

Understanding Japanese Suicide in Terms of the Interaction of Multiple Variables

By Roxanne Russell

Suicide is a complex behavior that is influenced by multiple factors. All behavior can be explained as resulting from the interaction of multiple factors, both internal and external, including biology, genetics, personality, culture, environment, time period and social situation. This necessitates examining multiple variables when attempting to explain a behavior such as suicide. Even more important than individual variables alone are the ways in which different variables interact with each other; it is the interaction of multiple factors that has a real effect on complex human behavior.

Although suicide is a universal human behavior, occurring in every region of the world and throughout history,¹ each instance of suicide is ultimately an individual act that occurs in its own unique context under specific circumstances. Beyond the common themes that are present in suicides from around the world, there are certain influences and characteristics that make suicide distinctive in a specific country. As every country has its own unique suicide rate, we can infer that differences in culture, populace and environment result in different suicide rates for each country.

According to data from the World Health Organization, Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world; it ranks 11th highest in the world for male suicides and 4th highest in the world for female suicides.² The latest statistics available from the National Police Agency of Japan show a sharp increase in suicides in the year 1998 followed by a high rate of suicide ever since.³

I hypothesize that the ascension of Japan's suicide rate to record highs in the last seven years can best be explained by the interaction of specific internal and external factors. The theme of suicide as a form of redemption that can be traced back to medieval Japan, the increase in psychological disorders coupled with a strong stigma against the mentally ill, certain

¹ http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suiciderates/en/

² http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suiciderates/en/ (based on a survey of 54 countries, using information from the years 1995-2001)

³ <http://www.npa.go.jp/toukei/chiiki4/jisatu.pdf> (statistics available until the year 2003)

personality types that are more vulnerable to suicidal ideation, the environment of a high pressure society and multiple economic recessions are all specific internal and external factors contributing to the rising suicide rate in Japan in the past decade.

Internal factors exist inside the person; they can often manifest in external behaviors, but always on an individual level. Cultural values, patterns of behavior and psychological conditions are some of the features that compose a person's internal characteristics. Cultural values comprise the first aspect of personality and are arguably the most important. These are beliefs, values and ideas specific to a certain culture that become ingrained in people's minds and actions throughout their lives. The second aspect is psychological characteristics that can be found in all humans, contingent on culture.

External factors exist outside the individual. They are the circumstances and situations that constitute the world in which the individual lives. They affect everyone, but do not become integrated into the individual's pattern of behavior as do the internal traits. They tend to be temporary states in the world at large. The state of the economy is an example of an external factor; it will affect one's behavior, but it does not necessarily become a part of an individual like culture does.

Cultural Values

Culture provides the context in which human beings live and plays an important role in shaping our beliefs and personalities. People assimilate culture from the environment through the course of their lives, integrating it into themselves as beliefs, values and patterns of behavior. Culture is the omnipresent force that influences all of our actions and beliefs, making it a good starting point for understanding suicidal behavior.

Japan is often described as a shame culture because shame, or more specifically fear of shame, is the primary means of maintaining social order; breaking the rules of proper social conduct results in the offender losing face and being censured by his or her peer group and family. The group is the most important social unit, and as such wields great power over each individual. As a result, Japanese are highly conscious of how they are viewed by their peer group.⁴

⁴ Matsumoto, David. Unmasking Japan: Myths and Realities about the Emotions of the Japanese. (California: Stanford University Press, 1996.), 10.

The overriding importance of social and group harmony sometimes makes it necessary for individuals to make sacrifices for the sake of the group. Self-sacrifice, whether it be in the form of a mere inconvenience to the individual in question or, in extreme cases, suicide, is virtuous and necessary because it promotes the harmony and well-being of the group. It is one's duty to sacrifice for the sake of the group, and duty is an imperative.⁵

Disrupting social harmony and offending someone are both ways of losing face. Inability to make up for a past offense results in social isolation which, in the highly interdependent social world of Japan, is a terrible punishment. This punishment is not limited to only the offender, but also extends to his or her family and associates. Therefore, the offender is obligated not only to his or her self, but also to close family and friends to restore his or her honor.⁶ Historically, suicide has been the primary means of showing one's innocence,⁷ regaining lost honor, and saving face for a past transgression.⁸

