

On Suicide of University Students

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(Received September 17, 1977)

INTRODUCTION

Suicide in Japan has several characteristic features. For instance, cases of suicide are more frequent among women than men. Also, the suicide rate has two peaks, one among the young, age 15-24, and one among the very old.

According to the "Demographic Survey" (1975) by the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the suicide rate among the Japanese is rising. It has increased from 14.5 (per 100,000) in 1968, to 17.5 in 1974. Here in Japan, however, the cases of suicide in the old age group have not increased as prominently as in the young age group.

Compared with various foreign countries in the suicide rate for 1972, Japan places 7th following Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Denmark, Australia and Sweden.

In the 15 to 24 year-old age group, however, Japan's suicide rate is more than two-and-a-half times higher than that of West European countries, and compared to the aforementioned countries, suicide rate ranks first in frequency among girls and 6th for boys (Ohara et al.¹⁾). The question naturally arises as to why the rate of suicide increases amid growing economic prosperity (Ishii²⁾).

As another characteristic feature, mention can be made of special patterns of suicide represented by "seppuku" (harakiri, self-disembowement) and "kamikaze" (suicidal attack)—honorable suicide, a historical product of Japan which might also be termed a homicide forced by society. To the Japanese, these patterns of suicide are concerned with the view on the life and death which originates partly in Buddhism which is peculiar to the Japanese (Iga³⁾).

In many such suicidal performances, it is not clear whether the person himself intended to kill himself. These self-destructive performa-

nces can also be understood as the "death-defying death" (Dublin⁴⁾). Yet, what is the cause of suicide which is occurring frequently in contemporary Japan?

In the present paper, we will analyze the suicide of students of Yamaguchi University, which occurred frequently enough to be termed explosive, from the end of 1970 to 1973, and discuss the young people who are driven to self-destruction.

1. On Suicide of Students of Yamaguchi University

The various departments of Yamaguchi University are dispersed in two cities; Yamaguchi City, which is situated on the southwestern tip of Japan proper and which may be called a university city, and Ube City, an adjacent industrial city.

It is a medium-sized national university with about 6000 students (approx. 4500 males and 1600 females). Many of the students are from neighbouring areas.

From 1970 to 1973, there were 11 students who committed suicide; 7 males, and 4 females. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24 for men and from 19 to 21 for women. Of the 11 cases, 7 students belonged to the department of liberal arts, and 4 to the science department. All four coeds belonged to the department of liberal arts (Table 1).

The fact that there had not been any student suicides for the ten years before 1969, and in the period from 1974 to July, 1977 is a phenomenon worthy of attention.

2. Unique Feature of Yamaguchi University prior to 1970:

The so-called campus dispute, with 1968 and 1969 as its peak, was

Table 1. Sex, age, method of suicide, ect. in suicide students

Case No.	Age	Sex	Department	Date of death	Method of suicide	Place of suicide
1	22	Male	Science	Dec., 1970	Suicide on the railway	Railway
2	21	Male	Liberal arts	Apr., 1971	Suicide on the railway	Railway
3	21	Female	Liberal arts	June, 1971	Suicide by gas	At home
4	20	Male	Science	Apr., 1972	Suicide by drowning	Pond
5	20	Female	Liberal arts	May, 1972	Suicide by gas	Boardinghouse
6	21	Female	Liberal arts	May, 1972	Suicide by gas	Boardinghouse
7	23	Male	Liberal arts	Aug., 1972	Death by hanging	Boardinghouse
8	19	Female	Liberal arts	Aug., 1972	Suicide by gas	At home
9	23	Male	Science	June, 1973	Death by hanging	At home
10	24	Male	Science	July, 1973	Death by hanging	Boardinghouse
11	23	Male	Liberal arts	Dec., 1973	Death by hanging	At home

kicked off by the enactment of the "University Administration Law", and grew into an anti-establishment movement whose aim was to throw the universities in Japan into confusion.

Some ultra leftist progressive student's criticisms against the old university administration system and organization were further escalated, and the crux of the issue became the effects and pressure of modern society. They enlarged a specific phenomenon, fixed it ideologically and fitted it into a formula something like a social science for popularization. It was a situation in which there had been no concrete plan or method from the beginning.

Their action, without any constructive outlook for the future, turned into violence. As a result, they rapidly lost the sympathy of the majority of students who upheld no specific political ism or doctrine but had been supporting the anti-establishment movement. Thus, the notorious campus dispute which had broken out simultaneously at various places in Japan headed rapidly toward normalization by 1970.

It is not coincidental that the suicide suddenly increased at that time. A similar phenomenon is observed at state-run universities throughout Japan (Ishii²), Fujito⁵).

