Barriers to Change: A Psychodynamic Analysis of Japanese Higher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

David McCurrach

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Abstract: As a result of lacking ICT competency and cultural pressures owing to collectivism, it is argued in this paper that the mental health of Japanese Higher Education Institution (HEI) teachers during the COVID-19 Pandemic was at serious risk. This was made worse by the frantic actions of HEIs forcing teachers to work online with little preparation or consideration for their emotional context. The author argues in this paper that in educational change, approaches to leadership can be usefully enhanced through a psychodynamic approach, as this enables leaders to consider how teacher anxiety can be acknowledged, expressed and contained. An analysis of the literature originating from Japanese universities, as well as perspectives from the author during the time confirms that the leadership faced significant challenges to reveal systemic issues in their response, and suggestions are given for future change.

Keywords: Psychodynamics, educational change, e-learning, COVID-19, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 Pandemic was a profoundly destabilizing event for the education sector, disrupting conventional teaching methods as practitioners were forced to move from classrooms to online environments with relatively little time for preparation (Colpitts et al., 2021; Fujita et al., 2021; Miller, 2022; Nae, 2020). When confronted with an unanticipated workplace change that massively alters a traditional role, it is perhaps natural that anxiety emerges as the dominant emotion. Yet, while anxiety is not *necessarily* damaging, extreme change *can* be hugely detrimental without sufficient preparation or effective leadership (Dale & James, 2015). Given that positive emotions, which are crucial to mental health, are most often experienced via personal relationships, physical separation from enacting remote work during the Pandemic can be hugely debilitating (Yamaguchi et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to assess how academic institutions manage teachers during times of change to provide greater insight into how to prepare for other planned or unexpected educational shifts. In the context of Japanese Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the government instructed universities to be 'flexible' during the Pandemic–in essence, simply "hoping for the best" (Kakuchi, 2020). With

a hands-off government policy, how Japanese universities manage their workforce becomes worthy of scrutiny. This is especially of interest given that the education system in Japan is often praised for its high attainment levels (OECD, 2018), and because the country has an image of a technological hub, the transition to an online environment ought to have been painless.

Perhaps it was not the case. Many teachers continue to rely on top-down, exam-focused pedagogies that stifle creativity and exert stress on students (Sakamoto, 2012; Smith, 2021, 2022). These pedagogies are rooted in a relatively conservative collectivist ethos, which resists educational reform in favor of maintaining social harmony (Hamamura, 2012) and hierarchical relationships (Winfield *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, despite the stereotypical image of Japan as a technological hub, many practitioners lack the key information communication technology (ICT) skills that would have facilitated a smoother transition to remote e-learning. Both factors–social adherence to collectivism and resistance to new technology–significantly increased the risk for heightened anxiety for teachers during the shift to an online environment. These barriers hindered teachers' confidence in technology and discouraged open discussions about their challenges. Those within leadership roles will undoubtedly be keen to remedy this in the future, and it would be prudent to assess the barriers more concretely in the Japanese context. However, a psychological viewpoint might also give insight into teachers to prepare those in leadership for change. One such perspective, psychodynamics, examines the relationship between individual and collective human behavior. Dale & James' (2015) key paper on psychodynamics illustrated how a lack of leadership and support during an educational change resulted in suppressed feelings and great dissatisfaction for staff and students, ultimately resulting in an arson incident. By employing a psychodynamic approach, however, the authors contend, feelings would have been able to have been expressed and "used productively in education change processes" (p.105).

By intentionally adopting a psychodynamic strategy in a secondary school, Fraser & Horden (2021) illustrated that the approach was highly effective during the COVID-19 Pandemic, enabling teachers to redirect "emotion into something productive" and "mitigate damage" (p. 3). Building on this, it would be pragmatic to assess the cultural and technological barriers that hindered the transition to online education and how effectively leadership or administrators in Japanese HEIs managed emotions during this period. Likewise, it is worth examining whether a psychodynamic approach could be readily adopted in Japanese educational settings during times of change. To the author's knowledge, no existing research has taken a psychodynamic perspective in a Japanese educational context, making these insights valuable for anticipating future technology-based educational change. Because of this, the paper will take an exploratory approach. First, it will delve into the barriers that caused anxiety among Japanese HEI teachers during the Pandemic. Cultural barriers, such as the emphasis on social harmony and collectivism, will be addressed, followed by technological barriers, including factors like age, beliefs, and contextual challenges related to e-learning that heightened resistance. With these foundational issues defined, the nature of psychodynamics will be explored, organically leading to an analysis and discussion assessing the management of teachers during the Pandemic. Finally, the paper will offer recommendations, with implications for how Japanese HEIs might better manage technology-based changes in the future.

BACKGROUND: CULTURAL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Cultural Anxiety & Social Harmony

The first barrier impeding online transitions during the Pandemic was conformity stemming from Confucian culture. Japan's island mentality offers a compelling context for studying education, as the country is both familiar and enigmatic to outsiders (Morely *et al*., 2020).

