

A short-term Dance Movement Psychotherapy for Hikikomori Women- Challenges for an early practitioner

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This article will describe a journey with socially isolated young 'Hikikomori' women by offering a 12-week dance movement psychotherapy (DMP) at a non-profitable organisation in Japan. I am a newly qualified therapist and was trained as a DMP in the United Kingdom. This project was launched two months after my return to Japan. The issue of Hikikomori interested me as they are one of the most socially and economically vulnerable young people as well as in my generation.

I will describe how each woman had their stories revealed and discovered the joy of forming relationships. I will also reflect cultural dimensions and challenges that I faced as a newly qualified DMP. For confidentiality, all names of individuals and institution have been changed.

Hikikomori

The organisation works mainly with young people who are suffering from mental health issues and socially categorised as '**Hikikomori**', or *withdrawn*. Hikikomori became a social phenomenon in the 1990's when Japan was faced with economic recession. Hikikomori is defined by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare as: a person (Age: 15-34) who does not go to school or work; does not leave home for more than 6 months; and has no social communications and interactions except with family members. There is an estimated 696,000 Hikikomoris in Japan (the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015). This indicates one out of ten people is being withdrawn. Many Hikikomoris stop going to school mainly as a result of bullying and/or family issues.

The organisation has 1 full-time and 4 part-time staff, as well as 1 full-time psychologist. Verbal counselling is available for the members and their parents. There are about 30 people aged between 20 and 40 years, coming to the day centre to work on making jewellery and crafts or do simple tasks such as packing. By doing so, they usually earn around 100 Yen per day (less than £0.7), which is far lower than a minimum wage (£6 per hour). Some of them are on social benefits but others aren't as they feel ashamed to receive the money. Therefore, their financial dependency on their families is so tremendous that some of them are urged to leave home by their parent(s) to become financially independent.

Yoga and improvisational sessions have occasionally been arranged at the organisation. However, no art psychotherapies sessions have been held until my dance movement psychotherapy (DMP) sessions started. My sessions were called 'Movement Therapy' suggested by the executive manager as there might be resistance towards the term of 'dance'. She was very cooperative and supportive throughout and made the best environment for DMP by making sure all staff would leave the office during sessions.

A new group

I conducted a taster session before launching the project. It was a slow open group and later became a women-only closed group. I met each one of them before the first session and gathered information about their backgrounds and goals for the therapy.

This group was consisted of five women: Kei is 21, talkative and affectionate to those whom she trusts. She had been on and off being a Hikikomori since the age of 14. Yoko is 23 years old, very quiet and experienced being a Hikikomori for four years. Yuri, 27, who is always accompanied by her mother, finds walking difficult: she worked at a supermarket, but later she was admitted to a psychiatric ward. Sachi, 31, is very

expressive, has a huge conflict with her mother for many years, being a Hikikomori for 18 years. Mai, 35, has been suffering from depression for 15 years, which led her to be a Hikikomori for 10 years. They all were born and raised in the same city as I was. All of them felt quite bad about their financial dependency on their parents, who are mostly divorced. They have experienced being inpatients at the mental health clinics, suffering from constant anxiety and tension. Most of them were bullied and stopped schooling while they were adolescents. Their goals included: becoming less anxious, making friends, having a normal life and going back to work.

Challenges

As I lived abroad for the last 15 years, in my first few sessions, I was very nervous and worried if I would be able to speak smoothly. I struggled a lot simply to express the words in my mother tongue that we use in sessions. It was a completely new challenge for me. I was aware that my clients saw me as a foreign traveller who is free, adventurous and courageous. I was also called a *sensei* (teacher) which meant they were placing me above them in the social hierarchy, something very significant in Japanese culture. Unlike English, Japanese people distinctly speak with various honorific terms to persons whom they think are older or superior. This fact seemed to me a barrier to build a therapeutic relationship even before we started the sessions. As the weeks past, I asked them to call me by name, instead of allowing them to call me *sensei* and explore the reason. However, I must admit myself that I didn't have room to pay attention to such a detail at this point.

Getting Creative

Reflecting on my feelings before I started this group, I was unenthusiastic about having to return to my country, and home-town. Contrarily, I was so keen and ambitious that I wanted to build my new career as a DMP and quickly fixed the group and met each woman for the assessments. After the taster session my supervisor, who is 10,000kms away, simply asked me, "So....now what image do you have at this moment?" "....." I went blank. I was reminded to become curious and creative, to allow myself to build a picture as the group was forming at the beginning of the sessions.

My initial image about this group was of "white clouds floating in the sky but having no forms". I started to watch clouds, sometimes drew images of the group, or moved on my own. These creative processes were helpful for me to ground myself more during these busy days.

