteer workers of New Start, often recuperated *hikikomori* themselves, provide various services to current *hikikomori* and NEET youth and adults. In addition to its main office, which houses administrative tasks such as the outreach activities performed by Hikari-san, New Start also operates a dorm, a restaurant, and a bakery. By having socially withdrawn individuals (both male and female, but disproportionately male) build social relationships through life in the dorms, work in the restaurant and the bakery, and socialize and attend job training lectures at the office, New Start aims for residents to “choose their own path in life” and ultimately rejoin society.

While the website openly advertised that New Start had provided counseling to over 6,000 *hikikomori, NEET, and the like (hikikomori, neeto nado)* New Start residents most regularly engaged with the term *hikikomori*, even as they explained the term didn’t apply. At New Start, graduates and students exhibited any, all, and none of the traits of social withdrawal. Many were originally introverted. And some simply quit their jobs because they hated their bosses, a period that had turned into extended unemployment, accompanied by depression or disappointment. Though called *hikikomori*, the residents at New Start actively questioned whether such a term applied. Regularly beginning sentences with, “Though it might look like *hikikomori,*” the residents would then explain their behavior in the context of their wants, needs, and social situations. Thus, when Hajime-san, a resident of New Start, and self-questioning *hikikomori* volunteered to do a
Q&A for prospective parents and people in the community, audience members hoping for an easy answer to the question, “what is wrong with my/ someone else’s child” were left disappointed, as his answers showed that the word *hikikomori* simultaneously did and did not apply.

R: Hajime-san, How did you end up at New Start?
H: I came here when my mom got sick. I was at home until last year, but then my mother was hospitalized, and my relationship with my dad got worse, and so I realized I had to come. I knew about this place from my cousin, so I looked it up, and I thought it might be better than staying home. I went to college in Nagoya and quit at 23. Then, until 29 I did what I want (jiyu-ni-shita). I worked some jobs, but my mother was hospitalized, and after she was hospitalized I was not getting along with my father and I thought I had to come here.

R: So in that time when you were hikikomori, what did you do?
H: I was interested in the body, how it works, so I read books and worked out.
R: So it was not that you were in your house?
H: No, I would go to the library every day. I would listen to music and read books about the body. It was sort of like work (*shigoto-mitai*). I was not working, I was, but it was like going to work for me because I was not going to school. So, from the outside, I guess it might look like *hikikomori*, but it wasn't like that for me. I had to have something to do every day, whatever I wanted to (*sukini-shiteita*), like bird watching.

R: So different than hikikomori? How were your relationships (*ningenkankei*) with people at the time?
H: My mother and father were okay. Up to that point, I had been a good child, and I guess they understood that, and that is why they let me do whatever I want (*sukini-saserareta*). It was when my mother got sick that things started to get tense. I had one friend who quit school too, and he came to visit. Since we both weren't working, we had time, but my classmates were working, and everybody was split up (*minna bara-baran datta*). I did not have a problem making friends as a child either. I think it was just that time as a third-year student. Everyone suddenly started to prepare for job hunting (*shuushoku*), and they suddenly started to do the same thing as each other. Moreover, I wondered, why did we all have to do the same thing? I thought of myself doing it and, "*kimochi warui*," I got sick thinking about it, and that is when I quit and went back home. That was ten years ago.
After the Q&A, as parents filed out of the New Start office, a sense of unease filled the air. Even though he used the word *hikikomori* to describe his experiences, Hajime-san explicitly rejected the category. Rather than answering their questions or providing the answers parents hoped to hear, Hajime-san’s story echoed parents’ experiences at home: no one cause could be isolated for social withdrawal. If the cause was still unclear, so too might be recovery. More than any easy reassurance, Hajime-san both followed the narrative of *hikikomori* and threw it on its head. He explicitly rejected the label *hikikomori* even as he used the word to describe his experience because it would obscure how his individual reaction was a response to an inflexible set of social expectations. Hajime-san also shows that, though the word *hikikomori* has an exact technical definition which is easily accessible to the public, desperation to understand and enable recovery from social withdrawal by outside parties such as parents causes a common confusion in the meaning of the word. Structural social conditions forced people to use the word *hikikomori* in order to gain access to resources. Paradoxically, this mobilization of the word *hikikomori* would later threaten to obscure the structural conditions - often the same conditions pressuring parents to find a label - for *hikikomori*-like behavior in the first place.