However, researchers will find that culture-based pressures cause a significant proportion of teacher anxieties locally, as conservative attitudes are still highly prevalent. Put simply, cultures shape emotions (Kitayama & Park, 2007), as "society is inscribed on our nervous system and in our flesh before it appears in our consciousness" (Morley *et al*., 2020, p. 768). In East Asia, the Confucianist philosophy has shaped culture by emphasising hierarchical relationships that enforce immense moral burdens on individuals to correspond to their roles (Winfield *et al.*, 2010). This deep-rooted influence on education extends to the notion of shame. As early as elementary school, homework is marked by teachers with large circles, with incorrect answers typically left blank. Cook (2019) argues that since shame inhibits learning, such marking practices limit it and serve to create encouragement instead. Shame is a powerful social tool, and minimizing it is a priority. The 'correct answer circle', is also perhaps emblematic of a bigger notion–*wa*, which translates to 'circle' but also, more importantly, *harmony.*

Indeed, a famous proverb in Japanese roughly translates to "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down"–implying that social harmony is achieved by minimizing shame. It is characteristic of a collectivist culture, which denotes that individuals see themselves as part of a group (e.g. family, workplace, country), and group motivations take priority over individual goals (Hamamura, 2012). This might involve saving face, avoiding conflict and having different notions of self, which are unconsciously and habitually reinforced (Stephan et al., 1998). While achieving social harmony has traditionally been seen as virtuous despite an individual's contrary true feelings, it comes at the expense of freedoms that allow one to express oneself, control emotions, or react to change. Of course, this is directly in contrast to the individualism present in Western cultures, whereby individuals aim to maintain their independence and convey their inner characteristics (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This disparity is highlighted in a study where Japanese participants were shown to experience more

emotions that are socially engaged (i.e. those that are positive, such as friendliness or indebtedness) and less that are disengaged (i.e. negative, such as anger); conversely, the American participants displayed the opposite (Kitayama et al., 1991). Stephan et al. (1998) argue that inhibiting negative emotions allows for other indirect forms of communication, such as silence or ambiguity, which require a strong contextual understanding.

Technology resistance

The second barrier obstructing the online transition was the teacher-technology relationship. Online education can be delivered either synchronously, such as through live Zoom or Microsoft Teams lessons, or via pre-recorded lectures, discussion boards, or access to materials on a website. Distance e-learning has evolved over many years, but it gained prominenceduring the rise of Web 2.0. This term relates to faster internet speeds, user-generated content, increased collaboration, cloud computing and social media that Franklin & Van Harmelen (2007) noted had some positive implications for universities. Particularly, courses could be accessed far more efficiently, on more devices than ever before, location independently, and offering a variety of interactive media to increase engagement (McCarty *et al*., 2017). Furthermore, e-distance learning permits more participants per class (Toh *et al*. 2022), which may ease the burden of staff shortages or decrease financial burdens. Both allow teachers and students to work from a location independently and in more comfortable environments, with asynchronous courses having the benefit of giving more time flexibility to teachers (Keiper *et al*., 2021).

However, Njenga and Fourie (2010) and Smith (2022) argue that HEI teachers must be wary of deterministic 'technopositivism', a compulsive enthusiasm for e-learning despite numerous failed initiatives. Some university teachers might question the extent to which remote learning is a more effective form of education than in-person classes, at least at the undergraduate level (Nae, 2020). It has been noted that the success of HEI e-learning

implementations relies on user satisfaction, instructor characteristics and course quality, all of which are distinct factors from the technology itself (Rizana *et al*., 2020). Furthermore, Protopsaltis & Baum argue that online-only courses stymied educational success without lowering barriers to entry, with employers viewing graduates from such programs less favorably; and that even despite positive attitudes towards technology, many teachers are still averse to technological change (Adnan & Tondeur, 2018). Thus, it can be assumed that many HEI teachers viewed distance education negatively before using it (Colpitts et al., 2021).

This negativity might have differed had teachers had experience with such systems. While e-learning existed in Japanese universities in the form of registration systems and some specialized distance learning courses, it is probable that for most teachers, transitioning to an online teaching environment was challenging. This is because there is an explicit gap between teachers and their learners in terms of digital competency. In a report in 2018 from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the percentage of Japanese 16-24-year-olds failing the ICT assessment was 12.1%, compared to 21.2% of 45-54-year-olds and 40.9% of 55-64-year-olds. The discrepancy extends to the government, which makes up the latter percentage–rather than acting as a role model, it faces scrutiny for continuing to use fax machines and floppy disks in 2022 (Fitzgerald, 2022) and faced embarrassment as the head of the country's cybersecurity division admitting to never having used a computer before (McCurry, 2018).

One possible explanation is those from the 'old world' are "forced to use unfamiliar tools and work and in unfamiliar ways and environments" (Franklin and Van Harmelen, 2007, p. 23). Prensky (2001a) depicts this educational technology divide as a gulf between *digital natives*–those who grew up with and are familiar with technology–and *digital immigrants*–those having to adapt to e-learning. Owing to brain plasticity and its malleability over time, the young are more adept at responding to new stimuli and essentially think

differently about technology. After all, “the environment and culture in which people are raised affects and even determines their thought processes”, Prensky (2001b, p.4) contends in a follow-up. This distinction may explain the lower ICT performance among older Japanese individuals highlighted in the OECD report. However, considering the age of Prensky’s work and the fact that ICT has been a staple in Japanese homes and schools for many years, these technological challenges seem particularly pronounced. Most teachers today would likely belong to the generation of digital natives, meaning that early environmental exposure cannot be the sole reason for resistance to technological change, suggesting that other factors contribute to the reluctance to embrace educational technologies.

