

# 6

## Interdependence: Alternative for the Twenty-First Century?

The last two chapters have elaborated the interdependent approach, first conceptualizing it, then relating examples of its cultural manifestations. We now turn to examine the potential significance of the interdependent mode for contemporary problems we—*collectively*—face at the global level. Instead of viewing the interdependent mode as a mere empirical descriptor of happiness and well-being across East Asia, in this chapter we gesture to its potential import globally. The crux of our argument is that WEIRD globalization has placed a heavy burden on contemporary youth, encouraging forms of subjectivity, development, and well-being that are difficult, if not impossible, to sustain in the contemporary economic and environmental climate. In the search for alternatives that can respond to these challenges—most of all, the sustainability imperative—we present emerging evidence that underscores the potential of the interdependent approach, not just for East Asia but globally. In this way, we advance the discussion from ‘alternatives to us’ to ‘alternatives for us’ (Geertz, 1973), resisting a relativist argument in favor of a pragmatic search for new solutions to shared problems. We also address temporal change in this chapter, resisting an a-historical, culturally essentialist reading of interdependence. Cultural change is constantly unfolding, and our role—at least as we see it—is to attempt to shape that change in a pragmatically useful direction in the face of an uncertain twenty-first century.

## New Models for the Twenty-First Century? Globalization, Sustainability, and the Independent Mode

Now more than ever, the need for a different development approach is highlighted in ecological, social, and economic crises: ecosystem degradation, potentially catastrophic climate change, excessive consumption of the affluent and extreme poverty on the other end, and growing inequalities both between and within nations. Underlying all these crises is the lack of a holistic view that would focus on causes instead of symptoms, and *the inadequacy of the architecture of global governance to address these problems*. ... To properly assess well-being outcomes, a more integrated measurement system that balances the ecological, social and economic and cultural dimensions of development is needed. (New Development Paradigm Initiative, 2014, p. V11, italics added)

As reviewed in previous chapters, the seismic discursal and policy shift toward happiness and well-being unfolding over the past decade has largely been driven by a loss of faith in the GDP=Happiness equation of the twentieth century. The 2011 UN resolution, *Happiness: Towards a Holistic Approach to Development*, explicitly raised the call for a new paradigm. In its wake followed work such as the New Development Paradigm Initiative, cited above. In 2015, the optimism of progress found in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) officially gave way to the far more sober Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, within the space of a single decade, economic, social, and intellectual paradigms that seemed so certain in the twentieth century were buckling under growing evidence that contemporary models were no longer sustainable.

Fascinatingly, however, deep reflection on the ‘contents’ of this new model/paradigm did not accompany this shift. Instead of a sole focus on economic growth, happiness and well-being would now take center stage. Yes. But what forms of well-being? What modes of happiness? As reviewed in the opening chapter, many of the new global indices of happiness, including the World Happiness Report (WHR) and the 2015 PISA Student Well-Being studies aimed to address the SDGs, simply *assumed* the universality of the independent approach dominant in the Protestant

West, and began measuring all the world by this standard. Was there empirical evidence to support the idea that this familiar independent mode would lead to a 'different development approach'? Or was it an old wine, new bottle scenario? Were these measures created unreflectively, and without any sense of alternatives? Can we expect that 'cultural products' emerging from the same cultures from which the previous unsustainable paradigm emerged will affect a new model? One key issue is, as pointed out in the quote above, the "inadequacy of the architecture of global governance" to recognize, let alone incorporate, alternatives. This lack of alternatives comes back around, in the model of the culture cycle discussed in the last chapter, to reinforce, on a worldwide scale, those non-sustainable ways of (well-)being.

Forming the larger backdrop here is the past few decades of globalization. One version of the globalization story focuses on the economy, production, and technology: out-sourcing, off-shore manufacturing, and communications advances have led to the global integration of markets, and upon this economic base we find increasing cultural and social globalization unfolding as well. This materialist version of globalization issues from a similar perspective as twentieth-century GDP-ism. Another version of the story is that contemporary globalization represents not simply the triumph of liberal market systems, but a much more expansive set of psycho-cultural pressures on non-Western countries; that is, the spatialization of Western modernity and post-modernity. In many countries, including Japan and much of East Asia, these cultural aspects of globalization are highlighted, with globalization frequently carrying the less felicitous sense of unwelcome 'Westernization' or 'Americanization'. Cultural products like global happiness rankings and, say, educational 'best practices' promoted by the OECD, UNESCO, and UNICEF are not inherently aimed at furthering the market economy, but do advance this psycho-cultural dimension.

A core element of this "psycho-cultural globalization" (Jung & Ahn, 2021) is the spread of Western-style individualism. According to one study that analyzed the cultural transition in Japan and the USA on the axis of individualism-collectivism between 1950 and 2008, a period of rapid economic development in both countries, there has been a common increase in individualism in both contexts, as measured by a decrease

in the number of household members, an increase in nuclear families or unmarried persons living in urban areas, and an increase in rates of divorce (Hamamura, 2012). Here we see that economic changes underpin, in some ways, social and thus cultural changes. We do not intend to deny this fact. Yet, the idea that similar economic changes produce or require similar psycho-cultural change is too simplistic. In the 1960s, Geert Hofstede attempted to quantify countries along an Individualism-Collectivism continuum, an important precursor to much of the cultural psychology work of today. One would expect, following a materialist assumption, that economic change leads directly to cultural transformation, that East Asian countries would—following their explosive economic expansion in the second half of the twentieth century—be much more individualistic today. However, Minkov et al. (2017) have recently reexamined the Hofstede values with data collected in 2014–2016, and confirms that East Asian countries are still not highly individualistic.