The suicide of an elderly couple implicated in a bird flu scandal illustrates the redemptive role of suicide. The husband, chairman of a poultry company, failed to report deaths of several thousand birds on a farm in Kyoto prefecture. As it turns out, the birds had died due to contraction of the bird flu. The bird flu is threatening to spread into Japan and is a growing health concern as there have already been lethal cases of it in humans from other parts of Asia. The discovery of two dead crows carrying the disease prompted an investigation into the possibility that the two animals contracted the disease at the farm. It is also possible that the crows have passed it on to other birds.⁹ The couple's suicide is a way of taking responsibility for the husband's failure to report the poultry deaths and an apology for the harm that has been caused as a result. Suicide as an honorable exit has a long history in Japan and is best known among the samurai.

There is a historical basis for honorable suicide that can be traced back to the days of the *samurai*, the ancient warrior class of Japan. Loyalty and honor were exalted as the highest of virtues by the *samurai*. Suicide could be a demonstration of loyalty, a form of honorable

⁵ Young, Jerome. "Morals, Suicide and Psychiatry: a View from Japan." *Bioethics*. 16 (2002), 416-417.

⁶ Matsumoto, *Unmasking Japan*, 20.

⁷ Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1946.), 166.

⁸ Matsumoto, *Unmasking Japan*, 20.

⁹ Zaun, Todd, "Head of Farm in Bird Flu Outbreak is Found Dead," *The New York Times*, 9 March 2004.

execution and a generally acceptable way to clear one's name.¹⁰ *Seppuku*¹¹ was the form of suicide used most commonly by the upper class *samurai*.¹² One of the most famous stories of *seppuku* is that of the 47 *Ronin*.¹³ In this story, a *daimyo*¹⁴ is ordered by the government to commit suicide when he draws his sword against an official at the *shogun*'s¹⁵ court. Forty-seven of the *daimyo*'s retainers plot revenge against the official who they deem to be responsible for their master's death. According to the laws of *bushido*,¹⁶ it is their duty to avenge their master. In the end, they kill the official and, even though they have restored their own honor by avenging their master, are ordered to commit *seppuku* for breaking the law. This story is very well-known in Japan.¹⁷

Monzaemon Chikamatsu (1653-1724) is well-known for his plays that involve lovers' suicide. His plays usually involve two young people who fall in love but whose union is opposed by their parents and society for some reason. In the end, they commit suicide so as to not give up on either their love or the duty they owe to their parents. It is a conflict of Confucian principles of filial duty and love, which is condemned by Confucianism. The lovers committed suicide in order to show their true feelings¹⁸ to the world while avoiding being undutiful to their parents.¹⁹

In "Sonezaki Shinju,"²⁰ one of Chikamatsu's most popular plays, the male protagonist, Tokubei, suffers a series of dishonorable misfortunes that eventually lead to his decision to commit suicide. Tokubei is in love with a prostitute and refuses to marry his master's niece because of his feelings. His master is angry and demands that he return the money that he lent

¹⁰ Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 166.

¹¹ Seppuku literally means 'cut stomach.' It is a process of cutting open the abdomen with a sword.

¹² Seward, Jack. *Hara-kiri: Japanese Ritual Suicide*. (Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc, 1969.), 19-21.

¹³ *Ronin* are masterless *samurai*.

¹⁴ A *daimyo* is a feudal lord that has control over a piece of land.

¹⁵ The *shogun* was the military leader of Japan during the Tokugawa period.

¹⁶ *Bushido* (the way of the warrior) is the code that dictates proper conduct for *samurai*.

¹⁷ Pinguet, Maurice, *Voluntary Death in Japan*. Translated by Rosemary Morris, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 141-143.

¹⁸ The Japanese word for lovers' suicide, *shinju*, literally means 'the depths of the heart.' *Shinju* refers to an act that displays one's true feelings. Pinguet, *Voluntary Death*, 339.

¹⁹ Pinguet, *Voluntary Death*, 153-156.