Intrinsic vs extrinsic barriers

An alternative view is to situate teachers onto a spectrum of e-learning advocates and detractors by considering their beliefs, which won’t necessarily only be dictated by exposure to technology during childhood. Focusing on Japanese educators directly, a study by Joshie *et al.* (2010) found that only 20% viewed the Internet as useful, 30% deemed ICT as effective for motivation, and the same number regarded technology as a resource rather than a pedagogical tool. Ertmer (2005) refers to these opinions as ‘second-order barriers’, meaning that if the perceived value of technology is poor, then teachers are unlikely to be willing to adopt it. The nature of technology use itself is also dependent on the underlying philosophy of the teacher. If teachers follow constructivist, student-centered beliefs regarding learning, they are more likely to adopt technology (Shiobara, 2018). In contrast, teachers with conservative, more teacher-focused pedagogies may only use ICT for clerical rather than instructional tasks (Ottenbreit-Leftwich *et al*., 2010). However, mindlessly pushing a *technology is the future* narrative in Japan may only weaken adoption given that “the stronger the pressure for reform

and the higher the 'innovation' banner is flown, the deeper the university crisis will become" (Amano & Poole, 2005, p. 701).

A final reason for resistance to online e-learning implementations involves the impracticalities that come with such a shift, or extrinsic barriers (Ertmer, 2005). There are obvious considerations, such as equipment availability, internet speed, and sufficient training. Less obvious may involve a sense of loss of control in online teaching. Especially in the case of asynchronous courses, some teachers may resent that their ability to direct learning is heavily diminished in a virtual space (Reinders & White, 2016). This is especially problematic in Japan where face-to-face classrooms are typically more teacher-centered, invoking a stronger sense of a loss of identity (Vasilache, 2017; Smith, 2021). The incorporeal nature of online courses may also create stress in terms of how work hours are perceived. Given the always-on nature of some remote learning courses, teachers may feel obliged to work and respond to emails outside of traditional hours, ultimately blurring the work-life balance, and causing additional stress and anxiety (Shiobara, 2018). Finally, due to the repetitious nature of synchronous online lessons, teachers may suffer from 'zoom fatigue' (Wiederhold, 2020) and thus maintaining motivation becomes a challenge.

Educational leadership in Japan

Whether these technological barriers stem from a lack of experience, personal beliefs, or practical considerations, they present significant challenges for those responsible for facilitating change. Consequently, the leadership style in education may need to evolve. As a result of reform spanning from the 1980s that both liberalized and decentralized the education sector (Yokota, 2021), Japanese educational leadership required more diverse specialities and greater communication skills (Yamamoto *et al.*, 2016). The style of educational leadership is transactional, which involves hierarchical structures, micromanaging, supervision, conformity,

and financial incentives without a shared sense of an objective (Yokota, 2019). A trend towards decentralization in more recent decades, however, has seen transformational leadership emerge, emphasizing more charismatic management, enhancing collaboration, and providing intellectual stimulation for employees (Colpitts *et al.*, 2020). Yokota (2019) found that while most policy documents in Japanese education featured aspects of transformational leadership, authority is still retained at central and regional levels. With a recent focus on educational leaders to meet performance targets, many educational leaders are still transactional.

However, as technology evolves, leadership must also evolve; thus, e-learning initiatives will be buoyed by transformational leadership. Since online e-learning is a new paradigm, it will ultimately require an evolution of transformational leadership, given the physical separation of teachers and leaders that will require careful and methodological implementation. Jameson (2013) notes that while some would question whether there is a need to distinguish e-leadership from 'regular' leadership, they assert that educational leaders at least need to recognize the changes due to ongoing and rapid technological advancements. Failures from e-learning implementations tend to not be from facilities but the e-leadership and the management of the readiness of their staff (Chua & Chua, 2017). Once again, this raises issues in Japan, where conservatism causes ICT initiatives to be met with "tepid enthusiasm" (Nae, 2020, p.13), and professors have "always been criticized for their… apathy towards change" (Amano & Poole, 2005, p.700). Thus, e-leadership will necessitate additional attention in the HEI sector. Beaudoin (2015) observes that e-leaders face four challenges when moving to online distance education:

1. *Managing change rather than technology*: technology is meaningless unless educational leaders manage the change effectively.

2. *Preserving the role of the instructor in student-directed learning*: an online environment diminishes the central, top-down role of the teacher. Leaders need to train teachers to maintain their online presence as teachers.
3. *Expanding innovation and weakening disruption*: the sudden introduction of innovation can be disruptive and thus leadership needs to manage innovation thoughtfully and sustainably.
4. *Bridging the digital gap*: technology access is still limited by economic disparities, and the regional expansion created by online education will necessitate the need for cross-cultural understanding.

