

Too Lonely to Die Alone: Internet Suicide Pacts and Existential Suffering in Japan

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Abstract Most striking in the recent rise of suicide in Japan are the increase in suicide among young Japanese and the emergence of Internet suicide pacts. An ethnography of suicide-related Web sites reveals a distinctive kind of existential suffering among visitors that is not reducible to categories of mental illness and raises questions regarding the meaning of an individual “choice” to die, when this occurs in the context of an intersubjective decision by a group of strangers, each of whom is too afraid to die alone. Anthropology’s recent turn to subjectivity enables analyses of individual suffering in society that provide a more nuanced approach to the apparent dichotomy between agency and structure and that connect the phenomenon of suicide in Japan to Japanese conceptions of selfhood and the afterlife. The absence of *ikigai* [the worth of living] among suicide Web site visitors and their view of suicide as a way of healing show, furthermore, that analyses of social suffering must be expanded to include questions of meaning and loss of meaning and, also, draw attention to Japanese conceptions of self in which relationality in all things, including the choice to die, is of utmost importance.

Keywords Internet · Japan · Loneliness · Subjectivity · Suicide · Suffering

Mina: I decided to die today. I’m sorry I caused trouble.

NATO Dan: Well, I won’t stop you, as I don’t think you are serious about it. If you do want to die, then please die quietly without causing trouble for other people. Jumping in front of a train is out of the question. I hear that a body that has died from freezing to death or from carbon monoxide still looks pretty. Well,

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I have to say that it's too late to regret it after you're dead. Good night. So, does my reaction satisfy you?

NATO Dan: The way you are, you're going to be driven into a corner even in the afterlife, too.

Mina: Mizuho-san, have you already died? Would you like to die together? After I've died, I am going to kill myself in the afterlife also.

Mina: I will certainly not cause anyone any trouble. I ran away from home when I was at elementary school. I don't think there's anyone who remembers me. I'll hide in the woods and take poison, and die by falling into a hole made in the past.

Kantaro: Wait, Mina. Don't die!

Mika: I really want to commit suicide. I really want to commit suicide because everybody bullies me and I don't want to go to school. God, I want to die. Aaah! I want to die!!!

Ruru: It seems no one's around right now....

Ruru: Mika-san, nice to meet you.

Ruru: Mika-san, are you also bullied? GGGGGGGGGGGGGG.

Mika: Would you like to go to Mt. Fuji's sea of trees? I was about to go. My regards. I am Mika. Let's be friends, shall we?

Ruru: Me, too. I tried to kill myself many times and strangled my own neck. Recently my wrists.... But I cannot die.

Mika: When would you like to do it?

Ruru: Personally, I prefer the winter break. The forest will be cold. If we wander around, I think we would die from hunger or the cold.... Otherwise, shall we hang ourselves?

Mika: Ruru-san, thank you! When shall we do it? I am always free! Please give me a call at home. (086) 922 4831. Other people, please don't give me nuisance calls! Ruru-san, only you can call me. Are we agreed?

Mika: Ahhh....

Mika: Death.

Ruru: Got it. I will give you a call tonight. I have to go now as my class is about to end. I wonder when I can come again....

Marcy [Moderator]: By any means, it's not that I want to prevent you from committing suicide. But I would want you two to understand the responsibility of posting these comments seriously, as it is disgusting. Mika asked for a suicide pal by posting her phone number. In general, such actions will give a sense of companionship and the courage to die to people who want to die, but who are half-heartedly suicidal, and who lack the courage to die by themselves. This is a state of mind arising out of a human "group mentality." Suicidal individuals tend to fall for such a technique, as they tend to have few friends. They can easily come to "depend" on "relationships of mutual trust." Ruru, please analyze your own head before calling. Mika, be aware that you might end up dragging along someone who might not commit suicide on her own. Anyway, I won't request that this correspondence be deleted, as these two seem to have already written down the contact information.... Well, as it is your life, it is your freedom to put an end to it, but ... please don't ask for company! (Za Keijiban 2003)

Introduction

The above two dialogues do not stem from a melodramatic fictional radio or television drama, but from an actual transcript of an Internet suicide Web site—in this case a chat site—with only the contact information changed. It is not known whether any of the individuals involved ended up committing suicide, but the rising rate of “Internet suicide pacts”—a new type of suicide in Japan—has led to widespread concern about the presence of such Internet sites and questions about the nature of group suicides and suicide pacts in Japan.

Suicide has long been an important topic of study in various fields including anthropology. Its relevance for study is not only due to its being a locus for central issues such as the value of life and the meaning of death, suffering and violence, but also because it is a topic that clearly reveals the necessity for explanatory models that mediate social and individual factors. One could broadly categorize the main approaches to suicide as falling into these two extremes: on the one hand, social, economic and cultural analyses that emphasize social determinism and, on the other hand, analyses of individual factors such as psychology and psychopathology. Whereas discourse on suicide in the United States focuses predominantly on individual pathology and factors such as depression, discourse in Japan has focused on social pathology, economic factors, a “culture of suicide” and cultural aesthetics.

The recent rise of suicide in Japan, and of new forms of suicide, such as Internet suicide pacts, has revealed the inadequacy of either of these two approaches when taken independently. Internet suicide pacts, in particular, provide instances where the inseparability of agency and social forces becomes particularly evident. Given the statements of those who commit such suicides, such as “I am too lonely to die alone” and “It could have been anyone to die with,” what is the meaning of an individual “choice” or “decision” to die, when this occurs in the context of an intersubjective decision by a group of strangers to die together, each of whom is too afraid or too lonely to die alone? In contrast to the popular Japanese discourse that suicide is one way that individuals can assert their autonomy in a collectivist Japanese society, suicide pacts seem to involve individuals giving up, or subordinating, their autonomy to a collective decision, a group choice.

Anthropology as a discipline has long acknowledged the importance of understanding the nature of the relationship between agency and structure. This is no easy task in the study of suicide, however, as there are limitations on the ability of anthropologists to engage in participant-observation and other methodological approaches, given the nature of the phenomena. The case of suicide pacts, in particular, presents an added dimension. Here, I feel that anthropology’s recent turn to subjectivity (Biehl et al. 2007; Csordas 2002; Good et al. 2007) represents a positive move and makes possible an analysis of individual suffering in society that provides for a more nuanced approach to the apparent dichotomy between agency and structure and that connects the phenomenon of suicide to conceptions of selfhood. Japanese understandings of relationality are much more amenable to the view that self is only understood in relation to other, and not as if a “self” could exist independently, and Japanese cultural understandings of death and the afterlife

make it possible to understand how individuals might unfortunately see collective death and suicide as a form of “healing” and connection with others.

Death in a “Suicide Nation”

Japan has been known as a “suicide nation” (Pinguet 1993, p. 14; Takahashi 2001, p. 26; Ueno 2005) due to the various forms of suicide that have gained prominence and public attention, as well as the fact that suicide has been seen, in certain cases, as a moral action and a last place to practice one’s “free will” in a generally conformist society (Doi 2001). Up until recently, suicide prevention was not a popularly acknowledged concept, but the recent sharp rise in suicide rates and new types of suicide, such as Internet suicide pacts, have attracted international attention and disturbed Japanese society to the extent that suicide prevention is now being taken more seriously. Until a decade ago, Japan’s suicide rate stayed at about 18 or 19 suicides per 100,000 people, roughly in the area of suicide rates for France and Germany (Takahashi 2001, pp. 25–26), but it surged suddenly in 1998 and has been elevated ever since. Since 1998, Japan has had the second highest suicide rate among the G-8 nations (26.0 in 1998, 24.2 in 2005), after Russia (34.3 in 2004) and significantly higher than France (17.8 in 2002), Germany (13.0 in 2004), Canada (11.6 in 2002), the United States (11.0 in 2002), Italy (7.1 in 2002), and the United Kingdom (6.9 in 2002) (Jisatsutaikougaiyou 2006, p. 2).¹

Suicide is also the leading cause of death in Japan among people under the age of 30. The year 2003 saw Japan’s highest number of suicides historically, at 34,427, or 27 suicides per 100,000 members of the population, followed by 32,325 in 2004 (Keisatsu Chou 2005, p. 4). These figures are all the more startling when one considers that there are 100–200 times as many unsuccessful suicide attempts as there are actual suicides (Takahashi 1999, p. 24). Looking into suicide rates by gender, the suicide rate for men in 2005 was 36.1, compared with 12.9 for women, supporting a general tendency showing that men have higher suicide rates than women. The number of suicides among middle-aged men between 40 and 54 was five times higher than that among women in the same age category, a figure some have pointed at as evidence of the link between suicide and the recent economic recession and rise in unemployment (Desapriya and Iwase 2003, p. 284). In the past, women’s suicide rates were prominently high in the age group of women 80 and above, but since the sudden rise in suicide rates among youth and adults (such as age groups 15–19 and 40–44) and the decrease in suicide rates of age groups 60 and above, the age curve, which used to increase steadily with age, has looked more even. Thus, for women, younger individuals are the main contributors to the rise in suicide. For men, the basic curve of suicide rates among different age groups before and after 1998 has not shown a significant change, although, again, suicide rates

¹ The fact that the data from this report compare suicide statistics from different years is likely due to variances in the collection of suicide data in different countries, which means that the most recent official suicide rate for a given country may be a few years earlier or later than that for another country.

among the elderly (75 and above) show a decrease in the last decade, despite a rise in overall suicides.

Most disturbing has been the rise in suicide rates among young Japanese. Comparing the sudden rise of suicides in 1998 against the rate in the previous year, women under the age of 19 show the most significant rise, with an almost 70% increase in suicides, followed by a 50% increase among men under 19 (Police Office Reports, in Takahashi 2001, p. 14). Both men and women between 20 and 29 show the next highest increases, and the third highest are for those between 30 and 39. This indicates that the recent rise in suicide is closely connected to the increase in suicide among young people in Japan. Supporting this is the fact that the age group of individuals over 80 has not shown a significant increase in the number of suicides, and in some cases the suicide rate has gone down. Among women, especially, it is clear that young persons are primarily responsible for the increase in suicide rates.

