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## **Staying in Their Rooms: Social Withdrawal of Young Finnish ‘Hikikomori’**

*This article explores socially withdrawn young Finnish people on an Internet forum who identify with the Japanese hikikomori phenomenon. We aim to overcome the dualism between sociology and psychology found in earlier research by referring to Pierre Bourdieu, who provides insights into how individual choices are constructed in accordance with wider social settings. We focus on the individual level and everyday choices, but we suggest that psychological factors (anxiety, depression) can be seen as properties of social relations rather than as individual states of mind, as young adults have unequal access to valued resources. We scrutinise young people’s specific reasoning related to the social and psychological factors and contingent life events that influence their choice to withdraw. An experience of inadequacy, a feeling of failure and a lack of self-efficacy are common experiences in the data. This indicates that young adults who identify with the hikikomori phenomenon find external society demanding and consider themselves lacking resources such as education, social networks or the personality type that they see as valued in society and as essential to ‘survival’. They also feel that they cannot control their life events, which may mean that they receive little help in their everyday lives.*

**Keywords:** Bourdieu, hikikomori, social withdrawal, social exclusion, youth studies

This article deals with the social withdrawal of young Finnish adults. There has been discussion of ‘cloistered young people’ in recent years (e.g. Jämsä 2012; Tamminen and Eskelinen 2013). Social withdrawal is defined as an individual choice to remove oneself from all types of interpersonal relationship (Rubin et al. 2002, 332; Bowker et al. 2013, 167). Socially withdrawn individuals choose to spend more time alone than their peers (Bowker et al. 2013, 167). We explore young Finnish adults who identify with the phenomenon of hikikomori (i.e. define themselves as ‘hikky’ or ‘closeted’) on the Internet. We analyse an Internet forum called ‘Hikikomero’ (in Finnish: steam room), which consists of young adults who describe themselves as having few or no social relationships outside the home. We pay attention to their experiences of the social positions, psychological interpretations and sudden events that may have influenced their choice of withdrawal.

The social withdrawal of young adults in Japan, i.e. the hikikomori phenomenon, has gained international media attention (e.g. Rees 2002). Hikikomori are young adults who isolate themselves from society and social relationships, often living in their parents’ homes and staying in their rooms, playing video games and reading (Saito 2013). In general, the term ‘hikikomori’ (pulling inwards) is used to refer to young adults who have not been involved in social activities or relationships for six months or more (Furlong 2008). Hikikomori is seen as a Japanese phenomenon, although it is arguable that the phenomenon exists elsewhere. Similar types of withdrawal among young adults have been observed in Spain (Malagón et al. 2010), Hong Kong (Chan and Lo 2013; Wong and Ying 2006) and the US (Teo 2013). The phenomenon is also known in Sweden. For instance, ‘Projekt Hikikomori’ in Uppsala provides help for young adults who suffer from severe social anxiety and isolate themselves from everyday social interactions. In Finland, a documentary by Tamminen and Eskelinen (2013) focuses on young adults with no education or employment who have been ‘buried at home’. In Finland there is also the concept of ‘peräkammarin poika’, an adult male living in the parental home who has not married or gained independence from his parents (e.g. Valaskivi and Hoikkala 2006). Even though the definition of hikikomori remains relatively vague, we understand social withdrawal as a scenario in which young adults isolate themselves from both societal institutions (such as school, education or work) and social relationships (such as sites of everyday interaction, friendships, dating) and which includes a certain element of individual choice. We also understand social withdrawal as a form of social exclusion (Wong and Ying 2006), which represents a risk factor in terms of individual development (see Rubin et al. 2009; Bowker et al. 2013, 171).

Earlier studies on social withdrawal have suffered from a lack of dialogue between sociological and psychological research. Psychological research (e.g. Borovay 2008; Teo 2010; Krieg and Dickie 2011; Saito 2013), which has dominated the scholarly discussion (Furlong 2008, 310), draws attention to psychological disorders such as depression, social phobias and personality disorders, and to psychosocial developmental pathways, for instance in terms of attachment theory. In Japan, the phenomenon of hikikomori has been linked to deviant and egoistic behaviour on an individual level, which does not pay sufficient attention to macro-structural processes; in Finland, the general framework for the discussion of the social exclusion of young people has been sociological rather than psychological (Valasjärvi and Hoikkala 2006, 213–214).