Garcia (2015) contends that leaders in these scenarios must possess extensive knowledge of online education, experience in designing and managing distance curricula, and a clear understanding of its potential. However, preparing for these challenges requires time–a resource many leaders lacked during the abrupt transition to online learning. Managing such changes is inherently risky, as evidenced by numerous failed and costly e-learning implementations (e.g., Nakano & Nakayama, 2019). Ultimately, if teachers have persistent anxieties regarding e-learning they might be hesitant to use it (Saadé & Kira, 2009), meaning those in leadership will need to communicate the benefits of the technology and introduce it effectively to facilitate adoption. This will be especially challenging in light of a collectivist and shame-based ethos which may act to hinder the psychological state of the teacher in a remote environment. To overcome these barriers and support the success of e-learning implementations, leaders must address the emotional needs of teachers. Adopting a psychodynamic approach may provide a valuable framework for understanding and managing these emotions, ultimately facilitating smoother transitions and greater acceptance of technological change.

CONCEPTUAL LENS: PSYCHODYNAMICS

Psychodynamics has garnered attention in recent decades for explaining social defenses in individual and group dynamics within organizations (White, 2004). Freudian assumptions of an unconscious dimension present within both social and individual life dictate how much behavior is unconsciously driven, and requires interpretation (Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001, p. 436). Indeed, notions of identity and culture acquire a much deeper meaning 'when enriched with psychoanalytical insights' (Carr & Gabriel, 2001, p. 417). In this section, the nature of psychodynamics will be explored regarding an educational change to provide a basis for discussion within the Japanese context. Most teachers would not contest that schools or universities can be taxing work environments. These contexts require that teachers maintain relationships with their bosses, administration, colleagues, students and possibly their parents, and maintaining these relationships can be mentally exhausting (Farmer, 2020). Educational change can be destabilizing to the work environment, and since change involves moving from the known to the unknown, psychological resistance is to be expected, with individuals reacting differently (Bovey & Hede, 2001). When emotions become entangled with intra-psychological factors, how teachers perceive and deal with them will directly affect their academic performance (Zhao, 2021, p.2). James (2010) refers to this stress as *affective intensity*, resulting in social defenses that may arise during unwanted experiences, which are common in educational settings. During an undesired change, affective intensity is therefore high and can result in psychological defense mechanisms that make regular work practices challenging to accomplish.

Social Defenses

There are five social defenses in psychodynamics that James (2010) highlights as key factors during educational change, and act unconsciously to protect the ego:

1. *Projection and Introjection* – Feelings that move from one individual to another or others are *projected*, which can then be 'felt' by recipients and are *introjected.*
2. *Regression* – an unhelpful state of returning to childlike dependency or acting immaturely in light of difficult situations.
3. *Repression* – emotions can be unconsciously inhibited and therefore prevented from being experienced in times of change. Denial is typically associated with repression.
4. *Resistance* – Simply refusing to accept a situation or request, which may irrational.
5. *Splitting* - The act of distinctly separating contradictory feelings as either good or bad.

However, these social defenses are not mutually exclusive, e.g., split feelings can be projected and then introjected to others. Furthermore, which defenses are present and the degree to which they are felt will be highly contingent on the individual. As a result, with such variability, understanding the psychological state of the workforce can be 'complicated and making sense of it can be extremely problematic' (James, 2010, p. 47).

The Organization as an identity

Further complicating educational change is realizing that the notion of identity extends to the institution itself. Although organizations may intend to preserve their identity through 'non-learning', (i.e. refusal to accept the consequences of change) they might benefit through a psychodynamic representation in terms of individual and collective defenses (Brown & Starkey, 2000). However, despite this potential, it is relatively under-explored in organization management and practice (Fotaki *et al*., 2012). Attempts to subdue anxiety in organizations may arise through 'identity maintenance', which originates from the need to preserve self-

esteem (Brown& Starkey, 2000). One of the ways this may be achieved is through rituals and routines, which may be thought of as a 'conservative impulse' (James, 2010). In a university context, regular meetings, one's workspace, set classrooms, coffee breaks, class rosters and seating plans are day-to-day events that create familiarity and act as defensive barriers to the anxiety created by change. Thus, attempting to maintain rituals and routines during the transformation becomes key to preserving institutional identity. Boundary maintenance is also key to preserving identity. James (2010) noted that boundaries in psychodynamics are representative of structural inconsistency and discontinuity, which can be both internal and external. They also occur on different levels: personal, institutional and cultural. In educational change, changes to boundaries such as workplace location or employee hierarchy will therefore impact affective intensity.

The Primary Task

Another means of viewing identity preservation is to consider how the change affects the original purpose of the institution and the faculty. In psychodynamics, this is known as the *primary task*, which can be defined as 'what an individual, group or organization feels it must do to survive and to continue to carry on' (James, 2010 p. 59). However, the primary task may differ for each component of the organization, for example, in higher education the institutional primary task may be financial success or prestigiousness; for the faculty, it could be research quality and output; and for the individual teacher, it may be quality of instruction to students. It is an essential activity that necessitates legitimization, but its definition is problematic in that too narrow a definition may threaten survival, and too broad will make prioritizing work strenuous (Bunnel *et al*., 2017). In this way, a dichotomy may exist between how each level of the institution interprets the primary task. HEIs need to create a supportive environment that allows teachers to focus on their primary task, but in times of change, the response may instead

be bureaucratic and defensive resulting in a persecuting and punishing workplace (Luck, 2010, p.281). During times of educational change, the notion of the primary task is at risk at any level, as what previously coincided with survival is rewritten. This adjustment of the primary task naturally heightens affective intensity, which may cause employees to avoid working on it.