Let us again turn to the Japanese case to understand these dynamics better. Undoubtedly, in Japan a market-based economy has put pressure on a culturally embedded interdependent mode of self-construal and well-being. As discussed in the previous chapter, Japanese corporations had traditionally placed a heavy emphasis on interdependence, and this was institutionally manifest in a range of shared activities and lifetime employment schemes ('the salary man' image that is so well-known abroad). Yet, the rise of contract (non-salaried) positions, labor fluidity, and corporate restructuring have forced Japanese workers to act more like independent individuals: working to ensure their own security and future prospects, prioritizing an individual career path over the needs of the corporation, and so on. Unfortunately, the decline in organizations predicated on an interdependent mode has led many Japanese to understand individualism, or individualistic ways of working, as a sort of denial of relationships. This has led to 'isolationism' as the means of achieving individualism. Many readers will have heard of the problem of *hikikomori* (literally: those who withdraw), wherein working-age Japanese adults refuse to enter society. Nakatani (2008) shows how the spread of neo-liberal values and institutions has led to the loss of security and the foundation of trust between people in Japanese society, producing these sorts of problems.

Thus, while one can marshal some evidence in support of a narrative that globalization has erased alternatives, we see a more complex picture. The actual impacts of globalization on changing Japanese values are somewhat superficial. The underlying approach of collective orientation and interdependent modes remain strong. It is precisely for that reason that we see conflicts and challenges arising. For some, the interdependent mode appears to be under threat. Many Japanese are no longer allowed or encouraged to seek a sort of quiescent happiness shared with others. Even if they would rather pursue cooperation or attunements, they are being encouraged and institutionally incentivized to seek competition and self-assertion. As Japanese companies become more performance-based and competitive, it is difficult for individuals to completely distance themselves from the competitive reality, even if they are not interested in competition for advancement. Thus, we see that in contemporary Japan, there are two ways of being, an individual independence mode that gets progressively stronger at the discursive level, and a relational interdependent mode that remains strong in spheres less touched by globalization.

Unfortunately, there are many instances where frameworks for understanding these differences excessively emphasize the opposition between the two. Take, for example, the Commission for the Design of 21st Century Japan (1999). It was written in the late 1990s by an influential group of Japanese political leaders, just as the impacts of globalization were beginning to be strongly felt:

Unfortunately, Japanese society still frowns on displays of individual excellence. This is closely bound up with an ingrained egalitarianism bordering on the absolute. ... The tendency of the Japanese to regard the harmony of their immediate surroundings as paramount has had the merit of creating a nation with minimal disparities in wealth and a high degree of safety relative to other developed countries. But instead of letting individuals give full rein to their abilities and creativity, these social settings have turned into shackles. (p. 8)

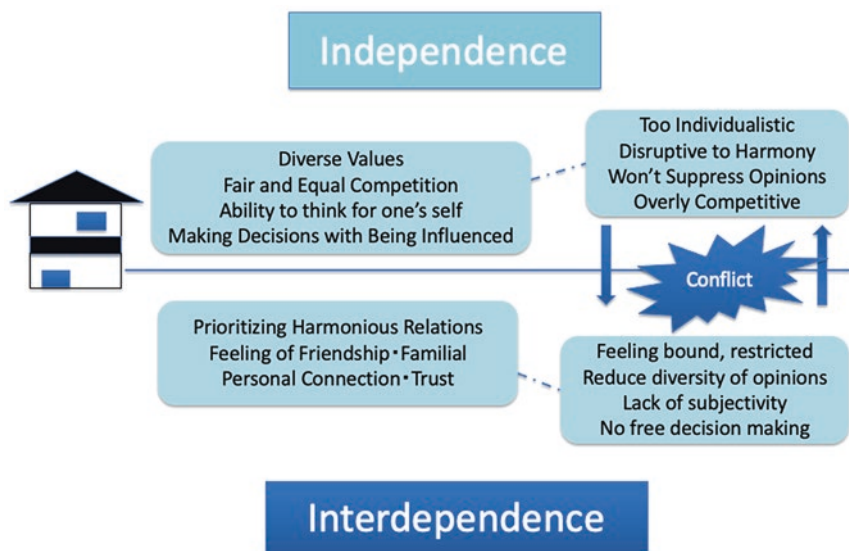
This Report goes on to suggest that a lack of 'robust individuality' has become the prime impediment to Japan's economic resurgence globally, continuing:

In the 21st Century ... Japanese will be required to assert themselves as individuals and to possess a robust individuality. The kind of individual called for at this time is, above all, one who acts freely and with self-responsibility, self-reliantly supporting himself. This 'strong yet flexible individual' takes risks self-responsibly and tackles the challenge of achieving personal goals with a pioneering spirit. (p. 8)

As we see here, under the continued influence of GDP-ism and buoyed by global (read: Western) discourses, there is a tendency to wholly dismiss an interdependent model, despite its recognized benefits (e.g., less inequality, higher degree of safety), and instead place sole faith in 'robust individuality'. The latter quote here is strikingly similar to the OECD's Key Competencies reviewed in the last chapter. At the same time, the contrast with the New Development Paradigm is stark.

In contrast to the simplicity of these sorts of policy discourses, we believe that fostering happiness and well-being in contemporary Japan begins with recognizing the interdependent mode, and then searching for ways to support a version of interdependence capable of weathering the tide of contemporary globalization. Our own view of the contemporary Japanese psycho-cultural situation is a two-story house, as depicted in Fig. 6.1. The ground floor is an interdependent mode, and the second floor is an independent mode. If the interdependent mode is the foundation, rooted in religio-philosophical narratives spanning thousands of years, the second floor has only just been added to the Japanese psyche, beginning with Westernization during the Meiji Restoration (1868) and accelerating greatly in the past few decades of neo-liberal globalization that emphasizes "individual freedom", and manifest in the cultural forms of neo-liberal policymaking and economic reforms. We note that a second floor can be easily expanded, rearranged, and redecorated. But the first floor, on the other hand, is an indispensable part of the building's entire structure. Compared to lavish discursive decorations over the past few decades taking place on the second floor, the first floor may appear non-descript and plain. Yet, there is no way to do anything on the second floor in Japan without having first entered the interdependent first floor.