The sociological research highlights wider societal processes and structural circumstances, such as the precarisation of the labour market and youth unemployment (Zielenziger 2006; Furlong 2008). Research on social exclusion points to the increased statistical likelihood of social exclusion among young adults. Social exclusion is context-dependent and can vary by country. In Finland, the factors that increase one's likelihood of social exclusion include a low level of education, which limits job opportunities due educational inflation and the lack of low-skilled jobs (Vanttaja and Järvinen 2006; Sipilä et al. 2011); the low socio-economic status of one's parents, including low-level education, economic disadvantage and health concerns (Paananen et al. 2012); a family history of single parenthood or divorce; immigration; and many different types of social defect, such as having been in custody at a young age (Eurofound 2012). In Finland in 2010, there were approximately 51,300 socially excluded young adults aged 15–29 (5% of that age group), of whom 32,500 were not seeking employment (Myrskylä 2011).

Sociological research on social withdrawal has also drawn on Merton's (1968) functionalism, which sees socially withdrawn young adults as rejecting both culturally shared goals and the means to achieve those goals, leading to frustration and alienation. Toivonen et al. (2011) see the hikikomori phenomenon as related to conformist and conservative Japanese cultural values: young adults conform to dominant life expectations (emphasising adjustment, the maintenance of harmony and the affirmation of interdependence with others) without having sufficient means to fulfil those expectations due to the growing insecurities of the labour market. Although Finnish culture highly values individual autonomy, that in itself may cause young people to experience pressure to meet those social expectations. For instance, young Finns leave the parental home at a relatively early age (e.g. Choroszewicz and Wolff

2010). This may also be related to Finland's high suicide rate among young adult males – one of the highest in the OECD (OECD 2013). In both Japan and Finland, the Internet enables young people to escape from social pressures by withdrawing from everyday encounters, replacing those encounters with virtual networks in chat rooms as well as activities such as gaming and entertainment (e.g. Valasjärvi and Hoikkala 2006, 212).

Psychological research lacks an understanding of the impact of social circumstances on individuals, whereas sociological research has neglected the subjective level at which individuals actively make choices concerning their everyday lives. Social withdrawal entails reflexive choices, even when an individual decides not to do something or not to go somewhere. These decisions are processes that have a cumulative tendency to produce a specific social reality. We understand social withdrawal not in terms of individual deficiency (see Colley and Hodkinson 2001, 340–343), but as a complex set of relationships between self and society.

We aim to overcome the dualism between sociological and psychological points of view by referring to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. The value of Bourdieu's theory here arises from two factors. First, statistical descriptions of youth employment rates tell us little of what takes place at the individual level, where structural processes are not directly conceptualised as structural problems but rather are lived as everyday anxieties and frustrations as young adults search for meaningful career or educational paths. Bourdieu explains how everyday life and individual choices are constructed in accordance with wider social settings. Second, anxieties and frustrations can be understood as arising from social relations, and Bourdieusian theory is able to deal with the psychological features highlighted in earlier research on hikikomori from a new perspective that does not locate psychological features within the individuals themselves. We also suggest that Bourdieu's work would benefit from a consideration of the contingent (i.e. possible but not necessary) features or critical moments (Thompson et al. 2002; Holland and Thompson 2009) that play a role in the individual life course.

### **The Bourdieusian approach: the illusion of individual choice**

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the emphasis on reflexive modernisation (Beck et al. 1994; Giddens 1991) has argued that individuals are gaining greater freedom from the structural

pressures that arise from pre-existing customs. Traditional ties to family, roles, class etc. have weakened, giving individuals more options in their everyday personal lives. At the same time as young adults are encountering growing insecurity in the labour market and education, they are also expected to make active choices. The hikikomori phenomenon in Japan is connected to postmodernism and changing labour markets (Furlong 2008; Toivonen et al. 2011). Young Japanese adults face a changing working life characterised by high rates of youth unemployment. The previous labour market system in Japan, which offered steady careers for employees, has been transformed into an insecure system in which the individual's capacity to successfully navigate the labour market is more central (Toivonen et al. 2011). Furlong (2008, 310–314) states that there has been an increasing tendency among some young males in Japan to respond to these insecurities by withdrawing from the stressful conditions of work, the competitive educational system and society. The individualisation process highlighted in postmodernism and the theory of reflexive modernity have not led to the elimination of the structural inequalities that affect individual trajectories to a significant degree (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).