Affective control & containment

At times of change, educational organizations must mitigate the damage caused in one of two ways. Despite the growing recognition of accepting the role of employee emotions, there is still a sense that institutions would rather emotions and work be 'mutually exclusive concepts since work must be a rational enterprise, while emotion is the antithesis of this' (Mann, 1997, p.4), and thus must be controlled and minimized. Taking this stance suggests an *affective control* strategy, which is a more authoritarian, top-down approach that aims to facilitate change by disregarding or eradicating the emotional context of employees (James, 2010). Essentially, it emphasizes that the needs of the organization take precedence over that of the employee. Such actions can result in staff repressing emotions and increasing anxiety, as leaders dismiss their sentiments as a weakness (Fraser & Hordern, 2021). There are times affective control can be advantageous, particularly when decisions need to be made quickly, such as during disasters, but are perhaps effective only as temporary measures. After all, managing change and conflict 'involves embracing it as an inevitable part of organizing rather than ignoring or suppressing it' (James & Jones, 2008, p. 5).

Affective containment contrasts with affective control. In 1962, Wilfred Bion coined the term to describe the establishment of well-being and the regulation of emotion via authentic communication (de Guzman *et al*., 2017). Dale & James (2015) expanded on the notion by contending that through communication, unwanted emotions are projected to another, i.e. to be contained, and processed to a more manageable state. While any member of the faculty can act

as a ‘container’, the authors argue that those in leadership roles are best poised to do so as they most likely have unwittingly acted as a container before. For example, in a scenario where a teacher wishes to complain to a principal, by listening to and acknowledging the complaint, the principal is containing the emotion, although not necessarily acting on it. If emotions are not projected, they are introjected, meaning they are internalized and can be the cause of certain actions. In the case of a principal as a container, the projected feelings they receive may themselves be introjected, and thus experienced as if they were their own. In essence, affective containment promotes communication between staff, and also staff and leadership, while providing clarity and transparency during a change. In terms of concrete steps that institutions can implement, Obholzer (2019) offers several principles for containment:

For all members of an institution:

Clarity in regards to the primary task

Clarity regarding accountability and authority

Opportunities for participation and contribution

For leadership:

Management informed by psychology

Awareness that risks faced by workers

Openness to end users (students in an educational context)

Dale & James (2015) further advocate two-way communication, offering platforms for debate, ensuring boundaries are maintained, and that sufficient support systems are utilized. Such

principles are necessary to disrupt unhelpful defense mechanisms, which will increase personal awareness and development, thus reducing resistance and anxiety (Bovey & Hede, 2001).

Psychodynamics and online teaching

The context of these affective containment measures, however, was created with a traditional in-person institutional context in mind. However, during the shift to online, teachers were put in an entirely isolated environment, confined to a screen, a context which Toscano & Zappalà (2020) contend has the effect of heavily reducing productivity. Furthermore, in the case of synchronous 'live' lessons, communication was time-restricted (Wiederhold, 2020). The result is that opportunities for emotional release decrease, and that of other negative defenses, such as suppression, increase. Therefore, affective containment measures must accommodate these restrictions within this context. As per the Vygotskian adage that interactions promote learning, this curtailment may have led some teachers to feel that they were unable to facilitate learning effectively. William & Moser (2021) contend that because online learning inhibits engagements through 'thematically fragment[ed] communication, episodic emphasis on group learning and the absence of substantive relationship building' (p. 6) and arouses negative and unhelpful thoughts and actions, the context ultimately results in a 'domain of silence'. Therefore, the incorporeal nature of the online classroom through relative isolation can be harmful to the ego, furthering increasing affective intensity. As such, competent affective containment is essential in a situation where members of a workforce are physically separated. Indeed, it was previously highlighted in Fraser & Hordern's (2021) study that damage from the sudden school closures and shift to online was minimized. This is because the leadership:

1. Recognized the deep anxiety faced by faculty and the need for affective containment;

2. Created online rituals and routines through daily emails and task allocation through a rota;
3. Allowed for emotional release of negative emotions through 'banter', 'virtual tea breaks' and meetings whereby frustrations and anger could be vented freely and productively;
4. Understood that boundaries between work and home are blurred online, making the teaching of lessons forbidden at home, and necessitating the use of the online platform at the actual school.

Thus, the study exists as a successful example of affective containment in leadership during a move to online distance learning and makes a suitable basis for comparison with the Japanese HEI context.

Psychodynamics in Japan

First, however, it is worth exploring the extent to which psychodynamics research has permeated the education sector in Japan. Ostensibly, scholarly articles related to psychodynamics in Japanese (*seishinrikidou*) appear to show a prevalence of medical-based research and little within the academic sector. Other concepts, including affective containment, are yet to feature in any Japanese literature to the best of the author's knowledge. Japan's relationship with psychology came to fruition in the early 20th century, particularly after the First World War, when improved economic conditions led to an increase in psychology departments in HEIs (Sato & Graham, 1954). In the 1950s it gained more popularity, as until then the majority of psychologists were too conservative to recognize psychoanalysis as a theoretical perspective (Oyama *et al*., 2010). Even then, despite the interest and study of psychological concepts, the direct impact on society in later decades was less sweeping than

anticipated. Azuma observes the failure was because: '…imported theories were applied too directly. Psychological concepts developed in one culture may be less effective in working with the minds of another culture' (1984, p. 49).