Hajime-san shows us that even though social categories like *hikikomori* and NEET have exact technical definitions (which parents were likely hoping to hear reinforced at the Q&A), these words multiple layers of meaning in use, such as one’s intentions or possibility for the future. Despite being professionally defined by counselors, medical professionals, and academics, definitions do not always capture the social implications of the word *hikikomori*’s use. While defined as a social and interpersonal withdrawal, *hikikomori* is also indicative of a withdrawal from Japanese social expectations for work and labor; one can be cast as *hikikomori* even without
refusing to talk to others. Refusing to sell one’s bodily capacity to labor to another for a set amount of time is here cast as an anti-social or medical problem.\(^8\)

When Hajime-san said, “it might look like I was a \textit{hikikomori},” his testimony points us to the second level of the word \textit{hikikomori}: an instrumental use that stands apart from its base technical definition. The word can be used while it does not fully apply and rejected when it is not useful. Thus, while residents often narrated their behavior as \textit{“hikomotteita toki”} (when I was shutting away), Hajime-san used the word \textit{hikikomori} to index a set of behaviors accessible to the audience even while rejecting the label in front of 30 parents and community members, revealing an engagement with the term that can be both selective and agentive. Because he was already a resident at New Start, Hajime-san was no longer forced to re-medicalize himself as \textit{hikikomori} to gain access to resources. It had now become more important to him to share the nuances of his story. Hajime-san’s choice to switch terms demonstrates a strategic engagement with the word \textit{hikikomori}.

Depending on the audience and the stakes, identifying or being identified as \textit{hikikomori} provides access to various resources and recovery narratives. Additionally, the word can be used by different parties, such as suffering individuals or their parents, and gives those involved a way to understand otherwise inexplicable behavior. Here, while \textit{hikikomori} might be unsure whether they actually qualifies, saying, “I am \textit{hikikomori}” grants access to various social resources, both material and affective. These resources may take the form of funding, access to New Start’s (and other recovery) services, or just plain sympathy. Additionally, referring to their child as a

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\(^8\) This is just one instance of long historical trajectory author terms the medicalization of deviance, in which socially non-complicit behavior such as African-American slaves fleeing American plantations in the 19th Century, (dраПетomania) was made into psychosocial diagnosis and disorder. See Troy Duster 2006.
*hikikomori* granted parents access to those same resources. Narratively, as Ellen Rubinstein notes, the use of the word *hikikomori* allows both parents and patients the hope that an individual might step back into the normal developmental line (2016). By using the word *hikikomori*, residents at New Start provided listeners with an easily-accessible frame of reference. Thus, though Hajime-san may not have fully agreed with the label, by using the word, the parents at New Start were easily able to imagine his experiences.

The flexibility of *hikikomori*’s application allows the continued treatment of *hikikomori* without full understanding of the term. That is, personal issues such as depression, anxiety, and/or not wanting to participate are masked or minimized to help the individual gain employment, the true mark of success when treating this social disorder. Indeed, rather than some neat narrative for *hikikomori* or professionals to adhere to, the messiness of the ability to use and not use the term performs valuable social work.

As mentioned in the introduction, the slippage between the word’s technical definition and its instrumental uses, as highlighted above, often causes day-to-day confusion between the words *hikikomori* and NEET. Despite being called a *hikikomori*, and even being at New Start, residents such as Hajime-san might not actually be *hikikomori*. If one can use the term or be labeled *hikikomori*, but more closely resemble a NEET, it can leave outsiders (such as the parents at New Start) with residual questions: What actually is a *hikikomori*? What actually is a NEET? And perhaps most importantly, is or isn’t my child one? And though such questions demonstrate a desire for an "illusion of wholeness" (Ewing 1990), a narrative in which all aspects of an interlocutor’s story fit neatly together, they risk missing the important social work performed by the use of the word *hikikomori*. Here it becomes important to expound on the key social difference(s) between *hikikomori* and NEET.
In contrast to the sense of weakness associated with *hikikomori*, the term NEET implies an agentive rejection of social expectations. For someone like Hajime-san, the term NEET (not-employed, educated, or in-training) is clearly more applicable than *hikikomori*, as he actively questioned why everyone began pursuing employment at the same time. Here, rather than failure, Hajime-san chose to step out of this expected social pathway. However, the word *hikikomori* was the label imposed from the outside because *hikikomori* have the option for recovery. Moreover, being *hikikomori* is more permissible than NEET which is generally considered an individual choice not to walk the beaten path, a far more stigmatized trajectory than simply not being able. One mother often lamented that her children were quite difficult to motivate to study. Her oldest, a son, was passing but not with the top of the class grades that mark children for prestigious universities such as Kyoto University and Tokyo University. In the car on the way to a baseball competition, she confessed, “I really think my son is going to become a NEET. He just isn’t good at school, and I just don’t think he’s going to be good at a job.” Echoing the anxieties of parents at the Q&A session at New Start, she often asked, “What do I do to make sure this doesn’t happen?” Where *hikikomori* was viewed as something passive, a result of a weakness, NEET was viewed as a stigmatized choice, a rejection of proper social reproductivity narratives without opportunity for redemption. This stigmatization played a key role in obscuring the reasons people like the residents at New Start rejected work in the first place.

However, rather than debating which and how each term might or might not be applicable, here I argue that the use of the terms *hikikomori* and NEET focuses attention on an individual’s capabilities or attitude rather than structural issues in the larger system of social expectations. This is perhaps the most harmful work of the word *hikikomori*. Using the word *hikikomori* obscures and perpetuates the structural conditions (one’s subjectivity in frictive contact with social expectations
and structures) that make social withdrawal possible in the first place. This usage, as outlined above, forces individuals back onto an ascribed heteronormative social trajectory, where recovery takes the form of precarious labor positions. It is in this context that the use of the word *hikikomori* constitutes a violent misunderstanding.

