

## Family and Group Suicide in Japan: Cultural Analysis

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**Abstract.** *Suicide is generally thought to be a personal behavior, however many suicide clusters have been seen all over the world. We have quite a unique behavior of suicide pact, which is called a 'Shinjyu', in Japanese society.*

*There is a variety of shinjyu. The latest word is 'Net-shinjyu', which means a group suicide where members are gathering through the internet. It became a social issue as the numbers of those completing suicide especially among the young generations have increased since 2003. Net-shinjyu is completely different from other 'shinjyus' (the traditional suicide pact) where people had a close relationship between themselves. Some authors point out that there is a correlation between the changing of group suicide and the rapid structural change of society, which involves cultural change.*

**Keywords:** Family suicide, group suicide, Shinjyu, Net-shinjyu, Ego structure

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**SUICIDE CLUSTER** Suicide attempts are performed contagiously, that is one person's suicide influences another person anywhere in the world. This is called a suicide cluster. The CDC (Center of Disease Control) in the U.S. defined a suicide cluster as a group of suicides or suicide attempts or both, that occur together closer in time and space than would normally be expected in a given community.

### ***Shinjyu* - A Japanese concept of Group Suicide**

Although suicide clusters are not limited to Japan, there is a quite unique suicidal model called '*shinjyu*' in Japan. It has a more personal meaning compared to other group suicides which have been seen throughout world history. Originally '*shinjyu*' meant 'the center of the heart', in Kanji, but the meaning is 'obligation to others'. It then changed in meaning to describe suicides performed together, by couples who have difficulty getting approval for marriage in their present life and who hope to be together for eternity. This is called "a double suicide" or "a suicide pact" in English.

### **The Romanticization of *Shinjyu***

The first notable and well known *shinjyu* occurred in 1703 in Osaka. This is known as "Sonezaki *shinjyu*", which comes the name of the place where it occurred. Tokubei, a young sales assistant of a famous soy sauce company, and Hatsu, a young high-class harlot, loved each other but they lost hope. They decided to commit suicide since there was no chance of being together because of their

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different social status. Eventually, they committed suicide together at Sonezaki. Chikamatsu, who was a popular playwright, created a work for a marionette drama and “Sonezaki shinjyu” was performed just one month after the suicide of the young lovers. The marionette drama was wholeheartedly supported by the people of Osaka and it had a long run.

Why did this suicidal behavior gain support from the community? Kobayashi (2005) explained as follows; Osaka was a huge business city in which capitalism had been successfully developed with a population of 400,000. The era was called Genroku, which was quite a safe time in the Edo period, without any famines or battlefields in Japan. People’s lives became abundant and their culture had matured well. People were concerned with love affairs and in such feudalistic times, a love affair between a young tradesman/craftsman and a young harlot became symbolic, demonstrating improved humanity. They were thought to be proud of their death for the sake of love. Chikamatsu continued creating his *shinjyu* works after “Sonezaki” and his dramas were commercially successful. Real *shinjyu* were also committed by ordinary people, which meant that fiction had become reality. It became a social problem as suicide clusters, became characterized by contagion, popularity and imitation. Eventually, the government prohibited the performance of *shinjyu* drama in 1722.

### The Subclasses of *Shinjyu*

Thus, the word ‘*shinjyu*’ originally referred to the group (a couple) suicide of young lovers. Subsequently, it has been applied to other kinds of suicide, which have been described as follows:

- 1) ‘*Ikka-Shinjyu*’ refers to a family suicide or a parents-children suicide, in which the suicidal individual kills their member(s) of family first and then themselves;
- 2) ‘*Muri-Shinjyu*’ refers to a forced suicide, in which the person wishing to commit suicide kills other people first before killing themselves. For this reason it’s considered to be a suicide-homicide, and the attempter, if he survives, is then indicted as a murderer. This also applies to ‘*Ikka-Shinjyu*’;
- 3) ‘*Ato-oi-Shinjyu*’ refers to a situation where a close relative/friend/lover commits suicide which causes another person to commit suicide out of grief;
- 4) The latest one is ‘*Net-Shinjyu*’. It refers to a group suicide of people who have met through the internet and subsequently they agree to commit suicide. This instance of *shinjyu* is unique as the victims don’t know each other intimately and have never met in person. The planners of these suicides, advertise on the internet with the slogan “Shall we die together tomorrow?” for the purpose of gaining members to commit suicide together (Shibuya, 2007).

