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Societal Factors Impacting on Images of the Future of Youth in Japan*

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Abstract

There was a bright future ahead for Japan after she was devastated by the World War II. In the process of emerging as one of the economically prosperous countries in the world, Japan has created various societal systems. Ironically, however, those systems are now working to hurt the image of the future of youth and to discourage their efforts towards the future. This study will look into some key societal factors that have impacted on future perspectives of youth and try to identify a turning point for a better future of Japan.

Introduction

One of the fundamental assumptions of futures studies is that the future is not out there to be discovered or unfolded but can be created by people's intentions and actions.[1] While intentions and actions of those who are currently leading the society are definitely significant, equally important are those of young generations who will create the much longer part of the future.

There have been many studies about images of the future that young people hold and their attitudes towards the future. Referring to a few studies in Australia, Eckersley shows that young people feel powerless about what will happen in the future and they tend to wait for events happening.[2] They are concerned about the increasing uncertainty that technology will bring about. They are aware that technology is not neutral. Their images of the future are particularly affected by broad negative changes taking place at present and by adults' values underlying those changes.[3] As one way to help young people overcome their pessimistic views about the future, Gidley reports a case in Australia in which Steiner education helps students enhance their capacities to imagine better futures and to face the future in a more positive way.[4]

In the United Kingdom, Hicks surveyed common features of images of the future of young people.[5] He assesses the impact of a futures workshop on the feeling of despair of those people, and argues for the importance of guiding images of the future for young people. Hicks and Holden compare and contrast images of the future of adults, of young people, of males and of

females based on several studies in countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia.[6] Holden finds that as children become older they tend not to be optimistic about their future and to begin to lose their confidence in what they will be able to do in the future. She stresses the importance of encouraging children to be involved in controversial issues from their ages so that they can experience to discuss, debate, and listen to various sides of the story.[7]

Rubin looked into images of young people in Finland.[8] Their images of society and the world in the future are quite vague and seem to be influenced by information coming from the mass media. She argues that education should take more solution-oriented approach rather than the problem-oriented approach to broad social issues. Nováky and Hideg examined the future orientation of secondary school students and of university students in Hungary.[9] Images of the future of those students were found to be shaped by what were prevalent in the mass media, which is similar to Rubin's study in Finland. Nováky and Hideg maintain that schools are still focusing on knowledge and values in the past and are not steering youth in the direction of the future.

Hutchinson extensively examines images of both the present and the future embedded and implied in the mass media as well as in school textbooks and students' works.[10] Hutchinson claims that there should be many alternative approaches to help students negotiate their future, instead of letting them fatalistically accept the prevailing negative images as their destinies.

Although these studies were carried out mostly in western countries, their findings are not foreign to state of affairs of youth in one of Asian countries, Japan. News about youth in the mass media are often not so encouraging and suggest that many youth in Japan feel powerless, are uncertain about their future, are overwhelmed by much information, and cannot see alternative paths to their future. Part of these problems in Japan will be discussed in the next section.

Youth Surveys in Japan

A number of questionnaire surveys focused on youth in Japan have been carried out by Japan Youth Research Institute (JYRI) since 1980s.[11] Among a variety of questions in the surveys, we will pay attention to those questions that are relevant to images of the future of youth and their knowledge about themselves and larger communities. As young people between the ages of around twelve and twenty-two are referred to as youth in those surveys, this definition of youth will be used in the rest of this study.

One survey conducted from the year 1998 to the year 1999 inquired 1,033 high school students about society in the 21st century. The proportions of males and females were nearly equal. Responses to the mostly positive features of the 21st century are presented in Figure 1.[12]

There were only two features such as "More equality for men and women" and "Better living conditions in suburb than city", which were anticipated to occur by over 70 percent of the Japanese students. The other features were expected by less than 30 percent of them. The gap between the higher expectations of the two features and the much lower expectations of the rest of the features is quite noticeable in the figure. In addition, those features associated with human relationships such as "More trust among people", "A narrower gap between the rich and the poor", "Less justice and corruption", and "Fewer crimes and less juvenile delinquency" were expected not to happen by a majority of the youth.