Less is More~ Beginning - Session 1~3

"*Less is more. Slow down.*" was the key for me to run this group. Indeed, these women found it difficult to come to the organisation, and be away from home. My first three sessions were focused on providing a space with the women to get used to moving by mirroring others and repeating movements they liked. I was very alert to a need of taking a good enough length of time for the warmup while wondering aloud if some repetitions might bore them. However, they all seemed to have discovered enjoyment in the act of just *moving together* and exploring various movements.

Sachi moved her arms in criss-crossed motions, which she said, "I am sorry for what I am." I was struck by her comment and remembered a description of herself being a burden for others. As I received her movement and we mirrored each other, I opened my arms wide as I felt a need to express the importance of accepting the way she was. Interestingly, Mai changed my movement into a cheerleading gesture as if we were all cheering for Sachi. At the end, Sachi said, "I thought nobody else would do my movement,

but saw others doing mine! I felt they were so adorable.” Mirroring movements, assisted by sounds and rhythms, was so powerful that these young women started to find a connection with others.

Space and Speed- Session 3~6

The slow introduction to a sense of space and speed was so critical because it led the group to create more varied movements and interact with one another and, in the end, move as a whole. The group was given an opportunity to move either directed or non-directed, change speed of movements and pass the leadership of directions to others. Our exploration in relation to the space and speed was rich; moving towards the centre, side, walking backwards, and opposite directions; changing speed of walking, moving with somebody else’s movements etc. We also tried to walk alone or together or at a different speed. This made me realise that, for example, I was walking much faster than Yoko and needed to really slow down to walk with her. Using space and speed created laughter, rhythms and sounds among us.

This experience was a new and another huge finding for the women. I also noticed that when using space, the group met more at the centre point. Kei mentioned that she felt happy when she found that some people wanted to go to the same points as her. Yoko said, “I found it more interesting to move with people rather than moving alone.” Yuri stood up and walked a lot in the space on her own for the first time. “What progress she made!” I thought. She always comes to the organisation with her mother who publicly describes her daughter as a slow person with a learning disability. She suffers from a medically unexplained symptom and needs a support to stand. Her wish in this therapy is to be able to walk. Yuri seemed to be relieved to be present in the group as I assured that everyone is welcome to sit or stand without asking permission. Her gaze was often in my direction and she spent most of the time following my movements.

Forgotten – Session 6~7

Sachi surprised everyone with her movements and words. While checking in, she suddenly said, “I forgot my name for a moment.” I invited these women to reflect about what it is like to forget yourself or what it means to them. However, in the end, I think I hardly utilised her poignant statement through movement, as I was relatively preoccupied with introducing props to them and felt that the process wasn’t happening organically. Although everyone looked interested in the new stuff, I suddenly got so anxious that my brain went blank- what am I going to do with the props? My anxiety may have been revealed to the group when we passed the movement leadership - I passed my movement to others too quickly. I also noticed that I was stuck physically, staying in the same place. It was me who forgot myself - I lost myself while being the therapist.

In supervision, we had to think deeply about this. I realised that I tried to bring changes quickly to the group, unconsciously fitting them into my way or my needs and not simply listening to their needs. There seemed to be a parallel process: while I was feeling anxious and eager for the participants to quickly change, their parents were urging them to move on and progress with their lives swiftly. The fact that these women started to giggle a little bit, talk to each other, notice others’ movements and offer positive feedback about others, was a significant shift for them. They had just begun to create new connection with others. I was again reminded that I was going to form something secure for this group. As an early practitioner, I had to remember my role to actively support their body movements and develop the group. Simultaneously, I was assured by my supervisor that changes had been happening and I did need to value myself and these small detailed changes. From the next session, I realised that I

stopped worrying so much and concentrated on noticing what was happening, which enabled me to make use of and develop what was emerging from the group.

Unfolding Stories- Session 7~10

The more bodily communications the women created, the more stories they began to unfold in the sessions. Mai shook the rain-stick near me, which made me move to the ground. The women who formed the circle started to cover my body, apart from my head, with colourful cloths and white feathers. Mai and Kei later said there seemed a story where “sensei” was buried. I was left with the feeling that this might be the beginning of the ending.

It was memorable for me that Yuri swung her cloth so close it nearly touched my cloth. I was really touched that she communicated her sincere wish to move and get connected with me through the cloth. I understood she had cherished this group and gained the joy of movement. She told the group that she felt her achievement was being able to stand and move with others.