The second floor houses the independence pursued by the discourses of 'free competition' or 'global values', and is where the furniture of



**Fig. 6.1** 'Two Story' conceptualization of modern subjectivity, case of Japan

'individual freedom', 'individual rights', and 'uniqueness' sit. Yet no matter how well elaborated, independence in Japan is an 'afterthought' on the second floor, not the foundation. Both individual freedom and the desire for uniqueness—core concepts in neo-liberal economics and education for self-esteem alike—are difficult to achieve without a deep understanding of the atomized, independent mode of self that predominates in the West. However, the acquisition of an independent 'cognitive frame' has only been accumulated, particularly in the Protestant United States, through a long history of religious beliefs and Western philosophical thought. When Japanese try to adopt only a part of this way of being 'individual', they do so within a context where the culture, secular philosophies of modernity (e.g., Nishida philosophy) and social institutions (e.g., education system) do not support this discourse. As such, distortion and conflict inevitably occur.

In fact, in the most globalized spheres of Japanese society, such as the business world (think: Toyota) and policymaking emphasizing economic growth (think: Ministry of Finance), the first floor of internal harmony

has been roundly dismissed as a conservative and troublesome old 'habit'. It is viewed as something 'backwards'. These sentiments come out strongly in the quote from the *Commission* above. But the same sentiments also appear in the frequent dismissal of Japanese philosophical ideas and theories, as well as in the field of education where, over the past several decades, the policy discourse has been one of derision and the need to create 'global human resources' (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2021). What is lost in this rather unfortunate and largely uninformed political discourse is the way that interdependence may support independence. Although many view these two orientations as contradictory, there are arguments about how they can be made compatible, hybridized, or switched 'on and off' depending on the needs of a given situation (see Kasulis, 1998). To over simplify, a weakening sense of trust on the first floor creates structural problems for independence on the second floor. In one empirical study, we conducted on local communities in Japan, we found that towns with high levels of trust within the community were more 'open' in their attitude toward accepting newcomers and change (Uchida et al., in prep). At first glance, we might expect that trust within a town would lead to exclusivity, as if 'only people from this town are trustworthy'. However, we found that when there is greater trust with others, communities are able to work together to deal with challenges. This includes welcoming newcomers who bring new ideas. Also, where relationships of trust predicated on interdependence exist, people are able to evaluate each other fairly without fear of misunderstanding. In other words, the cooperative nature of the first floor could be compatible with the independence of the second floor if it is used as a system for building and maintaining mutual trust, rather than a conservative and hierarchical one.

Our rather extended discussion of Japan is important for three reasons. First, recognizing change underscores that we do not see cultural patterns as essential and unchanging. These cultural patterns are constantly evolving, which is the very reason we need to think carefully about which patterns lead to which futures, and decide upon which patterns we seek to support. Patterns of culture are held in place, often only delicately, by the sorts of discussions and institutions we create and engage with. Second, a view of Japan's changes under globalization brings into focus, we believe, a dynamic unfolding across most East Asian societies. Given that



globalization in the independent mode is now common to all these countries, but these same countries simultaneously lack the deep Western religio-philosophical roots of individualism, what is happening in Japan may be a guide to thinking about what is happening across East Asia, and perhaps elsewhere in the world. Third, this discussion of Japan brings into focus why interdependent modes of happiness and the operationalization of those modes in forms such as, say, the interdependent Happiness Scale are crucial. As countries, like Japan, come to be increasingly impacted by global discourses, it is essential that those discourses are diversified enough to encompass and support modes of (well-)being found there. If global change is not inclusive, then it is merely hegemonic. Kitayama and Markus (2000) wrote more than a decade ago that “often as innocuous and well-intended as they are, various attempts to apply theories of happiness that are implicitly grounded in Western ideas of progress, liberalism, egalitarianism, and freedom to other cultural contexts may not reveal but distort lived experience of the people in those cultures”. We wholeheartedly agree, adding that when such theories become the basis for policymaking, this goes beyond mere distortion: it accelerates the elimination of alternatives. These other ways of (well-)being may well offer—as we shall see below—more effective solutions to twenty-first-century challenges.

## **The Transition Generation: Youth and Educating the Future of Well-Being**

Before moving to that larger discussion, it is worth spotlighting the youth and the cultural arena of education. These have been a consistent theme for us throughout this volume, as the youth and their forms of education reveal our collective future, already unfolding. The breakdown of twentieth-century models is most acutely felt among the youth, many of whom hold a vision not simply of breakdown but of bankruptcy. Numerous polls show a growing cynicism with twentieth-century policies, as the gap between the political rhetoric of optimism clashes with the pessimistic socio-economic realities that youth find themselves are faced with. Let us

again focus on Japanese youth and their education, then extend that discussion globally.

Are Japanese young people happy or not? The data on subjective happiness is, in fact, unclear: some results show that levels of happiness are generally declining among the youth, while others show that it is increasing. In the next section we will look closer at the latter data, as it is somewhat counter-intuitive but also highly instructive. What is clear, however, is that the objective economic and social conditions that Japanese youth find themselves in have not changed in a positive direction. The rate of full-time employment is decreasing, the number of part-time employees is rising, and young people's anxiety about the future has grown considerably, as manifest in, say, a consistently declining rate of marriage. Following the acceleration of globalization in the late 1990s, discourse and policies aimed at promoting competition (competition in a market-based economy) have become stronger in Japan. The country—once among the most powerful economies in the world—has been exposed to severe price competition by rising 'rivals' across East Asia. As a result, costs associated with human resources have been greatly reduced, working styles diversified, and, inevitably, inequalities have risen (Yamada, 2009). Exacerbating all of this, Japan has experienced a prolonged economic slump after the collapse of the so-called Bubble Economy in the early 1990s. Within Japan, the past few decades are often referred to as the Lost Decade(s). Originally it referred to one decade, now it is going on three.