We suggest that Bourdieu's work is useful here, as it is well known for its explanations of the regularity and reproduction of established power structures and inequalities in society. His view represents a sharp contrast with reflexive modernity or models that view individual choice as rational, strategic, calculative and goal-oriented. Bourdieu is able to provide insights into how disadvantage and a lack of resources tend to limit the possibilities of achieving success at school or in the labour market (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). An increasing number of young adults are disadvantageously positioned in relation to the acquisition of economic, cultural, social or symbolic capital (see Bourdieu 1985; see Bynner 2013, 41–43). This is related to young adults' subjective decision-making processes with regard to social withdrawal. Bourdieu (1977, 164) argues that individuals unconsciously adjust their practices and choices in accordance with the actual divisions of the social world. For Bourdieu (e.g. 1989), social space is constructed by unequally distributed capital, indicating that individuals' practices and choices are related to the positions they occupy in social space, their possession of (economic, cultural, social and symbolic) capital and their habitus. Bourdieu's concept of habitus implies that individuals are exposed to certain types of social reality (norms, language, divisions of time and space, values, attitudes etc.) that create corresponding dispositions, i.e. embodied tendencies towards certain ways of perceiving, thinking, experiencing and feeling (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 126–127).

Young adults who occupy certain social positions and are accustomed to certain levels of economic, cultural and social capital in their everyday environment are exposed to specific social conditions, which are instilled as ‘an ensemble of durable and transposable dispositions that internalise the necessities of the extant social environment’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 13).

Insecure social conditions on a subjective level may decrease the willingness to invest in labour markets or education, leading to reflexive processes in which an increasing number of young adults evaluate their chances of success in negative terms (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 116; Bourdieu 1992, 54). A choice not to do or take part in something can lead to a positive outcome when a particular habitus is ill suited to the games played in social spaces or fields (labour markets, education, relationships), when the achievement of the shared goal appears unrealistic to the individual in question (Bourdieu 1992, 54; Siisiäinen 2010, 32).<sup>1</sup> Hence the decision to withdraw may be seen as reasonable if one does not possess the necessary resources or suitable habitus (e.g. to be able to construct oneself as a successful ‘brand’ in the eyes of an employer). Bourdieu (1992, 62) would likely view social withdrawal as arising from a discrepancy between habitus and social space that makes individual dispositions ill adjusted to specific social circumstances. In the next section we explore this idea on a psychological level.

### ***Bourdieu and the psychosocial***

Bourdieu’s theory and his concept of symbolic violence are well suited to describe the psychological level, offering a relational emotion analysis that sees psychological dispositions as arising from social relations. Bourdieu has similarities to (cognitive) psychology and psychoanalysis (Lizardo 2004; Steinmetz 2006; Reay 2015). His concept of habitus is close to the concept of scheme in cognitive psychology (see Lizardo 2004). The difference is that Bourdieu stresses that habitus, which generates perception and understanding, is a product of the internalisation of society rather than an independent arena of psychological forces. Personal aspects of individuals such as emotions and affects are social in their nature (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 54).

This view has certain disadvantages as well as advantages. The problem is that Bourdieu makes psychological features, emotional states and reactions subordinate to social

factors, and therefore has a tendency to underestimate (although not necessarily to completely deny) the independence of psychological features such as personality or temperament that play a role in individual choices. In psychology, a disposition towards withdrawal may reflect the individual's temperament, which is regarded as genetic and which explains individual differences (e.g. Grossman et al. 2005; Rothbart 2007). Previous psychological research on Japanese hikikomori indicates that withdrawn young people have shy temperaments (Krieg and Dickie 2011, 6).

Psychological research considers the statistical correlations between certain characteristics/states and social withdrawal. Many of these factors (such as biologically based learning difficulties) are not social in origin. The possible causes of social withdrawal have been connected to parenting styles, i.e. as deriving from an insecure parent-child attachment, which might predict the lack of social competence manifesting as fear of rejection that is typical of hikikomori families (Rubin et al. 2009, 149–150; Krieg and Dickie 2011, 6). An overprotective or authoritarian parenting style indicates social withdrawal (Rubin et al. 2009, 150–151). Childhood rejection by parents predicts the development of hikikomori (Krieg and Dickie 2011, 6). A lack of peer relationships has a significant impact on the individual's psychosocial development and adjustment (see Bowker et al. 2013, 167), and is related to difficulties in acquiring social skills and forming intimate friendships (Rubin et al. 2002; Rubin et al. 2009). Hikikomori show a higher level of peer rejection than others, which is related to the experience of loneliness (Krieg and Dickie 2011, 8; Cacioppo et al. 2011; Heinrich and Gullone 2006). It is also possible that the child actively withdraws from the company of others because of social anxiety, low self-esteem and self-perceived difficulties with social skills and social relationships (Rubin et al. 2009, 145). The types of factor are challenging for sociology to deal with. Bourdieu has difficulty explaining why individuals who share similar social backgrounds and socialisation, possess a similar volume and composition of capital and have a similar habitus experience things differently, and make different choices affecting their lives due to these experiences.