This responsibilization of Japanese citizens begins early and continues indefinitely. From the beginning, Japanese education avoids the possibility that perhaps the social track itself is the problem by grouping students of various capabilities and special needs in the same alternate class during formative schooling years, or simply leaving students in classes that don’t cater to those needs and expecting them to adjust. (Letendre and Shimizu 1999) Shyness, anxiousness, and difference were left unattended as long and students were allowed to continue from grade to grade as long as they continued to meet expectations.

Thus, though many students at New Start often exclaimed they had no problems during school years, this is likely because the behaviors now confused for social withdrawal did not interfere with academic (and therefore future-oriented) expectations. However, once those particularities were met with socioeconomic expectations for work such as the dozens to hundreds of interviews required for securing employment, the residents at New Start reached an impasse and stopped moving along. After months to years of not working, their parents began to worry they were *hikikomori*, again locating a structural issue at an individual level.

Ultimately, leaving unaddressed the structural issues that lead to dropping out and unemployment, the use of the word *hikikomori* hid the pressures that manifested in their socially withdrawn behavior (long brewing and uninterrogated) such as the intense set of expectations for new graduates. Subsumed under the *hikikomori* narrative, both the emotional and structural issues that affected *hikikomori* remained uninterrogated over months and even years of unemployed
residence at home. This continued until parents, increasingly frustrated and unsure what to do, reached out to New Start. New Start, parents hoped, would be able to help get their child back to a normal, social life. Aware of the stress their condition causing their family and the shame with which they viewed themselves, their children, now residents, hoped for the same. Both parties under the mutual assumption that work was the way to do so.
Chapter 3: The Problem with Work

“There isn’t one correct path in life.

In the second half of the 20th Century, in order to move from an impoverished nation to economic superpower, Japan’s citizens became economic animals, working tirelessly to transform their country. Even now, Japan is a leading economic power, with the third greatest global GDP.

It’s time to start living again.

Thanks to the work of the 20th Century, the foundations for life have been put into place. We hope that in the 21st Century, Japanese people will be able to enjoy multiple facets of their own lives by forming bonds with others and ultimately create their own form of happiness through life and work. (Mission Statement – New Start Website)

Equipped with worksheets, Q&A scripts, and role-playing exercises, twice per week staff members at New Start gave residents two hour-long seminars entitled, "Phone Etiquette", "Interview Tips", and "How to talk to coworkers". On one humid 90-degree day (the usual climate in August) five students sat in foldable chairs in the back corner of the New Start Office, an old window model air conditioner blaring loudly next to the speaker. Despite the speaker's inaudibility, students leaned in to hear the question, "Do you feel confident talking on the phone?" "If you do, raise your hand."

After displaying their lack of confidence, the students at New Start promptly referred to the worksheets handed out and began roleplaying various phone conversations. Scenarios included, “what to do when you are applying for a job”, “what to do when a coworker calls in sick”, and “what to do when you are on the phone with a guest”. These conversations and skills, often taken for granted, were given special attention at the New Start seminars. While these far from supplanted the real thing, the staff hoped that graduates would be able to begin successfully navigating employment applications after these seminars. These seminars struck me with a strong sense of irony. How was it that residents had come to willingly attend seminars designed to train
them for positions they rejected in the first place? Wasn’t this exactly what made Hajime-san, an occasional participant in these seminars, *kimochi warui* (sick to his stomach) in the first place? How had being a *hikikomori* led right back to square one? New Start residents had somehow undergone a paradoxical shift in perception: from issues with social expectations for work to work as an answer to their problems. Perhaps work, broadly defined, wasn’t the issue. Rather, leading up to and during their time at New Start, some problem with work had shifted.

In *The Human Condition*, Hanna Arendt differentiates between the terms work, labor, and action. Though we might debate the flexibility of each definition, hers is a useful heuristic for understanding for how residents at New Start came to desire employment positions they rejected in the first place. She defines labor as the infinite, cyclical effort which produces something to be consumed and used. Essentially defined as a task, Arendt establishes, “labor is necessary not only for individual survival, but for the life of a species.” (1958:8). Work, by contrast, is the finite process that results in the production of some durable, material, and/or tangible thing with some sort of measurable permanence in the world. It provides an “artificial” world of things, and has a distinct (if not at least visual) impact on one’s surroundings. The combination of work, labor, and action, which she describes “our plurality (of possibility) as distinct individuals”, constitute what she calls “the Human Condition” (ix).