Faced with this, Japanese companies, which have an enduring seniority-based system, responded to these challenges in ways that maintained a relative continuity in conditions for mid-career workers (middle management) and above, but shifted dramatically the patterns of hiring and employment among young people: unstable contract posts, reduced benefits, and simply a refusal to hire youth (Genda, 2001; Toivonen et al., 2011). In 2010, while Japan's overall unemployment rate for all ages was 5%, the unemployment rate for those aged 25–34 was 6.2%, and the number of part-time workers exceeded 30% of the total (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2013). In addition, the job offer rate for college graduates (as of December of the year before graduation) has been consistently falling since 1997. The rate did bottom out in March 2011

(68.8%) and has been rising again. But few remain optimistic about the future. Moreover, the rate of young people leaving the workforce within three years is also extremely high, suggesting that the quality of the jobs on offer entail poor conditions or are underpaid: about one-third of all new graduates quit their jobs at an early stage. The lucky ones moved to better jobs. The unlucky ones ended up unemployed or simply in 'withdrawal'.

Under such changing conditions, shifts in the view of happiness among Japanese youth are inevitably undergoing change. Compared to their parents or grandparents generation (anyone over 50 years old), who grew up at a time of strong economic growth, the goal of 'work hard and get rich' is no longer a strong goal among Japanese youth. In fact, compared to young people around the world, Japan ranks the lowest in terms of the desire to "earn more money than my parents" (Zielenziger, 2007). This data is corroborated by a 2010 survey conducted by the Japan Youth Research Institute comparing the views and attitude of high school students in Japan, South Korea, China, and the United States. In response to the question, "Do you want to be a great person?", the percentage of students who answered "strongly agree" or "agree" was lowest among Japanese youth: 86% for China, 72% for South Korea, and 66% for the USA, but just 43% for Japan. In the previous chapter, we saw that only 49% of Japanese youth had the goal of achieving a high social standing, the lowest among these countries. We read these results as suggesting that, although Japanese young people are in a difficult situation economically, they are more inclined to maintain the status quo and have close relationships with their surroundings than to 'chase dreams and aspire to greatness' as the postwar Japanese generation did. Instead of focusing on a material-rich future, one that looks increasingly unlikely, they instead seem to focus now on 'present happiness'. That is, Japanese youth look to be increasingly detaching happiness from the GDPism of the past, allowing happiness to increase amidst difficult socio-economic conditions (see Komatsu, Rappleye, & Uchida, 2022a).

Evidence corroborates this reading. Figure 6.2 shows data from the Public Opinion Poll on Citizens' Life conducted by the Japanese government annually since 1948, focusing on the last two decades (1999–2009). Here we see that the youth are actually reporting higher levels of

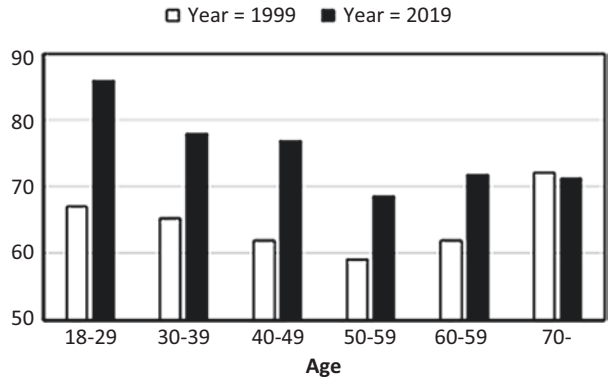


Fig. 6.2 Happiness among different ages: change across two decades in Japan

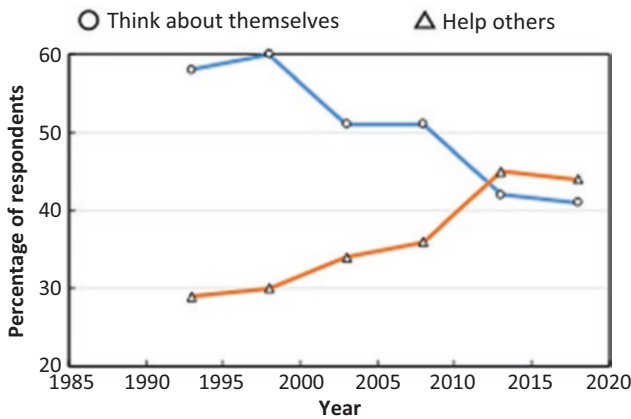


Fig. 6.3 Changing beliefs about self and others over the last three decades in Japan

happiness than older generations. There seems to be, among Japanese youth, a growing sense of ‘kinship’ and their preference for a slow life, a vision of young people not ambitious but who find happiness in taking care of their surroundings (Furuichi, 2011). As shown in Fig. 6.3, another survey shows that the percentage of respondents (all ages) who believe most people primarily think about themselves has declined, being

overtaken by the percentage who believe that most people prefer to help others. This data suggests a movement away from wealth=happiness equation, momentum toward a new definition of happiness that focuses on relations, in particular 'safe' and stable interpersonal relationships. That is, there is a return to harmony in the present context, rather than a strengthening focus on independent and individual acquisition in the future.