While Japanese cultural attitudes toward suicide in general have been tolerant, the public and mass media have not been inclined to view Internet suicide pacts in this way. Rather, because the underlying cause of these suicides is neither apparent nor clear, such suicides garner little sympathy. Instead, they are seen as irresponsible, thoughtless acts, and those who engage in them are considered copycats or too weak-willed to die alone. It has also been said that such individuals are incapable of understanding life and its depth and weight, seeing it instead as something light and virtual, and therefore they view death in the same virtual way (Ohsawa 1996, 2005, p. 102; Saito 2003; Usui 2002); computer games, television, films and so on have been invoked and blamed for this (Machizawa 2003, pp. 113–114; Usui 2002). Thus, such individuals are merely irresponsible for choosing to die when they have no good reason to do so, and when they are not undergoing any serious kind of suffering. One can detect aspects of this feeling tone in the comments of the Web site moderator in the above transcript. But how accurate and insightful is this popular view?

In this article I seek to shed light on this apparently “callous” and “thoughtless” category of group suicide by examining a particularly controversial type of group suicide—Internet suicide pacts. I begin by examining the recent rise in suicide in Japan and the most common public explanations given for this. I then examine the case of Internet suicide pacts, placing them within the context of suicide in Japan in general, and provide a representative selection of ethnographic findings from my study of Japanese suicide-related Web sites. These findings suggest that, far from being conducted by individuals who are not undergoing any serious kind of suffering, Internet suicides are characterized by severe existential suffering, a loss of the “worth of living” (*ikigai*), or its absence in the case of many Japanese adolescents and young adults, and a profound loneliness and lack of connection with others. I then place the suffering evident in Internet suicides within the broader context of social transformation, upheaval and collective traumas in contemporary Japan that have resulted in a “healing boom”—a public turn to healing and spirituality. As Durkheim (1966) noted in his classic study of suicide, social factors such as these can play an important role in suicide. Many questions, however, seem to fall beyond the limits of Durkheim’s sharp divide between social facts and

individual agency, including the question of why young Japanese are choosing to die collectively and with complete strangers, showing the need for an investigation into how social facts are instantiated within the context of individual subjectivity.

Suicide or Social Murder? The Rhetoric of Suicide in Japan

Any attempt at a cross-cultural understanding of suicide reveals the complexity of this task and ultimately challenges the standard definition of suicide in the West, which equates suicide to “deliberate self-harm” (see Desjarlais et al. 1995, p. 68). Although attempts have been made to understand suicide from sociocultural perspectives, suicide in the West has been predominantly understood through the lens of individual pathology, and many statistics indicate that more than 90% of individuals who attempt suicide suffer from psychiatric disorders such as depression or psychosis (74). In Japan, however, one of the dominant features in the rhetoric of suicide has been cultural aestheticization, whereby certain suicides are given a positive cultural valence (Pinguet 1993; Takahashi 1997, 1999, 2001; Traphagan 2004, p. 319). In the cases of Mishima Yukio and Eto Jun, for example, two famous writers who took their own lives, the public reaction and mass media reports included praises of their heroism. Overall, Japanese cultural perceptions of suicide are more tolerant than those in the United States, and in numerous cases suicides are viewed morally as a sign of maturity and responsibility.

In his work *Voluntary Death in Japan*, Pinguet (1993, p. 3) asserts, “The essential point is that in Japan, there was never any objection in principle to the free choice of death—a question on which Western ideology has always found it difficult to pronounce.” To this he adds, “If Japanese culture does indeed have an originality worthy of our sustained attention, it must ultimately be sought in an absence of metaphysics and idealism” (11). He traces this absence to the influence of Buddhism, especially the Sōto Zen school, with its emphasis on the impermanence of all things. This absence is not a lack, and within it, suicide for Pinguet becomes “a fierce excess ... an austere necessity ... which Japan resolved never to surrender on principle, as if she understood how much of the essence of grandeur and serenity vanishes from a civilization when its people let slip their freedom to die” (13). Although Pinguet’s choice of language seems to carry with it a trace of Orientalism, there is a tradition within Japan of *nihonjin-ron* (theories of Japanese uniqueness propagated by Japanese thinkers), and Pinguet points out that the term “suicide nation” was coined first by Japanese themselves in the 1950s (14; Ueno 2005).

When suicide in Japan is not aestheticized and is in fact seen as a pathology, it is typically as a “social pathology.” Japan’s economic downturn has frequently been cited as contributing to this social pathology, and to the rising rates of depression and suicide. There has been a strong tendency in Japanese thought on suicide to blame society itself and to look outside the actual individuals involved for the cause of suicide (see, e.g., Ueno 2005). However, while it is certainly necessary and helpful to broaden the view beyond the individual to include social, cultural and economic dimensions, completely removing the individual can have negative repercussions if it overemphasizes social determining factors. As Kitanaka (2006,

p. 9) notes, “Examining the medicalization of socially withdrawn children, Lock (1986, 1988) has shown that socially oriented medical discourse in Japan is not necessarily liberating, but can be moralizing and hegemonizing in the way that it overdetermines the meaning of people’s distress.” In her research on end-of-life issues in Japan, Long (2005, pp. 4–13) argues that “choice” is not the same as “autonomy,” as choices (such as making a decision how to die) are limited within a given context and environment. Since an individual’s choice is not separable from social limitations, this calls into question what we consider “individual” and “social,” as will be shown.

These two distinguishing factors of suicide in Japan—its cultural aesthetic dimension and the fact that it is seen as resulting from a social pathology—are, in my opinion, also the two factors that complicate the Japanese approach to suicide prevention. Both the strong tendency to want to see suicide as a responsible act in given situations, on the one hand, and seeing the causal efficacy of factors resulting in suicide as residing in society rather than in the individual, on the other hand, inhibit Japan from formulating a clear policy with regard to suicide prevention. The former view has resulted in arguments that to prevent suicide is to cruelly deprive individuals of one of the few, free, important acts they can make in an extremely conformist society. The latter view places the entire blame on society by arguing that Japanese society is so sick that until the entire society is restructured, high rates of suicide will be the inevitable result—to immobilizing effect. They therefore represent two extremes that arise from not recognizing sufficiently the interdependence of individual and social factors.

Public Explanations for Suicide in Japan

The Japanese government is highly aware of the recent steep rise in annual rates of suicide in Japan, but discussion around this issue has focused blame on the current social and particularly economic situation of Japan. The vast majority of news and journal articles discussing the issue attribute the rise in suicide to the economic recession, which they claim caused financial and psychological insecurity among middle-aged Japanese men in a society that had previously enjoyed extremely low levels of unemployment. The most common explanatory model provided is a three-step process: (1) the long-term economic recession has led to (2) depression among those who are unemployed or concerned about the possibility of losing their financial security, which then causes (3) a rise in suicide rates. Other factors invoked to explain the rise of suicide in Japan include Japanese culture, Japan’s status as a “suicide nation,” the nefarious role played by the Internet, the publicity provided by the media of high-profile suicides, which leads to imitation suicides, and patriarchal gender roles.

All of these factors are invoked in the informative article entitled “Suicide as Japan’s Major Export,” written by Japanese sociologist Ueno (2005), but she mainly focuses on the issue of the economy, especially insufficient welfare and unemployment. Ueno writes:

In light of an ongoing increase of suicide rate[s], although many things have been proposed regarding prevention, they [all] more or less fall under a mental health type of prevention policies. Launching a counseling system with [a] hotline may work well for some people, but not those with serious financial problems. Mental health is not about policy but more about how the unemployment rate is to be curbed [curbed] and the social net to be placed rightly, so that a just society can be achieved. Preventing economically induced suicides with a tightening of the welfare budget is quite impossible. Jobs with livable wages for men and women with more generous public assistance might seem an indirect route, but is in fact the most secular way to prevent suicide.... Economic problems, disease, and pessimism, have played a part, for which ... society is first and foremost responsible.

While Ueno's general analysis in the article is helpful in many ways, the conclusion she gives so definitively above is problematic for several reasons. Ueno points out the higher rates of suicide among men (rather than women) and increases in suicide rates when men reach the age where they can leave life insurance policies to their families. What she neglects to mention, however, is that suicide is the leading cause of death not among middle-aged Japanese men, but among youth. Nor does her analysis explain the suddenness of the rise in suicide rates over a very short period of time, or why this does not appear to correspond with any sudden change in Japan's economic situation. In 1998, the number of suicides suddenly shot up by 34.8% over the previous year. Looking just at adolescents, the increase was 53.5% over the previous year (from 469 deaths in 1997 to 720 deaths in 1998). Until 1997, the average number of annual suicides for more than 10 years stood at 22,410, but in 1998 it rose to 32,863, and in 1999 to 33,048 (Keisatsu Chou 2005, p. 4). Deaths due to traffic accidents have numbered only about 10,000 every year; thus, more than three times as many people lost their lives by suicide than by auto accidents in 1998 and 1999 (Takahashi 1999, p. 3). These figures stand out particularly in comparative context. In 2003 there were 34,427 suicides in Japan, or 27 per 100,000 (Keisatsu Chou 2005, p. 4), whereas in the United States the rate was 10.8 per 100,000 and suicide was only the 11th leading cause of death (McIntosh 2004, p. 1).

Ueno explicitly discounts mental health issues to focus on economic issues, but given the fact that Japan remains one of the most affluent countries in the world—economic downturn or no—this approach is insufficient without taking into account the more nuanced social dimensions of expectations, aspirations, and ideas about what Japanese call the “worth of living” [*ikigai*], that is, one's motivation in life. These, in turn, connect with the question of mental well-being and health, in a broad sense. Although economic deprivation and poor physical conditions certainly contribute to mental distress, it is clear that material affluence, without attention to social relations, is no guarantee of mental well-being and happiness (Keyes 1998, 2002; Ryff et al. 2003). The belief that greater affluence by itself will lead to less mental suffering and less suicide is unsubstantiated, as is the idea that the economic recession, taken by itself, led to higher rates of depression, which in turn resulted in the rise in suicide. As Kitanaka (2006) has shown, the rise in depression in Japan in the 1990s was not merely a result of economic hardship, but is connected to a

complex range of factors including the campaigns of pharmaceutical companies and psychiatrists to make the concept of mild depression more widespread. Kitanaka illustrates how Japanese psychiatry succeeded in creating a public consensus that the economic recession and resultant depression were the cause of suicide—in a society that historically had viewed suicide as a voluntary act, rather than one stemming from individual pathology (100). The notion of mental illness had long been stigmatized in Japan (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984; Ozawa 1996; Ozawa-de Silva 2006, 2007; Roland 1988), and depression was not an exception. However, corresponding with the recent rise in depression has been the success of the pharmaceutical industry in publicizing depression as a *kokoro no kaze* [cold of the heart] (Kitanaka 2006, p. 100; Schulz 2004), lessening the social stigma associated with depression and making it normal, something ordinary individuals can get, like a cold or the flu.