Arendt’s distinction between “work” and “labor” is especially important. Hajime-san - who suddenly wondered why everyone had to do the same thing but engaged in daily “work-like” pursuits such as studying - was not directly rejecting work according to Arendt’s definition. Rather, I argue, he was rejecting the monotonous economic-oriented tasks associated labor and their lack of possibility for action. However, work as Hajime-san refers to it, as well as it is usually imagined, is that survival-oriented labor without possibility for plurality (action). Refusing the socially
reproductive labor of applying to jobs, Hajime-san refused not only his own independent survival (sustained by his family’s middle-class status) but also the valuable social labor responsible for the reproduction of Japanese society. Having identified with NEET, this was an agentive rejection; during his Q&A Hajime-san wanted parents to know that he had chosen not to participate rather than blame it on some personal weakness attached to being *hikikomori*. For Hajime-san, the problem with work was not the act of laboring, it was its lack of possibility for action.

Here, the mission statement of New Start is quite powerful. Ostensibly recapturing the integration of action into labor under the term work, it urges residents to “create their own forms of happiness through life and work.” Drawn by the possibility that one could create their own prospects for life and happiness, amongst dwindling patience and economic support from parents and relatives, residents were drawn back to the lure of employment. However, in identifying as *hikikomori* and failing to establish what exactly about being economic animals is problematic, the residents at New Start were guided to a recovery that was not conceptually different, and possibly even more precarious than the lifestyle they rejected in the first place. Even as New Start critiques the economic model of the 80s, Japanese people as “economic animals, and claims we can slow down, it problematizes neither that model nor the expectation that happiness is achieved through work today. Indeed, if one must work full-time at a low-paying job with very few benefits and no room for time off or to get sick, this “new life” threatened to be worse than that of the economic animal, whose jobs were at least perceived to be stable and valuable. I do not mean to say however, that this dangerous lack of reflexivity is unique to New Start. Rather, it is indicative of greater academic debates about work, labor, livelihood.

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9 This term was originally coined in the US and then adopted by Japanese people to describe worker’s attitudes and habits in the heyday of the *my-homeism* model discussed above.
Kathi Weeks criticizes this cyclical mechanism which returns non-workers to work (labor removed from action) under the guise of self-choice, without fundamental reflection on the nature of work. In *The Problem With Work*, she laments the continuous unproblematized status of work amongst ongoing critiques of labor, livelihood, and neoliberalism.) According to Weeks, “even the best job is a problem when it monopolizes so much of life. What is perplexing is less the acceptance of the present reality that one must work to live than the willingness to live for work” (2011:1). Here, she critiques not just that people are required to work, or that it requires so much time, the problem she sees is in the lack of active resistance to it. This is an approach we can see in the hey-day of the Japanese economy, in which citizens supplanted their own doubts about the structure of a sacrifice-filled economic system to work towards tomorrow’s Japan (Allison 1994).

I argue that this critique also applied to the operations of New Start, where the driving force of and reason for work is thematically but not actually modified. Touting a hope that “people will be able to… create their own form of happiness through life and work” New Start is intimately involved in the continuous production of precarious labor. Originally groomed to occupy elite socioeconomic positions, New Start’s residents come to desire ostensibly less stressful positions, such as cleaning staff and the cashier shifts at neighborhood *konbeni* (convenience store), necessary but socially undervalued labor positions. Spurred by their parents’ diminishing ability and willingness to support their economically unproductive lifestyles, residents at New Start are marked successful when they embrace the neoliberal principles of *jiko-sekinin* (self-responsibility) and become self-sufficient, working individuals.

The oft-cited mantra that *hikikomori* simply lived at a different, slower pace than other Japanese people was thus both enabling and debilitating. Many students were drawn to New Start by the prospect that they worked, lived, or existed at a slower pace than others, and that was okay.
Though it alleviated much of the existential stress of daily life, it was problematic in that it effectively communicates that the residents are innately less capable than others in some socially defined way. In this case, the residents at New Start were viewed as less economically productive. Perhaps most importantly, it left the taken-for-granted fast-paced nature of work uninterrogated.

This approach ignores the key structural issues that cause the forms of anxiety, withdrawal, or *kimochi warui-ness* (sick to one’s stomach), that caused people to stop working, drop out, or give up in the first place. The idea that one’s child might recover, that some comparative debility is okay, or that *hikikomori* is indicative of the failings of just the individual and not Japanese social expectations, were discussed and debated without attention to the underlying causes that go beyond an individual model. This slower pace was a key aspect of what was attractive to residents about precarious positions such as the cashier shift at a local convenience store.