One survey conducted in the year 2000 involved 884 of second year junior high school students and second year high school students. The proportions of males and females were nearly equal. There were three questions concerning features of the society in the 21st century. Responses to those questions are summarized in Figure 2.[13]
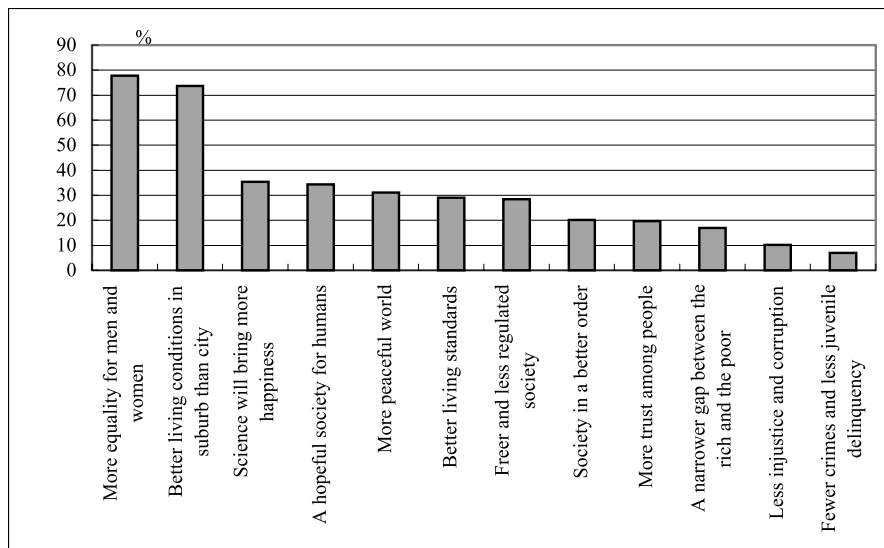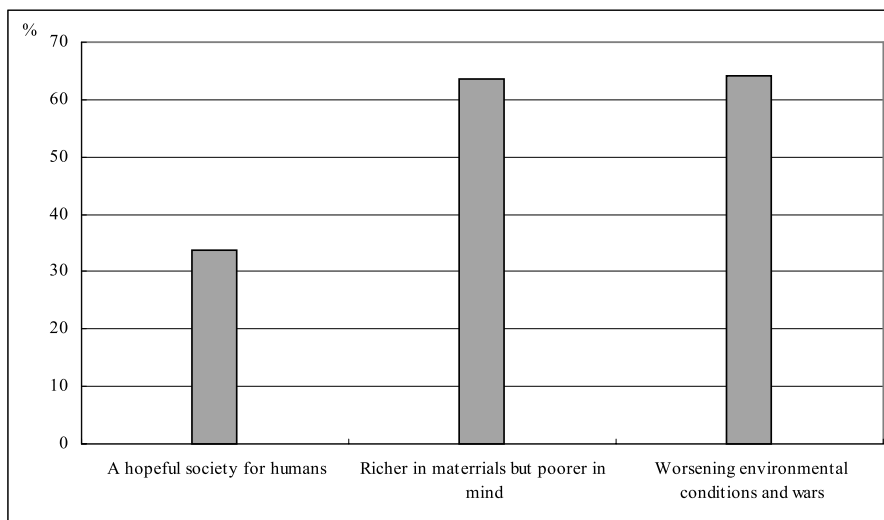
Figure 1 Expectations for the 21st Century

Figure 2 Three features in the 21st century

The first feature, "A hopeful society for humans", connotes optimism. Only 34 percent of the youth possessed such an optimistic view about the future. The second feature, "Richer in materials but poorer in mind", implying a partially negative condition and the third feature, "Worsening environmental conditions and wars", were expected to occur in the 21st century by 64 percent of the participants. The responses to these questions indicate some-what pessimistic feeling of the youth toward the future.

Another survey was carried out in the year 2001. It involved 1,250 high school students, of which 43 percent were males and 57 percent were females.

