

FETICHISMO VIRTUAL NA VIDA DE UM HIKIKOMORI BRASILEIRO: UM ESTUDO DE CASO

FETICHES VIRTUALES EN LA VIDA DE UN HIKIKOMORI BRASILEÑO: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO

VIRTUAL FETISH IN THE LIFE OF A BRAZILIAN HIKIKOMORI: A CASE REPORT

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RESUMO: O fenômeno hikikomori, identificado no Japão nos anos de 1990, é uma condição psicossocial em que a pessoa, deliberadamente, se isola da sociedade por seis meses ou mais. Trata-se de um problema crescente no mundo. O caso descrito nesse estudo refere-se a um homem de 38 anos que havia abandonado o emprego há mais de dez anos e se mantido em isolamento social por mais de cinco. Sua rotina consistia em acessar jogos e páginas pornográficas na internet. A análise deste caso destacou alguns fatores psicodinâmicos que podem estar relacionados a um maior risco para o isolamento social: base narcísica frágil, fixação edípica materna e dificuldade em lidar com conflitos na idade escolar. Além disso, destacou-se a hiperestimulação de fantasias virtuais, com ênfase no fetichismo, voyeurismo e sadomasoquismo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Hikikomori. Isolamento social. Fetichismo. Fantasia virtual. Cibercultura. Psicanálise.

RESUMEN: *El fenómeno hikikomori, identificado en Japón en la década de 1990, es una condición psicossocial en que la persona permanece completamente aislado de la sociedad por seis meses o más. Este es un problema creciente en el mundo. El caso descrito en este estudio es sobre un hombre de 38 años que había dejado su trabajo por más de diez años y permaneció en aislamiento social por más de cinco años. Su rutina consistía en acceder a juegos virtuales y páginas pornográficas en Internet. El análisis de este caso destacó algunos factores psicodinámicos que pueden estar relacionados con mayor riesgo de aislamiento social: una base narcisista frágil, la fijación edípica materna y la dificultad para lidiar con los conflictos escolares. Además, se destacó la hiperestimulación de fantasías virtuales, con énfasis en el fetichismo, el voyerismo y el sadomasoquismo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Hikikomori. Aislamiento social. Fetichismo. Fantasia virtual. Cibercultura. Psicoanálisis.*

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ABSTRACT: *The hikikomori phenomenon, identified in Japan in the 1990s, is a psychosocial condition in which a person completely withdraws from society for six months or more. This problem has been increasing in several countries. The case reported in this paper is about a 38-year-old man that had withdrawn from work from more than ten years and kept isolated in his bedroom for more than five years. He used to play online games and access pornography websites in his daily routine. This case evidences the combination of factors that may have contributed to increasing the risk of social isolation: fragile narcissistic foundations, maternal oedipal fixation, difficulties to manage conflicts at scholar phase. Besides, it highlights the excessive fetishist, voyeuristic and sadomasochistic excitement with the internet.*

KEYWORDS: *Hikikomori. Social withdrawal. Fetishism. Virtual fantasies. Cyberculture. Psychoanalysis*

Introduction

The emergence of the expression hikikomori to describe a newly identified phenomenon in Japanese youngsters in the end of the 1990s (SAITO, 1998) does not seem to be a coincidence when related to the globalization and internet popularization phenomena, which occurred in the same period. Young people cloistered in their bedrooms, spending months or years with no external contact, not going to school or work, whilst financially supported by parents, has been an increasing phenomenon not only in Japan, but in many other countries (KATO *et al.*, 2012; BOMMERSBACH; MILLARD, 2019; BOWKER *et al.*, 2019).

Hikikomori has been described as a social and psychopathological phenomenon in which a person who completely withdraws from society for six months or more (SAITO, 1998; KANEKO, 2006). Kato, Kanba e Teo (2019) proposed a review of the definition of hikikomori: it is a kind of pathological social withdrawal, mostly physical isolation, for at least 6 months, included an important functional deficit or suffering connected with the social isolation. According to Suwa and Suzuki (2002), this problem is more frequently identified amongst males.