Distracted from their personal experiences, and eager to seek out “their own way of life”, the actions of NEET, New Start, and *hikikomori* were finally and perhaps most pressingly, also driven by necessity. At home and at New Start, the inability to or desire not to work - sometimes but not always a rebellion against work - was swallowed up by the material reality that one *had to work to survive*. Residents often came to New Start after years of not working because as they put it, “They had no other option.” As parents aged, retired, and their ability to provide financial support dwindled, the pressure to be economically sufficient, rather than any distinct change in medical routine and social setting, was ultimately the greatest factor that drove residents to New Start, and then back to work. Here, the parents of residents at New Start, often relieved that their child was doing anything at all, were dynamic and pragmatic. While many had originally hoped their children would eventually secure some type of upwardly mobile employment, they now simply wanted their children to be able to support themselves.
However, the notion that one must work to survive is another paradigm Weeks finds problematic. She argues that the expectations not just to work but to do a “lifetime of work”, and not only work but “become workers” is indicative of work a “social convention and disciplinary apparatus rather than an economic necessity” (8). For Weeks the constant need or expectation to work is in fact a condition of the times and not actually necessary to the creation of social wealth. This can be seen in analyses of Fordism, Post-Fordism, and Japan’s ongoing recession. As David Harvey shows in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Toyota-ism (just-in-time Fordist production) Japanese capitalism was a series of constant expansions which could only slow down as markets continuously cannibalized each other (1991:124). However, the expectation that with enough labor markets can continue to expand goes against the zero-sum logic of global capital, in which one entity’s accumulation of capital inevitably comes at the expense of another. Here, the logic of the my-homeism family model, success of one family member in one ba (sphere of social identity and production such as work, home, and school) dependent on another family member in the other, was contingent on Japan’s continued economic expansion. As growth slowed, economic bubbles burst, and the Asian financial crisis occurred, the efficacy of the my-homeism model dwindled, with profound implications for Japanese society (Brinton 2005). While the my-homeism model is certainly a vital part of Japan’s sustained success in the world economy, the ongoing labour of Japanese citizens may yet never return Japan to its former growth levels.

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10 And here I realize global wealth is a delicate balance of printing new money, investment, and capital finance, but very little of it is the actual creation of New Wealth. Smaller economies expand as they gain greater access to the whole economic pie; the pie does not get bigger.

11 See, amongst many other works, Anne Allison’s *Millennial Monsters* for a detailed account of how the my-homeism economic model created the capitalist goods possible for Japan’s success in the global economy.
And while Weeks claims a neat cleavage, that “after the family, waged work is often the most important, if not sole, source of sociality for millions,” (6) I would like to emphasize that there is no clear divide. The structure Japanese people currently imagine as “social” is intimately entangled in relations of gendered capitalist production. Both family without work and work without family constitute social problems Japan must address. Work without family calls attention to Japan’s recognition as *muenshakai* (relationless society), in which death from overwork (Kitanaka 2014), group suicide (De-Silva 2008, 2010), and loneliness (Allison 2013), are made possible. Conversely, family without work is also at issue, a trend signified by the stigmatized term “parasite singles”, single women who don’t work or leave the home (Nakano 2014).

While many critique capitalism’s penchant for the destruction of family, and here it might be easy to posit oppressive economic conditions as the sole source of *hikikomori*, such criticisms occlude the fact that capitalism is an intimate part of what makes current conceptions of family and social relationships possible in the first place. Indeed, rather than the notion that capitalism is destroying the family, the historically specific “inherited presumptive unity” that we call family is a distinctly capitalist venture (Glazer 1993; Stoler 1995; Mies 1999). This sets up a key epistemological crisis. Though we imagine work as the means to sustain livelihood, heteronormative family reproduction, and consumption, these institutions all also exist to sustain work. Additionally, as a deviant category that serves to reinforce notions of normalcy in Japan, we might consider *hikikomori* to be a form of work in and of itself.

Week’s quote is useful however, as it also indicates that work is primary means of building social relations. This has useful applications for understanding the residents at New Start. When *hikikomori* do not comply with socioeconomic expectations, and thus do not work, they deny this system and are denied the access to relationship-building, as they seek to do so. They are then
labeled “the socially withdrawn”. We can think back again to Hajime-san, who sought to make
friends, but struggled as all of his high school and college friends had full-time jobs that likely
demanded overtime. Thus, if we trace “social withdrawal” to its source, hikikomori is a withdrawal
from work, and an inability to reproduce family, the assumed access points to social relationships.
Considering that waged (and domestic) work is often the given source of sociality for many, who
often don’t often have time for otherwise, being antisocial is often simply a result of not having
access to anyone to socialize with, not being averse to the act. In this regard, much room for
possibility exists for Japanese society, which hardly provides a ground for relationship-building
outside the beaten path of full-time employment or family-making.

Here, the way the socially withdrawn build relationships outside of commonly accepted
social trajectories offers the potential to reframe and consider otherwise types of socialities, such
as Hajime-san and Yuto-san’s relationships with both their family and other non-workers. This is
the possibility, as Weeks describes, “to have a life outside (and alongside) work” (2011: page).
Rather than deny sociality and future to those who don’t adhere to heteronormative production-
oriented family structures - which never constituted the majority in the first place (Kano 2015: 98)
- under the broad strokes paint-brush of “socially withdrawn” offers us the possibility for new
kinds of affectional communities. described by D’Emilio as “networks of support that do not
depend on the bonds of blood or the license of the state, but that are freely chosen and nurtured”
(2011: 110) These are networks that queer communities, as well as the families depicted in White’s
Perfectly Japanese have depended on for decades. D’Emilio also advocates that we support “issues
that broaden the opportunities for living outside traditional heterosexual family units,” “rights of
young people,” and “structures and programs that will help to dissolve the boundaries that isolate
the families”. Perhaps if we did so, “lonely Japan” wouldn’t be so lonely after all.
Hikikomori is not just a personal or psychosocial issue. Nor is it just a matter of economics. Rather, we must consider them together, and how one removed from the other can be seen at the source of many social issues in Japan today. Critiquing just individuals as we saw before, or just institutions, as we saw now, risks perpetuating the many social disorders that Japan is coping with today. In this regard, much room for possibility exists for Japanese society, which hardly provides a ground for relationship-building outside the beaten path of full-time employment or family-making.