We must, of course, be cautious in reading the data this way, as we may sound like apologists for an increasingly unfair socio-economic system. Indeed, we have already pointed out the negative dimensions of this transition, centered on those who cannot cope and simply withdraw (*hikikomori*) or refuse to participate in education and employment (NEET). In terms of *hikikomori*, we read this behavior as the plight of youth who have fallen out of the relational, interdependent arena(s) that define Japanese society. In 2010, it was estimated that there were 70,000 people who had exhibited withdrawal from society by the age of 39, and a 2009 survey suggested another 60,000 'middle-aged withdrawn people' at age 40 or older. Unfortunately, once these *hikikomori* have 'fallen out' it is very difficult for them to return. We have conducted further research into the reasons youth are prone to these options, as seen in the development of the "NEET and Hikikomori Risk Scale" (Uchida & Norasakkunkit, 2015). Utilizing it, we found three types of orientations to this sort of withdrawal: (1) an attitude that necessarily rejects working in a hierarchical society with traditional Japanese norms, (2) a lack of confidence in one's communication and social skills, and (3) lack of clarity or uncertainty around the 'future goals' one wishes to pursue. Those at particular risk of becoming *hikikomori* are those who deviate from or reject the wider Japanese-style interdependence orientation, have a lower sense of well-being, and have fewer close relationships in their communities. It is frequently pointed out that Japanese youth seem to have declining motivation to try new things, and when asked what motivates them, they often reply that they are motivated only by what they like to do and/or are good at, but not by anything else. This lack of motivation connects, it seems, to the lack of clarity or uncertainty around future goals as well.

While not naïve to the negative dimensions of this transition, it is important to recognize the emergence of new forms of happiness among

youth, as they may be pointing us to a different world, one more apropos for the twenty-first century. The danger is that policymaking, led by an older generation still entrenched in the twentieth-century views, reinforces the very outlooks that contribute to youth unhappiness and turn a blind eye to these alternative approaches.

As an illustrative example, let us briefly examine the recent movement to improve “self-esteem” among Japanese students. In the mid-2000s, amidst the policy discourses of individualism reviewed above and neo-liberal globalization celebrating the individual, several surveys emerged showing low levels of self-esteem (*jiko kotei kan*) among Japanese students. Pushing to one side the issues of response bias and cultural differences we have focused on throughout this volume, many prefectural Boards of Education (local education authorities) across Japan responded to these surveys by actively promoting pedagogies aimed at raising ‘self-esteem’. For example, one prefecture in the middle of Japan distributed materials to all its teachers, explaining Maslow’s Hierarchy (self-esteem purportedly linking to Maslow’s Level 4) and promoting lessons that “encouraged students to recognize their individualism”. This included the ability to ‘make individual decisions’ and ‘set one’s own goals’. Kyoto Prefecture, where we live, distributed guidelines to all local elementary schools encouraging lessons that asked students to “imagine what person they want to become in the future” (*naritai jibun*), and asking teachers to change the way they speak to students. Teachers were encouraged to put emphasis on positive words, individualization, and individual strengths, as opposed to pointing out negative aspects, whole-group discussion, and flagging individual weaknesses. At the same time, a range of popular books aimed at teachers emerged, sharing ideas about lessons that could improve self-esteem. One popular volume entitled, ‘The Shower of Individual Praise’, encouraged teachers to spend time in each lesson conveying the strengths of each student, so that each individual student emerged from the shower of praise “shining” (Kikuike, 2015).

While these new pedagogies are well-intentioned, the problems here are numerous. First, as we have seen, the notion of individuals with high levels of self-esteem is a particular cultural arrangement of North America. At root, it derives from an independent form of self-construal and

happiness at odds with the Japanese context. Among policymakers, at least some, there is a continued misreading of difference as deficit. Second, based on this misreading, policies and practices are introduced that, while seemingly alleviating the deficit, actually accelerate the move toward independent modes. Making ‘individual decisions’ and imagining who one will be in the future sounds very much like the OECD’s Key Competencies and the Cantril Ladder. Nonetheless, lessons that end with a ‘Shower of Individual Praise’ sit within an educational system that is deeply committed to fostering an interdependent mode. Japanese students then face mixed messages: become a ‘strong individual’ but learn attunement; think first of oneself (ego-centric) but stay committed to responsiveness to the other (allo-centric) forms. In a more critical appraisal, one could argue that the traditional forms of meaning and value—an interdependence mode—are being actively discouraged (e.g., not praising the overall efforts of the class).

In the surveys cited above, we have seen how there has been a shift in emphasis, away from pursuing one’s own goals and toward ‘helping others’. We have seen how Japanese youth appear to be increasingly satisfied with a life less focused on the pursuit of wealth and social standing. Our own empirical studies, conducted among college students and adults in Japan and the United States, found that in Japan, people who emphasized individualistic tendencies tended to be less happy (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014). The effect was mediated by the number of close friends: the stronger the individual achievement orientation, the harder it is for people to connect with others, and this may be a factor in lowering happiness. This same effect was not found in the United States. Here we see that the policymaking-turned-practice discourse is not only blind to these differences, but encourages attitudes that may actually lead to greater unhappiness. Japanese companies and schools have, under psychosocial globalization, shifted toward independent achievement orientations, but these systems are not undergirded by the personal values and perspectives that govern these systems in the North American cultural context. In this sense, the independent mode may be more difficult for Japanese, and other East Asians, to adopt, and subsequently lead to a range of unintended negative effects. We wonder aloud: instead of encouraging a transition to independent modes of happiness, shouldn’t

the emphasis be on repairing the interdependent mode threatened by changes in the wider socio-economic structures under neo-liberal globalization?

Here the larger picture comes into view. Despite a different dominant pattern of happiness at play in East Asia, global comparisons conducted within the narrow range of Western theories of happiness and well-being suggest East Asia to be in deficit. This deficit view leads to the introduction of new cultural practices that promise improvement, but (1) are at odds with the socio-economic context, and (2) block from view alternative forms of happiness. This much has been established already. But the key point is that in uncritically accepting the 'global' diagnosis, the next move becomes uncritically adopting practices from the more 'advanced' countries. Scant attention is paid to alternative practices, precisely because they are not well represented in the existing cultural products of global rankings, academic theory, or pedagogical practice. Yet, purportedly 'advanced' practices were developed at a very different time (i.e., periods of high economic growth), and in very different contexts (i.e., Protestant cultural sphere). Moreover, even if these practices 'improve' subjective happiness and well-being to some extent, youth with higher levels of self-esteem and independent self-construal are unlikely to be able to pursue the "person they want to become in the future" (*naritai jibun*), given declining resources and the breakdown of twentieth-century models. What is the way out of this?