There was a set of statements measuring self-assessment of the participants. The results are presented in Figure 3.
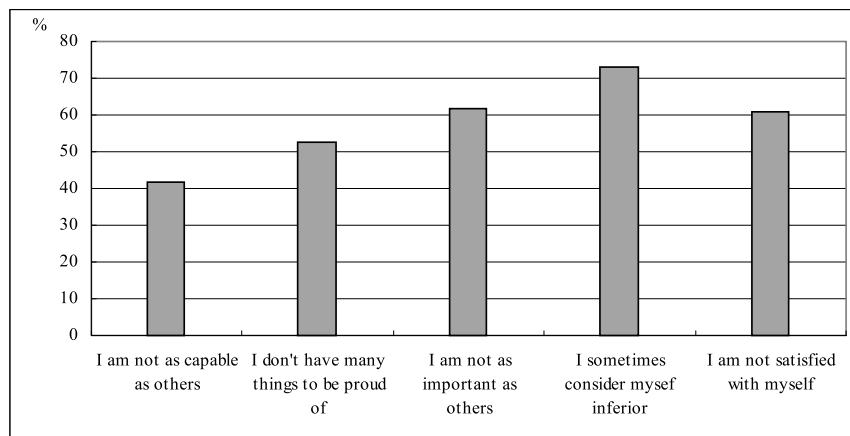
Figure 3 Self-assessment of youth

The four statements from the left made the youth to see oneself in comparison with others. Their responses show that they did not or could not value oneself much. In addition, 61 percent of the youth said that they were not satisfied with oneself.

The above three surveys revealed that those youth had rather pessimistic outlooks on both the future society and their own potential. Why can't they see more positive futures? Why can't they like oneself more? Although it is easier to attribute such problems of youth associated with the future to their immaturity or personality, this attribution will not clarify the real causes of those problems. Those problems need to be examined in a bigger context. In the following sections, we will look into some key societal factors that have influenced Japanese youth and their perspectives of the future.

Family and Community

From 1950s to 1960s, the paradigm of high economic growth prevailed in Japan. Values such as high productivity, hard work and technological solutions were promoted by the government and the industry and shared by the public. Marks contends that if the government is indifferent to the weak such an attitude becomes contagious to the public.[14] As the economy progressed, the public became too occupied with their personal livings to care about livings of the weak. And youth are part of the weak. Prior to that time period, adults recognized and carried out their responsibility to discipline youth in the community so that youth would maintain and improve the community in the future. Since the recognition of such a role by adults began to fade away, the distance between the world of adults and that of youth has been widening.

The traditional educational role of a community has been deteriorating for the past few decades. Youth used to be raised cooperatively in the community by multiple circles of people such as adults and youth in different ages in the neighbor. Nowadays, these ties with a diversity of people in the community are either very weak or almost being cut down. Even inside the family, father is likely to share little time with children at home as he spends most of his time at work. As a result, mother is left as the most and sole influential adult in the child's world.

Youth learn from experiencing a variety of values inherited in the community and in the society. They build and develop their own values by examining how theirs are getting along with the values treasured in a larger community. When the community ceases to be such a place, mother's role becomes too great to underestimate. The mother's values now influence the child very much as if they represent the values of adults in the society.

As mother mostly holds a belief that giving her child better education is the key to secure his/her happiness in Japan, she tends to push the child to study for his/her own happiness. Mother defines the role of the child as studying for a good personal future and regards other roles in both the family and the community as not so important. Being influenced by such a value prioritizing a personal success, the child becomes increasingly more self-centered and fails to acquire values such as responsibility, cooperation and diligence, all of which are necessary as a sensible member of a society.[15] The concept of community and society becomes so abstract that the child loses chances to realize one's role of maintaining and improving the social tie and order through his/her daily living.[16]

In the traditional community in Japan, children were busy with two tasks. A first was to provide necessary labor to their family. Having children share even a small part of household in the family helped them learn not only responsibility, cooperation and diligence but also pleasure. A second was to play with children in different ages in the neighbor almost every day. They had quarrels and disagreements on a daily basis, but at the same time, acquired skills and knowledge to deal with those without exacerbating them so that they could play together again next day. There had been many of paddies, fields and open spaces in the community, and those spaces had been important playing fields for children. The development of houses, buildings, factories, shopping centers and roads as the way to modernize the community, however, took away the major playing as well as growing field from youth in the community.