In the last years, several articles have been produced aiming to describe it, to understand its causes and to discuss up to what point this phenomenon may be considered a new psychopathology (LI; WONG, 2015; KATO; KANBA; TEO, 2019). However, there are divergences regarding its both definition and causes. As of the sociological studies, explanations regarding the opposition between conformist values of the Japanese society and the globalization context are prevalent (TOIVONEN *et al.*, 2011). Explanations highlighting parents' overprotection are also recurrent (TEO, 2010). Some researchers relate hikikomori to

school's high demands (SUWA; SUZIKI, 2002) or to rejection and dispute processes at school environment (TEO, 2010). Among psychiatrists, explanations concerning mood and personality disorders also prevail (KATO *et al*, 2012).

Although the interest on the problem is increasing, studies that promote the understanding of this problem in a broader perspective still lack. Moreover, the methodological difficulties are great, as the studies involve people who do not fancy reveal their emotions (LI; WONG, 2015). In Brazil, researches carried out on Scielo, Capes, and Pub Med online platforms have identified two Brazilian studies under the keyword "hikikomori" or "severe social isolation", one of them is in Portuguese language and the other one is in English. Most probably, this lack of Brazilian publications is a result of different psychiatric diagnoses; besides, it is a silent and recent phenomenon.

In the paper "Hikikomori in Brazil: 29 years of voluntary social withdrawal", Gondim et al (2017) describes a man in a voluntary social withdrawal for 29 years and his late spontaneous recovery. The authors sustain that some typical features of hikikomori in Japan were perceived in the case: young middle-class man, who has been facing intense social stressors and inadequate psychiatric and family support. The article "Hikikomori: a review about a serious phenomenon of social withdrawal" is the first Brazilian work about this topic in Portuguese language. Domingues-Castro and Torres (2018) have worked in a literature review about the hikikomori phenomenon and highlight the international increase of cases. According to them, this phenomenon has been occurred in several European, Asian and American countries. The clinical features are similar to those reported in Japan.

In the articles about hikikomori, reviewed for this study, disparity and outdate in the detailed description of individuals' habits and their virtual and sexual preferences were identified. This phenomenon was firstly described in Japan, where the pornographic industry with its fetishism is prosperous, as revealed by Dufour (2011). Despite of this, little attention has been directed to the sexuality and the virtual habits of the hikikomori.

In the early 2000s, Priote (2016) has started identifying an increase in the number cases of male adolescents who presented tendency to social isolation and school problems associated to the intensive use of the internet for games and pornographic website surfing. Then, we suppose a similar tendency amongst adults, and one of these cases stood out from the others due to the social isolation severity.

This article aims to analyze the influence of the internet on the substitutive sexual satisfactions, in special, of the virtual fetish and its relation to the process of social withdraw of a case, which is like the ones described in scientific literature as hikikomori. The report case which will show in this study will be denominate of Wilson³. It also investigates proposing new hypotheses to be investigated and identifying possible risk factors, in order to assist in the prevention of social isolation among young people.

Background

Freud (1905) shocked the scientific community when he proposed the existence of a polymorphous perverse sexuality at childhood, questioning the frontiers between the “perverse” and the “normal” in the scope of the psychic constitution. Different from adult sexuality, which has the intercourse as target, childhood sexuality, would be polymorphous in the substitutive pleasure, with highlights to the paired voyeurism-exhibitionism and sadomasochism, present at early ages. This pulsional flexibility would be a human being advantage when compared to other animals, as in the absence of a fixed object of satisfaction, it would be possible to abstract from the sexual drive through culturally significant creations.