²⁰ Translates to "Lovers' Suicide at Sonezaki"

him. However, instead of directly returning the dowry, Tokubei lends it to a friend. The friend steals the money, driving the protagonist into debt. He is shamed by his inability to return the money to his master and his refusal of the planned arranged marriage. In the end, he and his lover commit suicide together, an act of self-sacrifice that shows the purity of their feelings and restores the protagonist's lost honor.²¹ Just as *seppuku* is glorified in the samurai tradition, lovers' suicide is seen as a pure, sincere act, which moves the audience to tears. Chikamatsu's glorification of *shinju*, especially *shinju* involving girls that work in the entertainment district, is thought to have had an actual impact on the high suicide rate amongst entertainment girls that has existed ever since he was writing.²² The glorification of suicide is a part of Japanese culture that has an impact on people's attitudes toward suicide.

The traditionally positive view of suicide fits well with the Japanese aesthetic of *aware*.²³ A short life is seen as being beautiful because it is so fleeting. Another example of *aware* is the cherry blossom, a flower that only blooms for a short period once a year. The cherry blossom's beauty comes from the fact that it blooms for only a short period and then dies as quickly as it came. In this way, death is seen as being beautiful.²⁴ Two young lovers whose lives are brought to a tragically short end by suicide are seen as both sad and beautiful figures. *Aware* gives suicide a sort of tragic beauty. Altogether, the traditional Japanese conception of suicide is one associated with many positive emotions. Suicide is both an honorable and a beautiful act. Even though times have changed and with them conceptions of suicide, the aesthetic of *aware* and the traditions of the *samurai* still influence modern Japan. This traditionally positive view of suicide has also been reaffirmed in one of Japan's major religions, Buddhism.

Buddhism

Buddhism is one of the major religions of Japan. Buddhism has a strong association with death, and is primarily used for funeral rites and honoring the dead. Buddhism has had a strong influence on *bushido* and Japanese views of death in general as well.

²¹ Chikamatsu, Monzaemon, Four Major Plays of Chikamatsu, Trans. Donald Keene, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

²² Iga, Mamoru, The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum: Suicide and Economic Success in Modern Japan, (California: University of California Press, 1986), 61.

²³ *Aware* refers to the beauty of transient things.

²⁴ Iga, Mamoru. "Japanese Suicide." Suicidology: Essays in Honor of Edwin S. Shneidman, (1993), 302.

One of the main tenets of Buddhism is that this world contains much suffering and everything in the world is illusory in nature. The way to salvation is freeing the mind from these illusions.²⁵ The illusion of permanence is the most important of the illusions. The Buddha taught that even though we perceive the world as being permanent, in reality everything in the universe is impermanent, including the self. The self is not a separate enduring entity, but rather a result of the interaction between material form, feelings, perceptions, determinations and consciousness.²⁶ Humans do not have souls, in other words permanent versions of themselves that have the enduring quality of being that person.²⁷

Freeing the mind from illusions is the ultimate goal of the Buddha's teachings.²⁸ Suffering is eliminated when one attains Nirvana (Enlightenment), the state of freedom attained when a person ceases to cling to the world, the self and all other impermanent things and rejects the false belief that the world and self are permanent.²⁹ Certain Japanese sects of Buddhism interpret Nirvana as being more of a place or a sort of paradise after death than a state of mind. Death is seen as a way to get to this paradise and an escape from the illusions and suffering of life in the human world.³⁰

Furthermore, the doctrines of Buddhism that declare that nothing is eternal and that the body is of little importance because it is merely an impermanent object have been used to justify suicide; once one has the power to attain a state of enlightenment, there is not need to cling to the physical body which is merely an impermanent object. Some followers of Buddhism have interpreted this to mean that taking one's own life is not a sin.³¹

The perception of ephemeral things as beautiful and the glorification of lovers who commit suicide at a young age for the sake of love seem to lend themselves to an accepting attitude of suicide. There is no religion in Japan condemning suicide as a sin or treachery against

²⁵ Iga, The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum, 122-3.

²⁶ Watson, Gay, Stephen Batchelor, and Guy Claxton, ed. The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science, and Our Day-To-Day Lives. (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC, 2000), 20.

²⁷ Segall, Seth R. Encountering Buddhism: Western psychology and Buddhist teachings. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).

²⁸ Iga, The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum, 122-3.

²⁹ Nirvana, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9055914>

³⁰ Iga, Mamoru. "Japanese Suicide," 301-302.

³¹ Pinguet, Voluntary Death, 103.

god. Confucianism even sanctions suicide as a form of protecting one's honor or protesting injustice.³² All this put together with the samurai tradition of redemption through suicide gives suicide a sense of beauty and purpose.