Interaction with and care from adults in the neighbor and playing with friends outside are no longer common among children. Further, many of the responsibilities and roles of children at home are no longer demanded. Kurth-Schai argues that children tend to feel that they are prevented from contributing to their society.[17] Youth in Japan are not even expected to do so. The main role left for youth is to study hard in order to get a good job in a larger and established organization to secure their livings in the future.

Takahashi and Shimoyamada contend that the rapid economic growth from 1960s to 1970s in Japan triggered the trend for many traditions to become apart.[18] As more people obtained better income from working places outside of their community, their community lost attraction for the residents as the important place for work. While senior people stayed in such a community, younger generations progressively established their homes in newly developed towns that were more convenient for them to commute to their working places. It was obvious, however, that those newly moved nuclear families lacked a root in the community, which would have naturally grown if they had been born and raised there. In this way, the traditional close tie uniting the community and family began to fade out, and the family ended up becoming an independent world somewhat isolated from the community.

School

The nature of school life has also changed. A majority of parents believes that having their child enter a more prestigious university would be the shortest way leading to employment in a bigger and well known organization. The career in such an organization is considered the key for one's happiness. Conveying the child this belief and encouraging him/her to get better grades in study have become the major role of parents, especially that of mother. In response to the parents' expectation for school and to the industry's needs of competitive labors, most schools gradually became to participate in a small-scale version of the competitive race going on in the business world.

One statistical indicator, called "Hensachi", emerged as the best and the most effective measurement of how bright the student was in school. Hensachi dictates in what rank the student is in a large group of students of the same age. The higher the student's Hensachi is, the more likely the student can go to a more prestigious university.

In this way, Hensachi always reminds students that they are competing with the students not only in their own school but also in

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many other schools. Kadowaki argues that Hensachi has made some students have a too much sense of superiority and others suffer from an unnecessary sense of inferiority.[19] He contends that Hensachi broke a sense of togetherness and fellowship that schools used to be filled with.

The trust on Hensachi as an effective indicator of the student's ability has been growing rather than fading away. Hensachi not only has changed the atmosphere in school from cooperation to competition but also has pushed most parents to have their child go to private supplementary schools in the afternoon and in the evening after school several days a week. Those parents don't consider that the day-time school can make their child competitive enough. Those supplementary schools are attractive because they teach children skills and know-how to move up the Hensachi ladder. Running such a supplementary school has been a lucrative business.

In Japan, education up to high school focuses on providing students with the knowledge and skills necessary to pass entrance examinations to a university. What youth learn as knowledge in school is facts and theories in the past and the present and does not include knowledge in the future. Future orientation of youth such as images of the future and their roles in the future is not fostered in schools in Japan, similar to situations in other countries.[20] When the future dimension is incorporated into knowledge, one can better see the meaning of the knowledge and can have a good understanding of his/her own role in the future.[21] Without the future dimension, it is not easy for youth to see how they can make the knowledge useful in the future.

Slaughter argues that schools are not very much concerned with human beings, society and the future, and that power, control, economy and efficiency are paid much attention to.[22] Hicks and Holden claim that in order to help youth both to have positive images of the future and to shape up those images, schools need to provide students with some substance that are to work as seeds of those images.[23] Similar problems are identified in the education

in Japan. Sengoku criticizes that schools in Japan are focusing too much on being in command of students and lose sight of their educational mission with respect to what kind of people they would aspire to send to the society.[24]

Market

The industry structure in Japan has progressively shifted from production-oriented to consumption-emphasized since 1980s.[25] In the former, companies led the market by introducing products and services. They endeavored to produce quality goods in a mass scale. Hard work by laborers was highly valued. In the latter, the major leading player in the market changed to consumers. Their desire of buying not only more quality but also more individually tailored products and services has become one of the strong economic drives. As such a desire keeps being met, there have gradually emerged populations who unceasingly expand their desire and who are no longer able to restrain their desire for more and better.[26] Regardless of the age, as long as the person has a strong buying power of goods and services, he or she is valued in the market.[27] More consumption and more spending have become a treasured role of people in such a market.

