The relevance of educational contexts in the emergence of Social Withdrawal (hikikomori). A review and directions for future research

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the phenomenon of young people suffering from social withdrawal (hikikomori) has become a social emergency in many countries. The aim of this review is to analyse whether and how researchers have considered the relationship between the emergence and spread of hikikomori and the characteristics that educational contexts assume in neoliberal societies. The searches, which were conducted in the Web of Science, Scopus, Proquest and JStore databases, identified 73 articles published since 2000. The results confirm that in many cases authors have adopted a single-axis perspective as the key to interpreting the phenomenon, focusing on single factors ("psychiatrization" of the problem, diagnostic approach, proposals for recovery, etc.) or using traditional medical research tools. The review also identifies some studies that provide evidence in favour of how certain interventions in the school environment can contribute to re-socializing young hikikomori.

1. Introduction

A particular form of isolation was detected in Japan at the end of the 1970 s: young people, often male, with no diagnosed mental illness, decided to shut themselves up in their rooms, interrupting their activities, such as school or work, and cutting off all social relationships. The Japanese psychiatrist Tamaki Saito (1998)/ (2013) used the word hikikomori - a word composed of "withdrawing" [hiku] and "isolating oneself" [komoru] (Kato, Kanba and Teo, 2019) - to describe the phenomenon and the people who experience this particular condition. It is characterized not only by the symptoms described above, but also by the intensive use of digital tools for chatting or playing, the inversion of circadian night-day rhythms and, sometimes, by violent reactions against family members (usually the mother).

Hikikomori soon spread to many other metropolitan areas in Asia (Hong Kong, Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Iran), Europe (Austria, Italy, France, Spain, Finland), the Americas (USA, Canada, Brazil), Africa (Tunisia, Nigeria), Australia (Wong et al., 2015, 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2019; Bankier et al., 1999; Pozza et al., 2019; Caputo, 2020; Guedj-Bourdiau, 2011; Malagón-Amor et al., 2015; Husu and Välimäki, 2017; Teo, 2013; Stip et al., 2016; Gondim et al., 2017; Souilem et al., 2019; Bowker et al., 2019; Kato et al., 2012), and so much so that it has also become a mass media phenomenon involving not only researchers but also artists from different disciplines (cinema, comics, literature, music) (Hairston, 2010; Quaianni Manuzzato and Marchisano, 2018; Strecher, 2008; Bonobo, 2017).

There are no official statistics on people in social isolation, except in Japan. The Cabinet Office of the Japanese Government (Tajan et al., 2017) reports that the number of people in voluntary isolation in 2016 is 541,000 (between 15 and 39 years old). However, an expert in the field such as Tamaki Saito believes that the figure reported by the Japanese government is underestimated and the real figure could amount to 1 million (Pierdominici, 2008).

There is no clear explanation why the hikikomori phenomenon first appeared in Japan and only almost two decades later in other parts of the world.

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The first studies on hikikomori situated the phenomenon within the so-called culture-bound syndrome. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th Ed.; DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) defines it as "(.) recurrent, locality-specific patterns of aberrant behaviour and troubling experience that may or may not be linked to a particular DSM-IV diagnostic category. Many of these patterns are indigenously considered to be "illnesses", or at least afflictions, and most have local names" (p. 844).

Some researchers have therefore related certain aspects of Japanese culture to the emergence of hikikomori. They identify it with the *amae* phenomenon - a form of attachment and dependence of the child on his or her mother - in the feeling of shame, in valuation of the social role of the person, all cultural peculiarities of the collectivist Japanese model of society (Teo and Gaw, 2010; Ricci, 2014).

In forcing students to undergo exhausting selection examinations to gain access to institutions, and consequently prestigious professions, the Japanese education system itself has been called into question and considered responsible for the reproduction of subjectivities marked by the importance of the social role of the individual (Ricci, 2006).

Beyond seeing hikikomori as a cultural-bound syndrome, some scholars, such as Vogel (2012) or Suwa and Suzuki (2013), point out that the emergence of social isolation in Japan, rather than in other countries, has to do with the rapidity with which socioeconomic changes have manifested themselves in the country of cherry trees and with the contrast between the new forms of subjectivization, marked by the Western individualist model, and traditional Japanese culture.

In fact, since the end of the 1970 s, with the succession of crises that have affected the entire globe (worker insubordination, the oil crisis, the financial crisis, the e-commerce bubble, the real estate bubble), Japan has undergone profound transformations in its productive, and consequently social structure, which have in turn had a strong impact on people's psychological well-being. The enormous efforts a young person has to make to obtain a good qualification are no longer enough to gain access to a worthwhile job and thus to a respected social role. The choice that an increasing number of students are beginning to make as a form of silent protest, then, is that of rejecting society through hikikomori (Toivonen et al., 2011).

For some scholars (Furlong, 2008; Nonaka and Sakai, 2021), moreover, the Japanese economic crisis of the 1990 s would have accelerated the spread of the phenomenon, causing the rupture of the bond of trust between the harsh school selection and the guarantee of social prestige. In this sense, a combination of elements such as Japanese cultural specificity, selectivity of the educational system and socio-economic transformation processes may have contributed to the emergence of the hikikomori phenomenon in Japan earlier and more widely than in other countries.

The presence of other disorders diagnosed in some people in[7] hikikomori has considerably complicated the definition of this form of distress. At present, both scholars and the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Kato, Kanba and Teo, 2019) agree that a person in isolation is considered to be a person who manifests the behaviours described above, in the absence of other pathologies (schizophrenia, intellectual disability, etc.).

Other scholars (Suwa et al., 2003; Suwa and Suzuki, 2013) have suggested distinguishing between primary hikikomori, referring to a person who is in a condition of voluntary social isolation without co-morbidity with other psychiatric disorders, and secondary hikikomori, referring to a person who adds other mental pathologies to the condition of isolation.

With regards to the dimensions to be taken into account in the onset of hikikomori, studies appear to agree in identifying three factors as contributing to the distress: (1) individual characteristics; (2) the family; and (3) the school and more generally society (Saito, 1998/, 2013; Umeda and Kawakami, 2012; Kaneko, 2006).

Our study focuses on this latter aspect, with the aim of analysing the role played by socio-cultural factors, such as school contexts and educational processes, in the emergence and spread of the hikikomori phenomenon.