Personality Traits

Some researchers have found traits that they believe predispose people to commit suicide. Psychological traits are difficult to deal with as they tend to vary widely from person to person, but some trends can be found in certain populations. These traits are also highly influenced by cultural values. The most important examples are the goal-means discrepancy, perception of social resources and self-confidence.

The goal-means discrepancy refers to the gap between one's personal goals and one's ability to achieve them. A wide goal-means discrepancy means that one cannot realistically achieve one's goals with the resources currently available. According to Mamoru Iga, a leading expert on Japanese suicide, young Japanese tend to have a large goal-means discrepancy, having unrealistically high goals with few means or plans on how to achieve these goals. The goals are driven very high by the success oriented values present in society.³³ Students who aim high and try to get into extremely good universities will often be disappointed if they fail to get into their school of choice, even if they still get into a good school. For some this sense of failure is enough to drive them to suicide. Their goal was too unrealistic and their inability to obtain their goal left them so unsatisfied that they took their own lives.³⁴

A wide goal-means discrepancy makes one especially prone to suicide when it is paired with other specific personality traits. The first trait inhibited outwardly-directed aggression. The Japanese are socialized to restrain their aggression for the sake of maintaining group harmony. This inhibition can lead to aggression that would otherwise be directed at something external being directed at oneself, creating self-destructive tendencies. The other trait is perception of social resources combined with self-confidence. The Japanese can be very indifferent toward people in need, especially strangers, and do not tend to empathize with victims of crimes. An example is given by a journalist's experience with a robbery that occurred in the middle of a

³² Pinguet, Voluntary Death, p. 155.

³³ Iga, The Thorn and the Chrysanthemum, 139-40.

³⁴ Iga, The Thorn and the Chrysanthemum, 40-1.

busy street. The robber took a woman's purse and simply walked away from the scene. No one made any effort to stop the robber and simply ignored the woman's cries for help. Many Japanese may feel that they cannot turn to others for help because of the callous way in which people in need of help are treated. The Japanese also got comparatively low scores on the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, a psychological test that measures one's feelings toward oneself, indicating that they have low self-confidence. This perception of a lack of social resources, coupled with low self-confidence, can lead to despair and the feeling that there is nowhere to turn for help. Both internal and external resources provide no help.³⁵

Attitudes Toward Suicide

George Domino and Yoshitomo Takahashi conducted a study of American and Japanese medical students' attitudes toward suicide. Although the samples in the study are not representative of the average citizens of their respective nations, they do provide interesting insight into how the future doctors of Japan and America view suicide. Statements were presented to the participants with possible responses of agree, unsure and disagree.

A substantially larger number of American respondents than Japanese disagreed with the statement "suicide is acceptable for the aged and infirm persons."³⁶ Thirty percent of Japanese respondents agreed with the statement "I feel sorry for people who commit suicide," compared to 67 percent of Americans. Although almost as many Japanese agreed with the statement "sometimes suicide is the only escape from life's problems" as disagreed, many more Americans responded that they disagreed with that statement, with only fourteen percent saying that they agreed.³⁷ In general, the Japanese responses showed a much more accepting view of suicide than the Americans.

In another study of ordinary Japanese college and high school students, 25% of high school students and half of the college students responded that suicide was justifiable.³⁸ Both of these studies show an accepting attitude toward suicide amongst young adults. In particular, it is interesting to note that medical students show this degree of acceptance of suicide considering

³⁵ Iga, The Thorn and the Chrysanthemum, 140-4.

³⁶ Takahashi, Yoshitomo and George Domino. "Attitudes Toward Suicide in Japanese and American Medical Students." (Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, Vol. 21(4), (1991)), 351.

³⁷ Takahashi and Domino, "Attitudes Toward Suicide," 351-2.

³⁸ Takahashi and Domino, "Attitudes Toward Suicide," 353.

that the primary care physician is in the best position to identify and help suicidal patients. This attitude could possibly have an effect on how suicidal patients are treated.