Without being naïve to the negative dimensions, one way is to follow the youth themselves: reconnecting with an alternative sense of happiness and well-being, finding practices that support those modes, and thus shifting to a focus on the 'place' of happiness rather than individual disposition.

## **Sustainability, Disaster, and Collective Action: Interdependence as Alternative Approach?**

Among the challenges that humans collectively face, perhaps none is more pressing than the sustainability imperative. The *New Development Paradigm* (2014) cited at the outset draws attention to "potentially



catastrophic climate change”, a call taken up globally via the somber Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The youth, those destined to face the consequences, were—at least until the COVID-19 pandemic—protesting in the streets worldwide in the *School Strikes for Climate* movement, demanding immediate action on the climate crisis. Recall the Japanese government’s 2011 conceptualization of well-being led toward ‘sustainability’ (Fig. 3.8). Even the OECD, an organization dedicated to furthering capitalist modes of economic growth following the Second World War, recently argued in the *OECD Environmental Outlook to 2050: The Consequences of Inaction* (2018) that environmental sustainability must become the foremost policy priority: “Humanity has witnessed unprecedented growth and prosperity in the past decades. ... This growth, however, has been accompanied by environmental pollution and natural resource depletion. The current growth model ... could ultimately undermine human development.”

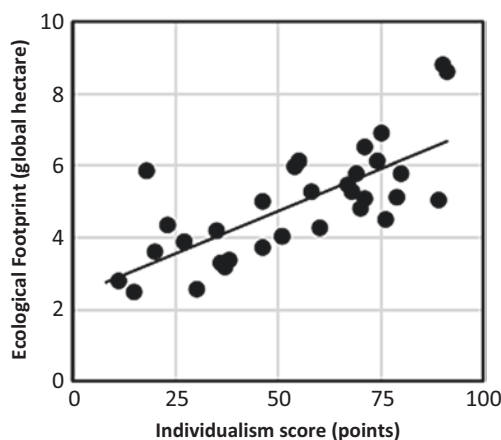
However, it is precisely ‘inaction’ that has defined the debate so far. Despite decades of scientific evidence, global agreements, and economic incentives such as carbon trading schemes, humans have collectively been unable to change course. Building on work done with our close colleague Hikaru Komatsu, we thus suggest cultural change as an alternative approach to addressing the crisis. The crux of our argument is that the North American independence model seems to fit an expansionary, growth period without resource constraints, whereas an interdependent model may be a better fit with a degrowth society, one defined by severe resource constraints. That is, when resources are expanding, maximizing individual gains may lead to growth and efficiency. However, in a degrowth scenario, where the amount of new resources that can be acquired is limited, rather than seeking to maximize individual happiness, sustainability must be redefined as collectively shared and/or in pursuit of ‘moderate’ levels of happiness.

Some recent work in the emerging field of environmental psychology has already prepared the way for this cultural approach. Arnocky et al. (2007) focus on attitudes toward the environment, reporting that individuals with an independent self tend to show only ego-centric concern (i.e., concern about environmental degradation because of the negative impact it will have on oneself) instead of eco-centric concern (i.e.,

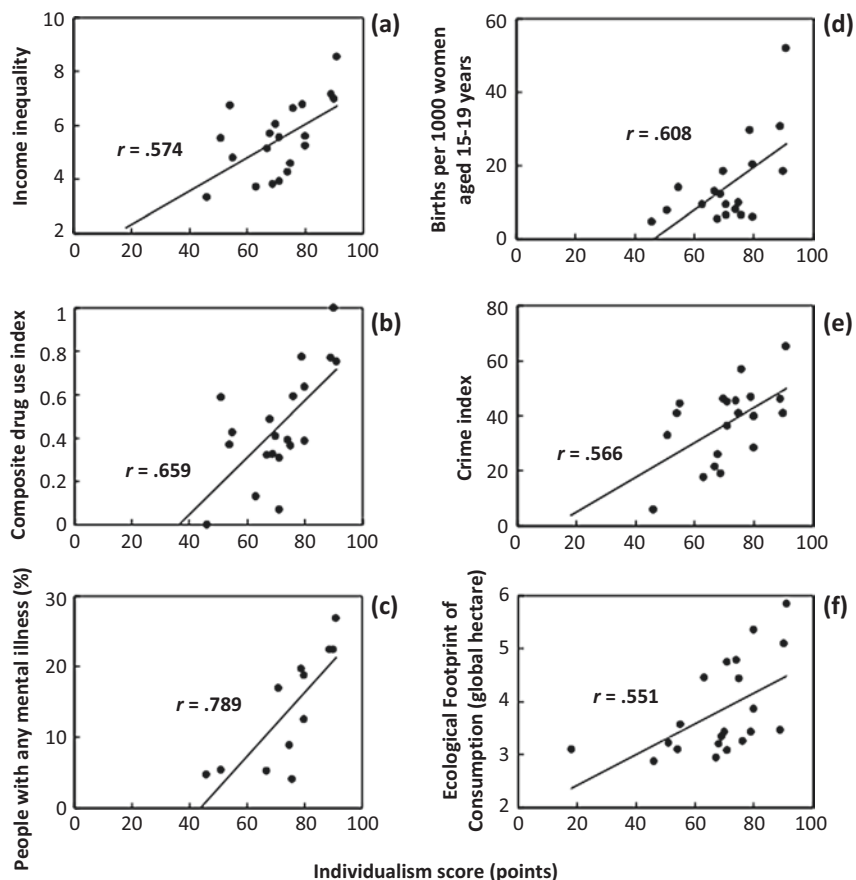
concern about environmental degradation because humans are a part of nature). Other studies find that individuals in the independent modes are less effective in controlling their desires for the sake of social and ecological improvement (Martinsson et al., 2012; Chuang et al., 2016). One consequence of this is that those with independent self-construal tend to engage in pro-environmental actions with less frequency, for example, sorting garbage and driving less (Chuang et al., 2016; Davis & Stroink, 2016).