This trend has made the market to target on youth as a very lucrative group of consumers. Although youth don't earn much money for themselves, their parents provide them with money as if parents regard satisfying their children's material needs as the demonstration of their love.

A society values its member when the member contributes to the society. In the present society in Japan, economic consumption has become the major means of contribution. Parents contribute to their society with their labor and earn income as the reward. This system has not changed for decades. What has changed dramatically is the relationship between youth and market. In the past, most buying activities in the family were controlled by parents and were aimed at raising their living standards. Children had little words to say about the family's buying decisions. Once the

living standards reached to a certain satisfying level, however, more of the parents' income began to flow to their children's hands. Children can now spend part of parents' income for materials, services and leisure based on their own judgment. The sense of balance between income and expenditure helps the person to control his/her spending activities. If children receive money without much effort and are always welcomed and served well by the market, they lose opportunities to develop such a sense as well as to contribute to their society in other ways.

The very high rate of possession of a cellular phone by youth in Japan exemplifies a lack of such a sense. One survey in 2003 shows that 87 percent of 30s, 91 percent of 20s, 98 percent of university students, 87 percent of high school students and 43 percent of junior high school students in major big cities in Japan have their own cellular phone.[28] Even if the monthly charge of the cellular phone service is not so cheap, the number of young users has constantly increased. The unique mindset of Japanese that you need to have the same stuff as your friends or colleagues in order to be welcomed as their member has pushed even youth who do not earn regular income to have their own phone. Once you have one, however, you won't stop there. Whenever a new service for cellular phone such as ringing melodies, Karaoke, photos, movies, electronic games is introduced, some of your friends will surely get it. Then it is just a matter of time until you will get it, too. And such a consumption cycle is exactly what the market loves to see.

In sum, what adults including parents have done on youth are: to deprive them of playing fields; to cut down opportunities for youth to grow in the community; to make youth pursue his/her own happiness by competing with others; and, to let them claim the freedom of being a good consumer in the market. They have almost stopped raising youth as a sensible member of the society. As Gidley argues, youth become rudderless in their social orientation without the necessary social glue.[29] Only the economic role of spending money is left to youth as the last and the most valued glue to

the society in Japan.

Youth with Little Effort toward the Future

The relationships between youth and the society discussed above have considerably determined the characteristics of youth in Japan. Alfred Adler regards the sense of belonging as significant for every member of the community. The sense helps the person affirm that he/she is a valuable part of the community in the same way as the community is valuable for him/her.[30] Without such a sense, the person is unable to recognize the unique meaning of his/her existence. Brunstad maintains that a new generation needs somebody who walks together and shows hope.[31] Unfortunately, the majority of youth in Japan doesn't have such a mentor and are left alone in the society.

The dramatic economic success until the end of 1980s and its repercussions impacted on prospect of the future of youth in Japan. In many countries, economic prosperity is being pursued as one of the most important national goals. Japan achieved the goal as one of the top runners in the world. The economic structure that Japan had built might be seen as one ideal model by other countries, but in fact, it is now clear that it was founded on a number of flaws and hype about the future direction. When the bubble economy finally burst, all those defects began to be unveiled. Since then, while dealing with those problems one by one, Japan has failed to set up a next goal for the nation. The reason why Japan's economy has stagnated for more than a decade is mostly attributable to the lack of a new future direction in the country.