Another popular contention by scholars and the mass media in Japan has been that the growth of Internet access and use is partially to blame for the rise in suicide. Suicide Internet Web sites are one widely cited aspect of this. In an article by the Associated Press, Usui Mafumi, a professor of psychology at Niigata Seiryō University with a popular Web site dedicated to the topic of suicide in Japan, is quoted as saying:

Depressed, young people and the Internet—it's a very dangerous mix.... When Japan was poor, families did more things together out of necessity, like sharing a bath or eating together, and the community was much more important, especially in rural communities. But now it's increasingly all about the individual. This leaves people more isolated and likely to contemplate suicide. (Woman 2006)

Although the exact relationship between the rise of the Internet and the rise in suicide remains unclear, Internet access does seem to have contributed to a rise in *hikikomori* [withdrawal syndrome], which refers to the more than 1 million Japanese who have stopped going to school or work for more than 6 months (but in many cases for several years, even more than 10 years), and who instead remain at home, never leaving their houses, and sometimes never even leaving their own rooms (Borovsky 2006; Machizawa 2003, p. 21; Saito 1998). In the 1980s, most of these people were diagnosed with schizophrenia and depression. Nowadays, however, according to one Japanese psychiatrist, Machizawa (2003), many of these persons do not have either clinical condition, yet still have great difficulty interacting with other people and choose to remain at home. Machizawa points out that the convenience of the Internet seems to make them self-sufficient, as despite their lack of social skills, they can still develop emotional closeness with others through the Internet (112–115). There is a clear resemblance between *hikikomori* and Internet suicide pacts, as their main communication tool is the Internet, and these individuals have reduced social interaction and social support. However, neither Internet suicide pacts nor *hikikomori* is easily explained by citing the economic recession as a primary reason.

Finally, when it comes to adolescents, both the mass media and researchers have tended to attribute suicide to two main causes: *ijime* [bullying] and the competitive school examination system called *jyūken jigoku* [examination hell]. They point out that many of the notes left by adolescent suicides say things like “I am a failure,

because I did not make it into such-and-such university,” or “I was afraid that I would fail the examination, and I lost hope in life,” or “I have been bullied by such-and-such a person. They did this and that to me, and therefore, I am going to die.” These letters sometimes seem to indicate that the act of suicide itself is revenge against the bullies by listing the names of the students who bullied them. Interestingly, however, this aspect of suicide as revenge seems to be missing from most cases of Internet suicide pacts. It is clear therefore that one cannot simplify all cases of suicide into one or two reasons such as “examination hell” and “peer abuse,” as important as these factors may be in many incidents of suicide. To attain a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, it is important to examine broader social and cultural factors that have been undergoing significant transformation in recent times in Japan.

***Shinju* and Internet Suicide Pacts**

In the study of suicide, the term “suicide pact” is used to refer to an arrangement between two or more individuals to die together or at close to the same time. Unlike mass suicides, where a large group of people may choose to die together for religious, ideological or military reasons, suicide pacts are typically made between individuals with a close personal relationship, such as close friends or lovers, and the reasons are diverse and usually highly personal in nature. The term in Japanese for these types of suicide pacts is *shinju* (心中), for which there is no exact translation in English, and which has particular historical and cultural connotations.

Shinju is now the general term for a small group of people choosing to die together, although, interestingly, the consent of all those involved is not a prerequisite for the deaths to be considered a result of *shinju*. The term *jōshi* describes the traditional idea of lovers choosing to die together because their relationship cannot be accepted in this world and they hope that they will be reunited in the afterlife. *Ikka Shinju* [one-family suicide], *Kazoku Shinju* [family suicide], and *Oyako Shinju* [parent-child suicide] describe family members dying together, usually in the manner of a parent or parents killing the rest of the family members before committing suicide, and with the idea that the parent is concerned that the rest of the family would not be able to continue in this world upon his or her death. The tendency in Japanese culture is to see such *shinju* as tragic suicide, whereas in the West such cases would often be seen as deplorable homicides.

The first connection between the Internet and suicide that caught the public eye was in 1998, when a 27-year-old man created a Web site called *The Counseling Office of Dr. Kiriko*. Through this Web site, he sent potassium cyanide to six people who wanted to commit suicide, and one woman successfully committed suicide by taking the potassium cyanide she was sent (December 25, 1998, *Asahi Shinbun*). Since then, there have been numerous reports about suicides involving Web sites.

It is difficult to say when Internet suicide pacts started taking place, as early cases were first treated as ordinary *shinju* [suicide pacts] before the category of Internet suicide pact was established [*intānetto shūdan jisatsu*; literally “Internet group suicides”]. However, Ueno (2005) notes that the first mention of Internet suicide

pacts in *Asahi Shinbun*, a major Japanese newspaper, dates to October 2000, in a note that at the time there were 40,000 Japanese Web sites on suicide, 150 of which were devoted to “how to commit suicide.” The first widely popularized case of an Internet suicide pact took place in February 2003, when a teenage girl found one man and two women dead in an apartment room, lying down side by side like the Japanese character for “river” (川). There were numerous charcoal briquettes in a *shichirin* stove oven, and all the windows were sealed up with Scotch tape. It later turned out that the man had set up his apartment to commit suicide, and had invited others to join him over the Internet; the two other women and the girl who later found them had agreed to do so.

Since this incident, a chain of suicide pacts has been recorded involving this method, which has become a popular way of committing group suicide. In October 2004, seven young men and women were found dead in a car in the parking lot on a mountain in Saitama Prefecture. There were four *shichirin* in the car and all the windows had been sealed up with Scotch tape. This was the largest number of individuals who had died through an Internet suicide pact until nine individuals died together in 2006 (Hi-ho Kai-in Support 2007).

At the end of 2006, entering the word “suicide” at the Japanese-language site of the popular search engine Google yielded 3,140,000 Web sites, and the phrase “suicide methods” [*jisatsu no houhou*] returned 22,600 results. The suicide-related Web site Ghetto (<http://www.cotodama.org/>) reports having had 976,580 hits (visits to the site) since it was opened, and 821 hits in one day (as of December 18, 2006). Another Web site, *Jisatsu Saito Jisatsu Shigansha no Iko no ba*, which literally means “Suicide Site: A Relaxing Place for Suicidal People” (<http://izayoi2.ddo.jp/top/>), reports having had more than 3 million hits since it opened and as many as 1,121 hits on a single day as of December 18, 2006.

Since September 2003, I have visited more than 40 of these Japanese suicide Web sites in an attempt to understand better the nature of Internet suicides and the role these Web sites play in them. Although participant observation is a more standard model for ethnography in cultural anthropology, I found that closely monitoring the statements of numerous suicidal individuals on more than 40 Internet suicide sites provided a means of gaining insight into their suffering and their motivations for seeking out communication with others. Among the more than 40,000 sites on suicide, I narrowed down the list of those to study by searching the Internet for phrases such as *jisatsu saito* [suicide sites], *shudan jisatsu* [group suicide], or *jisatsu kurabu* [suicide club] in order to identify suicide Web sites that were organized and run by a regular moderator with features such as a bulletin board (BBS) and chat rooms. Also useful was a site that listed and ranked the most popularly visited suicide sites (Site Rank 2005). The majority of the suicide-related Web sites I visited were composed of the following standard elements: (1) a site guide, (2) a BBS, (3) a chat area, (4) links to other Web sites, and (5) an area about the moderator who ran the site. Regulation of suicide Web sites increased over the time I studied them; thus, by 2006 most suicide sites stated that any message containing information such as a telephone number, address, and time/place to organize the suicide, would be immediately deleted by the moderator, while this was not the case in 2003.

Most suicide sites present themselves as functioning for the purpose of suicide prevention, that is, as spaces where suicidal individuals can openly share and discuss their troubles and suffering. However, the sites have also been blamed for having a bad influence on children. One Internet site that is opposed to the standard suicide sites, for example, is titled “Lured into Group Suicide by Recruiters: The Danger of Suicide Websites!” (Hi-ho Kai-in Support 2007). This Web site says:

Suicide sites have been places for exchanging ideas about group suicide. They have introductions to suicide methods and people can find suicide partners through these sites. There are vivid, persuasive words on these sites. There are persuasive recruiters who powerfully lure individuals, who are not yet sure about suicide, to commit suicide, and this is the pattern. Sometimes there are cases of individuals who initially tried to prevent someone from committing suicide, but who ended up being convinced by that person, and ended up involved in a case of attempted suicide.

The site also suggests that parents block terms like “suicide” by using Internet filters to protect their children from this danger by preventing them from accessing suicide Web sites.

The language of the warnings contained on this site projects an interesting image in that it suggests that the concern is not with individuals who have firmly and consciously decided to commit suicide but, rather, with a group of people who are unsure about what to do, are impressionable and might succumb to suicide if convincingly persuaded. This category of susceptible individuals appears in the moderator’s comments quoted at the beginning of this article. It is also a theme of Sono Sion’s powerful and disturbing film *Suicide Club* (*Jisatsu Saakuru* 2002), which portrays a wave of suicides that take place for no apparent reason, including groups of schoolchildren who decide to commit suicide simply because they have heard about others doing it. There is a strong sense, therefore, that Japanese adolescents are not immune to the dangers of suicide and may in fact be particularly susceptible to it.