Our own recent work has attempted to go beyond merely differences in attitudes and pro-environmental behaviors, to instead examine actual impacts on carbon dioxide emissions and resource depletion (Komatsu et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Komatsu, Rappleye, & Silova, 2022b). Utilizing the measure of ecological footprint, we found that countries where the dominant form of self is independent tend to have a higher ecological footprint, as shown in Fig. 6.4 (Komatsu et al., 2019).

In related work, and here connecting to the theme of education, we have also conducted studies finding that among high-income countries where independent self-construal dominates, forms of pedagogy such as student-centered learning also tend to dominate (Komatsu et al., 2021). Yet, it is these independent-heavy societies that are the least sustainable,



**Fig. 6.4** Relationship between individualism scores and ecological footprint of consumption. (Adapted from Komatsu, Rappleye, & Silova, 2022b)



**Fig. 6.5** Relationship between independence (individualism) and various sustainability indices. (Adapted from Komatsu et al., 2021)

both environmental and across a range of social indicators, including income inequality, drug use, mental well-being, crime/safety, and stable families, as shown in Figs. 6.5.

While the results for social (un)sustainability are interesting enough, we wish to maintain a focus on environmental sustainability. This same study found that countries with high scores for independent self-construal (individualism), including the United States, UK, and Australia, tend to favor liberal market economies, and yet these economies show

higher levels of ecological footprint of consumption. Japan—which, alongside Korea, has the lowest levels of individualism among high-income OECD countries—has a lower ecological footprint. Interestingly, Japan has seen substantial reductions in consumption-based environmental indicators over the past decade (15% in per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, 18% in per capita ecological footprint; 27% for material footprint) despite the lack of strong government control (Komatsu, Rappleye, & Uchida, 2022a). This is the same period in which, as we reviewed previously, Japanese youth were transitioning to new forms of happiness, one more defined by interdependence and moderation.

At both a macro-global level and country-level comparison then, there is emerging evidence to support the notion that self-construal affects environmental attitudes and impact. Coupled with the failure of other approaches to environmental sustainability, we wonder aloud whether it is time to open the climate discussion to culture. More specifically, is it time to raise awareness around the interdependent mode within these discussions?

Models centered on the individual pursuit of happiness tightly couple with capitalist models: vigorous competition purportedly leads to higher achievement among individuals, in turn generating benefits for society as a whole. Whether or not this is actually the case (recall the Easterlin Paradox), the precondition for this model is that competition among individuals does not bring about a state of co-poverty due to damage to the macro environment. We find that the dominant models of self, happiness, and economy arose in a period of European history marked by expansion and under a cultural assumption of infinite resources (Rappleye & Komatsu, 2020). Although we are now aware that resources are finite, we continue to assume models of self, happiness, and economy developed at that earlier time. Even the major United Nations agencies leading the SDGs, including UNESCO whose mandate is education and culture, have largely failed to recognize the dimension of culture, let alone different modes of self-construal (see Komatsu et al., 2020).

As an alternative, the proliferation of ‘cultural products’ that promoted an interdependent outlook would contribute to changes in self-construal, and—over time—likely contribute to sustainability. Cultural change is not as elusive or impossible as we might imagine. Studies in cultural

psychology have highlighted the notion of ‘priming’: simply reading a story with an interdependent theme or even circling interdependent pronouns (e.g., we) instead of independent pronouns (I) in a word search task increased interdependent self-construal (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner et al., 1999; Trafimow et al., 1991; see also Nisbett, 2003). ‘Cultural products’ are, in a sense, part of the priming landscape that impacts self-construal. Yet, what we see globally, despite all the rhetoric of sustainability and the purported shift away from GDPism, there continues to be a proliferation of cultural products that reinforce the independence model of the expansionary period, for example, all the happiness rankings we listed in the opening chapter and the pedagogical models scattered throughout. Can we really expect sustainable change to arise when the underlying cultural priming and cultural products remain unchanged?

## But Isn’t It Already Too Late...?

More pessimistic readers will no doubt argue that the odds are now overwhelming that human society will fail to achieve environmental sustainability. It is therefore either idealistic or irrelevant to continue discussing ways to ‘achieve’ sustainability. We actually agree. Current countermeasures to environmental problems, including climate change, are not commensurate with the rate and magnitude of the changes predicted. Even if all the countries implement the policies promised in the Paris Agreement framework, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are projected to *increase* not decrease (Nieto et al., 2018; United Nations, 2021). Today, it may no longer be useful to talk about sustainability but instead *survivability*. Indeed, Kyoto University, where both of us have worked for a decade or more, recently established the School of Human Survivability, arguably the first in the world. It disposes with the pretense that sustainability is still a viable option. Yet even if we openly acknowledge that the current trajectory is unsustainable and pivot to prepare for the disasters to come, we still insist that the interdependent mode is crucial. Societies dominated by independent modes are expected to have far greater difficulty in adapting to the inevitable consequences of the looming crisis. This point has been

confirmed by research in quite disparate fields, including social and environmental psychology, disaster science, and adaptation science.

For example, several studies in social and environmental psychology found that an independent self was less effective in controlling one's own desire for the sake of interdependent-collective social benefit (Seeley & Gardner, 2003; Chuang et al., 2016). Another study in environmental psychology (Arnocky et al., 2007) reported that an independent self cooperated less effectively with others than interdependent selves under hypothetical conditions of resource constraints. In the emerging fields of disaster science and adaptation science, recent work has found that societies with weak social cohesion and great inequality tended to be slow in recovering from catastrophic conditions induced by disasters (Dynes, 2006). Furthermore, in communities with weak social cohesion a higher percentage of people suffer from mental distress such as post-traumatic stress disorder after disasters. In one in-depth study, comparing the aftermath of Japan's Fukushima nuclear (2011) disaster with the Hurricane Katrina (2005), it was found that resilience was far higher in Japan, given far higher rates of social capital in Japan. We tend to view, in line with the argument in the last chapter, the relationship between interdependent modes and social capital as inseparable, and mutually reinforcing.