When the society as a whole does not share its common goal, such a mood of directionless affects youth. They become to prefer an easy going life to a hard working life. They choose to enjoy the present rather than to prepare for the future. In one international survey where an average of 34 percent of youth agreed to work hard for the future, only 19 percent of Japanese youth agreed with it.[32] Nakasato and Matsui argue that youth in Japan do not know

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much of mental contentment and pleasure and just continue to seek material satisfaction in the present.[33]

Hatou characterizes the past six generations of youth since 1950s as follows: the generation born in late 1950s faced the failure of student protest movements and missed further chances of proceeding with idealistic ideas; the generation born in early 1960s began to be loosened from various social ties and relationships, and "me" rather than society and "daily life" rather than career became major concerns for them; the generations born from late 1960s and early 1970s took affluence for granted and lost opportunities to train themselves for a better conditions; the generation born in late 1970s held a nihilism that a hard work could end up nothing after having experienced the mood of the society through the bubble economy in late 1980s, and lost trust on the then social norms; and, the generation born in early 1980s spent their teens during the long economic recession, had hard time to see hopes in the society, and began to confine themselves to their small comfortable circle of fellows isolated from the society.[34]

Hatou is critical about the present youth in Japan.[35] He observes that those young people easily give up hanging tough, refuse to conform to social norm, stay comfortably in a small circle of friends, and disrespect being diligent. Hatou argues that a young person can establish his/her identity only by socializing himself/herself through interaction with others in the society. Once the person recognizes his/her identity, the person starts to put more effort into upgrading himself/herself. Otherwise, the person's ego keeps inflating.

Nakasato and Matsui maintain that one of the weaknesses of youth in Japan is poor communication with others.[36] Youth know that they have not trained their communication skills, and thus, would rather try to avoid contacts with others as much as possible. This in turn let them keep focusing on their own matters.

Indifference to Society

One of the crucial societal conditions that have worsened since 1950s in Japan is the near detachment of family and youth from their local context. The more substances they can obtain from the market, the less they appreciate the importance of others for their living. The less opportunities to interact with other people, the more self-centered their norms and values become. As a result, family and youth become more and more to prefer to live independently from their community.

For youth, the detachment may not mean anything negative. Instead, it may be considered a favorable condition because it lets them to feel free to do whatever they would like to do just for their own benefits. Market has successfully manipulated youth to believe that consumption of goods and services is the easiest way to feel happiness in their lives. As the concept of market and its associated concepts of competition and survival are valued more, people forget to remind themselves that the society should secure a cooperative space for all people.

A lack of other kinds of involvements in the society, besides the economic one, has all the time more weakened youth's interest in society. They may see and hear what is happening on television and radio, but those news are just passing information for them. They rarely pay attention to links of one issue to other wider issues and/or deeper issues. And as the mass media often report more of negative news than positive ones, it is difficult for youth to regard their living world as a safe and attractive place. Thus, their indifference to the society is never reversed and has let them possess little motivation to attentively learn about their own society.

A Picture of Issues in Japan

In order to better understand the relationships among the issues discussed in the preceding sections, we use the four layer structure of Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). CLA is a critical futures method and is useful to understand both horizontal and vertical relations of an issue to other issues.[37] Figure 4 presents various issues related to Japanese youth in four layers

Litany

A lack of efforts for the future

- Enjoy the present
- Disrespect being diligent
- Easily give up hanging tough
- Prefer an easy going life

A lack of understanding of self

- Realize no other roles
- Study only for a better *Hensachi*
- Keep seeking material satisfaction

Little knowledge about the society

- Self-centered
- Refuse to conform to social norm
- Communicate poorly
- Stay comfortably in a small circle of friends

Social cause

- Expecting youth of few roles
- Little exposure of youth to societal issues
- Welcomed spending role
- Affluent youth
- Economic success
- *Hensachi*-focused education
- Forced competition
- Family as an independent world
- Little chance to interact with adults in the community
- Lost chances to play in nature and the community
- Academic success is the most important for a youth

Worldview

Adults
- Youth are peripheral
- The high priority is on our own generation's prosperous
- Youth is a valuable source of profit

Youth
- I'd like to benefit from the wealth of the society as much as I can
- I have little influence on society
- Except for economically, I can live independently from the society
- My life is for myself