1.1. Research questions

To understand how researchers have approached the emergence of the hikikomori phenomenon in relation to school contexts and educational processes, we take into consideration two dimensions in the studies reviewed: the theoretical-methodological dimension and the content dimension.

The analysis of the methodology used (design of the research, instruments used and choice of sample) allows us to explore which variables and dimensions have been taken into account.

At the same time, the exploration of the theoretical framework allows us to obtain indications regarding the perspective through which researchers view the hikikomori phenomenon and the importance they attribute to sociocultural factors in its appearance.

Secondly, we go into greater depth with regard the content of the main object of our review to explore which aspects of school culture are related to the emergence of the phenomenon.

Therefore, in this article, after a quick summary regarding the type of journal, year of publication and country where the research took place, we have analysed the studies reviewed with the aim of answering the following research questions:

1. Does the analysis of the research methods and theoretical frameworks of the selected articles allow a first approximate understanding of the importance the researchers assigned to the educational context?

2. How did they address the relationship between the emergence and spread of hikikomori and school contexts and educational processes?

1.2. Theoretical background

The study of the background has shown how, in research on the hikikomori phenomenon, "pensée médicale" is predominant (Foucault, 1994, p. 374). Due to the complexity we observe in the behaviour of people in social isolation, we are of the opinion that this approach is not exhaustive.

Therefore, our analysis of the reviewed articles was guided by the intersection of the following three theoretical perspectives:

(a) a sociological perspective, which considers the school as a means of reproducing the existing socio-economic structure (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/, 1972; Laval, 2003/, 2004; Dardot and Laval, 2009/, 2019);.

(b) the Disability Studies' critique of the notion of ableism, conceived, as Campbell (2009) writes, as the set of social and political structures that discriminate on the basis of perceived or actual abilities;.

(c) an (anti-)psychiatric-philosophical perspective, aimed at questioning the relationship between mental distress and socio-environmental factors (Foucault, 2003/2004, 1972/2012; Basaglia et al., 1975; Basaglia and Basaglia Ongaro, 2013; Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/, 1997; Laval, 2018/, 2020).

The first perspective allows us to identify an important homogenizing element in the socio-economic transformations that characterize the globalization process in relation to societies at an international level, including educational spheres. Changes in recent decades in the productive sphere (technological innovation, relocation of production, global market, communication) and labour market (precariousness and flexibility) have been accompanied and supported by political-ideological recommendations issued by different supranational institutions. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization all began to take an interest in the public

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[7] We have intentionally used the preposition *in* to emphasize the idea that, in studying the hikikomori phenomenon, we are interested in emphasizing the "choice" factor, rather than the psychic disorder.

institutions of States, such as health and schooling, orienting their reforms according to neoliberal principles (Santafé Carrera and Luque Guerrero, 2016). With regard to school reform laws, some researchers, such as Laval et al. (2012), have identified signs of such principles in: (a) the privatization of education and training pathways, including through the creation of a training market; and (b) the subordination of education to the new characteristics of the labour market, whereby selective and competitive teaching techniques have been introduced and the very objectives of education modified.

In addition to institutional reforms, the school context then becomes, albeit not in a mechanical and linear way, the cultural expression of a neoliberal ideology that prioritizes "ability" as the function to be acquired in order to become a self-made entrepreneur (Laval, 2018/, 2020).

This abilist perspective that underpins neoliberal societies (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2011; Goodley and Lawthom, 2019), combined with other forms of oppression (race, class, gender), can lead to the discrimination of those not considered to have "normal" abilities, the notion of the "normally able individual" being represented by the autonomous, flexible, productive, consumer individual.

Profoundly reshaped by neoliberal policies, the educational institution can, then, become a device capable of disciplining and subjugating difference, through the intensive administration of "normality" pursued through the attainment of standardized skills.

We believe that the (anti-)psychiatric-philosophical perspective offers the theoretical tools capable of synthesising the ideas set out above and allows us to reconstruct the anthropological and psychocognitive effects (Berardi, 2021, p.103) of the transition we are experiencing. It is, therefore, a key to interpreting some of the figures with which contemporary subjectivity is expressed, such as that of the hikikomori.

In this sense, according to Foucault (1972)/ (2012), it seems evident to us that each epoch classifies "different" behaviours within the category of "mental illness" and treats this issue with the intention of bringing the behaviour of these people back to the "normality" of the epoch. On the psychiatric field, we find the works (and practices, even political) of Basaglia and Deleuze & Guattari useful to interpret the complexity of the behaviour of those who deviate from the "norm". The interpretation that the latter give of the subject, such as a desiring machine (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/, 1975), brings us closer to an idea of the "crazy" radically different from that which prevails in the psychiatric sphere. For Deleuze & Guattari, the schizophrenic is the desirous subject who moves at the limit of social production and who rushes into neurosis and psychosis at the moment he suffers the processes of reterritorialization (normalization of desires, social roles, consequent work of control and repression) that capital constantly operates to optimize the extraction of surplus value. The "madman" thus represents the one who breaks the capitalist normality, who tries to escape the mechanisms of social control but who precipitates in failure and psychic suffering. Basaglia, for his part, insists on considering "mental disorder" as an "altered" behaviour that can only be understood if it is inserted into the dynamics of interpersonal and social relationships that have given it a face (Jervis, 2014, p. 255).

Therefore, assuming a non-medicalizing reading of difference, we use these theoretical perspectives to explore how the reviewed studies take into account the role of the school context in the emergence of hikikomori.

2. Method

2.1. Search method and inclusion and exclusion criteria

The search was conducted in the Web of Science, Scopus, Proquest and JStore databases using the following Boolean combination of keywords: hikikomori AND school OR hikikomori AND education.

For inclusion of the article, these descriptors also had to appear in paragraphs or sections in which the author was explicitly or indirectly interested in the relationship between hikikomori, school context and the educational process.

The selection of studies to be reviewed was carried out considering the following criteria:

(a) articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals since 2000 (the databases consulted do not give any results before 2000 in the selected languages);.

(b) empirical and theoretical studies;.

(c) research descriptors contained in the title, keywords, abstract and text of the article;.

(d) publications in English, Spanish, Italian, French.