However, Bourdieu's work is highly valuable and can significantly contribute to psychological research. The problem of some psychological research – such as that by Martinen et al. (2016), which demonstrates that a large number of young Finnish adults have a 'dark-side' identity profile characterised by low commitment and high ruminative, self-centred exploration, which in turn is more likely to lead to depression and anxiety – is that it presents identity formation as occurring in a social vacuum. This focuses on the deviant side



of the subjective self. The great advantage of Bourdieu lies in the concept of symbolic violence, which draws attention to dysfunctional practices. It implies that individuals produce their disadvantageous positions through their practices and everyday choices (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 167–168). Disadvantageous positions and a lack of usable resources – in other words, restricted access to labour markets and education, and a lack of everyday help – create certain types of emotional tendency, such as anxiety, frustration, insecurity and feelings of discomfort, apathy and hopelessness, which are emotional states that strongly orient individual practices and limit the scope of everyday life.

The concept of symbolic violence implies that power relations may operate in a way that makes individuals experience cognitive and emotional disturbances. They can appear as a ‘sense of limitation’ – a feeling that ‘this is not for the likes of us’ – or in physical reactions such as blushing (Bourdieu 2000, 161, 169). This comes close to psychology in the sense that dysfunctional schemes restrict actions and experiences, although for Bourdieu they derive from power-related social relations and socialisation (Bourdieu 2000; Reay 2015). Bourdieu (1990, 116) states that an unstable social environment is implemented in habitus as internal tension and contradiction, and he believes that certain psychological disturbances such as neurosis or psychosis may have a ‘socio-genetic’ origin. Many young adults are unequally rewarded in their access to valued resources in society, and in this sense it needs to be acknowledged that emotions (anxiety, distress, depression etc.) can be seen as arising from social relations rather than as subjective states of mind (see Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005, 490). Hence anxieties and other emotional disturbances cannot be fully psychologised, nor can medicalisation be suggested as a solution to the problem (see also Furlong 2008, 310).

### *Trajectories and contingency*

Bourdieu (e.g. 1985) understands social trajectories in terms of positions and capital and their development through time, highlighting that individuals encounter similar types of social circumstances relatively consistently throughout their trajectories. Bourdieu is likely to link failures in transition to insufficient amounts of capital, disadvantageous positions and unfavourable opportunity structures (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 108). This view, however, does not pay sufficient attention to the biographical approach or to young adults’ transitions to adulthood (e.g. Henderson et al. 2007; Holland and Thompson 2009). For instance, Giddens’s concept of ‘fateful moments’ draws attention to those moments ‘when

individuals are called to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives'. These moments are 'highly consequential for a person's destiny' (Giddens 1991, 112). 'Fateful moments' for Giddens (1991, 113) refers to life occurrences such as getting married, choosing an education or winning a lottery, when individuals stand 'at a crossroads'. Bourdieu neglects these types of 'critical moment'. In addition, Bourdieu's theory of practice, in which individual choices are adjusted to objective probabilities, would benefit from the idea of contingency. Contingency refers to an event whose occurrence is possible but not necessary or evident (e.g. Sayer 2000, 123). In an individual's life this may entail accidents or other traumatic events, deaths in the family or among friends, violence, bullying, good or bad teachers or coaches, coincidences, and being in the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time (see also Holland and Thompson 2009, 456). These types of biographical event cannot be reduced to social or psychological factors, as they take place independently of them, although the social and psychological factors described above play a role in how the individual manages contingent circumstances.

The role of contingent events in the lives of young adults is an empirical question (Thompson et al. 2002; Holland and Thompson 2009). A focus on the role of contingent events may reveal whether the events in question have transformed life trajectories in one way or another, i.e. if there is 'a relationship between young people's agency, their imaginations and their ability to realize opportunities and control their destiny' (Thompson et al. 2002, 338; Holland and Thompson 2009, 456). Theoretically, with regard to Bourdieu's work, these contingent events in young adults' lives can be powerful enough to change the orientation of practices and embodied dispositions. Therefore such events have the capacity to influence individual trajectories. Dispositions such as internalised meanings attached to objects and situations that orient practices do not necessarily remain the same, as new dispositions may arise from these contingent events.

## **Data**

We gathered data from Ylilauta, a popular website among Finnish youth, which is based on anonymity and offers several different topics for general discussion.<sup>2</sup> We analysed a board named 'Hikikomero', a Finnish translation of the concept of hikikomori that means 'steam room'. The board is defined as a peer support group for the depressed and socially excluded. Our data consisted of ten threads, which we collected in November 2014. The data we used

was posted between 2013 and 2014. We chose all the threads which dealt with general reasons given by the young adults themselves for social withdrawal. The young adults that took part in the discussion did not define themselves as socially withdrawn; rather they labelled themselves ‘closeted’ or ‘hikkiintynyt’, a verb describing the process of becoming hikikomori. Altogether our data consisted of 422 posts. We took advantage of the ATLAS.ti program, which is designed to facilitate the data analysis process.