**A CASE EXAMPLE – FAMILY SUICIDE** The author would like to show a typical ‘*Ikka-Shinjyu*’ case, which is also applied to ‘*Muri-Shinjyu*’. The following example highlights a classic motive behind a family suicide in Japan.

*Mr. A is a 66 years old man, who was found on a park-lake by a police officer, which was near his house. He was committing to kill himself by slashing the left side of his neck and piercing his chest and upper abdomen with a knife, running after he had killed his daughter by hanging, who was suspected to have a mental disturbance.*

*Mr. A lost consciousness and was brought to a hospital by the ambulance. Emergency surgery was performed and he was monitored by ICU staff. After surgery, he seemed to be in a state of derilium but eventually improved after psychiatric treatment. He was discharged by the hospital after his physical condition improved and was subsequently arrested to be examined for the psychiatric testimony, to decide whether he was mentally capable to stand trial.*

*Mr. A used to be a healthy guy and always thought of his grandchild anxiously, as his daughter could not take care of him adequately because of her illness. He had*

*decided to raise the grandson but he lost his self-confidence when he contracted pneumonia. He was afraid as if he might have tuberculosis and was disappointed that he was not able to protect his grandson. Thus, he killed his daughter and committed suicide. Through the interview from his family, he was thought to have a depression concerning with hopelessness about his future when he tried to kill his daughter and himself.*

**NET-SHINJYU: A NEW SUICIDE PACT WITH THE INTERNET** So far established modes of suicide have been discussed. There is a new-wave establishing itself in the Japanese community. ‘*Net-shinjyu*’ is a kind of group suicide gaining members through the internet. The method of choice is carbon monoxide asphyxiation within a vehicle. There are many communities concerned about specific activities, “Suicidal websites” that show suicide manuals and other related things. These websites have become a social problem, since the bulletin boards on suicide websites call for members of group suicide, or there have been cases of the trading of toxic agents that could be used for suicide attempt. The first *net-shinjyu* reported by the media occurred in November 2000 in Japan. The cause of death was an overdose of hypnotics, and all individuals who committed suicide, had previously met on the internet. The number of people seeking group suicide has increased on the bulletin boards or chat rooms on the web since the media reported the event. The most famous group suicide involved seven people (4 male, 3 female), committing suicide by carbon monoxide asphyxiation on October 12th in 2004, in Saitama. This has been the largest group suicide since they began to occur. The number of group suicide has increased contagiously since this event was reported. According to a document from the Japanese police department in February 2006, the number of suicide events accomplished using the internet was 34, with the number of completions totaling 91 in 2005, compared to 19, amongst 55 completions, in 2004.

### **Preventative Measures against *Net-Shinjyu* in Japan**

On June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the government remarked that measures are needed to stop harmful information spreading on the internet, such as group suicide application sites or sites concerning bomb making materials. They encouraged regulators to provide filtering software, so that harmful information could be controlled by the internet provider without (government) assistance. They planned to consolidate moral education and consultation centers. The latest report concerning the prevention of *net-shinjyu*, which was published on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007, says that 40 out of 79 people had their lives saved with co-operations between the police department and internet providers, those 79 people having been confirmed to give their notice of suicide. This co-operation started on the basis of using the guidelines which had been created by the associations of internet providers and other references. The name, address and other personal information of the suicidal messengers are uncovered acting upon requests, once such messengers are thought to be urgent by the providers. The meeting time with the messengers was about 1 to 71 hours after noticing their messages. In the delayed cases, police were unable to contact the providers due to their offices being closed for the weekend. The police requested that the providers be open all hours, so that the attempters can be identified/found at any time.

## DISCUSSION

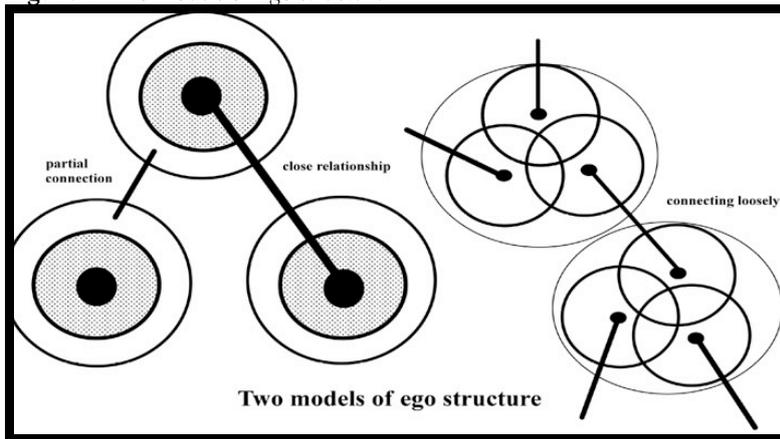
### **The characteristics of group suicide among young people**