Both reviews and theoretical studies were also taken into consideration in order to verify the degree of interest and the weight that international scientific research has given to the relationship between educational contexts and the occurrence of hikikomori in analysing the phenomenon.

Although the chosen research descriptors had a very high recurrence in articles dealing with the hikikomori phenomenon, they were often only present in the definition of hikikomori or in the description of the behaviour of the person in social isolation. Most of these articles were therefore not of interest for this review, for which the following exclusion criteria were followed:

- the descriptors "education" and "school" should not appear alone in the description or definition of hikikomori or as mere elements characterizing environmental or personal aspects;.

- texts such as conference abstracts, letters to the editor, theses and book reviews were excluded.

2.2. Analysis procedure

The articles were analysed on the basis of the previously formulated questions. In order to proceed with the thematic analysis, the constant comparison method was used (Glaser and Strauss, 1967/, 2013). The reading of the articles was accompanied by the encoding of as many categories as possible related to the research questions. Furthermore, in accordance with the method followed by Glaser and Strauss, each new piece of content that could be encoded in a category was compared with those already encoded in the same category. This process of continuous comparison made it possible to produce the theoretical properties of each category described in the Results and Discussion sections. Our analysis of the texts continued through the use of notes, or "memos". This made it possible to reduce the categories and their theoretical properties to those that were essential and functional for understanding and interpreting the texts, as well as highlighting the relationships and connections between categories. Furthermore, it also made it possible to avoid encoding the same content in different categories.

The research methods were encoded as: (a) quantitative; (b) qualitative; (c) mixed methods; (d) review/theoretical/expert opinion. Sampling methods were considered. In this way, it was possible to systematize information on the examined topics and how and why they were chosen. In particular, it was noted whether the participants were selected from the student population, from patients in psychiatric practices or hospitals or from the general population. The following demographic data were also considered relevant: age, gender and residence (metropolis, urban area, rural area).

With regard to theoretical models, the classification posited by Gonzalez et al. (2017) was followed, framing research on the problem of the relationship between hikikomori and school within three conceptual frameworks: (a) explicit theoretical framework; (b) theoretical signals present as traces within the research; and (c) unspecified theoretical framework.

The process of encoding the contents inherent to the subject matter of this study led to identification of the following categories within which to place the thematic analysis of the articles: (a) bullying and peer rejection; (b) structure of the school system; (c) school rejection as a cause and/or symptom; (d) relationship between school

transformations, society and the labour market; (e) school as a place for recovery.

3. Results

From the search, 280 articles were found containing the research descriptors in the title, abstract, keywords or text. Of these, 265 came from database searches and 15 were manually identified from the bibliographies in some of the examined works.

Application of the above criteria resulted in the selection of 73 studies (Fig. 1) for analysis, the results of which are presented below. A table summarising the data can be found in Appendix A.

Journals were classified into four categories: (1) medical-psychiatric; (2) psychological; (3) educational; and (4) social sciences (other).

Most of the reviewed studies were published in journals from the first two subject areas: medical-psychiatric and psychological. Only a small number of articles were published in educational journals, while a considerable number of studies appeared in other social science journals (however, it should be noted that journals such as Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry were also included in this category). Table 1 displays the results.

Since 2006 (Fig. 2), there has been an increase in the number of publications which, although not central to the subject of the study, refer to issues concerning the relationship between hikikomori and education.

With regard to the countries in which the studies were carried out (see Fig. 3), it is worth noting the prominence of Japan and a fair number of comparative studies addressing both Asian (Wong et al., 2019; Wong, 2009) and Western countries (Sanchez, 2017; Furuhashi et al., 2013; Martinotti et al., 2020; Bowker et al., 2019; Kato et al., 2012; Castelpietra et al., 2021). It is also interesting to note that, outside the Asian context, Italy appears to be the country with the highest number of articles on the subject (Iannattone et al., 2021; Caputo, 2020; Ranieri, 2015, 2018; Maglia, 2020).

3.1. Does the analysis of the research methods and theoretical frameworks of the selected articles allow a first approximate understanding of the importance the researchers assigned to the educational context?

With regard to the methodology or type of studies, of the 73 articles, 27 used a quantitative methodology, 26 a qualitative methodology, three mixed methods and 17 were reviews or theoretical articles (expert opinion).

An analysis of the methodological approaches of the studies examined made it possible to reconstruct the data collection methods, process of analysis, methods of selection and types of samples.
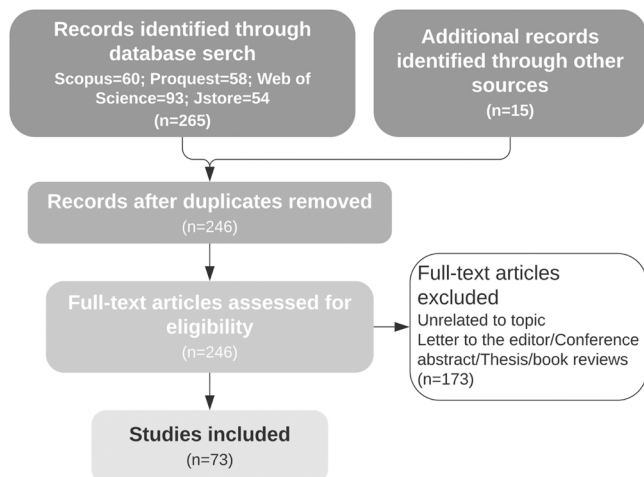

Fig. 1. Article search and selection process.

Table 1
Types of journals.