The suicide Web sites have many regular visitors and they are often young (many identify themselves as being in their 20s or as junior and high school students, 14–18 years old). In some cases the moderator is completely invisible, but in others the moderator has a visible role and regularly responds to visitors’ comments like a counselor. At one site, some visitors’ comments made it clear that they were visiting the site because they felt the moderator was supportive and understanding.

A typical example is the suicide Web site called Ghetto, which is composed of two chat rooms (one open to all visitors and one restricted to members), several discussion forums with titles such as “Grassland for Suicidal Individuals” and a links section called “Suicide Station.” The moderator states:

This site’s main purpose is to discuss suicide and mental illness. We welcome those who may not particularly want to discuss only sensitive issues such as suicide, but who would like to be connected with others who may have similar problems. For those who are facing a serious situation but still want to live, we recommend that you call the national hotline (*inochi no denwa*). (Ghetto 2006)

The moderator further explains how certain activities are prohibited on the site, including “writing in private information such as addresses and telephone numbers,” “spurring others on to actually commit suicide or other illegal acts,” and “suicide announcements with precise information such as place, date and time” (Ghetto 2006).

In studying Web sites like Ghetto, I decided to concentrate on the BBS sections, as I found these most useful in getting a sense of how individuals contemplating suicide might express their thoughts on-line. I preferred this to visiting chat rooms due to my reluctance to affect the visitors to these Web sites. Unlike chat rooms, BBSs allow individuals to post their comments on the Web site with the full knowledge that they will be public and can be read by anyone. The BBS forums varied from collections of poems, to sustained discussions about a theme or topic (such as “afterlife”), to a random assortment of monologues without much feedback or comments.

During my study, I was struck by certain recurring themes, comments and expressions. A very large number of the posts were by individuals who said they felt that they could find no meaning in this world, or did not know what they were supposed to do in this life. Teenagers complained about bullying at school, and many stated that they had not been attending school for a while. Some said they started visiting the site after losing their job, losing their spouse or contracting an illness. Others claimed nothing was wrong in their environment, yet they still felt empty. The following is a small, but representative compilation of examples of some of the most common types of expressions I found at the Web sites I studied, grouped into major themes.

One of the most frequently expressed concerns is an absence of meaning. Some posts reflect a general existential concern, such as Why was I born? Who am I anyway? Where am I going to go? I think there is no meaning to life as I do not even know that (Ikizurasa kei no foramu, November 22, 2006). Others cite specific incidents that led to a sense of life having no meaning: “I turned 21 this year. There is something I have been thinking about for a long time. Why was I born in this world? When I was 10 years old, I was scolded badly by my parents. Since then I started thinking that there is no meaning for me to live and I’ve attempted suicide many times” (Ikizurasa kei no foramu, September 16, 2006). This comment hints at resentment, and hatred is indeed an emotion that surfaces in some of the posts in connection with an absence of meaning. One visitor wrote, “Why was I born? Why am I living? ... I can hardly sleep nowadays as I hate everything” (Jisatsusha no Sōgen, December 22, 2006). Several express that even though nothing is wrong with their life in terms of external conditions, such as family life, finances and so on, they experience despair as a result of finding no meaning in life.

Conjoined with this absence of meaning is a sense of loneliness. Almost all the posts I came across at suicide Web sites made reference to how lonely the site visitors were. One individual wrote:

My dependency got worse as I started to participate in chat rooms. I feel anxious when I am alone. I cannot leave the computer even for a second. I feel anxious that I am not needed by anyone. Just being told that I am necessary

would be enough—I would have a peace of mind. I would do anything asked of me so as not to be disliked.... I am lonely. I cannot live alone. I want to be strong.... To be honest, I am becoming unsure of what I am living for.... As I cannot believe in true love, I seek even just the words.... I want to be loved and needed. (Nageki Keijiban, October 12, 2006).

Loneliness is often linked with an inability to interact socially. One comment notes, “I cannot stand loneliness! But I cannot trust people. I cannot trust anything except myself and my pet” (Nageki Keijiban, October 13, 2006). Loneliness is also experienced despite the physical presence of other people, as in the post of one student who wrote, “I am so lonely! Even at school, I am so lonely and I want to die” (Ikizurasa kei no foramu, December 13, 2006).

What is notable is how many of the posts do not give an explicit reason for this feeling of loneliness. The phrase *nanto naku*, meaning somehow or for some reason, occurs frequently, as in the following post: “For some reason, I am lonely ... all alone ... I wish I had not been born.... Life is long.... I will serve my life! Please come and fetch it [my life] if there is anyone who wants it” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, November 1, 2006). Another wrote, “For some reason, I am living. For some reason, I want to die ... but I am afraid of pain and I am also afraid of meeting Yama [the Lord of Death in Buddhism] in hell, and it does not matter much about living. I do not know what I want to do.... I just want to die. I wonder why” (Jisatsusha no Sōgen, December 24, 2006).

There are also comments in posts that explicitly call out for a change that will alleviate the loneliness being experienced, such as “I want to be alone, but I wish someone were there by me” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, October 28, 2006), and “I do not want to be alone. Even though I am a failure, I still want someone to love me” (Kokoro no Hanazono, November 19, 2006). Some, however, express a loneliness that does not seem like it would be eliminated by merely meeting someone. One individual wrote simply, “I do not have any place” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, December 21, 2006), and a school girl commented, “I feel lonely whenever I am by myself.... I feel like I would like to die, but then I am too afraid to commit suicide” (Kokoro no Hanazono, November 16, 2006).

Loneliness and an absence of meaning in life seem to be closely connected in the comments of these individuals, and both are given as reasons for suicide. There is often a sense of inner conflict: on the one hand, they experience intense loneliness when by themselves, but on the other hand, they feel mistrustful of others and do not like to be in social settings. In certain cases, these feelings seem to combine in the wish to die with others—in other words, to escape the pain of loneliness and absence of meaning in this life but, at the same time, to do so in connection with another person or persons, because to die alone would be too painful.

Thus, the following comments are common: “Are you suicidal and would you like to die with me? I don’t have the guts to die alone. I’m asking for people who would like to die with me” (Omae ha mou shindeiru, December 24, 2005), and “Is there anyone who wants to die but who can’t die alone? Please, let’s die together” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, November 7, 2006). The tone of suggestions to commit suicide together is often shockingly casual. One person wrote, in response to another

post: “Sleeping pills won’t kill you, as Kumagorou says. Is there anyone who would like to die using another method?” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, November 6, 2006). Another wrote, “Would you die together? By the way, I live in Gunma prefecture” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, November 4, 2006). Often, the tone is pleading or supplicatory: “I have been wanting to die and have been thinking about suicide methods. Please let me die with you” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, September 15, 2006); “If it is all right with you, would you like to die with me?” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, September 14, 2006); “I no longer wish to suffer. But I am too afraid to die alone. Is there anyone who wishes to die with me?” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, August 14, 2006).

One of the comments cited above mentions Yama, the Lord of Death in Buddhism, and it is quite relevant to ask what kind of afterlife, if any, such individuals are envisaging following suicide. However, many Japanese claim that they are not sure what the afterlife is like, and this uncertainty is prevalent on the discussion boards of the suicide Web sites as well. Christianity represents less than 1% of the Japanese population, and although the majority of Japanese families have some connection to a Buddhist sect, these ties are often only apparent during certain ceremonial occasions, and most Japanese are not practicing Buddhists, while even fewer would self-identify as practicing Shintoists. The largest type of religious affiliation held by Japanese would be the so-called “new religions” and “new new religions,” which are various sects that draw from Buddhism, Christianity and other traditions, and are often organized around a particular charismatic religious figure, but these are also regarded as suspect by many Japanese. Thus, the situation in Japan bespeaks a significant openness and variety of views when it comes to how the afterlife may be envisioned (one such envisioning takes place in the film *Afterlife* (*Wandafuru raifu* [literally “Wonderful Life”], Japan, 1998) by Kore-Eda Hirokazu, which was influenced by and partially based on the narratives of hundreds of “real-life” Japanese) and this is reflected in discussions about the afterlife on suicide Web sites.

One visitor commented, “Miwa Akihiro [a TV personality] said that even if you commit suicide and die and are reborn, it is just like running away. As you have not conquered the problem, you will repeat the same thing again and again [in future lives], so it’s meaningless to commit suicide” (Nageki Keijiban, December 11, 2006). Another wrote:

The mainstream view is that life is one time, but I think life repeats many times. That way, I think people can lead an easy life, be able to be kind to other people, not become desperate, and be unselfish. I think looting occurs during disasters because people think life is only one time. Regarding suicide, I don’t think it’s a solution to end this life, so I won’t do it. I think I would just have to go through the same thing again. (Nageki Keijiban, December 20, 2006).

Here, as in the case of the visitor who wrote about Yama, a certain conception about the afterlife serves as a disincentive to resort to suicide.

There are many posts that do not explicitly connect a wish to die to with an absence of meaning. However, these posts do often express a certain uncertainty with regard to what to do in life, which seems to be a milder awareness of an

absence of meaning. Such individuals seem to be on the borderline, as they do not wish to experience any pain that might be involved in dying, yet they also express the sentiment that neither living nor dying would make much difference to them. Committing suicide often has an active and intentional connotation, but these individuals express a great deal of passivity. They seek a painless death, and dying with others seems to be one way of eliminating some of the pain of death. One such individual wrote, “I’m so tired. What’s the point of living any longer? But I don’t want to die in pain. I want to vanish in a second” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, October 15, 2006).

The last common theme that I found among the posts and discussions was a sense that one’s social interactions were “fake,” a sentiment connected with the idea of not being able to trust others. One person wrote, “Recently I’m not sure why I’m alive. I go to school, do some part-time job, and it’s a nothing special, everyday life. But I can’t make friends, perhaps because I don’t trust people. I always suppress myself and show a fake self.... The only thing I think about is life and death. I really wonder why I’m living” (Jisatsusha no Sōgen, December 16, 2006). And another wrote, “I want to be normal. I’m pretending to be normal. If people find out that I’m not normal, then they will all leave me. I will then be all alone” (Kokoro no Hanazono, November 19, 2006). This sense of the pain of not being accepted for who one is comes through in statements made by those who have emerged from such a state as well, such as in this comment: “By the way, my environment has changed and I am now surrounded by people who accept me so I stopped thinking about death at all. At one time I really wanted to die” (Ikizurasa kei no fōramu, October 17, 2006).

