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Research Report

Topic 2: The problem of stress-related psychological issues, alienation and suicide among adolescents in highly developed regions of East Asia

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Introduction

By most socio-economic indexes Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are considered the developed regions of East Asia. Excluding Japan, these four nations were dubbed the four Asian tigers - in the second half of the 20th century they underwent rapid economic growth that transformed the shape of their society. They exploited their competitive advantage and the standard of living increased drastically.

Nonetheless, it is apparent that the inherent culturally reinforced attitudes that helped these states gain their momentum – the incredibly fast pace, competitiveness and the idea of collective thinking – have taken their toll on society, particularly on its driving force, youth. In 2014, the leading cause of death for Japan's adolescents was suicide.[1] 35% of South Korea's adolescents display mental health issues.[2] In Taiwan, a study found the weighted 3-month prevalence rates across the 3 consecutive years for overall psychiatric disorders to be 20.3%, 22.7%, and 14.8%, respectively.[3]

Adolescent mental health in the developed regions of East Asia is steadily worsening. There is insufficient assessment and aid framework in the region to combat this trend and an alarming lack of social aptitude for changing the status quo. The following pages will introduce the roots and specifics of this problem and illustrate potential solutions.

Key Terms

Adolescent: a young person in the process of developing from a child into an adult, the World Health Organisation defines it as any person between the ages of 10 and 19.

Mental health: as per the Oxford Dictionary of English mental health is a *"person's condition with regard to their* psychological and emotional well-being"[4] - that is to say, a condition of mental well-being, balance, and resilience in which the individual can successfully work and function and in which the individual can both withstand and learn to cope with the conflicts and stresses encountered in life.

Mental disorder: There is no simple definition of mental disorder that is universally satisfactory. A narrow definition of mental disorder would insist upon the presence of organic disease of the brain, either structural or biochemical. An overly broad definition would define mental illness as simply being the lack or absence of mental health. A more generally useful definition ascribes mental

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[1] Stephanie Liu 2015. "The Mystery Behind Japan's High Suicide Rates Among Kids" https://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/the-mystery-behind-japans-high-suicide-rates-among-kids/ (January 7, 2018).

[2] Chang Ho Hong 2011. "Current health issues in Korean Adolescents" https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3250591/ (January7, 2018).

[3] AM J Psychiatry 2005. "A 3-year panel study of mental disorders among adolescents in Taiwan." https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15994718 (January 7, 2018).

[4] Oxford Dictionary of English, "mental health"

disorder to psychological, social, biochemical, or genetic dysfunctions or disturbances in the individual.[5]

Main Body

Adolescence is a very difficult stage in life. The youth is expected to establish their identity, reach a certain level of independence, and grow intellectually whilst combatting the stress of entering loving, stable relationships, choosing their future path as well as the various self-esteem issues arising from physical changes their bodies are undergoing. To survive this stage mentally unscathed one needs a stable, or at the very least supportive and responsive environment.[6]

The relative prevalence of mental health disorders and attempted suicide among the adolescent population of East Asia, therefore, comes as no surprise.

Scholars point to the excessively competition-oriented academic environment to be one of the root causes of this phenomenon. In 2006, a study of suicide notes in Japan found *"a drastic increase in the number of students who blame overarching school pressures as the primary source of their problems."*[7] This goes hand in hand with the idea of conditional positive regard. Parents tend to want their child to be the very best and thereby succeed at life. However, a substantial percent make it a condition – a child will be loved only if he gets straight A's for example. This increases competition and stress whilst also lowering self-esteem and significantly weakening the support system we would normally use to cope i.e. family.[8]

Further, some realize the increased difficulty of establishing one's identity in these regions. The dynamic of collective thinking (an individual functions for the greater good of the collective) that drives many Asian economies ahead of their western competitors diminishes the role of an individual and stigmatizes uniqueness. How can you find your own unique voice, if anyone who does not fit in is excluded from relationships and interactions?[9] Moreover, rapid economic development of the region and accelerated globalization – abrupt changes in social values and the introduction of foreign cultures – continue to prevent adolescents from establishing firm personal values and independent thinking.