Instead, he contended that integrating Western-based psychology needed a culturally appropriate strategy, involving different, gradual stages of incorporation. These included the introduction of foreign experts, modelling and research conducted natively, and integration periods whereby native theories are developed and deployed free of Western concepts. As such, integrating psychodynamic approaches in the education field will require similar careful planning and procedural integration. How well approaches like affective containment will be adopted may depend on how determinedly the collectivist mindset is entrenched. Some argue that Japanese culture may be trending towards egoism - Hamamura (2012) contends that there may be some 'cultural lag' with regard to collectivism in Japan and that eventually there will be a greater shift to individualism. As with the debate on digital natives versus immigrants, however, only time will tell. Nevertheless, a psychodynamic viewpoint of Japanese HEIs at the time of the Pandemic will indicate how leadership dealt with the change, the type of containment procedures employed, and whether affective containment-like measures could be used in the future.

JAPANESE UNIVERSITY FACULTY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The transition to online

The initial fear of COVID-19 caused some institutions to consider delaying the start of the traditional Japanese academic year from April to September (Kang, 2021). Instead, many HEIs decided to delay the start of the spring term by two or more weeks, shortening the overall semester considerably. This meant that course syllabi had not only to be digitized but also rewritten as soon as possible to meet the new time constraints. As Hodges *et al*. (2020) note, fully online HEI courses take six to nine months of planning, preparation, and development. Thus, these time constraints proved daunting, as one teacher remarked about teaching online: "*I am concerned that students might not fully develop useful knowledge as well as their emotional intelligence. To be honest, I really worry if I can manage to cover all the curriculum content"* (Fujita *et al*., 2021, p. 12). A study by Kita *et al*. (2022) suggests that one of the biggest risk factors to the mental health of 537 Japanese HEI teachers during the Pandemic was technology competence, since: *"faculty members who had difficulty in using IT felt a substantial burden and decline in their mental health"* (p. 5).

Furthermore, in a small-scale study at a Japanese university, Miller (2022) observed that around half the teachers were given two weeks or less to prepare for the change to online; classes were synchronous and/or synchronous; and 62% had no say in decision-making. One teacher from the study remarked: *"It was a huge step out of my comfort zone, and I went through periods of stress and anxiety"* (p. 369). Teachers lacking key ICT skills will have particularly struggled to obtain assistance due to social distancing measures. In some cases, sidestepping ICT use was necessary as several older faculty members in the author's context required help filming lectures and uploading them to the university systems. Teaching guidelines from the administration were continually changing and updated only via email. This

created confusion in the faculty, as it took time to understand what the 'correct' teaching procedures were. This included whether to teach synchronously or asynchronously, how to deal with lateness or absences, or obtaining equipment and the procedures for reimbursement. Finally, a key source of initial anxiety originated from COVID-19-related discrimination, whether from infection, mask-wearing, or vaccine efficacy (Wakui *et al.*, 2021). The author can attest to these anxieties: in the April to July 2020 timeframe, fears surrounding the virus were exceptionally high among colleagues, although updates from the university with regards to measures to combat the virus were frequent.

Social interactions

For teachers in research positions, although the Pandemic forced in-person conferences to close, it created a context for increased participation that removed barriers due to the Internet: "*Conferences are now far more accessible to those who previously couldn't participate due to budget constraints or family duties. It's win-win"* (Miller, 2022, p.373). Indeed, this created the opportunity for both synchronous and asynchronous presentations, which at the time of writing persist in conjunction with in-person conferences, significantly broadening the pool of academics that can attend and contribute. Furthermore, in some cases, interactions resulting from the online context with students increased:

> *I am far more available as an online teacher to answer questions, and it ends up being a far more efficient and quick way of communicating with large groups of students at once* (Miller, 2022, p. 370).

While higher availability was a positive experience for this teacher, Miller notes that other teachers were less enthusiastic as it obfuscated the work-life balance that Shiobara (2018)

argued heightens anxiety. Hashimoto (2021) confirms that this was especially the case at the start of the transition: "*The first few lessons were very chaotic. I received close to 90 emails from panicked students who wanted immediate replies"* (p. 168). Another common theme was the aversion to isolation. Some HEI teachers indicated that a lack of in-person interaction was mentally damaging to faculty members, with one remarking that 'human connections are harder to build and maintain' online (Miller, 2022, p. 371), and another that: "*increased sedentary time sitting at a desk in front of a computer led to clear physical and mental health issues"* (p. 372). Unfortunately, there is little evidence in the surveyed literature that more interactions through online meetings or informal meetings were facilitated. Social interactions with other staff, at least from the start of the transition, were often maintained through self-organized chat groups and later through video conferences. However, interactions will have been even more limited for new teachers, as: "*...they cannot catch up well with the others because they don't have any opportunities to work with their team members physically. And you know, you cannot learn all these through online discussion"* (Huang, 2021, p.268). Additionally, the nature of video conferencing highlighted cultural stigma:

> *I reminded students that they would not be penalized for turning off their cameras and to let me know if they had any difficulties attending lessons. However, possibly due to the haji (shame) culture in Japan where individuals do not want to stand out, none of my students came to me about such issues* (Hashimoto, 2021, p.168).