Yoko wore a golden mantle with white feathers around her neck and slowly started to walk in the room; she later described herself as a traditional Japanese singer. Normally traditional Japanese singers wear shiny costumes, have a rich octave and sing with an enormous sense of grounding. When Yoko reflected that she realised it was ok to bring herself forward after having moved with others, I understood she had started discovering a new self within her – talking to a new person, sharing space with someone and in her words “revealing” what she was. In Sachi’s eyes, Yoko was a queen. Kei also appreciated that Yoko had “opened her heart to the group.” I felt this might have been the first time ever that Yoko was so appreciated and paid positive attention to from others. Having listening to what these women were saying about others, it hit me that, they were just seeking deep connection with others. At the end of the therapy, Yoko described her achievement as being able to speak to and with others.

Staying Present for the Ending- Session 10~11

The women started dancing in a circle like Native Americans as if they were celebrating a new friendship. It was so unconscious that I promptly went into the circle and lay down to watch their moves, laughter and energy. Later at one point I noticed myself drifting away from the circle, watching their moves and also running away from Kei who was playing with ribbons and cloths like a child. It wasn’t until I had in supervision and I reflected on my thoughts about the ending of the group that I wasn’t really aware of how I felt about it. I realised that I was AVOIDING the ending of this beautiful group. I again remember that I generally find it difficult to face endings. I knew I was going to leave the city again and miss the group and each one of them. In my mind, it felt that the clouds that had gradually formed would be disappearing slowly. However, I was assured by my supervisor that my clients would take something with them and the image of the group would be left with me. I, as a therapist, would have to allow the group to celebrate, enjoy, feel sad etc at the same time, as they began to close the 12 chapters of their own stories. They are the ones who write the stories and I am the one who witnesses the moments. I had to be present. I needed to think about what I had to do to bring myself back to the present moment. I think this was a crucial point to remember for myself and indeed a challenge as an early practitioner.

Nonetheless, towards the end, I felt I almost abandoned my clients; the warmup was much shorter and I did not do any mirroring, having had a shallow assumption that they could move on their own.... I completely skipped the established structure! Again, I felt I lost my therapeutic stance. Mai’s comment that she felt that she could not create more new movements was mirrored in a way that I had created a situation where they might

have felt “not good enough” (Casement, 1985). Perhaps to keep this fragile group, I should have kept the structure they got used to where they could feel it was ok to “be by themselves”. Reflecting on this mistake, I am now aware that I did unconsciously avoid the process of being with my clients towards the end. The ending with my clients was indeed terrifying for me.

On the other hand, I was conscious that many things were happening in my life and my mind was so much preoccupied with unknown things at the same time. I felt the status of my mind also impacted on the sessions.

Last Journey

Sachi, who had had a long absence, made it to the last session. At the beginning, she said “I am hesitant, but because we are gathering here for the last time, I want to say that this (therapy) was my first place to be heard.” Although she normally has a horizontally expanding movement, she stayed still for the first time, which was well received by Yoko who kept a posture of holding her palms facing the sky. Kei made a flower bud with her hands and made it bloom by opening upwards. I strongly felt that these women were not moving just for the sake of moving, but enjoying every moment of moving together. The movements had come to own its meanings, liveliness and emotions.

All of sudden, Sachi came to hug me from behind. My bodily response was that I maintained contact with her hands and gently led her towards movement. Reflecting in supervision, my supervisor suggested that I could have just received her hug as an acknowledgement of a “thank you” and hung onto the ending with her. I also realised that hugging isn’t a typical Japanese gesture in Japan, so it was an extraordinary way for her to show affection. Sachi later reflected that she felt allowed to be as she was and was able to relate to others. She has been seeing herself as a burden for others and blaming herself. However, in the sessions she had been an inspiration and surprise for the other women. Movements were somewhat “original and unique” and her verbal expressions were honest and sincere for others.

Everyone was moving freely throughout the last session. Kei was actively playing with everyone. Mai seemed more actively moving with the others. Towards the end, I noticed that everyone was moving in the circle in the same direction. It also looked like Yoko was leading and the rest of the women followed her, although she reflected it was a pity that she didn’t move more actively. I personally celebrated every minute of moving with each one of them and feeling liberated about doing my own movements.

Conclusion

Twelve weeks flew by quickly. These women discovered the joy of getting to know and relating to each other and sharing movements. I am sure they are going to take this bodily lived experience with them.

My wish that I had wanted to work for my own people came true because of them. I am left with huge gratitude for every woman whom I met and learnt from immensely. I will remember every moment we danced and talked. My journey as a DMP has just begun and I am still learning how to slow down and listen to clients. I became more aware of cultural aspects that had appeared in the sessions. I would like to take my experiences with these women forward to a next DMP journey.

I noticed that the clouds developed by themselves at their own pace and in their own way, and then moved on. They are still up in the sky, forming different shapes every day and always reminding me that they are there.

Reference

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