Myth

- The future is now
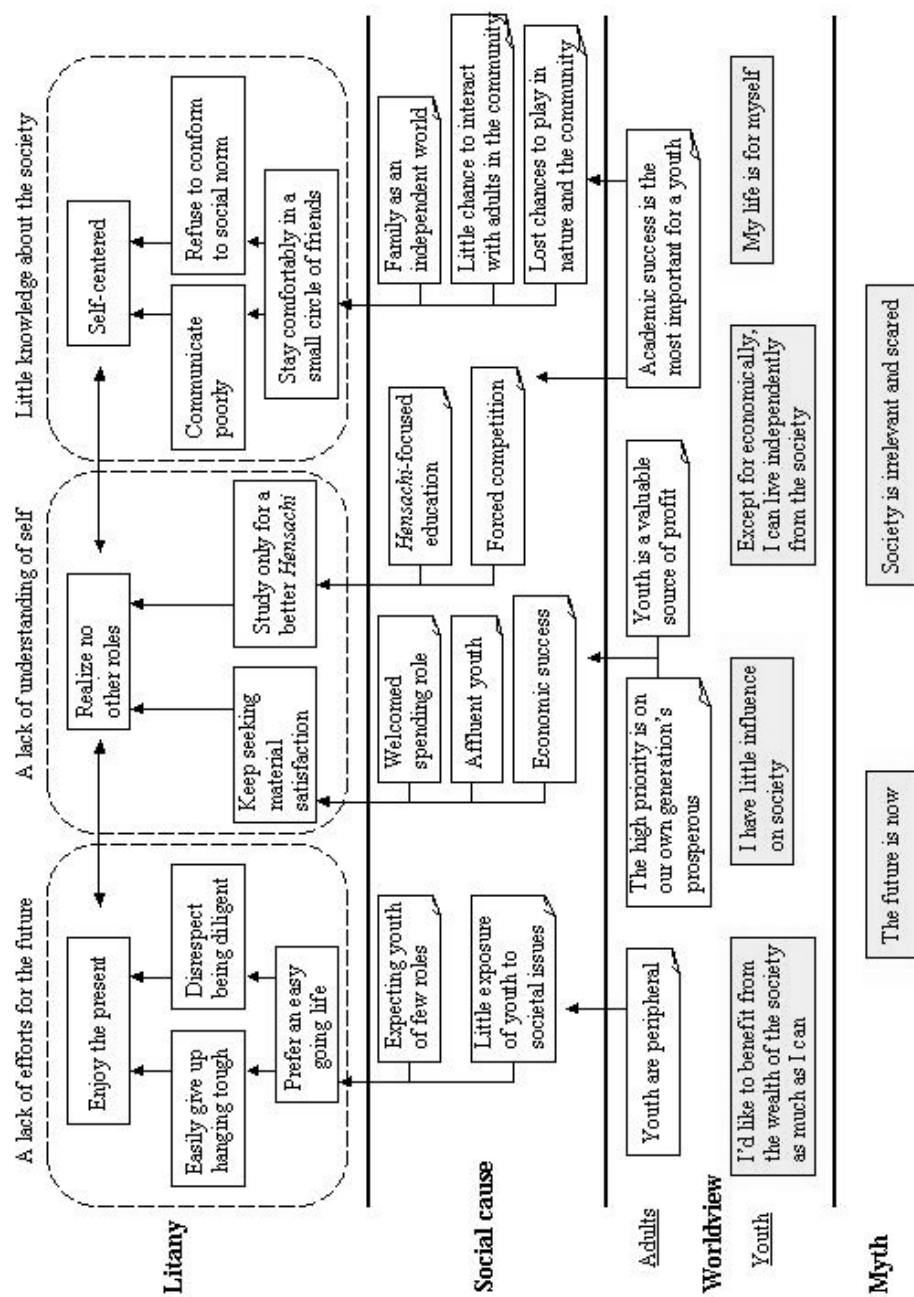- Society is irrelevant and scared

Figure 4 Issues related to Japanese youth

such as litany, social cause, worldview and myth.

At the litany layer, we see three groups of phenomena that influence the scope of the image of the future of youth and their attitudes towards the future.