It can be speculated that the same sense of shame may have been present for some teachers and their technical competence, as asking for initial ICT assistance may have been problematic.

Administrative support

Crucial to alleviating these technological and isolation burdens faced by teachers was effective leadership and administrative support (Kita *et al*., 2022). However, this appeared to vary depending on the institution. Hashimoto (2021) remarks: "*It was explained that teachers should educate themselves regarding free web services. We were provided with a webpage link that explained how to use Google Classroom but without any further assistance"* (p. 165). Given the immediacy and emergency-like situation of the online transition, this is likely indicative of many HEIs across the country. However, it also resulted in a lacking clarity with regard to procedures: "*I was not guided on how and to what extent I should care for students, which made this somewhat challenging. This may be evidence on how university administration was also in chaos amid COVID-19 and unable to set down firm guidelines"* (Hashimoto, 2021, p. 170). This undoubtedly would have resulting in an increase in anxiety. The author was similarly given the liberty to use any e-learning solution he wished, including via synchronous or asynchronous teaching, or both. While some faculty members appreciated the autonomy, the lack of instruction caused much anxiety as teachers did not know which platform to choose. It also had the side effect of creating confusion for students, as different teachers used different platforms, increasing complexity and resulting in confusion and complaints from students.

Adaptation

There is a sense that time was needed for teachers and institutions to adapt to the online environment. One positive aspect of the push for online was that it forced teachers without the necessary ICT skills to gain them quickly. For these teachers, while a steep learning and stressful curve, the skills gained were viewed positively and utilized in future lessons: "*It's easier to keep records of attendance and grades - you can set up activities that are automatically graded which make things much easier for the teacher"* (Miller, 2022, p. 369).

Similarly, in the author's context, it was observed that while many teachers had never used certain e-learning solutions before, some appreciated how certain tools made their workload easier, such as automatic homework submission, grading, attendance, and access to materials. Kita *et al*. (2022) note that a year after the lockdown, the largest burden for most HEI teachers took place within the first few weeks, with many having successfully adjusted a year later. In this way, the Pandemic directly challenged the beliefs of teachers who previously had poor perceptions of technology. Saito (2020) highlighted these aspects, noting that the structural changes resulting from COVID-19 are 'something that was seen as desirable in the past' and that it was only possible as it disrupted the equilibrium of the traditional education system.

DISCUSSION

The Primary Task

To begin with, if the primary task of university teachers was chiefly researching, then maintaining it would have been challenging if confined to their home, at least initially. This is because conducting primary research, collaborating with others domestically or internationally, and attending conferences would have been naturally curtailed in a remote context (Huang, 2021). Furthermore, institutional financial burdens will have likely increased primary task-related anxiety. However, while both in-person domestic and international conferences were severely curtailed, as noted, online conferences may have facilitated collaboration later as they became cheaper and more convenient (Miller, 2022). This was observed to only occur later, however. For teachers in instructional-only positions, their primary task will most likely have been meeting their students' needs. Teachers that were used to traditional classroom instruction might have been faced with significant challenges due to the difficulties in the social dynamics of remote teaching, including non-verbal behavior that dictates the flow of a lesson or the

emergence of natural discussions. Perceptions that they could not teach effectively online were apparent which would have further increased their primary task-related anxiety.

Leadership

Affective containment measures appeared to be lacking in most surveyed contexts. Leadership largely appeared to initially rely on email to manage teachers for Pandemic-related announcements and updates on procedures. Given it was noted that the organization-like structure of most universities gives rise to a transactional leadership style (Yokota, 2019), it was confirmed that affective control-style measures were the more prevalent response, which are more likely in emergency situations. As the lack of two-way communication is indicative of transactional leadership, many institutions lacked more transparent and robust support systems that Obholzer (2019) deemed necessary during educational change. It wasn't clear as to the frequency of meetings in most HEI contexts, although it is speculated they may have increased after the initial online transition period once the faculty was comfortable with the technology. In the author's context, chat groups were useful for emotional release among co-workers, i.e. 'banter', but were self-organized, and it is speculated that many teachers would have lacked the contact information to join such groups without prior social connections. Indeed, the shift to online may have potentially created the type of isolating environment that inhibits communication for these newer teachers (Williams & Moser, 2021), which would have been especially psychologically damaging.

Boundary maintenance appears to be another issue. The blurring of the home and workspace seemed common, and this was a clear cause of anxiety for teachers as Miller (2022) suggested. A secure role boundary between students and teachers is necessary during educational change (Dales & James, 2015), but during the Pandemic, it appears many teachers were overwhelmed with emails in some cases. Leadership ought to have made clear to faculty

when to reply to student emails to maintain these role boundaries. There also was ambiguity in device or platform boundaries, as despite the prevalence of a university e-learning platform as freedom of platform choice was given, or in others, the use of a third-party platform was mandated (Hashimoto, 2021). This could have been resolved by requesting teachers to continue to be present at the university and continue teaching their online lessons within their regular classrooms using the university platform. It was expected that it would be difficult to maintain institutional identity through rituals and routines in a remote setting, and this appeared to be the case. However, as Fraser & Horden (2021) demonstrated, new online rituals and routines could have been created, such as daily university updates, incorporating a task rota, and crucially, regularly scheduled meetings. This would have been particularly helpful to combat the loneliness that increased teaching online (Kita *et al*., 2022).