Psychological Disorders

Various conditions have been shown to predispose people to suicide. One of these conditions is the existence of a psychological disorder. Many people who commit suicide were suffering from some sort of psychological disorder, usually a mood disorder.³⁹ Psychological disorders, or mental illnesses, can be thought of as diseases of the human mind. Psychological disorders have a variety of causes, such as chemical imbalances in the brain, and manifest in the form of abnormal behavior, which includes both overt and covert behavior.⁴⁰ Abnormal behavior is defined by four criteria: the behavior must be distressing to the individual, it must be deviant from social norms, it must be dysfunctional and it must be dangerous to the person's health. Mood disorders are the category of psychological disorders that deal with abnormal emotional states, for example clinical depression.⁴¹

There is a great deal of research on the connection between psychological disorders and suicide. Clare Harris and Brain Barraclough's study of suicide risk of people with mental illness is based on studies from thirteen countries. They compared the suicide risk of people with certain psychological disorders to that of the general population. People with mood disorders, particularly depression, were around twenty times more at risk for suicide than the general population.⁴² Another study shows that somewhere between 30 to 70 percent of people who kill themselves also suffered from a mood disorder.⁴³

Psychological disorders are on the rise in Japan and not enough has been done by the government or the health care system to deal with it. According to a newspaper article from

³⁹ Jamison, Kay R., Night Falls Fast: understanding suicide, (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 19, 100.

⁴⁰ Overt behavior can be seen by others (ex. raising one's hand). Covert behavior cannot be seen by others (ex. thoughts, feelings). Behavior Modification class, taken Fall 2004 at Mary Baldwin.

⁴¹ Abnormal Psychology class, taken Fall 2004 at Mary Baldwin

⁴² Jamison, 100-101.

⁴³ Jamison, 103-104.

2004, almost 60 percent of Japanese companies have seen an increase in the number of mentally ill employees, primarily employees suffering from clinical depression.⁴⁴

Despite this rise in mental illness, companies have barely made an effort to improve the mental health of their employees. In one study of Japanese workers who had committed suicide, more than half had done around 100 hours of overtime per month and, although a large majority had shown signs of depression, most had not sought out treatment.⁴⁵

Although physical illnesses are listed as the most common reason for suicide, Yoshitomo Takahashi proposes that in reality psychological disorders play a more important role in suicide. His postulations are based on research and reports from mental health professionals.⁴⁶ Mental illnesses, such as depression, are looked down upon and regarded as a weakness. There is also a lack of therapists and most doctors are either unwilling or unable to help patients with depression. Mental illness is often perceived as a weakness and many doctors tell patients to just tough it out and stop complaining.⁴⁷ Even if doctors were better equipped, many patients would not acknowledge their own problem or seek help for fear of being seen as weak.⁴⁸ They are concerned with what other people think about them and are afraid that being diagnosed with a mental illness will bring shame on them.

Some attribute the rising rates of mental illness to the new high-paced lifestyle of modern Japan. The stress of trying to keep up with society can lead to anxiety disorders and depression. Japan is an especially competitive, high-pressure society; it is easy to fall behind and simply drop out. *Hikikomori* is a type of social withdrawal that seems to be unique to Japan and instances of it are on the rise in recent years. People who are described as *hikikomori* lock themselves in their rooms, rarely if ever leave their houses and engage in almost no social interaction. *Hikikomori* is thought to occur when a young person is no longer able to keep up with the rapid pace of modern

⁴⁴ “60% of Firms Say Employees with Mental Disorders on Rise,” Japan Economic Newswire, 20 August 2004, LexisNexis Academic, online.

⁴⁵ “Long Overtime Hours Linked to Suicides over Work Stress,” Japan Economic Newswire, 10 June 2004, LexisNexis Academic, online.

⁴⁶ Kosky, Robert J., Eshkevari, Hadi S., Hassan, Riaz, and Goldney, Robert D., Suicide Prevention: the Global Context, (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), 123.

⁴⁷ Beech, Hannah. “Hidden Away: Stigmatized, Abandoned, Often Locked Up, Asia’s Mentally Ill are Left to Inhabit a Living Hell,” Time International (South Pacific Edition), 24 November 2003, Expanded Academic, online.