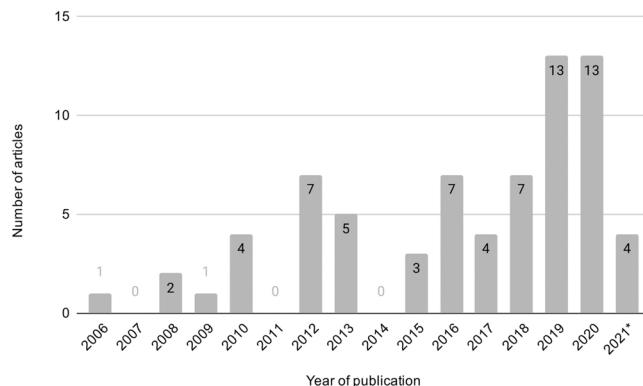| Disciplines	Percentage (number) of studies
Medico-psychiatric	58% (42)
Psychological	12% (9)
Educational	8% (6)
Social sciences (other)	22% (16)

Fig. 2. Year the reviewed articles were published. * 2021: when considering the growth trend in the number of publications containing references to the relationship between hikikomori and education, the year 2021 should not be included, as this is the year in which the review was carried out.
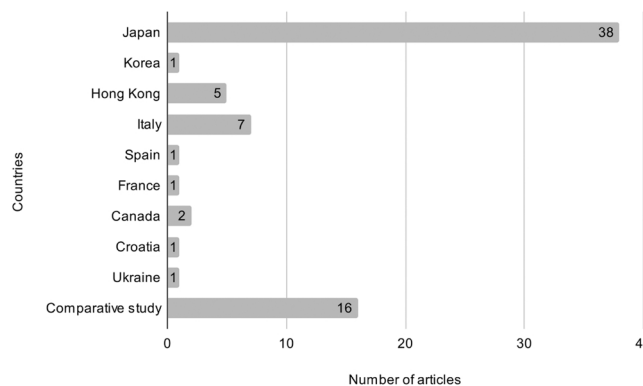

Fig. 3. Countries in which studies were conducted.

Most of the quantitative studies made use of questionnaires (e.g., Bowker et al., 2019) to investigate the correlation between the hikikomori condition and depressive states, anhedonia and parental support. Some authors (e.g., Kato et al., 2012) conducted exploratory studies to examine knowledge of the hikikomori phenomenon in psychiatric settings and its characteristics (age, location, causes, etc.). In many of these cases, medical-psychiatric and psychological investigation instruments were used, such as psychiatric scales, diagnostics, psychometric tests, etc. (e.g., Kato, Katsuki et al., 2019; Tateno et al., 2016).

With regard to qualitative studies, the following methodologies were employed: (a) action-research; (b) interviews; (c) discussion groups; (d) case studies; (e) focus groups; (f) narratives; (g) peer-to-peer learning; and (h) case vignettes and case presentations.

As for the instruments listed in the qualitative research reviewed, these were used to achieve different objectives: for example, a particular form of peer-to-peer learning process was employed by Yokoyama et al. (2019) to experiment with educational modes with young people in hikikomori that differed from the competitive and a-solidarity modes of traditional Japanese schooling; Rubinstein (2016), on the other hand, used in-depth interviews and discussion groups to explore parents'

narratives about their children in hikikomori; while case studies, case vignettes and case presentations were often used by researchers from the medical or psychological fields with the aim of focusing on diagnoses and intervention hypotheses (e.g., Silić et al., 2019).

Analysis of the sample led us to conclude that, although few subjects (n = 8) were explicitly identified within the student population, an in-depth analysis of their characteristics reveals that many subjects began to isolate themselves socially precisely while still attending school (Table 2).

By way of example, an analysis of the text in Wong's (2012) study clearly showed that the time when the respondent began to isolate socially corresponded to the school (or university) period:

"When I didn't go to school and played online games alone, I felt very unhappy as I knew that it was useless to stay at home (.) (User 30)" (p. 422);.

or:

"(.) I found the programme different from the class in school, which is less boring (.) (User 26)" (p. 425).

Similarly, an analysis of the research sample used by Imai et al. (2020) led us to conclude that the period of onset of social withdrawal coincided with the time when the subjects were attending school:

"The percentages of patients with past school refusal were significantly higher in "current" (n = 31, 59.6%) and "past" Hikikomori patients (n = 35, 50.0%) than in "others"." (p. 5).

An analysis of other demographic data such as age, gender, geographic area and social status (Table 3) revealed that approximately just under half of the studies reported gender and age (for example, Yokoyama et al., 2019; Tateno et al., 2019; Tajan, 2015; Sulla et al., 2020), while only an extremely small number of articles reported geographic context (n = 14; e.g., Bowker et al., 2019; Kato, Katsuki et al., 2019; Koyama et al., 2010; Stip et al., 2016; Yong and Nomura, 2019; Umeda and Kawakami, 2012) and social class (n = 6; Wong, 2009; Frankova, 2019; Hamasaki et al., 2020; Umeda and Kawakami, 2012; Chan and Lo, 2014b; Sulla et al., 2020; Iwakabe, 2021).

These data confirm that: (a) the phenomenon seems to prevail in urban areas (the fact that some of the articles in which the area was not explicitly reported were studies conducted in Hong Kong, a highly urbanized geographical area, also supports this hypothesis); (b) the social composition is generally middle-class (e.g., Yong and Nomura, 2019), although there is no shortage of cases of young people in hikikomori

Table 2

Research method: choice of sample.

Sample composition	No. of articles
Students	8
Parents of students	1
General population	4
Young adults in hikikomori/young adults (without further specification)[a]	11
Patients[a]	12
Parents/young people in hikikomori[a]	3
Mental health professionals (researchers, psychiatrists, paediatricians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, medical students)	4
Patients vs. control	5
Professionals and young people in hikikomori[a]	1
Professionals, parents, young people in hikikomori[a]	1
Patients vs. control* * and sample parents	1
Students, freeter vs. control[b]* *	1
Teachers	1
Adults with a hikikomori background	1

* * The control group was selected from the student population.

[a] In many of these studies, the individuals involved had a history of isolation starting at school age.

[b] "In Japan, 'freeter' was a term introduced by a advertisement magazine in the late eighties, combining 'free lance' and 'albeiter' (a students' slang that means part-time or periodical side job)." (Inui, 2005, p. 244)

Table 3

Articles reporting demographic data of samples consisting of individuals in hikikomori.

Demographic data	No. of articles
Age	33
Gender	39
Metropolitan/urban areas	11
Rural areas	3
Social status	6

belonging to the working class (Wong, 2009); and (c) the prevailing gender in the studies examined was male.

The small number of articles that took into account geographical context, school environment and social class confirms that in many cases the dominant interpretative paradigm is psychiatric-psychological, and therefore one interested in interpreting the hikikomori phenomenon in pathological terms, neglecting how the characteristics of contemporary societies might influence the onset of voluntary social isolation.

The theoretical approaches adopted in the scientific research were categorized as follows: (a) explicit theoretical framework; (b) theoretical signals present as traces within the research; and (c) theoretical framework not specified (Fig. 4).