Ultimately considered successful when they rejoin the standard life course, and more often encouraged to get a job than psychological counseling, hikikomori warrants reframing in terms of productivity as well as psychosociality. This would better indicate the interaction of subjectivity and work. The acknowledgment that one’s subjectivity and work are in conflict, rather than just laziness and personal weakness, would allow us to avoid stigmatizing nonworking individuals and pay the critical attention to the system of expectations that Weeks demands. Hikikomori, often introverted, shy, or anxious as individuals, show us how these personal and psychosocial traits interface with social expectations, and the degree of stigma produced when those conditions aren’t met. Thus, already anxious individuals must succeed in the stresses of the Japanese job market, where even more stress is incumbent. Success entails the ability to work under this constant pressure. If one caves or chooses not to, they must then accept a social failure and the stress that entails. Faced with the notion that “mawari no me” (the eyes around the person) view them as failures, the way out of this mental space is to then return to work, and the stresses they refused before. Blaming social withdrawal solely on an individual and not also on interactions with unaccommodating social expectations until mounting social and financial pressures force these individuals back to work constitutes an act of violence. The ongoing misunderstanding or
misdepiction of *hikikomori* until they’ve no choice but to work is constitutive of a violent misunderstanding.

Where I asked before how New Start could reorient those who refused Japan’s most prestigious career path, to taking some of its most undesired positions, the answer here becomes clear. Taking work for granted allows mounting social pressure and the discourse of necessity to coax *hikikomori* back from the fringes of society into some of Japan’s most precarious working positions. The ways the forces of production draw those who rebel back into its fold is a well-observed characteristic of work and capitalism (Willis 1977). Framed as temporary and inexplicable, *hikikomori* eventually seek to rejoin the labor positions they denied in the first place. This is the ultimate violence of the word *hikikomori*. 
Conclusion – Hikikomori and the Way Forward

I begin my conclusion with a critical survey of the single-faceted solutions that have been proposed to and for *hikikomori*. As previously argued, the use of the word *hikikomori* often obscures the multitude of structural conditions that make it possible. As evidenced by the continuity of *hikikomori* - from six months of withdrawal to six years and from youth well into adulthood, solutions for *hikikomori* remain far beyond the expertise of just one’s social, professional, or medical circle. Proposed solutions and explanations reflect this. While each solution offers its own validity; each offers a social or medical band-aid to a greater structural wound. Rather, each must be put into dialogue with each other in order to begin to unravel and address the complex experiences that society terms “*hikikomori*”. As in the case of Hajime and Yuto-san, we saw that *hikikomori* was not just a personal or work issue, but a complex web of social, economic and emotional answers. Neither simply seeing a psychologist, nor finding an easier job would have solved the pressures that caused them to seem socially withdrawn. While it can be tempting to identify single and neat causes for *hikikomori*, it is clear that helping the socially withdrawn requires a more nuanced framework.

For example, an oft-proposed solution for *hikikomori* by psychologists and counselors is to advocate the family’s role in supporting and educating youth as they navigate their way back to social normativity. However, this assumes that families aren’t the original source of tension for *hikikomori*, or that family and child’s goals are even aligned. As Adrienne Hurley reminds us, viewing the "family" as mitigating force, capable of weathering violent episodes or other antisocial behavior overlooks family in the sphere where these behaviors are often learned and enforced, and is thus explicitly a violent misunderstanding. In creating a web of taxing codependencies, family
relationships can often be as taxing as they are supportive.\textsuperscript{12} Thus, families have a particularly trying double-duty, of steering their children toward the future while not forcing them to resent it. Too often, the difficulty of this balance and the role of fathers is overlooked; causing mothers to take the blame for both being “too coddling” and “too hard” on youth. They, like everyone else, are doing their best. They can also be the sites where hikikomori feel the most acute stigma after all.

The social bodies that people find themselves beholden to – such as school expectations to matriculate and coworkers’ expectations to acquiesce - can play harmful as well as helpful roles in people’s lives. The expectation that close networks of family and professionals can treat this disorder obscures its structural nature. Hurley adds, “it is the social minds that idealize, vilify, or render unrecognizable the pressures of our anxious or antisocial experience (as seen in the above sections), which engender a violence of their own” (2013: 252). As Hurley shows, the same social bodies that are supposed to keep individuals on track often also cause their derailing. She claims, “the very processes of socialization to which we are all subjected to, (in their long list of expectations and conditioned but unfulfilled desires) often drive us crazy after all” (2013: 252). Discussing youth violence, a behavior often attached to hikikomori, if there are "monsters" (or vampires) in our homes or next door, they are metaphorical monsters of our own creation.