⁴⁸ Wehrfritz, George, Hideko Takayama, Kay Itoi and Deborah Hodgson. “Death by Conformity,” (Newsweek International, 20 August 2001), Expanded Academic, online.

day society and simply withdraws into his or her house.⁴⁹ Agoraphobia, paranoia, anxiety and aversion to sunlight are some of the symptoms of *hikikomori*. Antisocial behavior appears in a person's late teens and can last for years. Takemi Matsuda, publisher of a magazine for people suffering from *hikikomori*, attributes the increase in social dropouts to social problems, such as the tendency for kids that do not conform to be ostracized or bullied by their peers.⁵⁰

Bullying is one of the biggest problems in Japanese schools today. Children that do not fit into the group and are seen as being different are ignored by their peers and can often become the victims of bullies. Physically violent bullying is also becoming more common. As a result, many more children are dropping out of school and, in extreme cases, locking themselves in their rooms and becoming *hikikomori*.⁵¹

There is a correlation between mental illness and suicide.⁵² Young adults who are suffering from a severe psychological disorder such as *hikikomori* are more at risk for suicide than the general population. This combined with their restricted social support and diminished prospects for the future put them in a high risk group for suicide.

Economy

Ever since the collapse of Japan's bubble economy in the 1990s, the country has experienced multiple recessions.⁵³ Recent economic figures indicate that Japan's economy suffered a mild recession in the last quarter of 2004. This comes in the wake of a spurt of growth that was thought to be a sign of a possible end of Japan's economic crisis.⁵⁴ There was a large spike in the suicide rate in 1998, the same year that the economy went into recession and several large banks failed.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Beech, "Hidden Away."

⁵⁰ Wehrfritz, George, Hideko Takayama and Deborah Hodgson. "Tune Out, Stay In," (Newsweek International, 20 August 2001), Expanded Academic, online.

⁵¹ Beech, Hannah, "School Daze: Cramming. Bullies. Rote Lessons. East Asia's Schools are Failing their Students. Big Changes are Planned, but will they come soon enough?" (Time International, 15 April 2002), Expanded Academic, online.

⁵² Jamison, Night Falls Fast, 19, 100.

⁵³ Metraux, Daniel ed., Southeast Review of Asian Studies, 26 (2004) : 121-24.

⁵⁴ Zaun, Todd. "Japan Says Its Economy Contracted in 4th Quarter," (The New York Times, 16 February 2005).

⁵⁵ Bremner, Brian. "Death Trap; Business Suicides are Epidemic. What Can Tokyo Do?," (Business Week, 2 June 2002), Expanded Academic, online.

In the year 2003, suicides among people in their 40s and 50s accounted for over 40 percent of all suicides. Suicides by the unemployed constituted 47.4 percent of all suicides. Health problems were most commonly cited in suicide notes, appearing in 37.5 percent of all suicide notes. Economic difficulties came in second at 35.2 percent. Increases in the suicides of businessmen have been one of the main causes of the rise in the total suicide rate.⁵⁶

Businessmen who have lost their jobs, especially those who are middle-aged, are at a high risk for suicide. Many are heavily in debt and cannot make the payments after losing their jobs. Declaring bankruptcy is viewed as almost being a crime and, as a result, there are over a million Japanese who are essentially bankrupt but have not filed for bankruptcy.⁵⁷

Many workers entered their jobs with a promise of lifelong employment. The system of lifelong employment existed in Japan until economic pressure no longer made such a system feasible. Lifelong employment was a guarantee from the company to the employee that as long as he worked for the company he would never be fired. This system inspired a lot of loyalty amongst workers, who essentially had a guarantee of economic security of the rest of their lives. However, when the economic crisis hit, companies had no choice but to lay off large numbers of employees. The businessmen who lost their jobs not only have great difficulty finding new work, they also have to face the shame of not having a job. Quite a few businessmen dedicated their whole lives to their company; traditionally businessmen spend their whole day at the office, work late into the night and go out drinking with colleagues later. Most of their social life revolves around their coworkers. It is almost as though they have lost everything when they lose their job.⁵⁸

Workers at Tokyo Life Line, a suicide hotline, have reported an increase in calls from middle-age men. The reasons for the calls were usually difficulties due to economic problems, particularly unemployment, and feelings of loneliness and depression. One forensic pathologist has observed that most middle-age men who commit suicide had recently lost their jobs. He claims that there is a strong, positive correlation between suicide and unemployment, in other

⁵⁶ <http://www.npa.go.jp/toukei/chiiki4/jisatu.pdf>

⁵⁷ Bremner, "Death Trap."