Most of the articles examined did not have an explicit theoretical framework. The few that did included, for example, the study by Chan (2019), which referred to Social Control Theory, and that by Yokoyama et al. (2019), in which Dialectical Behaviour Therapy was used to develop the methodology. On the other hand, theoretical signals appeared in some articles through the use of notions or concepts that allowed the research to be framed within a theoretical horizon that was not further explained. By way of example, Berman and Rizzo (2019) used Judith Butler's notion of *indistinguishability between self and others* as a building block to construct a critical sociological analysis of hikikomori.

3.2. How did they address the relationship between the emergence and spread of hikikomori and school contexts and educational processes?

A thematic analysis of the reviewed articles led to the identification of five separate categories: (a) school refusal as a contributing cause or symptom; (b) bullying and peer rejection; (c) structure of the school system; (d) relationship between school transformations, society and the labour market; and (e) school as a place for recovery.

As Fig. 5 illustrates, the most represented thematic category was school refusal, with 49 articles reporting this. It was followed by bullying and peer rejection (34 articles), structure of the school system (31 articles), relationship between school transformations, society and the labour market (28 articles) and school as a place for recovery (19 articles).

3.2.1. School refusal

A group of articles (e.g., Tateno et al., 2012; Imai et al., 2020; Yuen
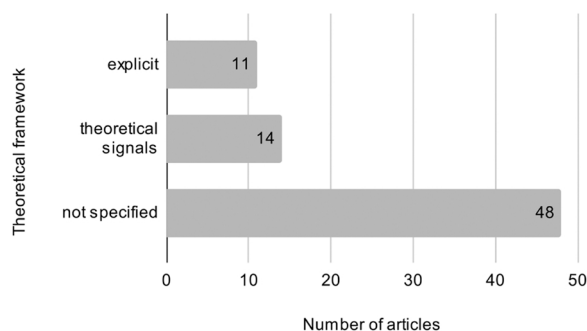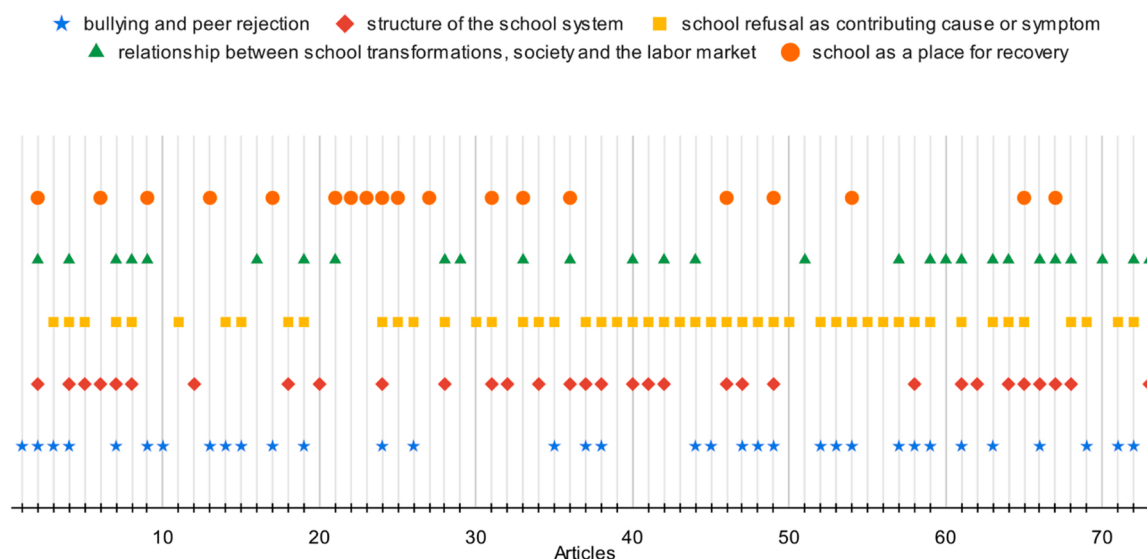

Fig. 4. Theoretical framework.

Fig. 5. Representation of conceptual categories as a function of articles.

et al., 2018; Tateno et al., 2017; Tajan et al., 2017; Ranieri et al., 2016; Nagata et al., 2013; Malagón-Amor et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2013) considered school refusal as a symptom (sometimes also as a cause) of hikikomori or as a problem behaviour that can lead to voluntary social isolation.

Some authors pointed to a connection between the structure of the school system and school withdrawal. Among these, for example, Yoshii et al. (2016) identified school rejection as the first manifestation of isolation and pointed to the need for schools to report this type of behaviour to families and specialists at an early stage.

Others linked school drop-out to selective competitive processes typical of the Japanese educational model. This is the case with Furuhashi et al. (2013), who explicitly referred to the "*gestion n é olibérale de l'éducation*" (p. 263), and Uchida (2010), who considered the increase in school drop-outs from 1978 to 2005, investigating the total number of hikikomori within these data and reaching the conclusion that the high level of competitiveness in the Japanese education system is conducive to young people choosing isolation:

"It is highly competitive to get into universities with high standards (.) Consequently, Japanese students are more likely to enter into a "student apathy" state, in other words, a Hikikomori state." (p. 106).

In characterizing school refusal as the first manifestation of hikikomori, among the possible factors favouring this behaviour, one group of researchers (Koyama et al., 2010) pointed to the economic crisis and certain socio-economic transformations, such as the competitiveness of the labour market and job insecurity.

Although bullying, peer rejection and school failure were often mentioned in a superficial way among the causes contributing to school refusal (e.g. Iannattone et al., 2021; Silić et al., 2019), no specific analyses were found regarding the characteristics of the context and educational processes that determine the above-mentioned behaviours and situations. Neither have there been any studies that, even through the voices of young people in social isolation and teachers in educational institutions, allow us to understand the complex web that links the phenomenon of school drop-out to the onset of hikikomori.