Becoming an Adult in Japan and the “Worth of Living” (*ikigai*)

The rise in group suicide among strangers, exemplified by Internet suicide pacts, raises challenging questions about the nature and causes of suicide in Japan. Commenting on the death of nine young Japanese in October 2004, who arranged a group suicide over the Internet and died in their cars due to carbon monoxide poisoning, caused by charcoal-burning stoves, one Japanese man wrote at a BBC News Web site:

In 70s we were not rich but we had dreams. If we studied and worked hard, we could buy TV sets, cars and so on. We’ve never imagined that our companies go bankrupt or we get fired for a recession. We are pessimistic and vulnerable. Once we lost a life model, we have a difficulty finding new one [*sic.*]. Now adults in Japan are struggling to find new dreams or purposes to live. We have to change or we can’t show a brighter future where young people will want to live. (Akira Tsutsumi, Nara, Japan; BBC News 2004)

Such comments point to both Japan’s economic situation and the loss of a clear *ikigai* [literally “worth of living”], or reason to live, among both older and younger generations. As Traphagan (2004, p. 316) notes, “For many Japanese, younger and older generations are perceived as having completely different core values, which

leads to considerable stress between those generations.” In addition to these factors, one is naturally left to question the state of mind such individuals are in when contemplating and committing *shinju*, or suicide pacts, with relative strangers. One woman who died with a man she had just met over the Internet stated in her will: “It’s sad to die alone. It could have been anyone” (Sasaki 2007). The actual nature of the relationship is difficult to define: on the one hand, the individuals are strangers who may mean very little to each other. On the other hand, the fact that they are doing something together—even if it is suicide—creates a bond and requires a relationship of trust. We have seen comments such as “Will you be my friend? Will you die with me?” This is a strange kind of friendship and—for the many Japanese who believe in the continuation of life after death—a strange kind of companionship on the journey from this life to the next, a journey that they may not have the courage to venture alone.

While we commonly understand how social conditions can result in social suffering, anthropology has tended to focus on particular social conditions of deprivation, such as poverty, oppression and prejudice. This is not the case for the social suffering in Japan that we are investigating here. Although Japan did suffer from a long-term economic recession, the society has nevertheless succeeded in modernization and development in the post-World War II period, becoming a major capitalist power with tremendous success in terms of education, standard of living and medical care. It is an affluent society in terms of material well-being, and it remains so despite the recent economic recession, which has commonly been blamed for the recent rise in suicide rates and depression. Despite all this, the social and cultural environment that such individuals are born into is one within which they feel the absence of a clear *ikigai*, conjoined with a loss of traditional family values, changes in family structure and a perceived failure to meet the aesthetic expectations of society. These and other complex factors seem to be resulting in a profound sense of loneliness and alienation.

Adolescent suicides have often been characterized by the intention of punishing others, for example, with the thought, “If I die now, I will make all those bullies feel bad about themselves.” But the latest group suicides show no sign of wishing to punish others, and the method of carbon monoxide poisoning seems to lack dramatic appeal; rather, it seems to be popular because it is perceived as the most painless and comfortable method. In addition, suicide in Japan has often been characterized as a way to “take responsibility.” Through one’s strong connection and affiliation with a larger entity—the nation, the company, one’s code of honor—one commits suicide as a form of corporate atonement. Yet recent adolescent suicides and group suicides, such as Internet suicide pacts, seem to be quite the opposite of this. Rather than arising from a sense of connectedness and self-sacrifice, they seem to indicate a fundamental disconnectedness or *anomie*.

A strong sense of isolation, loneliness and alienation alone might not be so distinctive or unique, but the choice to die with others, especially strangers, is less usual. It is not hard to see such suicide pacts as a sad cry for individuals who are seeking reconciliation, connectedness and unity with others and, perhaps, the world. In Japanese society, dying alone is stigmatized, and it is a cultural imperative for family members to be present when a person dies. Long (2001, p. 273) writes, “The

potential for loneliness of the dying seems to be a particular concern, expressed not only in words (for example, *kodoku na shi*, “lonely death”), but also in the near obsession with *shini me ni au* (being there at the moment of death).” In most cases of individual suicide, one might not actively wish for others to die alongside oneself. In cases of group suicide, however, this wish to avoid a “lonely death” seems to obtain. Even the choice of the *shichirin* stove itself is significant, for it is a nostalgic symbol of comfort, togetherness and communal action, like gathering around for a barbeque. This raises the question of whether modern Japanese are paying the price of pursuing “individualism” with a sense of loneliness and alienation. If suicide is not being used as a way to punish others, or make a dramatic statement, and if it is not arising as a form of sacrifice or corporate atonement, is it possible to think that these suicides are something entirely different: an attempt to bring about healing from a state of existential loneliness?

To understand this suggestion, it will be necessary to place it in a broader context. The year 1995 was a tragic year for Japan. The Kobe earthquake hit on January 17, and the cult group AUM attempted mass murder by spreading sarin gas in a Tokyo subway station on March 20. Because AUM employed many concepts and techniques from established religions like Tibetan Buddhism, yoga and Hinduism, these came to be associated with violent extremism. Previously, large numbers of people in Japan had turned to established and new religions when confronted with serious internal problems, but after the AUM incident, new religions especially came to be seen with aversion and suspicion. Counseling, which had been stigmatized, became more popular in the wake of these two tragedies.

In addition to the tragedies of 1995, the broader social and cultural situation in Japan has been affected by rapid structural and ideological changes following World War II, such as the decline of traditional extended family structures, changes in traditional values such as placing the family above the individual’s needs, suspicion of the idea of religion and changes in company structure such as the loss of life-long job security. Many contemporary Japanese individuals are torn between adopting Western individualistic values and maintaining traditional values, as in the case of wondering whether they should put their own or others’ happiness first. Traditionally *ikigai* would have been closely associated with social roles, such as one’s job for men and caring for the family and one’s in-laws for women. *Ikigai* has now become more of an open question for many Japanese, who must struggle to find a meaning for their existence without the traditional social roles to fall back on.

Yamamoto-Mitani and Wallhagen’s (2002) study among Japanese women caring for their elderly in-laws reveals a range of responses from an acceptance of traditional social roles and finding one’s *ikigai* in them (“Caregiving and *ikigai*, after all, for me ... they are inseparable” [407]) to a more ambivalent intermediate position (“I have to believe that taking care of Mother is my *ikigai*. I have to believe that, otherwise I feel empty” [409]), to a feeling that one’s social role is a suppression of the self and should not be one’s *ikigai* (“It is really sad if caregiving is my *ikigai*” [407]). They write that “[The] moral imperatives that underpin the lives of Japanese women are undergoing significant modification.... The introduction of more Western institutions has also encouraged more individualistic views of self, family, and well-being” (403).

Mathews (1996, p. 734) notes how a strong sense of *ikigai* is linked with a feeling that one is needed, essential, not merely a nameless cog in the machine that could be replaced without anyone noticing; this explains why, in his interviews, “family as *ikigai* tended to breed less ambivalence than work.” The comments of suicidal individuals at Web sites illustrate an absence of feeling needed, a yearning to feel needed and a corresponding lack of being able to find a reason to live. Company men who may realize that they are not essential to their company’s survival still need to convince themselves that they are, in order to make their work their *ikigai* and thereby have a reason to live (735). Yet the comments of suicidal individuals at Web sites seems to indicate that they are not integrated into any kind of framework—either work or family—that makes them feel essential and needed.

It therefore does not seem a coincidence that this lack of integration, feelings of worthlessness, a lack of *ikigai* and loneliness are more prevalent among young persons than adults, who would already be integrated into larger networks that would create a sense of being needed and an *ikigai*. A younger person does not have a clearly defined role or position of responsibility within a family (as a caregiver and provider, for example, which a father or mother can be, either through company work or by taking care of the home) and has not yet assumed a position within a company or as a caregiver in his or her own family. Mathews (1996) has noted that for younger persons, *ikigai* comes not from the self’s embeddedness in these networks, but from anticipation of future selves and, one would assume, future relational networks. It would seem therefore that the anticipation of *ikigai* serves as a kind of *ikigai* when a network of social embeddedness, obligation and a feeling of being needed have not yet been established. In that case, what is missing in these young persons’ lives is this sense of anticipation—that there is something in the future worth living for, and a clear set of paths to the future or scenarios that can be envisioned.

Further complicating this issue is the conflict of ideals Japanese youth face with regard to what it means to become an adult in Japan. While the influence of Western values is clearly visible in Japan, the model of adulthood presented through such values differs significantly from traditional Japanese notions, and when these models come into conflict, the difficulty of combining Western ideals into existing conceptions can result in tensions (Pike and Borovoy 2004). One point of contradiction concerns the notion of adolescence, and another is the ideal sense of selfhood that is to be achieved.

Adolescence, of course, takes on varied significance in different cultures, and lasts for varied periods according to diverse cultural logics. In Japan, the adolescent period is considered rather prolonged, due to the fact that many young Japanese remain resident at their parents’ houses and continue to lead financially dependent lifestyles after high school or college graduation. Adolescence or *seinen-ki* is broadly defined as the period between 15 and 24 years of age (by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, for example), but this period can be conceived of as extending as long as to age 34. It is also common to consider people who are in high school and college (15–22 years old) as being in *seinen-ki*.

Thus, unlike the United States, the link between adolescence and puberty as a period of biological turmoil is not emphasized in Japan (LeTendre 2000; Mead

2000; Pike and Borovoy 2004; White 1994). Rather, it is seen as a period in which one engages in highly competitive examination preparations (for junior high school, high school and college) while training to become a responsible adult (LeTendre 2000; White 1994). However, as Pike and Borovoy (2004, p. 508) note, adolescence in Japan is not emphasized “as a time of emerging autonomy and independence” but, rather, “as a time of social integration, great energy, and potential, rather than as a turbulent time of transition and antisociality.” White (1994) also notes that adolescence in Japan is the period to prepare and discipline individuals for social relations in adulthood.