If at the time of Freud, the civilized moral prompted for the repression of polymorphous perversions and their redirectioning to the maintenance of productive force through abstraction (FREUD, 1930), in the consumer society, the perverse fantasies started to be economically explored (DUFOR, 2009). In this context, one must question the predominance of what Lebrun (2007) denominates ordinary perversions⁴ of neo-subjects. The difference between classical perversion and ordinary perversion would be related to the subjectivation process, as the neo-subject would be subjectivation-resistant, remaining attached to polymorphous perverse fantasies, while the perverse would deny (Verleugnung) their subjectivation mode (LEBRUN, 2007). It may be mentioned that the neo-subject tends to remain attached to his/her mother and refused to grow up and take adulthood responsibilities, Wilson’s case appears to be, as possibly, so does other hikikomori.

³ The patient’s name and the object of his fetish were changed to better assure anonymity. This name was chosen because of the patient’s identification with the movie “Cast away” (2001), in scenes where the protagonist talked with a ball he called Wilson.

⁴ Ordinary perversions: this would be a sort of perversion produced in the daily routine and stimulated by the social-economical context: “a perverse economy may engage individuals in a bond or denial in a way that individuals are not properly perverse.” (LEBRUN, 2007, p. 333).

A fetishist culture

Freud (1905) defined fetish as a mechanism of satisfaction obtained by means of substitution of the sexual target by a part of the body or an unanimated object. In his view, the case would be considered pathological in case the fetish became the only mean of sexual satisfaction. Birman (2009) observed that Freud (1927) relaunched the concept of perversion when he clarified the constitution of the fetish object in the male psychism, with identification of the denial mechanism (*Verleugnung*). Therefore, “perversion elucidates itself in this theoretical context as being something fundamentally masculine, as a result of castration anguish, which would be put into discussion in this type of sexual experience” (BIRMAN, 2009, p. 383). Although Freud (1927) started from an infantile theory, the fetish is something more than an attempt of imagining a phallus where there is none, but a specific means to deal with deprivation experiences.

Türcke (2011), in a recapture of the Freudian analysis, establishes a relation between a supposed original trauma and the need for repetition as an attempt to deal with anguish. In the author’s vision, the contemporary culture has created exciting mechanisms in face of the existential anguish, which establishes a symptom of generalized abstinence and, at the same time, a paradigm, grounded in the search for sensations, fixing drive on fetishized objects.

According to Dufour (2009), the project of a perverse society is being built for centuries and Sade was one of its greater precursors, with Mandeville and Adam Smith, when asserting the logical supremacy of private addiction as something good for the economy. However, in the early 20th century, a decisive step was taken in the sense of the affirmation of fetishism as a type of indirect economical exploitation of the sexual drive. Edward Barnays, Freud’s nephew, stood out for using the psychoanalytical knowledge in an advertising campaign in New York during the crisis of 1929. In this event, beautiful women would model while enticingly smoking cigarettes, in allusion to fellatio, with the message: “torches of freedom”. The proposed advertising was of unconscious replacement of sexual satisfaction by the cigarette. It also included an allusion to the female freedom achievement (DUFOR, 2009).

If in the industrialization period, spirits were distributed in factories as means of relief and distractions for workers to bear the burden of large shifts (TÜRCKE, 2011), in the last century, the cinema and televisual entertainment started to be part of

the unconscious substitutive sexual satisfaction (ADORNO; HOKEIMER, 2002). Nowadays, the cyberspace, when gathering medias, market, social networks, games, and pornography, has become a propitious environment for excitement and the exploration of polymorphous perverse fantasies and fetishism (PRIOSTE, 2016).

Case description

Wilson, 38-year-old man, was referred to psychological assistance after a chest pain for which he had to be assisted at the emergency service in a public health center. In his first appointment, he showed apathy, slow thinking, temporal organization difficulty, and relevant memory lapses. He did not know how long he had withdrawn; maybe five years or more. He could not recall the last time he had been to work. His routine, for a long time, consisted of trading days for nights, surfing the web, watching animes, drinking coffee and playing games on computer. He lived in a humble home and his retired father financially supported him. Wilson, at the end of the first session, admitted some lack of the sense in his life: “living or dying... whatever”.