3.2.2. Bullying and peer rejection

Another group of articles identified bullying and peer rejection as one of the factors related to hikikomori that act as possible contributing causes to the choice of social isolation (Yoshii et al., 2016; Berman, 2019; Sánchez Rojo, 2017; Guedj Bourdiau, 2020; Wong et al., 2019; Kato et al., 2012; Tateno et al., 2019; Sarkar, 2020;etc.). For example, in describing the condition of hikikomori, Yoshii et al. (2016) only stated

that it can occur as a result of bullying at school, while in their study, Kato et al. (2012) set out a more articulated reflection. For these researchers, a multiplicity of biopsychosocial, cultural and environmental factors, including family and school, can be considered a direct cause of hikikomori; these same factors have significant influence on various problematic behaviours such as bullying, and this, they concluded, is related to hikikomori.

Only Nae (2018) traced a link between a phenomenon such as bullying and social transformations resulting from the processes of globalization that have taken place in Japan since the late 1970 s. For this researcher, the sense of isolation, anxiety and disorientation experienced by millennials as a result of social change is expressed in a wide range of problematic behaviours, including bullying:

"The psychological impact of the social changes discussed above is considerable. (.) ikizurasa [burden to living] (.) was used to cover a wider array of issues, from the so-called "adult children" to futoko, school-related problems, bullying, (.)." (p. 20).

3.2.3. Structure of the school system

Many studies focused on the characteristics of school systems, with a particular focus on the Japanese one, underlining the highly competitive and selective aspect of this educational system (Berman, 2019; Suwa and Suzuki, 2013; Kaneko, 2006; Inoue et al., 2018; Uchida, 2010; Teo et al., 2020; Shimono et al., 2021; Kato et al., 2018; de la Calle Real and Muñoz Algar, 2018), its overly uniform idea of inclusion (Rubinstein, 2016; Borovoy, 2008) and the close causal link between school and the possibility of social achievement (Caputo, 2020; Chan and Lo, 2014a; Wong, 2020).

Ranieri (2005) considered the delay with which educational institutions report pupils' school absenteeism, stressing how timely reporting would allow prompt intervention and help prevent extreme forms of isolation such as that enacted by people in hikikomori.

Borovoy (2008), on the other hand, looked at the link between school drop-out, bullying and the characteristics of the Japanese school structure, stressing how Japanese educational institutions are characterized by a sort of "imposition of equality" achieved through a standardized education that conceives the student body as uniform, thus erasing individual differences.

All students must achieve the results that the system has established using the tools the school makes available; those who do not succeed due to individual differences are forced to leave the education and training system.

In this way, the school system contributes to marginalizing the

difference in those young people who feel they cannot meet the behavioural and performance standards of a socially imposed model of normality/normativity. An apparently egalitarian approach is thus in fact transformed into a very rigid selection:

"The momentum of mainstreaming pushes toward including as many students in conventional pedagogy and socialisation as possible, while offering little except places in which to withdraw for those who simply cannot fit within the normal." (p. 561).

In general, with a few exceptions (e.g., Borovoy, 2008; Rubinstein, 2016), in most of the studies pertaining to this category, the analysis of the *Structure of the school system* was conducted in only a descriptive manner, identifying certain structural aspects (selectivity, homogenization) that may contribute to determining the onset of hikikomori.

3.2.4. Relationship between school transformations, society and the labour market

A further group of articles, largely consisting of theoretical studies and reviews, focused on relationships between school transformations, society and the labour market (Li and Wong, 2015; Kato, Katsuki et al., 2019; Ismail, 2020; Suzuki, 2020; Rosenthal and Zimmerman, 2012; Norasakkunkit et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2019).

Furlong (2008), for example, explicitly criticizing the psychiatric approach to hikikomori, correlated this form of youth distress not only with the strong pressures of the Japanese education system, but also the anxiety that young people experience in relation to their future:

"The acceptance of the medicalised view of the phenomenon has helped blind policy makers to the impact of broader structures, especially education and labour market policies, which might be regarded as providing clues about the main triggers." (p. 310).

For the author, this state of anxiety derives mainly from the productive transformations that have taken place in Japan since the 1970 s, which have also led to a transformation of work in the direction of making it more flexible and precarious. These considerations led Furlong to assert that many of the preconditions for the spread of the hikikomori phenomenon already exist in the West.

Among the empirical studies, we noted that of Kido (2016), who investigated some of the preconditions that can lead young people to enter a state of hikikomori. Through an action-research conducted with self-help groups and starting from a complex theoretical framework, which included cultural anthropology (Allison), social psychiatry (Saito), sociology and critical Marxism (Berardi), the author concluded the study by stating that it is precisely some characteristics of contemporary post-industrial society that favour the spread of the particular form of anxiety experienced by young people in Japan, called *ikizurasa* (pain of living). To describe this kind of socio-economic anxiety, Kido borrowed Berardi's words, when he argued that people's cognitive dimensions (desires, emotions, understanding of the meaning of life) have been altered by working conditions to the point that it is life in its entirety that becomes the object of relations determined by capital. Echoing Berardi's thinking, Kido claimed that these alienating conditions exacerbate people's states of panic or depression.

Moreover, some authors (Li et al., 2018; Teo, 2010) suggested the idea that schools are not a separate entity from society. Their studies referred to scientific work done by other researchers (Wong and Furlong respectively), who identified social transformations caused by economic destabilization and changes in the labour market as some of the possible variables that may contribute to the phenomenon emerging.

3.2.5. School as a place for recovery

A number of studies have examined the problems involved in recovery for young people in a state of hikikomori. Many of these approached the subject using the classic tools of psychiatry or psychology. The proposals, experiences and examples that were illustrated thus ranged from therapeutic sessions to telephone consultations, from the creation of 'meeting spaces' to support for job placement (e.g. Ranieri, 2015, 2018; Kato, Kanba and Teo, 2019).

However, it was possible to identify some articles that addressed the recovery of young hikikomori through other forms of schooling than the competitive ones typical of the Japanese model.

The emergence of psychological problems in young people as an unintended consequence of the structure of Japanese schools is a fact known to the Japanese educational authorities themselves. Indeed, as reported by Kato, Kanba and Teo (2019), the Japanese government even intervened at one point by introducing a "relaxed educational policy" aimed at reducing the competitiveness that characterizes the country's school model.

A number of private schools took up the suggestions contained in these practices and developed them into organic educational activities aimed at rehabilitating young people in hikikomori. The educational practices they have designed and implemented propose school contexts with non-competitive, non-selective, non-meritocratic times, spaces, content and teaching methods.