⁵⁸ Wehrfritz, George, Hideko Takayama, Kay Itoi and Deborah Hodgson. "Death by Conformity."

words, suicide and unemployment rates have a tendency to rise together.⁵⁹ This trend has also been confirmed by the health ministry's statistics over the past ten years.⁶⁰

Japan's economic crisis has left many people unemployed with no hopes for future employment. Hardest hit by the economy are middle age businessmen who have lost their jobs. The economy is the most dramatic external influence on suicide but it is not the only one.

Societal Pressures

Society is an external source of pressure and stress. Social pressure applies to everyone, but they tend to be specific to different groups of people. Different things are expected of children, adults, elderly citizens and government officials for example. This section will contain group-specific examples of societal influence on suicide. Examples of societal pressure are very specific to certain groups of people, as social expectations differ from group to group.

There is an enormous amount of pressure on children to do well in school. Due to the fact that traditionally education has been the only method of raising one's social status, attainment of higher education and getting into top schools is an important goal for Japanese children. Getting into a good school is very prestigious. Many school-age male suicides can be attributed to difficulty or anticipated difficulty with the college entrance examinations.⁶¹ This emphasis on education started in Japan's period of modernization, during which the government was looking for more educated young people to help the nation catch up with the West, and has extended into the present.⁶²

Entrance examinations are always a source of stress for school age Japanese children. There are entrance exams for every level of school, including kindergarten. The entrance exam is very stressful because it is the only criteria on which students are evaluated and it is basically a one-shot deal. It is possible to make repeated tries on the exams, but they only occur once each year. The pressures of school take a toll on children and adolescent's mental health. Failure in school plays a large role in adolescent suicide, and often appears in suicide notes.⁶³

⁵⁹ Wehrfritz, George, Hideko Takayama, Kay Itoi and Deborah Hodgson, "Death by Conformity."

⁶⁰ Ishida, Kakuya. "Public Responds to Calls for Suicide Counselors," The Yomiuri Shimbun, 4 July 2004, online.

⁶¹ Most of a child's education revolves around preparation for the incredibly difficult college entrance examinations.

⁶² Iga, The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum, 36-7.

⁶³ Iga, The Thorn and the Chrysanthemum, 41.

Most of the pressure to do well in school comes from a child's mother. The mother is held responsible for the child's education, so she invests a great deal of time into it. Mothers are also traditionally very emotionally attached to their children because of the absence of the husband from the household for most of the day. They focus all of their energy into their children and expect great things of them. There have even been cases of mothers killing their children because they did not get into a first-rate kindergarten.⁶⁴ Confucian principles of duty to the parents combined with a sense of obligation to the mother create a desire to please the mother in children. Failure in school can become equated with failing one's parents. For some children, the only way to apologize is to commit suicide.⁶⁵

In addition, young children are increasingly miserable in school. There is an alarmingly high suicide rate amongst school age children. Violent acts committed by students against their peers and teachers are increasing. Bullying has remained an ever present problem in Japanese schools as well. Many children are dropping out of school all together in a phenomenon known as school refusal.

The elderly are another high risk group for suicide due to social factors. In addition to the usual burdens and health problems that are involved in growing old, the elderly in Japan face some unique problems. As young people move away from the country to the city, many elderly citizens are left behind to live on their own. Many complain of loneliness, especially in areas that aren't very populated.⁶⁶ As Japan becomes more focused on the immediate family and more old people are living alone, the elderly come to have an even higher suicide rate than usual. Also, many elderly citizens are facing the dismal prospects of a failing social security system. As the number of elderly citizens, the age group with the highest suicide rate,⁶⁷ increases in Japan, it is likely that the suicide rate of the entire country will grow as well.

Society does not only directly influence a person's decision to commit suicide; it also influences other factors such as mental illness that in turn have an effect on the suicidal mind. Although each factor on its own can have a strong influence on suicide, it is when they all come

⁶⁴ Beech, "School Daze."

⁶⁵ Iga, *The Thorn and the Chrysanthemum*, 42-3.

⁶⁶ Wehrfritz, George, Hideko Takayama, Kay Itoi and Deborah Hodgson, "Death by Conformity."