3. Campus Dispute and Suicide:

By 1970, the campus dispute had ended and traces of it could no longer be found on campus. The "University Administration Law" had been executed, and no marked reform was made in the university administration system, then the target of attack by the students. The off-campus, anti-establishment movement by some radical students has since become more intensified, but the off-campus struggle had nothing to do with an increase or decrease of suicide in campus. The element related to it was confined to the campus dispute arising from in-university problems (Ishii²).

From the fact that the suicide rate in various countries decreased uniformly during the World War I and II, suicide is believed to decrease in number when a tie between people has been strengthened.

When a university is jolted by such a campus dispute, a tense atmosphere spreads among many students and a fraternity-like solidarity (McArthur⁶) is established and strengthened among the students. This feeling of solidarity is felt more keenly in persons who consider themselves as being useless and estranged. As the campus dispute subsides, this feeling of solidarity wanes rapidly, and this probably accounts for an increase in apathic students (Yamada⁷) at this time, driving some students to suicide.

Further, it is of interest to note that suicide is concentrated during the student's vacations in spring (April), summer (July-September) and winter (December-January).

As the campus dispute came to an end, their self-expanding ability declined and their initiative, productivity, and energy decreased so much that they probably fell into a state of narcissism, in which one cannot love anybody but oneself, nor can one give anything to other people.

Some of these students became apathetic due to psychological and social isolation.

They sometimes concentrated more energy on their studies, their objective being a post-graduate education, while at other times, they showed self-negation and self-attack, escaping into an unrealistic world and experiencing a short-circuit reaction. That such aggressiveness becomes introvert, and is touched off easily, are characteristic of the young. Their actions become anomic and egoistic. An abnormal condition, e.g., the campus dispute is taken by them as a normal thing, and a normal condition, or the settlement of dispute, is regarded by them as the collapse of equilibrium.

As a result, there develops a separation between the individual students and the constituent members of the society. When aggressiveness, inherent in man, is directed toward the outside world, there is said to be no act of self-destruction.

Thus, a tendency for the number of suicides to decrease drastically at the time of a campus dispute (Fujito⁵⁾) may be explained by the student's togetherness in opposing the university, a symbol of the establishment.

4. Suicide Fad

The temporary fad of suicide can be cited as one of the characteristics of suicide in Japan. Let us mention two well-known cases in Japan.

In 1903 a young man committed suicide by diving into a waterfall, leaving behind an excellent composition entitled "Impressions at the Top of a Rock". Right after that, this waterfall has become a place where suicide was often committed.

As the second example, a coed, in 1933, killed herself by diving into the crater of a volcano. During the next four months, 87 persons committed suicide at the same place by the same method. Cases 5 and 6 in our study were coeds who belonged to the same department and who were on relatively good terms with each other. A suicide note of Case 6 contained a passage in which she glorified the suicide of Case 5 and said she would die after the manner of Case 5. Two weeks later Case

6 attempted to commit suicide by gas, the same method as Case 5.

In this case, one can see the nuance of double suicide, as one of the characteristics of suicide in Japan.

5. Suicide Note:

Bjerg⁸⁾ attempted to reproduce the life space of the suicide out of a suicide note. As pointed out by him, what is written in a suicide note is of little help in clarifying the cause-effect relationship in many cases.

All of the 11 suicides left a note or its equivalent. However, the reasons, motives and objectives of the act of suicide were not mentioned in detail. There were 7 cases in which a note was left which mentioned the campus dispute, and 4 cases concerned with the question of the opposite sex. These were all coeds, and their notes touched on questions of the other sex that arose during the campus dispute.

There were 2 cases that expressed their mental state short of explosion, 2 cases of self-negation, one case desirous of suicide with a note which said, "I've at last found what I have been seeking. This will relieve me of misfortune", and one case expressing a hope or expectation that the act of suicide might meet his primary wish, the cause of the present frustration, with a note reading, "Let's live together in the other world".

6. Suicide and Psychoses:

The fact is that Cases 9 and 11 had previously had a hebephrenic type of schizophrenia. At the time, both cases were cleared of acute or positive symptoms, and their families did not notice any abnormal actions in the subjects immediately before the suicide.

Case 9 left a diary telling how the sense of solidarity with his classmates during the campus dispute, was lessening day by day. Case 11 once told his family that he alone was left behind, while his friends, with no concrete future plan during the campus dispute, gave up the student movement and started making efforts to find employment. In these 2 cases, there is no denying that their pathological experience was probably the motive of suicide.

In the psychiatric field, one will often encounter schizophrenics who attempt to commit suicide following auditory hallucinations, e.g., "Kill yourself", megalomaniacs who jump from high places, believing themselves to be immortal, and depressive patients who are overwhelmed by such a depressive feeling that they lose all hope for the future and choose death.