By way of example, Nakasato (2016) illustrated the initiative of one Japanese so-called "free school", the NKG, which, before starting activities, welcomes the entire family in order to plan the educational action with them. Once accepted at the school, the child engages in a series of activities aimed at improving his or her relational and emotional skills. The teaching tools and content are unusual: music, practical activities such as woodcrafts, art, trips to the surrounding area, and studying foreign languages.

Kaneko (2006) also analysed places for recovery, comparing schools that adopt opposing methods: one of these adopts methods such as those outlined above (flexible organization versus the rigidity of the traditional system), while the other requires the person in hikikomori to respect "real" times and modes, thus "forcing" individuals in isolation into a completely different lifestyle from that to which they would be inclined.

In their research, on the other hand, Yokoyama et al. (2019) referred to a form of peer-to-peer learning process known as Community-Based Enterprise Development, used in some school contexts to promote the psychological well-being of participants and reduce anxiety:

"(.) the peer-to-peer learning concept of C-BED enables young people of similar social status and common feelings to get together, creating a comfortable environment for them to interact and communicate without any medical authoritative/hierarchical relationships." (p. 860).

If some authors only hint at the importance of the school's educational role in preventing social withdrawal among young people (Chong and Chan, 2012; Wong et al., 2019; Sánchez Rojo, 2017; Tateno et al., 2016; Wong, 2012), others, such as Vogel (2012) have proposed urgent intervention, even more than recovery, through modification of the school context and processes in order to structure a school model capable of counteracting the spread of the hikikomori phenomenon. The author's idea is for a flexible school that prepares young people to accept the characteristics of the new labour market and teaches them how to build the skills they need to live with the uncertainty of today's world.

Our analysis of this thematic area has allowed us to focus on some essential issues. On the one hand, there are remedial practices that are actually non-competitive and flexible educational activities. These would bring into question formal educational models guided by paradigms that could be called neoliberal due to their being based on individualism, competition, self-entrepreneurship or competence didactics. These studies provide evidence of the effectiveness of intervening in school settings to address the emergence of social withdrawal. On the other hand, there are conceptual elaborations, such as that proposed by Vogel (2012), which seem to us to remain trapped in what Fisher (2009)/ (2018) called *capitalist realism*, and which consider school as a functional dimension for the acceptance of what exists in order to allow young people to reduce their stress load, and consequently its negative effects such as depression, school dropout and hikikomori.

4. Discussion

This review of the scientific literature was conducted in order to outline the panorama of studies that have addressed the emergence and spread of hikikomori in relation to the educational context and processes.

The first question we asked concerned the research methodologies and theoretical approaches used by researchers, while the second was designed to investigate how these authors made the relationship between hikikomori, the school context and educational processes explicit in their studies.

Confirmation of interest in the relationship between hikikomori and the educational context was evident in the increase detected in publications over the last twenty years. We also noted that the publication of studies on the subject has begun to move beyond the typical disciplinary field of mental disorders or mental illnesses, and begun to involve disciplinary fields such as education, anthropology and social studies. In spite of this, both the data concerning the greater number of articles published in medical, psychiatric and psychological journals, and the small number of studies that explicitly report a theoretical framework of socio-cultural reference, allow us to state that the psychiatric/psychological approach remains predominant in the study of hikikomori.

Our review detected at least two gaps in the literature on the subject. The first is the reduced presence of empirical studies examining the condition of young people in hikikomori in formal school settings. The choice of young subjects still in formal education was found in only eight studies and appears to be a choice derived solely from practical convenience, rather than from an interest in exploring a context, the school, in which young people spend an important part of their lives. It is easier, in fact, to find people in hikikomori among this population group than among those of adult age. The other studies used samples covering different age groups and, as in the previous case, the objectives of the studies never included the role of the school setting in relation to the occurrence of hikikomori. Given that in-depth analysis of these samples often showed that many of the subjects taken into account in the research began to isolate themselves while attending school, it seems useful to point out the underestimation of the variable "school setting" in the analysis of hikikomori.

Secondly, few studies also reported the class composition of the sample (n = 6) and the geographical context in which the research was carried out (n = 14), despite evidence that the phenomenon is more present in urban areas. We consider it a gap in the literature that neither the social composition of the samples and the relationships between the onset of the hikikomori phenomenon and the urban or rural connotations of the places where this problem is most frequently manifested have been explored. Such research would make it possible to conduct an in-depth study on correlations between the onset of the problem and other environmental and social aspects, such as the impact of neoliberal global transformations on society as a whole, including schools.

With reference to the second research question, evidence emerges from the review concerning the role that the school context can play both in promoting social isolation and in encouraging the recovery and reintegration of hikikomori. On the one hand, in fact, the scholars point out how bullying, the rigid school organisational structure and the competitive culture contribute to the choice of isolation; on the other hand, it is reported that cooperative, flexible educational experiences that respect individual diversity can play an important role in the resocialisation process of hikikomori. However, the researchers themselves seem to underestimate the value and role of the variable of the school context and educational processes.

Indeed, the thematic analysis showed that most researchers focused either on investigating correlations between what is often called the hikikomori "syndrome" and already classified pathologies or the clinical description of the phenomenon (e.g., Bowker et al., 2019; Kato et al., 2012; Tateno et al., 2019).

Other authors (e.g., Yoshii et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2019), on the other hand, merely referred to bullying or school rejection in a list of possible causes or symptoms of hikikomori, without further analysis of the conditions that led to the onset of these problems. For example, dropping out of school has an immediate link with the hikikomori lifestyle, since, in many cases, it marks the beginning of the choice of isolation. However, most of the researchers neglected to examine whether the school context is also responsible for drop-out first and isolation later.

One potential consequence of this line of research is that it may underestimate the timeliness of systematic intervention in contexts (such as school) by offloading responsibility for change and adaptability onto the individual. In some cases related to both bullying and school refusal (e.g., Berman, 2019; Borovoy, 2008; Furlong, 2008), reference was made to responsibilities being placed on a selective, competitive and diversity-homogenizing school structure.