⁶⁷ <http://www.npa.go.jp/toukei/chiiki4/jisatu.pdf>

together and interact with each other that they produce a noticeably large increase in suicide. It is the amalgamation of many factors that drives the suicide rate up, not just one factor alone.

The Interaction of Multiple Variables

Suicide is not a simple behavior. There is no one unifying characteristic shared by all who take their own lives. Nor is it wise to assume that those who do commit suicide were motivated by a single event, thought or idea. If suicide were simple and there was only one single thing that caused suicide, be it depression or unemployment, the human race would have ceased to be many hundreds of years ago. Not everyone with depression, or any mental illness for that matter, commits suicide. Unemployment and suicide have been shown to be strongly correlated in some studies, but not all.⁶⁸ All of this points to the idea that suicide is caused by a number of things, not just one.

Culture, psychological disorders, the economy and society all have an effect on suicide by themselves; however, it is when they exist together and interact that they produce a marked effect on the suicide rate. Although all factors are interacting with each other, many in unpredictable ways, it is possible to see a few distinct patterns.

Japan's economy is in decline and many people are going bankrupt. Bankruptcy is considered to be incredibly shameful. The traditional way to regain lost honor is to commit suicide. In addition to this, studies have already shown that economic difficulties are correlated with suicide. It is exactly this sort of interaction that is driving Japan's suicide rates up. A condition like bankruptcy that on its own might not lead to suicide becomes lethal when paired with shame and a culture that approves of suicide as a way to regain honor.

Societal factors can cause a great deal of mental stress, which leads to psychological disorders. Psychological disorders in turn predispose people to suicide. In addition, Japan's mental health care system is extremely poor and doctors are often not properly equipped to help mentally ill or suicidal patients. Psychological disorders do not have to end in suicide, but with little in the way of mental health care, people with psychological disorders sometimes have nowhere to turn.

⁶⁸ Jamison, 88.

There are many factors that influence suicide in Japan, but it is the interaction of these variables that makes the suicide rate high. The Japanese government will have to target some of these specific factors if it wants the suicide rate to come back down again.

Suicide Prevention

The increase in suicide-related deaths poses a serious problem for a country that is already dealing with a declining birthrate and an aging population. As Japan's birthrate continues to decline and the number of elderly citizens increases, the government faces the problem of finding enough working-age people to keep the economy going. Suicide also poses a threat to the population of Japan. Businessmen who commit suicide can leave behind families with little means to supporting themselves. The government cannot afford to ignore the welfare of its citizens, especially when it comes to something that can be prevented like suicide. Suicide hotlines are a start to solving the problem but that alone is by no means the solution.

Some influences on suicide, for example culture and the economy, cannot be changed. This is why it is important to find other influences that can be changed. Targeting specific things will produce better results.

An important step in lowering Japan's suicide rate is eliminating the stigma against mental illness. One way to do this is to explain mental illness in terms of biological causes. Instead of talking about a 'mental' health problem, explain things like depression in terms of chemical imbalances in the brain or, as one doctor described it, "fatigue of the brain."⁶⁹ Simply exporting Western psychology to Japan will not work; it must be modified to meet Japanese cultural expectations. It is important for the Japanese to create their own forms of therapy that would specifically appeal to Japanese people. Such forms of therapy would be much more effective.

Suicide prevention must be targeted at specific groups. Businesses should monitor their employees' mental health or at the very least revise overtime policy. Attitudes toward doing work overtime need to be changed. Adolescent suicide would be dealt with most effectively at school. Special classes about suicide for older children could be the first step; however, ultimately the school system should be overhauled completely, most importantly by removing

⁶⁹ Wehrfritz, George, Hideko Takayama, Kay Itoi and Deborah Hodgson, "Death by Conformity."

the entrance examination in favor of a more balanced evaluation of a student. This reduces the pressure on students and would be beneficial for the school system in general.

Suicide results from the interaction and presence of multiple factors. Even if certain elements such as economy and culture are difficult to change, it is still possible to change other things like attitudes toward mental health care. Looking at the multiple factors involved in suicide provides many possibilities for combating suicide, whereas only looking at one reason limits us to that reason alone and can narrow the possibilities of prevention. Suicide is a problem that many nations are contending with today. Analyzing the influences on suicide in each country could provide much more specific ways of trying to prevent suicide in each country.

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