As the Internet forum was anonymous, it was difficult to gather basic information such as participants’ ages. Participants themselves had created questionnaires about age on the board, and these suggested that the age of participants was between 20 and 30 (plus a few younger or older participants). Most participants were male: in one of the threads we were able to spot 19 males and seven females. General discourse on the board seems hostile towards female hikikomori, which may mean that females did not feel comfortable enough to take part in the questionnaires. We lack any other information about these young adults. It was also possible that younger participants gave false information about their ages because of the age restriction on forum access.

Our decision to focus on an Internet forum raises ethical questions, as the writers have not been able to give personal consent. Therefore it is essential to respect individuals’ privacy and to ensure that no harm will be caused to the writers, in particular when they have revealed highly personal thoughts, experiences and feelings about their circumstances and lives. We have not been able to seek permission from the individuals we quote in our research. Internet-based research generally entails ethical problems that are not easily solved, particularly over whether Internet forums are public or private spaces (e.g. Convery and Cox 2012; Whiteman 2012). Our ethical guidelines also referred to Haasio (2015), who studied the same Internet forum. We consider our forum to be public, because it provides free access to everyone and does not require registration. Therefore we assume that these writers are to a certain extent aware of the public nature of the forum. However, even though the forum is public, the writers might understand their posts as private (Convery and Cox 2012). Thus our obligation is to protect their privacy. Although the Internet forum is anonymous, denoting that identification should not be possible, we have taken all requisite measures to ensure that the writers will remain anonymised. First, we use only posts from writers that do not use a pseudonym and post all their comments anonymously, making them difficult to trace. We do not individualise the writers, and do not provide any personal information such as places or ages. Second, we have translated the data from Finnish into English, which means that the

data does not exist on the Internet in the form presented here. The translation may not always be literal, but is meant to capture the writer's original meaning. The data we have used is no longer available on the Internet. Although most of the data is not easily accessed at present, and the translated extracts presented below are not possible to find with search engines, the data is stored on Internet archive pages. Third, we firmly believe that our general framework, based on Bourdieu, will not tend to increase the loneliness or alienation of the writers, as our approach avoids the 'victim-blaming' mentality and calls into question whether the hikikomori phenomenon derives from deviant psychological states or personalities. We consider these measures and views necessary in terms of research ethics and in order to minimise risks to the writers.

## **Method**

The fact that these young adults identify as a 'closeted' group related to the Japanese phenomenon of hikikomori indicates that social withdrawal is a part of reflexive processes entailing individual choices. We understand that the conduct, thoughts, feelings and judgements of individuals can be seen as adjusting to and arising from certain types of social position. Individuals 'know how to "read" the future that fits them, which is made for them and for which they are made [...], through practical anticipations that grasp [...] what unquestionably imposes itself as that which "has" to be done or said' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 130). We analyse how individuals describe their positions and resources (i.e. the facts that they reveal in the data concerning schools, jobs and relationships), even though the anonymous nature of the data prevents us from knowing the exact positions they occupy in social space. Bourdieu sees individuals' experiences and practical knowledge as 'a principle of generation' of objective regularities (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 8). Our approach involves two stages: first, we take a look at how the young adults 'read the future that fits them' in the data, and second, we ask whether their choices can be understood as adjustments to certain types of social condition due to a lack of resources or events they cannot control.

We use theory-based thematic analysis. We coded the data with in light of the theoretical insights provided by Bourdieu's work. We paid attention to three research questions. First, we explored the ways in which the young adults perceived their place in society and the type of social resources they experienced. Second, we paid attention to the

psychological understandings described by the young adults and the ways in which they explained their own psychological states. Third, we found it necessary to look for the role of contingent events in young adults' lives in encouraging their tendency to withdrawal. We were then able to identify three closely related yet distinct themes: an overly demanding outside world; failure; and a lack of self-efficacy. We believe that all three forms of reasoning can be understood as manifesting themselves in everyday choices that create a certain type of social reality for young adults.

### **The Demanding Society: Feelings of Inadequacy**

The first theme we identified pays attention to the experiences of young adults in which society is seen as demanding and unjust. Young adults who suffer from a lack of education and income are incapable of accessing valuable resources and social positions, implying also that they fail to integrate into society in general. These young adults encounter not only a decrease in their lifetime income, but also a loss of status and meaning in a society that highly values work.