We agree with Laval (2003)/ (2004) when he points to neoliberal policies as an element of profound change in the world of education at the international level. The business paradigm (competition, selection, skills, acceptance of flexibility and precariousness employment or even free labour) has become hegemonic in the world of education and training. In respect of this, some of the reviewed studies (Kido, 2016; Furlong, 2008) analysed the relationship between changes in the productive system and school structure, highlighting how the transformations produced by labour flexibility and precariousness produce exacerbated forms of competitiveness that reverberate in the school cultural context.

Taking these studies as a reference, we believe it a plausible hypothesis to consider the Japanese school structure as a model that anticipates global transformations in the world of education. On the one hand, this would explain why hikikomori first appeared in Japan, and on the other, it might enable us to understand one of the reasons for its spread to many other countries with advanced capitalism.

In respect of this, we believe that the study by Borovoy in particular allows us to interpret the homogenizing and egalitarian mechanism of the Japanese school system as a device capable of producing "vies perdues" - lost lives (Bauman, 2003/, 2007). These are then often taken care of by the family and return in other ways - those of frequenting cyberspace - to produce profit by once again becoming functional in the reproduction of the social system (Fisher, 2009/, 2018). In this sense, the "difference" in individuals who cannot be involved in formal education and production can be categorized in various ways, depending on which sectors of the neoliberal command deal with them: the mentally ill and the disabled, by the world of science; the *choosy* or *bamboccioni* (to cite the Italian case - Labour Minister, Elsa Fornero; Economy Minister Padoa Schioppa), parasite singles (to cite the Japanese case - Yamada, 2012), by institutional politics. In this way, although separated from the social body, their lives somehow re-enter the circuit of value production (through the use of drugs, the recourse to specialists, use of the internet, etc.).

5. Conclusions

The results of our literature review can be summarized as follows: (a) for the researchers, the subjects taken into consideration were neutral and, in some cases, homogeneous, identified or identifiable with one or more pathologies; (b) hikikomori is considered to be a problem affecting the individual or, at most, the individual together with his or her closest circle (the family); (c) the existence of other factors (school rejection, competitive school models, bullying, etc.) that may contribute to social isolation is not denied, but the fact that they are not investigated suggests that they are not considered relevant; and (d) in a small number of studies, the existence of a homogenizing factor at a global level (neoliberal policies orienting, or imposing, changes in the direction of individualism, competitiveness and precariousness, also in the educational field) is taken into account as a possible joint factor in the international spread of the hikikomori phenomenon.

Therefore, our review highlights the fact that authors have in many cases adopted a single-axis perspective as the key to interpreting the phenomenon, focusing on single factors ("psychiatrization" of the problem, diagnostic approach, proposals for recovery, etc.) or employing traditional medical research tools (various types of screening tools, diagnosis, etc.), while underestimating the role of context and how the intersection of other identity markers (such as gender and social class) may contribute to determining the conditions for the emergence of hikikomori.

The few studies that have escaped this pathologizing vision seemed to suggest interesting research ideas. On the one hand, we can interpret hikikomori as a *ligne de fuite*, to use Deleuze and Guattari's concept, which initially allows the individual to escape the "lines" imposed from outside that generate stress, depression and states of psychic malaise but which turns out to be a black hole capable of zeroing out the potential for transformation that the line of flight seemed to possess (Treppiedi, 2020). On the other hand, we can regard hikikomori as one of the possible expressions of social psychosis caused mainly by the conditions of living under capitalism and, in particular, by an educational context contaminated by the ideology that Goodley and Lawthom, (2019) have called neoliberal-ableism (individualistic and consumerist closure, competitive pressures, push for self-entrepreneurship and consequent dissolution of social ties, absence of truly free time, spasmodic search for employment).

In this sense, in line with Foucault's and Basaglia's studies on mental distress (Basaglia and Basaglia Ongaro, 2013; Basaglia et al., 1975; Foucault, 1972/, 2012), we suggest that the hikikomori phenomenon be interepreted as a form of counter-bevaviour that manifests itself as a possibility of resisting and rejecting the dominant system, which is achieved passively by removing the body from any social context other than a virtual one (Colucci, 2004).

We consider these reflections to be essential starting points for future research on the possible joint responsibility of neoliberal education in producing youth distress and, in particular, in the emergence and spread of the hikikomori phenomenon.

In fact, our review uncovered scientific evidence of the positive role that school context, based on non-competitive teaching strategies, can play in the process of resocializing hikikomori students (e.g., Yokoyama et al., 2019; Nakasato, 2016; Kaneko, 2006). We believe it is important to integrate and broaden this research perspective, critically questioning educational policies, the organizational dimension of the school, and educational practices, with the aim of advancing our understanding of how institutional contexts (such as school) can contribute to reproducing and/or addressing forms of social unrest and rejection.

In this sense, we believe it an urgent matter to investigate non-competitive and flexible didactic strategies and models, which, in addition to serving a function in terms of recovery, are configured as educational lines of flight capable of moving away from the dominant entrepreneurial paradigm in education.

5.1. Implications for research

Our review suggests that, based on the few empirical studies available, there is evidence in favour of how certain school interventions (peer learning process, flexible organization, family involvement in the educational plan) can contribute to the resocialization of hikikomori students. However, since this evidence is dominated by Japanese studies and its generalized application is uncertain, more research is needed to clarify whether and how the school environment in advanced capitalist societies influences the choice of social isolation.

For this reason, future studies could focus on analysing the relationship between educational processes and the occurrence of hikikomori outside Asia in order to identify, also from a comparative perspective, contextual elements that may favour understanding of the phenomenon.

One last element of reflection valid for future research concerns the importance of involving the young people themselves in the research. In consonance with that expressed by Gonzalez et al. (2017), we believe that the voices of students must not be neglected if we are to obtain more in-depth knowledge of the possible relationship between educational contexts and processes and the onset of youth distress.

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References and recommended reading

(*) denotes that the article was used in the review.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Conception and design of study: G. Coeli. acquisition of data: G. Coeli. analysis and/or interpretation of data: G. Coeli, A. Planas-Lladó, P. Soler-Masó. Drafting the manuscript: G. Coeli. revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content: G. Coeli, A. Planas-Lladó, P. Soler-Masó. Approval of the version of the manuscript to be published (the names of all authors must be listed): G. Coeli, A. Planas-Lladó, P. Soler-Masó.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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Appendix A

The following are the review data to this article: https://osf.io/r7mpq/? view_only= 37268081e0f242beba72d3534caf56bc.

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