If solutions are left to just families or individual professionals, social withdrawal risks lasting well into adulthood due to these overarching structural issues, as evidenced the many adult residents at New Start. This also disproves the presumption that hikikomori are all youth as well.

\textsuperscript{12} Amy Borovoy’s \textit{The Too Good Wife: Alcoholism and Codependency in Japan}, shows how wives’ desires to be a “good wife” require daily decisions that often serve to exacerbate their existential stress, such as the enabling of their husband’s alcoholism by ironing his work clothes so that he will arrive at work on time.
While much attention has been given to the issues of youth (Brinton 2005; Borovoy 2008) and the elderly (Traphagan 2003; Danely 2014), very few address the stresses of young adult to middle age existence. If *hikikomori* were considered youth twenty years ago, when Tamaki’s book was released in Japanese\(^{13}\), and have yet to find resolution, many of them are now in their 30s and 40s. While the stresses of applying to colleges and jobs is well heard, the stressful lives of adults and their ability to also quit or be fired from work still warrant much attention. No longer considered adolescents, with less time to recover, and putatively having had more time to succeed, resources such as empathy are vastly limited for Japan’s older unemployed. Such a change in perception might serve Japanese citizens now well past being considered “youth” and make more resources available to them. While New Start serves as a rare exception, in providing support and services to people well beyond university and work debut applications, treating *hikikomori* as solely a youth issue misses large swaths of the population that are in fact not youth at all. Thus allowing the average age and number of “*hikikomori*” to steadily grow.

Another proposed possibility is the prescription of mental health medications in Japan. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (also known as SSRI’s or antidepressants) such as Paxil and Luvox have only recently made their way into Japanese markets. Sales tripled in the early 2000s and continue to increase on a steady trajectory (Vickery 2006). However, Japanese doctors are wary of the risk of over-diagnosis. In practice, they must continuously navigate the always difficult and blurry distinction between mental illness as "biological" or “psychological," as a product of individual biology or stress-induced social environments (Kitanaka 2011). While medical professionals and families debate how much and for what to medicate their children,

pharmaceutical treatment presumes that social withdrawal can be explained biologically. Often, doctors shy away from unpacking the interaction of these borders because they are wary of the responsibility of a failed or misdiagnosis, even as they attempt to do their best (Kitanaka 2008; 156).

This shift toward pharmaceuticals has been made possible by the shift from dynamic to diagnostic psychology, a medical system which heavily relies on clearly demarcated symptomatic diagnoses (Horwitz 2003). However, medication is a risky proposal for hikikomori, which is defined to be “in the absence of any other clear mental health issues” (Tamaki 2008: 24). Additionally, if hikikomori are identified by expressions of commonplace existential concerns such as "I am worried about the future" (Borovoy 2008), as referenced before, we risk medicalizing commonplace existential concerns in the absence of a better explanation. Further, we risk targeting the wrong age group. And as with the students at New Start, if hikikomori really is an issue of economic productivity as well as a psychosocial one, this would mask social problems with surpluses of medication. The bio-psycho- and socioeconomic are of course, intimately entangled. As previous studies have shown (Schepet-Hughes 2001; Luhrmann 2016) the lack of economic prospects can provide powerful impetus for the development of mental health disorder. Moreover, treating social issues with pharmaceuticals is a band-aid on a larger wound.

Clearly, no single solution can resolve the multifaceted issue that is hikikomori. However, small steps toward understanding can help the socially withdrawn while researchers and professionals continue to investigate. If scholars continue to draw attention to the particularities of

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14 As seen in Amy Borovoy’s The Too Good Wife (2005), in which a common solution suggested to wives of alcoholic husbands in Japan, the solution is often far more complicated than the Western feminist notion of just leaving. Often decades out of employment, socially pressured to care for their families, and at the mercy of an economy not designed for re-entry, these problems require the navigations of many social issues even if only one seems to be the issue.
*hikikomori* circumstances, they may help the parents and professionals who are doing the best they can with the tools they have make incremental headway toward helping *hikikomori*. In the meantime, even in this flawed model, we as individuals would do well to lift the stigmas of failure and social withdrawal.\textsuperscript{15} As the socially withdrawn fail to live up to expectations, their real and perceived stigma as having done so only amplifies their existential angst. If *hikikomori* did not have to spend so much time worrying about how their friends, family, and society view their failure, they might have fewer anxieties and fears in an already stressful environment. This, in turn, might make it easier for them to recover in whatever shape that takes.

We stand to learn much about how to help the socially isolated if we consider Hajime-san rejected employment because of a problem with expectations for *employment at large*, not a personal issue or just a single situation. If scholars acknowledge the problem, that is, the problem with work in context, and help give parents, professionals, and individuals the vocabulary and skills to work within those parameters, we might not see the same rash of suicides, social withdrawals, and loneliness that seem to characterize Japanese society today. In a global economy that takes work for granted even as it acknowledges its diminishing possibilities, we might recast social withdrawal disorder, as also one of many larger, productivity disorders. *Hikikomori* here offer a possibility; that what professionals often jump to classify as mental health is also a matter of economic health, an example of the social made manifest through the material (Durkheim 1912). Nancy Scheper-Hughes echoes this point in her study of schizophrenia in a rural Irish village, in which she shows that mental health and economic possibility are intimately entangled (2001).

