

# **Psychological consequences of post-industrial anomie on self and motivation among Japanese youth**

**by  
Vinai Norasakkunkit**

I will present some experimental evidence and survey evidence to look at differences between at risk youth versus “occupationally functional youth”. I will also talk about some family dynamic issues as predictors of risk.

According to Markus and Kitayama’s theory, societies that tend to prioritize individual goals, tend to foster the development of an independent view of the self where the self is relatively distinct from others and the environment. This is called the independent self-construal. And societies that tend to foster group-oriented goals like those in East Asia tend to foster a view of the self that is more interdependent with others and the situation. This is called the interdependent self-construal.

With the independent self-construal, there is a tendency to try to strive towards distinguishing yourself from others and focusing on positive qualities of the self. This is called the self enhancement motive.

In contrast, with an interdependent view of the self, people tend to strive to maintain social harmony to try to fit in with others, to adjust themselves to situations and norms and relationships. Thus, they have to constantly pay attention to their own shortcomings and correct for their shortcomings so that they can decrease the gap between personal behavior and socially-expected behavior. We call this the self improvement motive.

So generally the self improvement motive implies that the self is pretty malleable. Whereas the self enhancement motive makes us focus more on the fixed qualities of the self that are positive.

If you apply this model for how people might respond to failure and success feedback, assuming that the average Japanese have a relatively more interdependent orientation of self and therefore more malleable self, they are more likely to persist in response to failure because they are focused more on trying to correct their own shortcomings so that they can better fit in with others and maintain social harmony. Whereas, this pattern would be reverse for an independent orientation of self.

Heine’s team conducted an experiment where he randomly assigned Japanese and North Americans across two conditions. In one condition, participants performed a very challenging task and then received failure feedback. In the other condition, participants performed a relatively easier task and received success feedback. Upon receiving success or failure feedback, depending on which condition the participants were assigned to, they were asked to do a similar challenging task and the amount of time they persisted on that task was measured.

As expected, upon receiving success feedback, North Americans persisted longer than when receiving failure feedback. Whereas for Japanese, the pattern was reversed.

This kind of study showing cross-cultural divergence in psychological tendency is typical study in cultural psychological research. However, one of the limitations in cultural psychology and social psychology is that we tend to always sample from the center of society – people who are quite functional in their societies and therefore who have internalized the dominant

psychological tendencies of the society. Well if we keep doing that then it's hard to capture the more dynamic aspects of the culture.

If you assume that culture is changing, then there must be an increasing population that's moving away from the center of society to the periphery of society due to changes in the circumstances of the society. We believed that the NEETs and hikikomoris represented such a population and that it might be interesting to look at this group of people to capture some aspects of cultural change and globalization impacts on psychological tendencies.

The implications of NEETs are that they are not participating fully in society and therefore represent a failure to conform to the cultural mandate of Japanese society. In other words, they have more room to deviate in their psychological tendencies from the predominant Japanese psychological tendencies. Thus, they should endorse lower levels of interdependent values. As a consequence of being lower on interdependence, they should have less malleable selves as well, which means that their motivational pattern may look a little more like those of North Americans than those of typical Japanese. To test our hypothesis, we replicated Heine's study with high-risk students versus low-risk students. The students were divided into high risk and low risk according to a NEET/hikikomori risk scale we developed. We also included some other measures, including a measure of self-construal to measure independent and interdependent self-construal.

Results from the self-construal scale indicated, as expected, that the high risk group scored significantly lower on interdependence than the low risk group.

With respect to the persistence on a challenging task, as expected, the low-risk group persisted more upon receiving failure feedback than success feedback, whereas the high-risk group looked more like North Americans where they persisted more on success feedback than failure feedback. These results confirmed our hypothesis that the high-risk students tended to have less malleable selves because they were more motivated by positive feedback than negative feedback in contrast to the prototypical Japanese pattern. We believe this difference is due to the high risk group being lower on interdependence than the low risk group and not necessarily because they were higher on independence, which they weren't.

In a second study, we compared university students, who served as a control group, and 28 NEETs and recent hikikomoris recruited from NPOs. We measured their attitudes towards how malleable they thought the nature of personality is. We asked them things like to what extent do you think effort will actually change the core nature of a person and so on. And as expected students felt that a personality is more malleable whereas the NEETs felt that personality is relatively fixed, so that's consistent with what we find in the experimental results.

We were also interested in looking at family relation factors as predictors of risk and measured the degree to which participants felt accepted by their parents and peers. We also measured global self-esteem and perceptions about malleability of personality.

We submitted the data from these measures to a structural equation modeling to examine the sequential causal links of predicting risk. The model suggests that there is a distinction between the hikikomori-type NEETs and the freeter-type NEETs. It's the hikikomori-type NEETs that you find primarily in the NPOs and it's those NEETs where you could see low self-esteem being a strong predictor of risk. Low self-esteem seems to also be associated with not having very positive family relations. Surprisingly, level of peer acceptance did not emerge as a predictor of risk.

In conclusion, the unique motivational pattern among high risk students and NEETs/hikikomoris may represent a cultural change in the ways Japanese youth are defining themselves, rejecting interdependence in this case and the factors that influence motivation to work hard. The motivational pattern and attitudes of NEETs/hikikomoris may represent an extreme version of a trend that is prevalent among Japanese youth today. Family factors suggest that hikikomori might stem from family dysfunction, which may distinguish them from other types of NEETs. However, the fact that such families are on the rise probably has more to do with systemic changes in society and the culture.

That concludes my presentation. Thank you for your attention.

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