As a result, depression, drug addiction, smoking, wrongdoing, bullying, social isolation, addiction to the internet or computer games and maladjustment behaviours are becoming obvious social problems.

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[5] Andrew C.P. Sims, James L. Gibbons, Charles D. Claiborn, Linda Andrews, Sari Shepphird, Stuart C. Yudofsky 2018. "Mental Disorder" https://www.britannica.com/science/mental-disorder (January 7, 2018).
[6] Adolescent Development and Participation Unit 2006. "Adolescent Development in East Asia and the Pacific" https://www.unicef.org/ADAP_series_2.pdf (January 8, 2018).
[7] Stephanie Liu 2015. "The Mystery Behind Japan's High Suicide Rates Among Kids" https://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/the-mystery-behind-japans-high-suicide-rates-among-kids/ (January 7, 2018).
[8] Psychestudy 2017. "Conditional Positive Regard" https://www.psychestudy.com/general/personality/conditional-positive-regard (January 7, 2018).
[9] Stephanie Liu 2015. "The Mystery Behind Japan's High Suicide Rates Among Kids" https://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/the-mystery-behind-japans-high-suicide-rates-among-kids/ (January 7, 2018).

Suicide rates are at an all time high.[10] And yet, nothing is being done to change the obviously harmful environment.

Public misconceptions about mental illnesses and traditional beliefs of them being "*self-limiting disorders that will resolve on their own*", "*caused by weak character*" or a "*malicious spirit possession*" lead to much stigmatization of both mental illness as well as psychiatric institutions and services. In fact, a study in Singapore found, that the main reason why people do not seek professional help in regards to mental health is due to the perception of it rather than the lack of help available. Family also tends to play a greater role in resolving such issues relatively to the west. The lack of education, however, means that families are often not equipped to deal with these delicate matters and ultimately worsen the situation. Some still seek and trust traditional healers over physicians, who tend to misdiagnose and thus deny patients much needed professional help. Even when one manages to overcome this stigma the aid framework in East Asia is still severely underdeveloped.[11]

Previous attempts at a resolution

Many developed regions in East Asia are taking initiative to ameliorate public mental health. Countries, such as Japan or South Korea, made investments to better mental health facilities and increase the number of psychological and psychiatric professionals per capita. However, the efforts made at actually mitigating the root causes of worsening mental health are scarce, and when present often misguided.

Possible Solutions

Psychiatric and psychological services are lacking and so is social aptitude to change the status quo. To change this, essentially, a process should be initiated. First, a framework for professional psychological education with a sufficient institutional backing should be developed to alleviate the immediate symptoms of a flawed environment and help those already struggling. Then, a de-stigmatization and education campaign should take place to underline the importance of mental health, of seeking professional help and of creating a positive, stable environment that is in keeping with a healthy population. It will require extension of scarce economic and political resources, but it should definitely be done in order to resolve the situation.[12]

Relevant Countries

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[10] Adolescent Development and Participation Unit 2006. "Adolescent Development in East Asia and the Pacific" https://www.unicef.org/ADAP_series_2.pdf (January 8, 2018).

[11] Hiroto Ito, Yutaro Setoya and Yuriko Suzukii 2012. "Lessons learned in developing community mental health care in East and South East Asia" https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3449347/ (January 8, 2018).

[12] Hiroto Ito, Yutaro Setoya and Yuriko Suzukii 2012. "Lessons learned in developing community mental health care in East and South East Asia" https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3449347/ (January 8, 2018).