Why does everything need to be so complicated? [...] It is absolutely impossible to get a job. You have to go through two interviews and speak three languages fluently. A willingness to work is not enough; you have to be joyful, social and positive. You have to be able to work in teams and under stress. You have to have at least five years' work experience and a degree. You are not even able to get an interview unless you know people who know people who might hire you. (Writer 1)

This writer experiences inadequacy and hopelessness, finding it inconceivable that they will get work while expressing the centrality of their desire and need to find a job. They see themselves as outside of influential networks, lacking resources, and positioned disadvantageously in relation to their goals. The writer expresses criticism of the outside environment and society rather than pure self-blame, even though they experience their 'hikyness' as problematic, comparing themselves to standards that they believe are highly respected in today's world and which they are not able to meet, such as positivity and sociability.

This type of personal experience cannot be distinguished from restricted access to the labour market, high levels of youth unemployment and temporary work and the disappearance

of low-paid work, even though these are experienced as subjective insecurity and hopelessness. This indicates that the writer's reasoning arises from social relations and reflects a sense of powerlessness, as these young adults do not believe that their actions produce the desired outcomes. Social exclusion in terms of a lack of education, work and social relationships forces some of these writers into extreme loneliness and a sense of disappointment.

Writer 1's thoughts also reflect cynicism and pessimism, seeing the outside world as unjust and merciless:

Only the strong survive and the weak are trampled without mercy. For years I've watched as people struggle with overwork along with stress and depression [...]. One falls after another, and society just increases its demands, but why? Eventually I too became depressed, lost my relationships and became 'closeted'. I'm weak, I admit it.  
(Writer 1)

The writer sees a cruel world characterised by the failure of many people to live satisfying or fulfilling lives. Social withdrawal has followed, as they not only feel unable to meet society's demands but have also lost relationships. Statements that there is no one who will help them are relatively common throughout the data, indicating that these young people position themselves as lacking social capital. This indicates a lack of networks for help and support. Raffo and Reeves (2000, 148) have found that social relations (social capital) both support and constrain individual actions and outcomes for young people, and hence strongly influence their capability of agency.

Social exclusion in terms of education, work and networks positions young adults disadvantageously in society, which is difficult to overcome. Generally, the writers refer to their insufficiency of many kinds of resource, from education to personality types, expressing strong feelings of inadequacy. This indicates that individuals are reflexive: they think about their future, and their own positive and negative characteristics, resources and positions; they think about how they feel and what is the most logical thing to do next; they count up the options that might lead to an outcome that fits them.

## Psychological Sense of Failure

By paying attention to the psychological understandings of the young adults themselves, we found that many explain their own social withdrawal as deriving from mental health problems. Some of the writers regard themselves as antisocial, having Asperger's syndrome or suffering from mental illness. They also see themselves as lacking the necessary social skills to manage social settings. Many of the writers who highlight their own psychological states understand them as preceding their current social positions (such as unemployment), which also indicates a strong emphasis on failure:

Low self-esteem and obsessions partly since childhood caused the feeling of inadequacy. Before I got depressed, I tried to fix this feeling of inadequacy and self-esteem in many ways, such as enhancing my looks, identifying with ideologies or lifestyles, and forming formal relationships [...]. After realising that I was never going to match my standards, it drove me to depression; I dropped out of school, relationships and obsessive working out. [...] I started to feel shame while shopping for groceries [...]. There were young people hanging out at the shop, [...] the thought that they are doing well and they have the right to be self-confident, unlike myself, caused heavy blushing, and at my worst, even tears. (Writer 2)

Low self-esteem, negative self-image and obsessions started in childhood, resulting in feelings of inferiority and shame, which further made this writer compare themselves to others who appeared superior. The writer states that depression drove them to withdrawal, but they see hope for the future, as the origin of their mental health problems has become clear to them. This quote illustrates how mental health problems narrow the scope of everyday life, as most social situations become impossible to manage.

In this respect, mental health problems influence decisions, such as dropping out of school, hobbies and social relationships, which have a further effect in increased experiences of loneliness, depression and anxiety (see Bowker et al. 2013, 171). In addition, there is research indicating that social inequalities play a role in psychological stress. Socio-economically disadvantaged young adults have more mental health problems than middle-class students (Torikka et al. 2014).

Writer 3 experiences their mental health problems as the main reason they are not able to work:

[I] feel that I'm not up to being a good worker. [...] It is easy to call you a lazy social service case etc., but they don't take into account that it is also not good for the employee [sic] to hire depressed, antisocial, and someone who is even afraid of social situations, someone who suffers from psychosomatic symptoms [...]. Why would an employee [sic] hire this kind of person, if there are 100 healthier and more motivated in the queue? (Writer 3)

Writer 3 stresses that they should not be hired, as they not believe in their own value for an employer due to their mental health problems. This writer sees that there was a certain turning point in their social trajectory, highlighting that their life could have gone differently. This writer also has difficulties accepting the equation of mental health problems with laziness, because 'the voices scream inside your head, delusions and paranoid thoughts prevent you from going outside.' This writer experiences psychosomatic symptoms as having a strong effect on them.