Being an adult in Japan comes with a strong emphasis on being a responsible member in society. For an equivalent of “worker,” Japanese use the term *shakai jin*, which literally means “social being,” emphasizing a sense of belonging. For women, being a mature adult is intimately connected with motherhood (Kinsella 1994; Lebra 1984; Pike and Borovoy 2004), and Pike and Borovoy (2004, p. 502) even describe the prevalent view of “motherhood as the only route to maturity.” Higher education for women is still seen as a period for them to train to be good wives and mothers, especially at two-year junior colleges (McVeigh 1997). For men, being a mature adult is strongly associated with being employed at a company and being financially responsible to one’s dependent family.

Given these considerations, a prolonged adolescent period among unmarried single men and women may be seen as a sign of resistance and unwillingness to enter an adulthood that comes with highly defined and highly gendered social roles and, therefore, a more tightly constrained social existence. The rise in age for marriage and the bearing of children maybe an indication of young women’s wish to prolong adolescence and delay their entry into the responsibilities of adulthood. Scholars like Kinsella (1994), for example, have argued that the obsession of young Japanese women with “cuteness,” such as Hello Kitty merchandise, can be read as a form of protest against the gendered role of mature motherhood.

The liminal state between childhood and adulthood may be appealing to young Japanese because of the relative degree of freedom it affords. At the same time, however, the flip side of that freedom from entrapping social relations is a degree of uncertainty and isolation caused by the absence of those very same social relations. Remaining in such a state for a prolonged period of time, as happens with the many young Japanese who stay at home late into their twenties and thirties, could allow that uncertainty and disconnection to develop into anxiety; the prolongation of the period before transition into adulthood could make that transition all the more difficult and concerning. Thus it is not surprising that these themes—existential anxiety, loneliness, lack of satisfying social relations and lack of a role or meaning for oneself—all appear regularly in the posts and conversations recorded on suicide websites.

Healing and Social Well-Being

After 1995 many Japanese began seeking therapeutic help for their suffering, giving rise to a “healing boom” of healing practices, healing techniques, healing music and

even healing drinking bars, which has continued to this day. Prior to 1995, the word *iyashi*, or healing, had hardly been used in Japan, but it quickly rose to widespread use, alongside imported words like *torama* [trauma]. Women's magazines started reporting that "healing makeup" was trendy because many people wanted the "healing look" (some actresses got grouped into this *iyashi-kei* face). The meaning and connotations of the term *iyashi*, however, do not correspond identically to the word "healing" in English. It refers to something that is soothing, is comfortable or brings one heavenly feelings. Ironically, the *shichirin*—the stove used for carbon monoxide poisoning—is the ultimate icon of the nostalgic warm fireplace in a traditional Japanese house, as it was commonly used in homes until the 1950s.

The sudden rise in suicide in Japan in the late 90s is therefore best explained as the result of the coming-together of many factors: the background of modernization—with its promise of progress, development and wealth as an ersatz *ikigai*—and the corresponding gradual erosion of traditional social and familial networks; the burst of the economic "bubble" that shattered this promise of ever-increasing economic wealth as a new source of meaning and orientation; the punctuated tragedies of 1995, which were not preventable by Japanese affluence and could not be solved through it or other modern means; and the consequent rise not only of mental health issues and awareness of mental illness, but also of a turn to healing and spirituality and an increased awareness of existential alienation, loneliness and loss of meaning. The phenomenon of group suicide—dying with other people, rather than terminating one's life alone—seems to be an effect of this problematic progression, indicating a wish for a sense of "comfort" and a fleeting, final sense of embeddedness while, at the same time, expressing a reluctance to take full, individual responsibility for cutting oneself off from life. The wake of the 1995 tragedies has witnessed both a strong antireligious sentiment among Japanese and yet an increased awareness of their suffering and need for holistic, even spiritual, healing. Seeking out solutions for mental and spiritual well-being, it is possible that some have gone for counseling and healing practices, while others, unable to find comfort in such methods, have chosen the way of individual or group suicide.

For people living in the West, the decision to kill oneself would generally be something private, shared perhaps with a very close friend or relative—certainly not something involving a stranger. To open up one's apartment or home for others to come in—others whom one had only contacted via the Internet—to participate in an act of group suicide would seem a violation of one's privacy, to say the least. The fact that some Japanese do so reflects a sense of communal trust that exists in Japan but is far less prevalent in American society. My (2006) work shows this difference in privacy and trust in my research on the Japanese therapeutic practice of *Naikan*, where I found that Japanese clients at *Naikan* centers would allow their confessions (very intimate and personal reports of their life stories from birth to the present) to be recorded on tape, kept at the *Naikan* center and rebroadcast later for the *Naikan* sessions of others, whereas this practice is never done at *Naikan* centers in Europe or the United States.

Yamamoto-Mitani and Wallhagen (2002, p. 402) write that for Japanese, "psychological well-being is typically sought through belonging to a group in a harmonious manner and achieving certain goals by means of group activity; it is not

experienced as an individually derived construct (DeVos 1985; Lebra 1976).” In her discussion of Japanese selfhood, Tsuji (2006, p. 417) writes that social embeddedness, obligations and conformity are the “three closely interconnected components [that] play a crucial role in forming Japanese identity.” Of social embeddedness, she writes:

Playing one’s role properly weighs more heavily for self-realization than does pursuing one’s interest (DeVos 1973). Furthermore, because group affiliation is so essential in attesting to who one is, being unaffiliated means social anonymity and makes one an object of suspicion. As Plath (1980:217) commented, “The ‘cultural nightmare’ of Japanese is to be excluded from others.” (417)

Here, “playing one’s role properly” recalls statements at Japanese suicide Web sites about “faking it” and being unable to show one’s real self; and the Web site statements we have mentioned above (such as “I do not have any place”) reinforce Tsuji’s claim that being excluded from others is a powerful source of suffering for Japanese. Of obligations, she writes, “Group membership serves as informal social control, encouraging people to behave in a way that is acceptable to, and expected by, other members of the group. Uncodified though such control may be, it is effective nonetheless because leaving a group one finds intolerable is not an easy option for the Japanese (Hendry 1998)” (Tsuji 2006, pp. 417–418). Of conformity, Tsuji notes that “underlying the importance of conformity is the belief that an individual is incomplete by him- or herself, so interdependence is imperative (Edwards 1989). To promote interdependent relationships, Japanese culture ... equates the assertion of individual desire with selfishness or arrogance” (418).

What is the nature of this relationship formed through Internet suicide pacts—at once a relationship of strangers, yet requiring a basis of trust and mutual understanding, and involving the decision to terminate one’s life? Committing suicide with another person presupposes a relationship of trust, and the act itself—given its paramount seriousness and gravity—creates a new type of relationship, bond or connection between the people involved. Then is it not a paradox that the statements of suicidal individuals—as shown at Internet discussion board and chat sites—contain constant references to how they cannot trust others, are lonely and have failed to connect with others and form meaningful relationships? In such a situation, a stranger may act as a tool to create a form of quasi-community, but without the emotional trappings that inevitably accompany a relationship with someone one knows better. Taking the threefold categorization of relationships employed in Buddhist psychology of those whom one likes or feels close to (friends), those whom one dislikes or feels hostile toward (enemies) and those to whom one is merely indifferent or about whom one knows little or nothing (strangers), then there is an advantage to choosing someone from the third category to die with. Persons who wish to commit suicide may not want friends to die with them, due to their friendly care or emotional attachment; these same persons may not want to die with an enemy, due to feelings of aversion. A stranger, however, causes neither problem, while still creating the safety of a group environment and the comfort of taking a communal rather than an individual action.

Another aspect of group suicide with strangers is the trade-off between individual agency and responsibility: when one assumes agency, one also needs to take responsibility. For example, traveling abroad on a group tour, a common way of traveling for Japanese, involves relinquishing a degree of individual freedom, but with it one also relinquishes individual responsibility and the burden of bearing that responsibility solely by oneself. If the group decides something, or the group takes an action, it is not so much that “I, the individual” am taking that action; rather, “I am merely going along with the group.” It may even be something the individual wants to do, yet feels uncertain about doing by oneself; if so, joining a group that is doing it makes it easier for individuals to fulfill their own wishes. In fact, the alignment of autonomy with social obligations, rather than autonomy over and against social obligations, seems to be an important factor in social well-being cross-culturally (Keyes 1998; Sheldon et al. 2004), and one would expect this to be especially true of societies such as Japan, given the importance of social relations in the constitution of selfhood (Kondo 1990).² The fact that the group chosen in suicide pacts is a group of strangers seems to indicate that existing relations—at home, school, work and so on—are perceived as inadequate and deeply problematic, and that future relations, if formed within these same networks, would be equally unsatisfactory. This isolation creates a feeling of profound loneliness that only intensifies the need to merge with others and forge new, authentic relations of a wholly new and other kind, unmediated through the unsatisfactory, preexisting modalities of social interaction.

Loneliness and Existential Suffering

There is no question that loneliness is a central factor in understanding the situation of suicidal individuals and those who participate in suicide Internet Web sites, and we have seen that comments on loneliness are very prevalent at such sites. Yet what role does loneliness play in understanding the phenomenon of Internet suicide? Up until recently very little work has been done on the topic of loneliness in anthropology despite its pervasiveness cross-culturally and its interesting relationship with modernity. However, the last 10 years has seen a significant increase in work on loneliness in sociology, social psychology and the health sciences, although most of it has concentrated on the elderly and children. These studies have identified three essential characteristics of loneliness: that it involves perceived deficiencies in one’s social world, that it is a subjective state experienced by the individual rather than an objective feature of the individual’s social world and that it is experienced as unpleasant and distressing (Kraus et al. 1993, p. 37). As scholars have emphasized either the social factors involved in loneliness (social networks, number of friends, level of social interaction) or the individual factors (personality variables,

² In some studies, individuals acting because of autonomous reasons have reported greater subjective well-being than those acting because of controlled or externally regulated reasons (Deci and Ryan 2000; Sheldon 2002; Sheldon et al. 2004, p. 99), and one cross-cultural study has argued that older individuals feel greater autonomy in performing social duties (rather than seeing them as externally imposed injunctions) (Sheldon et al. 2004).

cognitive bias), depending on their disciplinary bias (sociology favoring the former, psychology the latter), the proposed responses have likewise been for changes in the social situation or individual therapy (Carden and Rettew 2006; Hawkey et al. 2005; Kraus et al. 1993; Lopata 1969; Mahon et al. 2006; Martina and Stevens 2006; Renshaw and Brown 1993; Stack 1998; van Tilburg et al. 1991). Interestingly, this parallels our earlier discussion of the way suicide is viewed in Japan predominantly as a social ill or pathology, and in the West as an individual one, with corresponding theories for treatment and response.