Japan – In 2002 Japan began a reform of its mental health policies, which aimed to change the public's attitude toward mental illness, reorganize and reinforce psychiatric medical services, and reorganize and reinforce community support systems. Though it now has one of the most developed psychiatric services and facilities in the region, the publicity campaigns have fallen rather short. The symptoms of the harmful environment are being combatted, but its root causes remain unmitigated.[13][14]

Singapore – With its suicide rates high and mental illness prevalent, Singapore is taking initiative. With the National Mental Health blueprint, it supports community outreach, professional education and the development of proper mental health services and facilities.[15]

South Korea – Mental health services in Korea lag behind those of other countries, with fragmented support focused largely around institution, and insufficient support services provided to those who remain in the community. Nonetheless, the government appears to be taking the issue seriously, though the budget for mental health still falls short of the WHO recommended 15% of total government health care expenditures, being at a measly 3%. It is a very sensitive topic in Korean society and, therefore, politicians tend to avoid it or approach it carefully.[16]

Taiwan – Nearly 30% of children in Taiwan suffer from a mental disorder. Efforts have been increased to combat the issue. The Taiwanese are working on confronting the issue openly and improving care and treatment for people with mental illnesses. [17]

Hong Kong (China) – *"It is the [Hong Kong] Government's policy direction to encourage community support and ambulatory services, coupled with necessary and essential institutionalised services, so as to build a mental-health friendly society, facilitating re-integration into the community."* Hong Kong officials recognize the threat and importance of mental health and seek to reform their own healthcare system as well as promote community education. However, it is argued, that due to a lack of resources these attempts have thus far been dissatisfactory.[18]

Relevant Organisations

WHO – With one of its core principles being there is "no health without mental health", the WHO has been at the forefront of fighting for adolescent mental health all over the world. In East Asia it proposed several action plans and worked out some reports. It articulated to states the importance of mental health, most notably expressing the diverse nature of the Autism spectrum disorder and the dangers it poses to individuals.

[13] Stephanie Liu 2015. "The Mystery Behind Japan's High Suicide Rates Among Kids" https://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/the-mystery-behind-japans-high-suicide-rates-among-kids/ (January 7, 2018).

[14] Yutaro Setoya and Tadashi Takeshima early 2000s. "Japanese Mental Health System Reform Process" http://www.npo-jam.org/en/pdf/en_data_001.pdf (January 8, 2018).

[15] Singapore ministry of health & others 2010. "Healthy minds, healthy communities" https://www.imh.com.sg/page.aspx?id=129 (January 9, 2018).

[16] AM J Psychiatry 2005. "A 3-year panel study of mental disorders among adolescents in Taiwan." https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15994718 (January 7, 2018).

[17] Cindy Sui 2016. "Taiwan steps up efforts to improve mental health care" http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-35610064/taiwan-steps-up-efforts-to-improve-mental-health-care (January 9, 2018).

[18] Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government 2017. "Mental Health Review Report" http://www.hpdo.gov.hk/doc/e_mhr_full_report.pdf (January 9, 2018).

World Psychiatry Association – The World Psychiatry Association assembled a task force with the aim of developing community mental health care in East Asia. In their report *"Lessons learned in developing community mental health care in East and South East Asia"* they restate the importance of combatting cultural prejudice, along with developing appropriate mental health facilities and services.[19]

Relevant UN Resolutions

A/RES/46/119
Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 1991 during the Forty-sixth session, on *The Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and the Improvement of Mental Health Care*
Available at: http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/46/a46r119.htm

A/HRC/32/L26
Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 29 June 2016 during the Thirty-second session, on *Mental Health and Human Rights*
Available at: http://www.lisboninstitutegmh.org/assets/files/HRC%2032%20-%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Human%20Rights%20-%20adopted%20-%2001.07.2016-20160701141220.pdf

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[19] Hiroto Ito, Yutaro Setoya and Yuriko Suzukii 2012. "Lessons learned in developing community mental health care in East and South East Asia" https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3449347/ (January 8, 2018).

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Singapore ministry of health & others 2010. "Healthy minds, healthy communities" https://www.imh.com.sg/page.aspx?id=129 (January 9, 2018).