The patient denied suicidal thoughts and said that, before this crisis, he was satisfied with his way of life, because he was a person without ambition. He explained that enjoyed on the internet and didn't fell melancholic or bored. In his word: “If I had some money to buy cigarettes, I would not be here seeking treatment. Everything was all right”. Family and some friends were concerned about his isolation, but he mentioned feels good without meet people, including online chat refusal whit colleagues. Their isolation process was progressive, first quitting work, then abandoning personal contacts with friends, holding only online conversations. After this, he stopped responding to email or any message sent by the narrow circle of friends that he had. His contact with family members in the same house was also limited.

Wilson started working when he was still a teenager and got a job position in the IT area when he was around 20. As he considered himself shy, he believed that the work with computers helped him “hide himself”. At this stage, he was not interested in going out with friends and preferred staying home. He lost interest in his job as years went by. He did not see sense in “working, paying bills, living, and dying” anymore. This negative view seemed resulting from his father's life pattern: working hard and getting drunk at the end of the day. His father's alcoholism affected the familiar relationships, with predominant tension and fear.

Wilson affirms he never considered getting married or having his own house. He felt as a protector to his mother.

Aiming to identify his own shyness cause, Wilson recalled an accident at school in which he felt embarrassed for getting hurt. The isolation at home was a relief: he was away from school fights. This is how the strengthening of the videogame-mother company bond functioned as an escape from the violent interpersonal relations. Wilson has also reported difficulties at beginning of pre-school, when he was hit by a boy and was stimulated by his own family to hit back every time it happened.

At teenage, the challenge to relate to girls was lived with suffering, as although he felt attracted to them, he could not take the initiative or approach them. He did not find himself handsome, or interesting. He associated this low self to the belief that his mother found him unhandsome.

After about five months of appointments, Wilson managed to overcome shame and speak of points related to sexuality. He explained keeping the habit of accessing pornography websites, in search for a specific object of fetish. He associated this fetish to a play erotic scene at childhood. At teenage, he discovered pornographic magazines of specific themes. However, it was during early adulthood, with the access to internet, that the virtual world of fetish started to be part of his daily routine. The sadomasochistic scene supplied him with a type of unimaginable satisfaction with real women.

Wilson was assisted through a psychoanalytic approach, weekly, for a period of 9 months⁵. At the appointment with a psychiatrist, he was diagnosed with severe depression and started antidepressant treatment. Nevertheless, no significant success was obtained through drug treatment. With psychotherapy, the patient started leaving home for the appointments and, within months, he resumed sporadic meetings with friends. Gaming was decreased; he went back to sleeping during the night and keeping awake during the day. An improvement in his ability to tell his story with temporal connection was observed. Notwithstanding, during this period, the search for a job and autonomy did not progress. Wilson evaluated that the appointments promoted better view of things, since earlier, he saw no purpose in living and death was preferable. In

⁵ The process was interrupted when the analyst changed her job and Wilson was sent to another psychologist.

his words: ‘now I see that I need to have my own life. Before this, I could not even see this.’

Discussion

This is the second case related similar to hikikomori, described in Brazilian literature, which presents as clinical and social phenomenon like discussed by Kato et al (2012); Li and Wong (2015) and; Kato, Kanba e Teo (2019). However, its important highlight some cultural and psychological aspects disregarded until then. The analysis of this case leads us to the hypothesis that, in the phase of virtual consumerism of the web 2.0, there are one exploration of voyeuristic and sadomasochistic sexual drives, especially of male audiences through gaming and pornography, which may alter the libidinal investment of young people in interpersonal relations, particularly amongst young people with psychic and social vulnerabilities.

Wilson’s excessive attachment to cyberspace experiences seems to be, on one hand, a refusal to symbolic castration. In his words: “in the cyberspace, I am rich. In life, I am nothing”, letting himself in the delight of omnipotent fantasies. On the other hand, lays the rejection towards his father’s destiny: ‘to work, to pay the bills, to live and to die’, embraced by spirits. To Wilson, the cyberspace meant an alternative to this insipid destiny, with the promise of a continuous enjoyment, with no culpability, no frustrations.