This theme indicates that mental health problems are given as a main cause of social withdrawal and an inability to adjust to society's demands, whereas the earlier theme (feelings of inadequacy) implied that society's standards are overly demanding, from which it followed that many were likely to 'fall'. The difference between the first (social) and second (psychological) theme is whether the writers emphasise demanding societal factors in relation to which they feel inadequate, or whether they have a more individualist, ego-centred understanding of their situation, in which case they locate the main cause of their withdrawal in dysfunctional features of the self and experience their excluded position as natural. However, young adults in general can be understood as victims of symbolic violence, as they are disadvantageously positioned in social relations, meaning that they have fewer opportunities to mobilise their resources than wealthier older generations. Mental health problems such as anxiety or depression may be the effect of an uncertain future and demanding external conditions, and may follow from a sense of powerlessness and helplessness (see Ehrenberg 2010). Young adults may lack the means to deal with uncomfortable feelings caused by social factors while misrecognising their social origin, focusing on psychological explanations instead.



### **The Lack of Self-Efficacy: Events Cannot Be Controlled**

The third theme overlaps with previous themes. The concept of self-efficacy is linked to the idea of exerting influence to control one's own life circumstances, well-being and ability to affect outcomes (Bandura 1995, 1). In this section we relate self-efficacy to contingent events, defined here as possible but not necessary events that may occur in young adults' lives. For instance, a death in the family is a possible event in a young adult's life, but it does not happen to all young people. A death can be more harmful to a young individual in a disadvantageous social position (and in such cases is likely to be associated with illness or poverty rather than accident) (Thompson et al. 2002, 335). However, a single event may play a central role in terms of individual choice, as it might change a tendency to act in a certain way in a certain context, or generate new processes of meaning construction:

Everything started to go wrong after my dad died a month after I had my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and went to live on my own, I got depressed [...] I dropped out of vocational school and got kicked out. I didn't have any relatives or decent friends I could talk to and spend time with, [...] I became closeted, even though I tried to start school twice, both attempts failed as I simply was not able to leave the house. (Writer 4)

Writer 4 notes the contingent event of their father's death as an influential turning point that took place around the time they were leaving home. This indicates that the incident had 'significance for major emotional or biographical disruption, raising issues, perhaps of increased vulnerability, a threat to existing meaning systems, a challenge to identity, and a sense of difference or stigma' (Ribbens McCarthy 2007, 287). In addition, because of this death and the difficulties of getting help and support from their environment, the writer withdrew from everyday activities such as school, which 'closeted' them further.

In addition, young adults are not able to control their parents' decisions and choices, but have to 'live with the consequences of these decisions' (Thompson et al. 2002, 340). Contingent events such as moving from one place to another can also have a strong effect on an individual's life:

Childhood before school was a complete separation from my peers. Sometime during primary school my parents' divorce and moving to an extremely small place. No interesting activities unless you drive 50 kilometres. (Writer 5)

Writer 5 spent their early childhood without the company of peers. In order to explain their social withdrawal, writer 6 presents the lack of proper friends as a significant factor: ‘So I suppose the most evident reason probably is the lack of like-minded friends in a critical state.’ There is, however, another contingent event, bullying, which had an impact on this writer: ‘I have made the problem worse by downplaying and denying the existence of the problem. It is like some sort of whirlpool, in which all my problems prevent me from getting help, and because help does not come, my fears get stronger.’ The experience of being bullied had serious consequences for their mental health. Bullying seems to be a relatively common experience for socially withdrawn young people in the data, and peer rejection is also indicated in previous hikikomori research (Bowker et al. 2013; Krieg and Dickie 2011). A large longitudinal study in Finland has indicated that being exposed to bullying in childhood is related to later psychological disorders and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and psychosis (Sourander et al. 2016), implying major limitations in terms of individual agency. We treat bullying as a contingent feature in young people’s lives that cannot be reduced to social positions and resources or psychological factors (although a lack of economic, cultural, social and symbolic resources as well as certain personality features may affect the likelihood of being bullied).

We found that many of these types of event are perceived as uncontrollable, and rather than actively influencing contingent events, young people tend to withdraw. The question is how significant these young adults consider the influence of these events on their life course. Holland and Thompson (2009, 456; see MacDonald et al. 2005) found that critical moments had a more damaging influence on socially disadvantaged young people, who had lesser possibilities to control sudden events. This drew attention to ‘the extent to which events themselves were within young people’s control’ and ‘the extent to which they were subsequently able to respond to them’ (Thomson et al. 2002, 340). The responses could indicate either a preference for agency or an absence of agency (Thompson et al. 2002, 342). Our data indicates an absence of agency.