Culture

Researching psychodynamics can be difficult as people tend to hide feelings (James & Jones, 2008) and this is probably even more so the case in Japan where the collectivist and shame-based culture makes expressing emotions more challenging to observe. Indeed, a crucial theme was the nature of the emotional release. Since this was noted as critical for affective containment, it was especially challenging due to the remote settings of COVID-19. Despite initial hardship and confusion, from the limited literature and the author's observations, emotions do not *appear* to have been projected negatively on others. The author can attest to a stoic mentality amongst co-workers that was akin to a pervasive 'wartime spirit' (Fraser & Hordern, 2021, p.3) although it is likely a form of repression. If this is the case, then it can be speculated that repression may be one of the leading causes of anxiety.

As Yamaguchi *et al*., (2020) assert humans need social connections to thrive and given that the mental health of Japanese HEI teachers pre-Pandemic was already at risk (Kataoka *et*

al.,2017) and then significantly declined (Kita *et al*., 2022), then it is not unreasonable to assume that this lack of perceived projection and introjection could have resulted from collectivism and contributed to the decline. Conversely, it is possible that non-verbal cues and other group behaviors, distinct from Western cultures, are more important in Japan (e.g. Kitayama et. al, 1991), although as previously noted, their observation was outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, there was an acknowledgement that the shame-based culture created a negative influence in the remote working context (Hashimoto, 2021). Since inhibiting emotions in this way requires other forms of indirect communication (Stephan *et al*., 1998) that were lacking in an inherently remote context, psychological damage must have been considerable. Such was the anxiety for Japanese teachers at the time of the Pandemic that some researchers asserted it 'forms the basis of [a] mental health crisis' (Yamaguchi *et al*., 2020, p.49).

Adaptation

On broad timeframes, however, Hamamura (2012) points out that 'culture can persist for centuries, but it can change in a matter of a few decades' (p. 4). Time is an agent for change, which can break down cultural and technology batters. For example, it was observed that there was an improvement in the uptake of technology by teachers during the Pandemic due to its increasing adoption, which altered teacher beliefs. Thus, despite persistent conservative attitudes, it is anticipated that adopting psychodynamic approaches like affective containment can also facilitate change more easily in the future if introduced gradually, such as those proposed by Azuma (1984). Yamaguchi *et al*. (2020) recognized in the early stages of the Pandemic that a stronger, positive psychological perspective can assist the country, suggesting a methodological psychodynamic adoption process during educational change is possible. At the same time, Arnaud (2012) points out that 'psychoanalysis should not be considered as a

panacea for organization and management research' (p. 1124) and instead be part of a multi-discipline approach. Furthermore, contrasting and advocating approaches based on Western individualism in an Eastern collectivist culture inherently brings its own biases, as the researcher's context influences their interpretations and knowledge generation (Ogawa, 2009).

The Future

However, leadership may be forced to turn to psychodynamic approaches, as at the time of writing, there is palpable uncertainty regarding the future. Epoch-shifting events such as extreme weather, severe economic depression or even another Pandemic are not inconceivable, and naturally, the education sector must adapt to the changes that may arise. A less alarming, but more likely change involves e-learning, as the ever-tighter integration of technology and pedagogy increases. Student-centered, contextual, and collaborative initiatives will undoubtedly increase as mobile technology becomes ever-more indispensable (Smith et al., 2024), with forthcoming augmented and virtual reality-based platforms looking set to revolutionize learning (McCurrach, 2019; Smith & McCurrach, 2021). In Japan, a recent push for digital textbooks in the national curriculum will be a paradigm shift for many teachers (The Japan Times, 2022) and will necessitate transformational e-leadership in facilitating change. Educational leaders must accept and understand the challenges that currently exist in the HEI sphere.

CONCLUSIONS

Japanese HEIs are still currently rooted in conservatism which makes educational reform challenging. This is because the collectivist and shame culture present in Japan may act to inhibit negative emotions, which are crucial to contain during educational change. In the case of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the lack of ICT competence was also highlighted as a barrier to change, stemming from exposure, beliefs and other extrinsic factors. Although the Pandemic was an unforeseen event, it served to highlight how culture and ICT competence combined to hinder the mental health of teachers**.** Making things worse was a transactional HEI leadership that gave little consideration to the emotional context of HEI teachers. Had this not been the case, it would have given rise to a more supportive environment that respected the work context and facilitated more two-way communication between both leadership and faculty members. Instead, due to poor communication and boundary management, the mental health of HEI teachers suffered. To that end, the author advocates that for future educational change, whether unforeseen or not, leadership ought to adopt a psychodynamic process. This can be achieved through the gradual exposure and integration of Western psychodynamic concepts (Azuma, 1984) and by adapting the affective containment principles as outlined by Dale & James (2015) and Obholzer (2019), which promote more assertive and transparent communication. Given the severe lack of research in this context, an analysis of affective containment measures in a Japanese educational context would provide valuable insights that would better prepare HEIs in the country for the next unexpected change.

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