Wilson’s case seems to illustrate some changes about the sensations seeking culture: his father would intoxicate himself with alcohol, his mother lived her fantasies by television soap operas, and he lived with his omnipotent fantasies of online games and sadomasochistic voyeurism. Three individuals experiencing certain degree of isolation and apathy towards the leading of their own life.

According Birman (2009), the fetish opposes to the polymorphous perverse pulsional tendency of continuous object substitution. In the fetishism, there is a drive fixation, which is crystallized in a single object. This pulsional immobility could reach its limit in a mortification of the drive itself and desire stagnation (BIRMAN, 2009). In this sense, it may be supposed that the eternal repetition of same, in omnipotent fantasies of games and in sadomasochism of the pornography websites, may have contributed, in Wilson’s case, to drive mortification, explicated by an absence of sense in life, absence of search for internal blank filling. All his libidinal satisfaction was concentrated in the sadomasochistic voyeurism and in the games, with no sublimatory perspective.

It may be also concluded that there was psychological vulnerability in Wilson due to narcissist frailty. He considered himself as a burden, besides that, he had difficulty affectively bonding with his father, which may have contributed to the insecurity in relations outside family circle. Some studies about the hikikomori suggest attachment traumas at childhood, resulting in posterior bonding avoidance behavior (SAKAMOTO *et al.*, 2005). Still on the family relations, it is important to highlight the oedipal problematic and his excessive attachment to his mother.

Wilson had traumatic experiences at school. The relation between hikikomori and bullying is evidenced by Sakamoto et al. (2005); however, in Wilson's case, the family stimulus for him to release his aggressive drive, instead of resolving conflicts in a pacific fashion, contributed for the validation of sadomasochistic satisfactions. With few familiar or scholar coercions, in the sense of suppressing and offering sublimatory possibilities, Wilson became a victim of his own perverse impulses. The violent games at home consisted of a less stressful alternative to release such impulses. To Freud (1930), familiar and social coercions would be important in the process of sexual and aggressive drives sublimation.

The poorly resolved tensions in the familiar and scholar environments, the lack of coercion, as well as oedipal conflicts, have contributed in Wilson's fixations in the polymorphous perverse satisfactions from the cyberspace. The games offered Wilson a satisfaction alternative to the competitive social life, at the same time it would allow a technologically controlled sociability, with no risks. The virtual fetishes, in turn, would offer him sexual satisfaction with neither the need to deal with the unpredictability of the female desire, nor the risks of impotence, with the advantage of not having to abandon the protection of the maternal cocoon.

Concluding remarks

The case presented herewith reveal subjacent aspects to the hikikomori phenomenon with deeper sexuality facets which are more difficult to be spotted and evidenced, and which offer authors and scientists clues to broaden the comprehension of this phenomenon. Moreover, this is not about universalizing the conclusions grounded on one single case, but to add new hypotheses to be investigated, considering the complexity of factors. The importance that the studies about hikikomori consider the affective bonding at childhood and the virtual habits during

adolescence is highlighted, in special to the polymorphous perverse fantasies. It is probable that omnipotent fantasies experienced at the cyberspace, as well as the excessive linking of the website-exhibited pornography fetishes, play an important role in the hikikomori phenomenon, although they are not sufficient to explain all cases. A combination between frail narcissist bases, oedipal maternal fixation, difficulties in the managing of scholar conflicts, and the free exercising of the fetishist, voyeuristic, and sadomasochistic polymorphous perverse impulses at cyberspace could consist of risk factors, which must be investigated. It is also relevant to consider that the transition of a desire-suppressing based culture - cultural malaise - to the malaise of immoderate desires, whose lack of social coercion in the sense of perverse impulse suppression, has changed the libidinal economy of individuals, making people more vulnerable to diverse fetishist fixations.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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