\textsuperscript{15} In *A Disability of the Soul*, Karen Nakamura shows the potential provided at Bethel House, where the stigma attached to Japanese schizophrenia patients is assuaged in the aim of helping them be more sufficient. While the model is certainly controversial in that it asks patients to accept schizophrenia as a permanent problem that they have, it also shows possibility for life paths outside of a medicalized and hospitalized state.
Disorders like *hikikomori*, group suicide, and suicide run rampant in the Japanese social imaginary. As indicated above, too often treatment is framed around a weakness of the victim or a problem with capitalism, rather than the interaction of the two.

To simply blame capitalism, rather than a pinpointed critique and analysis of the mechanisms that trap *hikikomori* at work, as I have sought to do, risks the same obscuring habit as the word *hikikomori*. This leaves us with an important point: while capitalism creates the conditions of one’s oppression, it also creates the conditions for one’s possibility. We can clearly see how hypercapitalist social expectations are in part to blame for Hajime-san’s hesitation. However, we must also acknowledge that those same expectations created the comfortable middle-class affluence necessary to question such expectations in first place. As we see in Anna Tsing’s study of the *matsutake* mushroom, a rare and expensive delicacy which grows nowhere except in the remains of dilapidated capitalist structures, and in the process generates new forms of capital and sociality around its collection, possibility even among the remains of capitalist ruin. Even if those possibilities are neither ideal nor utopic. This is a metaphor that also applies to New Start. Though directing residents to low-paying but less-stressful jobs does not promise a utopian future or re-expand Japan’s long-contracted job market, they residents who have long felt trapped the tools to support themselves and a path to imagine *happiness*, whatever that might mean, a mushroom in capitalist ruins.

At the end of her book *Revolutionary Suicide*, Adrienne Hurley suggests that maybe the real problem after all is that society asks children to do too much. Maybe, in training them for a lifetime of forty-plus hour per week employment (if they’re lucky), in sending them to school, piano lessons, sports practices, and cram schools, we put too much value on their perpetual exhaustion. If we recall the mother who lamented her son’s uncertain future, she expressed her
worry on the way to a baseball game, in the short time off between his regular schooling, music lessons, and after school lessons. Even if changes are made - such as providing family support, proper counseling, and shorter work hours - lack of attention to the fundamental social structures that cause both “youth” and their parents to stress about the future, social issues such as *hikikomori* will continue to proliferate.

I close with a word of caution. After reading the previous sections, it can be tempting to criticize the hyper-competitive economy of Japan. Scholars must also resist the notion that there is something innately pathological about Japanese society and instead acknowledge that Japanese society, despite all the flaws pointed out above, still produces a "majority of mature, relatively well-adjusted individuals" (Hurley 2011). For example, Michael Zelzeninger’s argues that in contrast to the stringent expectations of life in Japan, *hikikomori* would not exist in a "free society" where individuals are free to choose their path to adulthood like the US (2006). This ignores the vast swath of competitive socioeconomic pressures global middle-class youth are subject to. In the Japan and the U.S., two countries that have often been represented as the social antithesis of each other, media and academia regularly cover topics such as abuse, bullying, suicide, and school delinquency (Hurley 2011: 222). Further, treating social issues like *hikikomori* as problems “over there” risks paralyzing other nations’ abilities to treat similar problems when they arrive locally. In multiple cases, and in ways not unique to Japan, individuals frustrated with the stress of their jobs quit, apply for new work, and risk becoming lost, lazy, or withdrawn along the way. While they may not call it *hikikomori*, scholars have observed issues of social withdrawal in multiple places that are not just Japan, such as Spain, Korea, Italy, and Mexico. (Malagon-Amor et. al 2008: Garcia-Campayo et al 2007: Kato et al 2011, 2012).
Rather than offer an easy solution of my own, this paper has sought to draw attention to the fraught interaction between individuals and their social expectations in Japan. With more cognizance of these circumstances and the complex narratives by which hikikomori, but also, NEET, freeta, and precariats navigate those experiences, it is my hope that parents and professionals, working to address expansive issues with limited toolboxes, will be better able to direct individuals to the support structures they need. Or perhaps, not drive individuals to the fringes of this support in the first place.

Ultimately, the rehabilitative skills that New Start gives hikikomori do not fix the social holes and forces that trapped these individuals in the first place. Rather, if at the end, they push hikikomori into equally precarious employment positions, with the message that this is an alternative form of happiness, they quite explicitly only exacerbate the problem. However, alone, under pressure from society and their parents, to right a wrong they never committed, if graduates believe they are happy, even in Japan’s least privileged positions, perhaps they’ve done something right. Working jobs at the bottom, that quite literally support Japan, they play a vital social role, and deserve greater recognition for their ability to hold Japan’s pyramid society up. This is the work of hikikomori.
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