## **Discussion**

We have dealt with the social withdrawal of young Finnish adults who label themselves in terms of the Japanese hikikomori phenomenon. Challenging earlier assumptions in psychological research (e.g. Borovay 2008; Teo 2010; Krieg and Dickie 2011; Saito 2013),

which tends to view withdrawal in terms of disorders or psychosocial development pathways, we aspire to offer a more sociological approach to individuals' emotional states, which can also arise from social relationships and resources that influence decision-making processes. Similarly, we find problematic those sociological explanations that emphasise structural processes such as labour markets and education and that expect a straightforward, mechanical correspondence to take place in an individual's head without considering the psychological level or subjective reasoning behind the decisions that affect outcomes. In this sense structures may be seen as pressuring individuals, making them adjust to cultural norms and expectations (Merton 1968; Toivonen et al. 2011; Furlong 2008).

The Bourdieusian approach explains how socially excluded or withdrawn young adults' positions, resources and dispositions have an effect on choices, in a process in which these choices are understood in relation to the objective possibilities of a social space or field, rather than as mere adjustments to external norms and values. Bourdieu notes that individuals are reasonable and capable of reading the future. The outside world is rejected through a complex process of self-evaluation and self-reflexivity. If these young adults experience feelings of inadequacy, failure and lack of self-efficacy, their decision-making processes lead to choices that feel safe and necessary for them and make them invest in practices which feel more comfortable, such as gaming and the Internet. Yet these choices rule out the possibilities of alternative realities.

The outside world, such as the labour market and education, is seen as overwhelming and demanding, and young people see themselves as disadvantageously positioned, lacking the essential (social as well as psychological) resources to manage or stay in the game. These young adults are not likely to invest in practices if they do not find the game worth playing – in other words, their experience is characterised by disillusion. Their indifference is linked to their reasoning that the game – the labour market, education or dating, for example – makes no difference to them: they are unmoved or 'not [...] troubled' by it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 116). The experience of lacking something, whether economic or educational resources or the 'successful' type of personality, which seems to be a key factor in meaning construction processes and is common to all decisions to withdraw, leads to ideas (that appeared in the data) such as 'money cannot buy happiness,' 'I don't want to play by other people's rules in order to achieve happiness,' and 'I found my peace after accepting my "hikkyness" and stopped fantasising about a normal life.'

In this article we have aimed to provide a theoretically informed, Bourdieusian analysis of young people's withdrawal which will overcome the dualism between objective and subjective aspects of individual choice. We have explored the ways in which young adults perceive their place in society and the types of social resource they experience, and we have found that feelings of inadequacy are common: these young people are not able to meet society's demands. However, this is often connected to a criticism of the outside world and today's social circumstances. Secondly, we have paid attention to the psychological understandings and states that the young people describe. Personality traits or psychological states (depression, Asperger's syndrome, lack of social skills) are understood as preceding social withdrawal. In these cases a more individualistic explanation is given in which the young adults tend to be more critical of themselves than of society. Thirdly, we found it necessary to look for the role of contingent events that play a role in young adults' lives and are powerful enough to transform immediate tendencies to think and feel in certain ways in specific circumstances. Experiences of bullying and bereavement are relatively typical events, which we understand as able to limit the sense of agency, and therefore to increase the likelihood of social withdrawal when combined with a lack of self-efficacy such that young adults are unable to contribute to their social circumstances, but instead are determined by them.

By scrutinising the specific reasons young people give for their withdrawal, it is possible to draw attention to small things in everyday life, such as decisions not to do something and not to go somewhere, which have a wider tendency to create cumulative effects, in turn further generating negative experiences and consequently limiting individual agency and the scope of everyday life. These types of decision increase the cost of choosing differently (to take part, or to become attached to activities and people) in the future. We have paid attention to their voices when young people express the desire to withdraw, deciding not to take part. Withdrawal is not likely to be explained by a social or psychological (or any other) factor alone. Future research needs to draw more upon different disciplines, a task we have not been able to carry out in this article.

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<sup>1</sup> In Finland, Siisiäinen (2010, 2014) has referred to Bourdieu's understanding of the causality of the probable with regard to unemployed young people: these individuals are making a reasonable choice not to take part if access to the labour market is already denied them.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ylilauta.org/hikky/> (accessed 03/10/2016). The data posted in 2014 (three threads) is no longer available on the website; the data posted in 2013 (five threads) is no longer available. We hold the data for 2013 and 2014 as screenshots, in their original form as presented on the website.