Rajagopal (2004) refers to nine suicide completions in two suicide pacts on October 12th in Japan, expecting these people to herald a new disturbing trend in suicide pacts. The fear is that these kind of tragedies, involving strangers meeting over the internet, could become increasingly common. The epidemiology of suicide would be likely to change, with more young people living on their own, joining like minded suicidal people to die together. Also adding important information about the two group suicides on October 12th, four people out of the first group of seven lived with family members, and a housewife out of the second group of two lived with her husband. It is a generally held belief that the relationship between victims of suicidal pacts is typically exclusive, isolated from others, and the immediate trigger for the pact is usually a threat to the continuation of a relationship. Were the most victims in Japan considered to be isolated?

Professor Usui of Seiryō University pointed out that “there is an extremely dangerous assortment of depressive young people on the internet”. His reasoning is as follows; there are many young people who intend to commit suicide but never do. But then someone proposes active suicide methods to the strangers who meet on a suicidal website - this is the catalyst for group suicides which have occurred contagiously recently. Inside the chat-rooms of suicidal sites, people are talking about their wish to die, and the most effective suicidal method is also discussed there. Most suicidal sites consist of young people, sometimes young teenagers also visit there. Everyone is suffering from personal problems, such as being bullied, domestic violence, a lack of a relationship with family members, and so on. A female completer, who died in 2002 in Tokyo, left a note saying “it is awfully desolate that I die by myself, so I need someone with me”. Usui describes as follows; there used to be more chance of spending time with family members, when we Japanese were thought to be economically poor. But, these days, our lifestyles have changed to be more individualistic, people have become more isolated and the situation has resulted in people planning suicides.

### **How did the changes of society affect the people committing suicide?**

Regarding social change, there is the opinion that the components of family have changed since 1965. Before then, the majority of Japanese families had been keeping the same lifestyle, three generations (grandparents-parents-children) living under the same roof. After 1965, nuclear families have been increasing rapidly, only three to four family members (father-mother-a child/children) live in the same home. Now we tend to be more individualistic and it makes it difficult for us to understand how to deal with interpersonal relationships. Miura (2006) explains the reason why the relationships of young adults appear loosely connected, by introducing Tsuji’s study. Our being used to have an Ego structure like a concentric circle and it came from the community. There were general and close relationships between a limited number of individuals, who have spent their whole lives in such communities like a farm village, the lower part of a town, an army or even a company. However, we do not have such strong communities in our present life, we do not know who our neighbor is. Communal life has been lost in the home, as families do not work together in farming/fishing or in trading. Families live separately even under the same roof, it is no longer a serious issue that we do not keep any general or close relationships among family members. Thus, we tend to have less connection with others in our present lives. Young people, brought up in today’s society, have not learned the value of community, they do not share space feelings, and time. It seems natural to them, that there is no space or time to share. It is normal that, at any given moment, the different members share space for a short time. *Shinju* used to be a ceremony for a couple who seriously wish to be eternally intimate. On the other hand, the *net-shinju* is a quite different ceremony for individuals, as they share the act of suicide but never share intimacy. An explanation for this is that at present the Ego structure of young adults, which used to be like a concentric circle, has changed its shape, to have multiple centers loosely connecting to others (See Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1** Two models of Ego structure

A similarity was found between the Ego structure of the *net-shinju* group and the one of many young adults. With these group suicides, they also reflect the condition of young adults, who are seeking community, which they only loosely relate to. These individuals do not feel that they have lost their community, because they do not know what it is.

**CONCLUSION** The original meaning of *shinju* was introduced as a specific group suicide in Japanese culture. The varieties of *shinju* referred to still appealing in Japanese society presently. And finally, *net-shinju* was introduced as the latest group suicide with the most advanced method currently. *Net-shinju* became a big social issue especially among young adults with increasing number of suicide completion. The changes of style in family and group suicide are discussed referring to disappearance of community and enhancement of individualistic life style. These suicidal behaviors are presently thought to be culturally specific in Japan and some part of Asia, but there may not be geographical differences with regards of *net-shinju*.

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