The first one, named as "A lack of efforts for the future", has stemmed from one of the adults' worldviews, "Youth are peripheral". Adults with this worldview take it for granted to exclude youth from decision making processes of and/or discussions of important issues in the family, school, and community. By being left uninvolved in those mattes, which inherently require a long-term thinking, youth miss the chance to extend their thinking framework and their perspective remains short-sighted. Also the sense of being excluded is likely to push youth further to their small world. As a result, youth's main interest becomes in gratifying their immediate needs. The idea of the future becomes distant from their daily life, and there emerges the worldview, "I'd like to benefit from the wealth of the society as much as I can", in their mind.

The second phenomenon, called as "A lack of understating of self", has its origin in the adults' worldviews "The high priority is on our own generation's prosperous" and "Youth is a valuable source of profit". These worldviews degrade youth as just a means to achieve adults' goal of becoming wealthier, and manipulate youth to believe in the value of spending and consuming in the market more than necessary. At the same time, the worldview, "Academic success is the most important for a youth", dictates that youth should set raising their "Hensachi" as their educational goal in school. The problem of these three worldviews and the resulting economic and educational systems, shown at the social cause layer in Figure 4, is that they never provide youth with a holistic understanding of what an individual in the society can do for the society. Just playing the economic and academic roles never helps youth recognize how important he/she is for others in the society. As a result, youth gradually become to posses worldviews such as "I have little influence on society" and "Except for economically, I

can live independently from the society", as presented in the lower part of the worldview layer in the figure.

The third phenomena at the litany layer, referred to "Little knowledge about the society", is a natural consequence of the reality that youth are marginalized and are deprived of opportunity to be of help to people in the society. Youth in such a circumstance have no other choice besides holding the worldview "My life is for myself", to justify the meaning of one's existence.

Underlying the worldviews of youth, depicted in the lower part of the worldview layer, might be myths such as "The future is now" and "The society is irrelevant and scared". When the future loses its position, the present dominates. When the society appears as another place, it would be difficult for anyone to hold positive images of the future of their community, nation and the world. This is what has happened to youth in Japan. The idea of a society is too abstract, distant and irrelevant for them to be an object of being imagined. Considering that we will not be able to realize what we cannot imagine, the youth's indifference to their society is the critical problem for the future of Japan.

Social Integration[38]

The deterioration of the healthy growth and of images of the future of youth were unnoticeably progressing while Japan was busy in pursuing her economic expansion, and has gotten worse when Japan entered into the current economic recession in the late 1980s. Many of the pressing problems related to youth in Japan seem to have more or less stemmed from such deterioration.

The adults' worldviews shown in Figure 4 indicate that adults are too occupied with self-centered perspectives to take care of place and role for youth in the society, and that they are eager to make use of youth for their benefits. This attitude, called adult's "Me-ism", is prevalent in Japan. Being confronted with such an attitude, youth become suspicious about both adults and the society run by them. The suspi-

cion leads youth to become indifference to their society, to become less knowledgeable about it, and to begin to be afraid of it. Mau found out in his study of decision makers in Jamaica that those who were less knowledgeable about the present problems as well as their causes were more likely to have pessimistic view of the future of the problems.[39] The negative images of the future society held by Japanese youth are probably an extension and a reflection of their fear toward their own society.

The adults' worldviews discussed and their me-ism cannot be of help for a better future in Japan. The harmful impact of those on the images of the future of youth is never trivial. Forcing everyone to compete for survival and to exploit others as much as possible never produces a safe and healthy environment for youth. Any society cannot be formed without cooperation with many others, and youth are very important part for the cooperation. The very core of any positive images of the future is neither technology nor societal systems, but is sound relationships with people in the family and in a larger world. When such relationships are fostered by adults, youth will experience and enjoy a real sense of social integration.

There have been many discussions regarding how to correct the problematic youth in Japan. Those discussions, however, have failed to recognize the fact that youth grow under the strong influence of not only what adults intentionally do but also what they unconsciously do. When the person seeks causes of a certain circumstance not in others but in oneself, the situation can easily alter. At that time, the person matures further.[40] It is crucial, therefore, when adults turn their eyes to themselves and acknowledge and face the adverse consequences that their self-centered worldviews have brought to youth. When that happens, the nature of images of the future of youth as well as the future direction of Japan will then begin to change.

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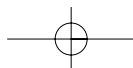Aichi University
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