The predominant approach taken in sociology and social psychology has been criticized as being too simplistic, and those seeking a deeper understanding of loneliness that goes beyond whether one is married, has enough friends or enjoys a high enough level of social interaction, have turned to the extensive literature on loneliness in existential thought and phenomenology, such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Tillich, and Buber (Karnick 2005; Nilsson 2006). Surveying the literature across this broad range of disciplines reveals the complexity of loneliness and the fact that it can refer paradoxically to both a dysfunction and a cause of pain, which has been primarily the approach taken by the social and health sciences, and a beneficial quality that leads to deeper self-understanding, which is a quality more emphasized by the philosophers (Karnick 2005; Nilsson 2006). Another dimension added by philosophical reflections on loneliness is its ontological and existential nature. Yalom notes three kinds of loneliness, of which, along with interpersonal and intrapersonal isolation, the third is existential isolation, a “‘separation from the world,’ where the person is confronted with an anxiety in the face of nothingness but also his own freedom. Loneliness is regarded as the deepest source of normal anxiety” (Nilsson 2006, p. 95). Nilsson (2006) notes:

Lindström and Lindholm’s (60) study shows that loneliness is one category of existence. Furthermore, the same authors demonstrate the existential meaningfulness of loneliness and write: “It belongs to the mystery of love that one attempts to uphold another’s loneliness and create a free space in which existential loneliness can be transformed into a mutually shared loneliness (60, p. 41).”

Attention to the existential dimension of loneliness helps to explain how Internet suicide sites create a space of communication and acceptance where lonely and potentially suicidal individuals can enter in, express themselves and feel accepted and understood by like-minded individuals who are also lonely, thereby transforming their individual loneliness into a shared loneliness, and their dysfunctional loneliness into a more beneficial form of loneliness, one less dominated by consuming mental pain and more conducive for introspection and growth. In a study examining the use of cell phone text messaging by Japanese schoolchildren, Ogata et al. (2006) showed that mobile phone use decreased feelings of loneliness and facilitated friendships and connectedness when used in an informed manner. It is worth noting also that Internet suicide Web sites also contain forums for poetry; poetry as a literary form is solitary in terms of composition and typically understood in Japan as born from intense self-reflection and solitude, yet it is nevertheless a form of communication, and an intensely personal and meaningful one. Poetry is

closely related to the idea of solitude and loneliness as positive forces for introspection, contemplation and creativity.

I would suggest greater terminological sophistication by calling the negative dimension of loneliness “afflictive loneliness,” borrowing from the Buddhist taxonomies of mental states, which note that certain mental states are afflictive when they disturb the peace of mind of the individual and are based in cognitive and affective distortions not in accord with reality and not conducive to happiness (Guenther and Kawamura 1975). The positive dimension of loneliness would be better described as “nonafflictive loneliness” or solitude. Afflictive loneliness seems to include a state of threat to the person, and reflects existential suffering. Nonafflictive loneliness, or solitude, is not a dysfunction. Both types of loneliness are connected with the ontological and existential dimension of loneliness, but differ in terms of the way that ontological dimension is cognitively and affectively received and engaged by the individual. Reorienting the framework on loneliness in this way opens up room for interventions that do not need to be limited to the single agenda of “eliminating loneliness,” but that could include ways of helping individuals to learn mental and behavioral habits that reduce levels of cognitive and affective distortion, which would result in a decrease in loneliness or, alternatively, in a transformation of afflictive loneliness into solitude.

Furthermore, it is very important to make this distinction between existential suffering and clinical depression, because psychiatrists have noted that when people who were severely depressed are treated, it is often when they emerge from depression that they experience existential despair and can then become more prone to suicide than when they were actually depressed. This distinction has been employed by Havens and Ghaemi (2005, p. 138) in their article suggesting the use of therapeutic alliance with patients with bipolar disorder who suffer from subsyndromal depression, often as a result of the medications prescribed to treat their bipolar disorder:

It is our view that many bipolar patients may not have clinical depression viewed as an endogenous disease entity, but rather they may be suffering from clinical ‘*despair*,’ as defined by the existentialist philosophers Soren Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard, 1989) and Karl Jaspers (Jaspers, 1998). Patients may suffer, too, from a complete loss of hope for the future and a loss of any grounding in the world.

This is a point Arthur Kleinman has been making in his work on depression and neurasthenia in cross-cultural perspective (1986, 1988, 1991, 2006; Kleinman and Good 1985; Kleinman et al. 1997). His early work addresses the possible dangers inherent in the medicalization of human despair, and in his most recent work (Kleinman 2006, p. 9, *italics added*) he explicitly states:

Perhaps the most devastating example for human values is the process of medicalization through which ordinary unhappiness and normal bereavement have been transformed into clinical depression, existential angst turned into anxiety disorders, and the moral consequences of political violence recast as

post-traumatic stress disorder. That is, *suffering is redefined as mental illness and treated by professional experts, typically with medication.*

Not just Western philosophical thought, but also Buddhist analyses of suffering are of relevance here. In Buddhism, suffering is divided into the three categories of manifest suffering (obviously painful experiences), the suffering of change (the impermanence of pleasurable experiences) and the pervasive conditioned suffering of existence (one's existential situation; the fact that one is endowed with a body and mind that are subject to suffering).—The third category—that of existence—connects with the ontological and existential dimension of suffering involved in existential loneliness and recognized by Western philosophers and theologians such as Tillich (1952), Kierkegaard, and others. That is to say, the mere fact of one's existence as a limited, delineated, separate individual with limited connectedness to others and to the universe, and a limited understanding of one's place in it, reflects a situation of pain, anxiety, doubt and fear—in other words, suffering. This third level of suffering is considered the most subtle, but also the most pervasive and lasting. As Tillich notes, in writing of existential anxiety, “it belongs to existence as such and not to an abnormal state of mind as in neurotic (and psychotic) anxiety” (41). This helps to show the difference between existential suffering and mental illness, such as depression. Similarly, Frankl (1992, p. 125) writes:

I would strictly deny that one's search for a meaning to his existence, or even his doubt of it, in every case is derived from, or results in, any disease. Existential frustration is in itself neither pathological nor pathogenic. A man's concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of life is an *existential distress* but by no means a *mental disease*.

A clear recognition of this level of suffering would help in understanding the phenomenon of Internet suicide in Japan. The suffering caused by painful experiences, the loss of a loved one or a change in one's circumstances is easier to understand, and suicides arising from these kinds of suffering evoke sympathy and understanding. A deeper understanding of pervasive, existential suffering, as evidenced by afflictive loneliness, would help reduce the tendency to see suicides that arise from this suffering as incomprehensible acts, or as merely the result of mental illness, as commonly understood. Social psychologists informed by an existentialist approach, for example, have noted that an inability to maintain a certain consistency of self-understanding across multiple social roles (what William James described as *Zerrissenheit*, or a feeling of being torn apart). This creates a sense, therefore, of being inauthentic or fake to one's true self and an inability to see actions of social duty as autonomous engagement (rather than imposed externally)—an ability that seems to increase with age and maturity—are correlated with reports of lower subjective well-being and suffering (Sheldon et al. 1997, 2004). This speaks to the comments made by visitors to Japanese suicide Web sites—comments on loneliness, feeling fake, being unable to relate to others—and supports the idea that this existential suffering is connected with a difficulty experienced at the entrance into adulthood and its concomitant establishment of a self-identity congruent with social relations and roles, that is, the reconciliation of individual

autonomy with social relations and obligations that may be a prerequisite to a strong *ikigai*.

The work of Schwab and Petersen (1990) on correlations between religiousness and loneliness shows that not mere religiousness, but rather the nature of the content of religious belief, was correlated with loneliness, supporting the idea that the content of cognitions plays a significant role in loneliness and therefore that changes in cognitions could effect positive change in dealing with loneliness and promoting psychosocial well-being. They also note:

Further investigations of the relation between religiousness and loneliness should take into account not only the multidimensionality of religiousness, but also various dimensions of loneliness, especially something like “cosmic loneliness,” one aspect of which is “a sense of broken relationship with Being or God” (Sadler and Johnson 1980:45). The UCLA Loneliness Scale used in this study does not include such a dimension. (343)

As noted, loneliness can be seen to involve two factors: the external environment and effect of social forces on the individual, and the attitude or perception of individuals themselves. A response to loneliness must therefore involve both these dimensions: on the one hand, changes to social structures that will reduce the social isolation of individuals and, on the other hand, methods for individuals to be able to change attitudes, perceptions and behaviors, and thereby to find increased social satisfaction from the situation they already find themselves in. A suitable response must acknowledge both the social factors involved in promoting loneliness and suffering, but also the individual cognitive biases, attitudes and propensities of individuals that perpetuate them. This response would seek to effect social change, but also to provide resources for individuals to change their own perceptions and modes of interaction. In such a way, individuals are not disempowered from being able to take positive action to change their own situation; yet by addressing social factors, it is not merely left up to individuals to fix their own problems—rather a social network is created to support them in that process through education, opportunities for interaction and so on. Both dimensions are necessary, because research has shown that loneliness depends both on the presence of social networks and on individuals’ subjective evaluations of their social networks (Kraus et al 1993, p. 38). My research on *Naikan* has shown the powerful effect that a cognitive reevaluation of one’s own situation—even, or especially, in the case of severe circumstances or trauma—can have on an individual’s long-term affect, mental health and well-being (Ozawa-de Silva 2006, 2007).

