



Short communication

Japanese university students' difficulty in living and its association with suicidal ideation

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we investigated (1) Japanese university students' actual "difficulty in living" and (2) its association with suicidal ideation. The Difficulty in Living Questionnaire was administered to 547 Japanese university students. Results revealed that 37.5% of the students felt difficulty in living, and 21.0% had ongoing suicidal ideation. An exploratory factor analysis resulted in a three-factor model, and multiple regression analysis showed that factors "external self-insufficiency" and "feeling of emptiness" significantly predicted suicidal ideation. To prevent young Japanese adults from committing suicide, increasing their self-affirmation and feelings of value among other people is crucial.

1. Introduction

A new expression, "difficulty in living" (*Iki-dzura-sa*), has recently emerged in Japan. In particular, young people seem to feel this "difficulty in living" (Doi, 2014), but no scientific research has been conducted to clarify this actual state of being. Still, data from surveys confirmed that young Japanese people tend to have lower self-esteem and to feel more depressed than young people in other countries (Cabinet Office, 2014). Japan is the only country among the seven major industrialized nations where suicide is the leading cause of death in young people (MHLW, 2018). For university students, suicide has been the primary cause of death since 1996 (Sugioka, 2018). In contrast, university students with a lifetime history of suicidal ideation constitute approximately 10% in the United States and in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations 6 (Farabaugh et al., 2012; Peltzer et al., 2017). In China, this figure is approximately 20% (Zhang et al., 2012), but in Japan, it has been shown to reach 50% (Sugioka and Wakabayashi, 2012).

Using a free-form description survey, Otsuka and Anamizu (2017) qualitatively analyzed the "difficulty in living" trend among Japanese university students. Results showed that about 40% of the respondents felt difficulty in living, which involved, for instance, self-distress and dissatisfaction with the society. Moreover, Otsuka and Anamizu (2018) interviewed 30 Japanese university students to investigate their feelings of difficulty in living and suicidal ideation. Results revealed that many students felt overwhelmed by adapting to others and by self-deception and had chronic suicidal thoughts. Despite this research, the

statistical features of difficulty in living and its association with suicidal ideation have yet to be clarified, one reason being that English-speaking countries have no similar "difficulty in living" concept, so no research has been performed in the west.

Joiner et al. (2009) indicated that suicidal ideation arises from overlapping "thwarted belongingness" and "perceived burdensomeness." They described "thwarted belongingness" as the state and feeling of isolation and described "perceived burdensomeness" as the perception that one's own living is burdensome for others. Therefore, by investigating the actual state of difficulty in living of Japanese university students, we aim to reveal any specific background of suicidal ideation among youth in Japan and to clarify the important points of suicide prevention.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

In this quantitative research study, a questionnaire was distributed to 735 university students in a Japanese metropolitan area, where the largest number of university students were enrolled. Of those questionnaires, 547 were analyzed (197 males, 350 females; mean age \pm SD: 19.22 \pm 1.23 years; range: 18–26 years; effective response rate: 74.42%).

From June 2015 to February 2016, before and after some lectures, respondents anonymously completed the questionnaires, but only after providing informed written consent. The participants got no feedback

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or rewards to their responses. In case of mental upset caused by participation, we prepared a system through which respondents could receive clinical care from psychologists and psychiatrists. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the International University of Health and Welfare, Otawara, Japan.

2.2. Measures

This research employed the Difficulty in Living Questionnaire (DLQ), which was originally created from the classification of various difficulties in living using a method by the Japanese ethnologist Jiro Kawakita (Otsuka and Anamizu, 2017). To investigate diverse difficulties in living, we extracted 18 items excluding bodily sensations like “ache” and psychiatric symptoms such as “anxiety” and “depression.” Moreover, we added the two items “I feel it’s difficult to be alive” to elicit feelings of difficulty in living directly and “I want to die” to query suicidal ideation. Respondents indicated to what extent they currently felt the items’ content in their daily lives on a six-point scale ranging from “Do not feel at all” to “Feel very strongly.”

2.3. Data analysis

To clarify the DLQ’s structure, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis for scores on the original 18 items and then multiple regression to predict suicidal ideation based on DLQ subscales. IBM SPSS Statistics version 23 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) was used to perform all the analyses.

3. Results

For the item “I feel it’s difficult to be alive,” 205 respondents (37.48%) answered “Feel” and 50 of them (9.14%) answered “Feel strongly” or “Feel very strongly.” For the item “I want to die,” 115 respondents (21.02%) answered “Feel” and 29 of them (5.30%) answered “Feel strongly” or “Feel very strongly.”

Table 1 displays the results of the factor analysis. Although the floor effect was found in item 11, it was still analyzed because a previous survey reported it as a difficulty in living. As a result, no item had a factor loading of less than 0.30. In this study, we obtained a three-factor model with an eigenvalue of 1 or more and a cumulative contribution of 57.14%. Factor 1 was defined as the “external self-insufficiency” (ESI) factor ($\alpha = 0.88$) because it focused mainly on feelings of self-insufficiency and alienation from others and the external world, including inferiority, self-denial, and overadaptation. Factor 2 was defined as the “feeling of emptiness” (FE) factor ($\alpha = 0.80$) because it concerned the lack of hope and fulfillment in life. Factor 3 was composed of concrete inconveniences and dissatisfactions in everyday life, so it was termed the “frustration in daily life” (FDL) factor ($\alpha = 0.77$). These three factors showed a certain reliability coefficient, confirming the scale’s internal consistency.