In these cases, they appear to be in a mental state lacking enough

good judgement to make a rational decision on their intention at the point of time they attempt suicide. Granted that the judgement itself was wrong, their acts were the upshot of a decision they made of their own will in the mental state at the time; hence, these cases are regarded as suicide (Kato⁹⁾).

Not all of the 11 suicide students were radical anti-establishment activists during the campus dispute. They were all opposed to the student movement and, if anything, were involved strongly in opposition to the student activists.

As to their family environments, they were all of the middle class, and only one case had only one parent. This result is contrary to the usual idea that families with problems are liable to turn out suicide candidates.

So far as information available to us is concerned, these 11 students all had personality characteristics such as dependency, selfishness, an inferiority complex, self-centeredness and a strong impulsiveness. However, these personality characteristics are mental features peculiar to the youth, though varying in degree.

7. Means of Suicide:

Suicide by taking large-doses of hypnotics is considered to be an expression of a naive wish, that is, a romantic wish to escape into an "eternal sleep". Suicide by hypnotics is usually most common in women, and is not reliable with a low success rate, so it is attributed to troubles with love affairs in many cases.

Suicide by being run over by a train is committed in order to cut and destroy the bad 'self'. Death by hanging is chosen where a person has a strong suicidal desire and is struck by a "quiet and deep sorrow". Death by drowning is an expression of a wish to escape. Suicide by gas is carried out because of violent aggressiveness, and it is chosen because of self hatred and also because of an aversion to surrounding things. This violent and sure means of death is often observed in old people and is employed when they are isolated from society and feel despair. While no reliable data on attempted suicides are available, not one case of drug suicide was found, but there were 4 cases of suicide by gas among those studied. And it is worthy of note that those who chose this means of suicide were all coeds.

Indeed, suicide by gas is dangerous because of the possibility of explosion and fire, and there is a high possibility of killing persons nearby. Because of its indiscriminate aggressiveness, this type of suicide poses a major social problem. The fact that cases of such dangerous

suicides are on the increase, is one of the manifestations of a mental crisis of youth of today.

8. Prevention of Suicide:

A rapid change from a time-honored, large, patriarchal family system to a nuclear family has taken place since World War II. In a sense, the bond between constituent members in the nuclear family has been strengthened, but there is a tendency for the youth of today to make efforts to get out of this family relationship. While they try to turn away mentally from the other members of their families, they also show a strong dependency on the family unit.

In society too, they want to maintain contact with others, but do not translate this intention into actions, and spend days, mentally occluded. Furthermore, as strangers in the contemporary society, they confine themselves to their own narrow world, regress, and spend a life full of ambivalence. Under such conditions, the family and society can do little to prevent suicide. Suicide whose origins lie in despair due to isolation are difficult to prevent. The victims of such suicides are said to utter a "quiet cry for help" immediately before death.

The achievements of the Suicide Prevention Center of Los Angeles (SPC-Los Angeles), established in 1958, should be praised. With this as a model, more than 200 suicide prevention organizations have been set up in the U.S.A., and they are in full operation (Katsumata¹⁰). Services such as the "Crisis Telephone Service", "Family Development Program", etc. of the SPC-Los Angeles appear to be giving many suggestions in the future policy of how the university health counselling center should operate.

Changing the trend of society which places the emphasis in a high education is the only key to the prevention of suicide in Japan (Ishii²). Personalities lacking an interest in the future and a recognition of other will be formed out of the circumstances under which one is required to spend all of one's time from one's childhood in preparation for entering a school of higher learning.

Couldn't it be that the act of suicide not only aims at selfdestruction but also has a "function of appeal", wishing for human contact, and a life worthy of man? From such a viewpoint, the question of suicide in the youth group is not one to be tackled only by psychiatrists and counsellors, one but which requires studies by, and activities of, persons in various fields.

SUMMARY

We have discussed suicides that occurred frequently among students of Yamaguchi University from 1970 to 1973. The suicide consisted of 7 male and 4 female students and were seen in the course of the settlement of the so-called campus dispute.

These 11 students were not student activists nor did they have any particular problems in their home, except in one case. A conspicuous personality trait common to all the cases was immaturity.

The fact that the suicides did not occur during the campus dispute, but occurred frequently in the course of its settlement is considered due largely to the collapse of the feeling of solidarity which was born spontaneously during the dispute.

It should be noted that many students chose aggressive methods, such as killing themselves by gas, or on the railway. Immature personality and violent aggressiveness can be said to be characteristics of the youth of present-day Japan, but herein appears to lie the key to prevention of their suicide.

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