Cultural Understandings of Death, Selfhood and Afterlife

It seems anathema to consider suicide as a path to well-being, a form of healing, a therapeutic move to relieve suffering or a way of establishing connectedness to others. It also seems illogical. Yet the decision to kill oneself—if it can even be called a decision in the usual sense of the word—seems in these cases to be made under tremendous emotional suffering, with the mind engaged in thought processes

that might not appear rational to a person in ordinary circumstances. In Japan, moreover, the troubling idea of suicide as healing is reinforced by the social presentation of death. When viewed cross-culturally it is evident that there is a variety of competing interpretations of what constitutes identity and whether or not death, whether voluntary or involuntary, signals the termination of the person or, rather, his or her transition or transformation to another state of being.

The cultural basis of suicide behavior needs very centrally to be related to conceptions of death prevailing in a given culture. To speak as Durkheim does of categories of suicide—*anomic*, *altruistic* and so on—makes little sense in itself unless these categories are themselves related to the cosmology and to the social and historical construction of ideas about the meaning of death. In his desire to sociologize the explanation of suicide, Durkheim suppressed such dimensions of the problem, which, in a more adequate theory, clearly need to be incorporated. For example, while *altruistic* suicide is not uncommon in Japan (for example, the suicide of elderly people stricken with illness or of women upon their husbands' death), DeVos (1973, p. 448) finds that Durkheim's four categories of suicide do not adequately fit the data, suggesting that "the feeling of inner insufficiency, worthlessness, and lack of satisfaction with what life has to offer is the core concern not only in *egoistic* suicide, but in many supposedly *altruistic* suicides as well."

In Bataille's (1993) view there is an interplay between the life and the death instincts: death represents not discontinuity—the interruption of life—but, rather, a greater continuity that is the context of the differentiation caused by birth into life. Death is nondifferentiation. Life is separation, and death, whether through natural causes or through its embrace in suicide, represents a reentry into the continuity shattered by birth. As Richardson (1994, p. 103) phrases it, "Death, then, is violence, but it is at the same time communication. It is the consciousness of death, not life, that makes community a possibility." Both sexuality and death for Bataille are transgressive—both represent the collapse of the possibility that life is dominated by work. As such, his ideas are a challenge to the established value structure of Japanese society and of those economists in particular who see production and productive activity (in industry or in education) as the heart of postwar Japanese culture.

In addition, the assumptions that religion is a spent force in modern society and that Japan, in particular, is a "nonreligious" culture need challenging both at the theoretical level (especially in light of the rise of fundamentalism and the "post-materialism" of the New Age movement) and, specifically, in terms of the constitution of Japanese society. Not only can a case be made for the position that Japan represents an interesting example of a society pervaded by religion, though of a largely noninstitutionalized kind, but also that it is necessary to consider some specific aspects of the religious culture of Japan. These might include the social significance of beliefs in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, the explanation of the very widespread cult of *mizuko kuyō*, the Buddhist cult of appeasing the spirits of aborted children (LaFleur 1992) and the explanation of what are known as "sudden death" temples, to which elderly and infirm Japanese resort to pray for a "good death" and, in particular, one not marked by pain or destitution

(Davis 1992). Each of these represents, in its own way, an element of a model of the religious interpretation of death in Japan.

In societies where an “essentialist” sense of self prevails, suicide tends to be seen, in secular terms, as a termination of life and as the cessation of all worldly responsibilities and, in religious terms, as a sin—the fleeing of responsibilities and, more importantly, as the abolition by the self of God’s absolute privilege of presenting and removing life. But in Japan, where none of these characteristics prevails, suicide is not seen as a sin (but in some cases as a duty), is not the termination of life, but its translation to another level, and is not even the cessation of responsibilities, since one can act in death in ways that influence life (the whole Sino-Japanese system of ancestor worship is based on exactly this premise). To speak of suicide as simply the termination of the self is thus not strictly accurate in Japan: suicide can be seen as a return to nature, as the merging of oneself with that of another (especially in love or double suicides or in the fairly frequent suicides of elderly people following the death of their partner) or as withdrawing from society in order to influence it from the outside. These are difficult issues to address, but a consideration of how group suicide, death and the afterlife are represented in contemporary Japanese popular culture reveals that cultural views of death may play an important role in group suicide.

Conclusion

People can receive relief and comfort from finding that they are not alone, that there are others who are undergoing a similar kind of pain or suffering along with them. The majority of traffic at the suicide Web sites may involve Japanese visiting them and receiving enough comfort from them to go on living. But for some, this comfort might extend to taking one’s life: cases in which, for Japanese experiencing afflictive loneliness, it would be more comfortable to die with others than alone. The idea of suicide as an escape into freedom from the intractable and unbearable constraints of life is neither new nor unique to Japan. Nor is the idea that the journey into what lies beyond death—if anything—can be faced more readily and less fearfully when done with companions. The ending of the 1991 American film *Thelma and Louise* thematized both these ideas, when the two women protagonists chose to drive off a cliff to their deaths, holding hands, rather than face the police, who had finally tracked them down, and return to the drudgery and pain of the world they left behind. Or as Doi wrote in 1971:

The West as we see it today is caught in a morass of despair and nihilism. It is useful to remember here that the Japanese experience long ago taught the psychological impossibility of freedom. For the Japanese, freedom in practice existed only in death, which was why praise of death and incitements towards death could occur so often. (Doi 2001, p. 95)

Internet suicide, then, while not something completely new or emerging ex nihilo, may be a recent and troubling manifestation of widespread psychological suffering in a different guise: involving strangers and the Internet. The widespread

nature of what I have termed afflictive loneliness, and its connection with social transformations in Japanese society, requires an investigation of what is undoubtedly a kind of social suffering. The term “social suffering” has been employed in anthropological literature to refer to the “assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience” (Kleinman et al. 1997, p. ix). It is a useful way of bringing together the arenas of mental and physical health, politics, culture and socioeconomic forces and institutions, and of highlighting “the often close linkage of personal problems with societal problems” (ix). While social suffering has been examined primarily with regard to the “desperately poor and powerless” (ix), the case of rising suicide rates in Japan challenges us to expand and refine our understanding of social suffering to include not only the outward-in or top-down effects of social forces on individuals living in poverty or oppressed conditions, but also the internalization and externalization of cultural ideas and social forces that individuals participate in and cocreate in the more complex dynamic of meaning and loss of meaning—including what Doi, perhaps dramatically, terms “a morass of despair and nihilism.” Just as the earlier work of Kleinman (1988) focused on the role of meaning in individual suffering, and his later work came to encompass the social dimensions of suffering (1997), an important direction for the future is increasing our understanding of the interrelationships between these two levels.

Concretely, this would lead us to consider critically the project of the modernization of Japan and the importation and imitation of Western cultural ideas and practices. Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan has sought to import models from Western societies, such as looking to Germany for its medical system, to the United States for its school system and so on. Similarly, when social problems have arisen, it has looked to the West for solutions, as in the case of *karōshi* [death by overwork], which led the Japanese government to reduce workdays and introduce more national holidays, in imitation of the European system. Rather than seeking a solution from the outside, however, the case of Internet suicide pacts may indicate a need to gain more insight from within Japanese society itself and to construct a solution that stems from this deeper understanding.

Contemporary Japan has adopted a Western conception of individualism in a way that has resulted in a rejection of traditional Japanese extended-family structures. Early Showa (1926–1989) literature depicts a rejection of *amae* [roughly, “dependency”] to family members, and Japan in the second half of the 20th century was also characterized by a sentiment of rejecting concepts of *giri* [duty or obligation] and duty and a feeling that one should be able to pursue one’s own interests rather than that of the collective or the family. But this rejection of Japanese traditions may have come at a price. In some cases, it seems that this process of imitation and importation has proceeded in a partial or distorted way. The incorporation of Western “individualism,” without the surrounding social structures that temper that individualism (ideas and practices of charity, the social service orientation of religious associations and so on, which have not caught on in Japan), seems to have resulted in Western individualism’s being localized as mere egocentrism. In light of the decline of traditional family and social structures, this leaves contemporary Japan in a difficult in-between state.

What implications does this have for future research on suicide and its prevention in Japan? What is needed, I believe, is an integrated approach that moves beyond the problematic dichotomy of social vs. individual perspectives, as if a complete explanation could be achieved from either alone, and that explicitly recognizes instead the complex dynamics of the social *in* the individual and the individual *in* the social. This would be an approach that does not seek a simple explanation or focus exclusively on one factor—such as the economy, school bullying or the Internet—but that considers also the social transformations of Japan; Japanese cultural understandings of suicide, death and afterlife; and an understanding of mental states of suffering, and of mental development, that acknowledges the importance of individual meaning-making and acknowledges individual agency.

Also important is a more refined understanding of the nature of individual choice, a direction pioneered by Long (2005), and autonomy (Sheldon et al. 2005). The case of Internet suicide pacts in Japan draws attention to the question of what kinds of choices are possible—What is one allowed to choose?—within the contexts of one's culture. In Japan suicide is culturally acceptable only in certain prescribed circumstances—when there is a clear reason for the person to commit suicide according to cultural norms. Outside of those culturally prescribed circumstances, suicide is clearly not acceptable. Thus it is simplistic to say that the rise in suicide is accounted for by the fact that Japan is a “suicide nation” with a culture that permits or promotes suicide; this would be true only if the individuals committing suicide were doing so for the culturally accepted reasons. In fact they are not; hence the lack of public acceptance regarding these suicides, which are seen instead as evidence of people who are weak-willed. If, then, this is a case of individuals committing suicide when the culture does not condone it, how can they justify it? This is not something they can choose individually; it is something that causes trouble for others, for the group. But if it is something that the group chooses, then it is not a question of them as individuals violating a communal standard. The decision of the group, then, becomes something that they can follow—are indeed obligated, according to cultural prescriptions, to follow; social obligation is thereby reconciled to individual choice. This in turn points to the idea that if a solution to the problem of suicide in Japan is to be found, some attention must be paid to the very traditions and structures that modern Japan has sought to cast off—not through a return to outmoded social relationships that are no longer possible or relevant, but through a deeper understanding of the values of interpersonal connections that were embodied in those roles and relationships and that now need to be cultivated again, albeit perhaps in different forms.

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