Table 2 displays the results of the multiple regression analysis. No multicollinearity was found. A significant regression equation was found [$F(3543) = 154.843, p < 0.000$], with an R^2 of 0.458. ESI and FE were significant predictors of suicidal ideation.

4. Discussion

The results indicated that nearly 40% of Japanese university students felt that it is somewhat difficult to be alive. Although a previous study (Sugioka and Wakabayashi, 2012) showed that around 50% of Japanese university students had experienced suicidal ideation, this study showed that 20% experienced some ongoing suicidal ideation and 5% strongly wished to take their lives. In other words, it was not rare to find Japanese university students with suicidal ideation.

Despite the classification of students’ difficulties in living as feelings of self-insufficiency, emptiness, and daily frustrations, self-insufficiency

Table 1
Items in the DLQ three-factor model and results of factor analysis.

Factors and items	F1	F2	F3
ESI ($\alpha = 0.88$)			
6 I feel inferior to others when comparing myself to them	0.84	-0.14	0.04
11 I feel there is no place for me in this world	0.78	0.17	-0.20
18 I cannot be my true self	0.68	-0.04	0.06
7 I feel lonely	0.64	0.05	-0.02
16 I feel like I am not needed in society	0.60	0.43	-0.22
4 I cannot express my thoughts and arguments well to others	0.55	-0.06	0.10
12 I feel stress in all relationships (e.g., friends, family)	0.54	-0.10	0.31
20 I always have so many problems and worries	0.49	0.06	0.29
17 I feel unhappy with so much information I don’t want	0.30	0.10	0.16
FE ($\alpha = 0.80$)			
14 I do not have hope in my future	-0.13	0.85	0.10
15 I never feel fulfilled/satisfied	0.03	0.62	0.14
8 I have no mentor to follow	-0.06	0.60	-0.04
10 I feel empty in my life	0.30	0.53	0.02
FDL ($\alpha = 0.77$)			
1 I feel inconveniences in my daily life	-0.10	-0.02	0.81
2 I cannot do what I want to do	0.03	0.02	0.64
5 I feel emotionally drained	0.41	-0.04	0.42
3 I am dissatisfied with the current social situation	0.02	0.12	0.39
9 I feel things aren’t fair	0.09	0.34	0.35
Factor correlations			
	F2	F1	F2
	F3	0.74	F2
		0.63	0.54

Principal factor method/Promax rotation.

Note. DLQ: Difficulty in Living Questionnaire; ESI: external self-insufficiency; FE: feeling of emptiness; FDL: frustration of daily life.

Table 2
Summary of multiple regression analysis for variables predicting suicidal ideation in Japanese university students.

	B	SE B	β
ESI	0.62	0.06	0.48***
FE	0.33	0.05	0.28***
FDL	-0.06	0.06	-0.05
R^2	0.46***		
F	154.84***		

Note. *** $p < 0.001$. ESI: external self-insufficiency; FE: feeling of emptiness; FDL: frustration of daily life.

in their surroundings and emptiness were more likely to lead to suicidal ideation. Since FE was a type of depressed mood, it seemed psychiatrically natural to connect it to ideas about suicide. Here, we focus especially on ESI.

Joiner et al. (2009) explained that an active suicidal idea occurs when thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness overlapped. However, in Japanese university students, just self-insufficiency in the external world can lead to suicidal ideation, regardless of the perceived burdensomeness to others. Additionally, subjective feelings about self as socially nonconforming, like, for example, distress at self-failure, among others, could prompt suicidal ideation. In other words, the expression “difficulty in living” seemed to symbolize the feeling “I was never suited for living (in this world),” and the difficulty of doing so can strip young people in Japan of the will to live.

Therefore, to prevent young adults from committing suicide, devising plans to increase their self-affirmation (i.e., feeling their own value) among the surrounding people is essential. To improve their self-respect, providing solitary students with peer support and places or organizations of belonging is also essential. Finally, these strategies should help young people accumulate experiences in which, in this real

world, others can accept these young people's internal selves and thus represent them in reliable relationships.

As for limitations, we conducted a subjective questionnaire, which could be susceptible to biases including desirability bias. This study also had no confirmation of the respondents' mental conditions, so further investigation using some scales to rule out psychiatric problems is necessary. There might be various reasons for difficulty in living such as peer, family, or academic problems, but this study could not clarify all the reasons. Moreover, suicidal ideation should be differentiated from, albeit related to, actual suicidal attempts. To clarify the association between difficulty in living and suicidal attempt, examining the difficulty in living among persons who have experienced suicidal attempt will be required.

5. Conclusions

We conducted an original questionnaire for 547 Japanese university students, finding a high rate of suicidal ideation (21.0%) as well as subjective difficulties in living (37.5%). This study showed that just self-insufficiency in the external world could lead to suicidal ideation among them. To prevent young Japanese adults from committing suicide, increasing their self-affirmation and feelings of value among other people is crucial.

Conflict of interest

None.

Contributors

Hisashi Otsuka developed the original idea for the study and drafted the manuscript. Hisashi Otsuka and Sachiko Anamizu designed the study, supervised data collection, analyzed the data, and read and approved the final manuscript.

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