Indeed, the Fukushima disaster of March 2011 in which a tsunami and earthquake led to nuclear meltdown revealed many things about Japan. It helps us hypothetically envisage the future. In Japan, where major earthquakes and typhoons are frequent, there is an acute sense of how disaster can have an immeasurably large impact on the human mind and shape culture, thus making this a particularly robust field of research there. In terms of Fukushima, one survey conducted in the Tohoku region before and after the Great East Japan Earthquake in January 2011 and February 2012 found, somewhat unsurprisingly, that subjective well-being after the disaster was lower than before the disaster, and that this tendency was particularly strong in the major disaster-affected prefectures (Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima) (Horige, 2013). Another survey conducted in June 2011, three months after the earthquake, showed that the tendency of post-traumatic stress was significantly higher in the disaster-affected areas than in the unaffected areas, indicating the need for medical support and clinical counseling (Kyutoku et al., 2012;

Kotozaki & Kawashima, 2012). It is perhaps obvious that natural disasters lower happiness and well-being, but even man-made disasters have negative impacts on happiness, even among those not significantly impacted by actual events. For example, the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States had a significant impact on people outside of the USA such as in the UK, where it was reported that feelings of happiness declined after the attacks (Metcalfe et al., 2011). In addition, according to a monthly survey of adults across the USA about Hurricane Katrina from August to October 2005, negative emotions “felt during the week” increased in early September, the month when Katrina’s damage became most apparent (Kimball et al., 2006). It seems obvious to us that the climate change will lead to more frequent disasters, and these will become an increasing drag on subjective happiness in coming decades, even for those of us not directly affected. Some work is already pointing to ‘climate depression’ as a new affliction, one particularly strong among the youth (Kalmus, 2021).

In Japan, one of the most interesting findings to emerge from the field of disaster research is the way that such events tend to strengthen the interdependent mode. Following the Great Kobe Earthquake (1995), one study sought to understand the psychological changes among university students by conducting a survey four to seven years after the disaster (Nishimoto & Inoue, 2004). It found that when faced with the threat of nature, there was an increase in the importance of connections with others and the appreciation of family and friends. Similar results were confirmed after the Fukushima disaster. For example, researchers at Keio University found that altruism increases in the aftermath of a disaster, as manifest in donations and increasing number of people involved in activities aimed at helping others (Ishino et al., 2012). This finding resonates with data from another public opinion poll: the percentage of people who believed that most people think about themselves reduced greatly after the Fukushima disaster, whereas the percentage of people who believed that most people want to help others increased (Komatsu, Rappleye, & Silova, 2022b). The latest round of the same survey conducted in 2018 also confirmed a comparably high percentage of people who believe that most people want to help others.

Notably, a first survey for the Cabinet Office's Happiness Index we featured in Chapter Three took place in December 2010, just three months before the disaster struck. Obviously there was no way to know that the Fukushima disaster would unfold a few months later. It was a large-scale happiness survey of 20,000 young people in their 20s and 30s. As a panel survey, it was designed from the outset to have the same person answer twice. The second survey was scheduled to be conducted at the end of March 2011. But since the second survey came just after the earthquake, the decision was made not to include residents of the six prefectures most affected by the disaster. New participants were recruited to replace those who had been left out. Analyzing this data in light of the Fukushima disaster, Uchida et al. (Uchida et al., 2014) found that: (1) As Kimball et al. (2006) pointed out, people felt depressed after the earthquake, so temporary positive emotions decreased and negative emotions increased; (2) at the same time, the experience of the earthquake changed people's sense of values, and they began to reevaluate their environment and the existence of others, which they had taken for granted; and as a result, (3) their criteria for judging happiness changed, and happiness tended to increase.

The second (later) survey included a question about change, added in light of the disaster: "Has your way of thinking about life and happiness changed?" In response to this question, a total of 58% of the respondents answered "greatly changed" or "somewhat changed", indicating that more than half of the respondents had experienced some form of change in their outlook on life and values. Those in this group also responded affirmatively to the direction of such change: "emphasis on connection", "emphasis on individual effort", and "feeling of emptiness". Overall, the change in emphasis on connection was the highest. These results show that more than half of the young people in their 20s and 30s experienced some kind of change in their outlook on life and values after Fukushima, even though they did not live in the immediate disaster zone. In the wake of the disaster, the Japanese word 'kizuna'—meaning 'fundamental connection'—became more prominent.

If what happened in Japan is any indication, a collective future marked by frequent climate-related disasters is likely to encourage a deep rethinking of what happiness and well-being mean. This rethinking will, of



course, occur with greatest intensity among those directly affected by such disasters, as material acquisition and individual gain proves to be impossible. But more generally, we expect to see shifts among those not directly or intensely affected, as well. We find it hard to imagine how future disasters can be linked to arguments in favor of greater independence. Instead, we expect disasters linked to climate change to give rise to discourses around interdependence, as the social, economic, and ecological matrix from which independent modes of self-construal have arisen begin to erode. In the face of such challenges and changes, how long will policy in the twenty-first century continue to issue the call for “one who acts freely and with self-responsibility, self-reliantly supporting himself”? How long will classroom pedagogies emphasize showers of personalized praise and individualized learning models? How long will it still be meaningful to measure happiness and rank countries according to questions like “I am satisfied with my life” and “I have acquired the things I want in life”? How long will research continue to promote twentieth-century modes of happiness and well-being?

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