

Title: The Existential Crisis of Japanese Youth: Theorizing Educational Achievement and Subjective Well-being through Rosa's Social Acceleration Theory

Research Overview (50 words): The purpose of this study is to theorize the paradoxical coexistence of life meaning and suffering among Japanese youth—world-class skills with low subjective well-being alongside rising sense of life meaning—as an "existential crisis." Drawing on Rosa's social acceleration theory, it offers a temporal-structural reframing transcending the psychological-versus-structural dichotomy in existing scholarship.

Purpose of Study: Contemporary Japanese youth exhibit a puzzling coexistence: international comparative data (OECD PISA 2018, 2022; OECD PIAAC 2013; International Youth Foundation, 2016) show world-class general skills, yet subjective well-being ranks among the lowest in developed economies (Honda, 2020), while longitudinal national surveys reveal rising *ikigai* (life meaning) over four decades (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, 2018). Existing scholarship on youth suffering has been split along two axes—whether youth feel suffering, and whether to frame it psychologically or structurally—preventing an integrated account of why suffering and meaning coexist, and why educational achievement fails to translate into existential well-being.

This paper asks: how can this paradoxical coexistence be theoretically reframed? It proposes "existential crisis" to designate the coexistence as a social-structural phenomenon rather than psychological malaise, drawing on Rosa's social acceleration theory for temporal-structural reframing. The purpose is threefold: (1) to conceptualize

the existential crisis as irreducible to psychological or structural explanations alone; (2) to demonstrate how Rosa's framework—the threefold acceleration (technological, social change, life-tempo) and alienation through the acceleration/de-acceleration dialectic—integrates the two approaches temporally; (3) to contribute to educational-sociological research on youth suffering by introducing the missing dimension of time.

Research Methods: This study is a theoretical reconstruction integrating three components: (1) critical reading of empirical data on youth well-being, skills, and life meaning (OECD PISA 2018, 2022; OECD PIAAC 2013; International Youth Foundation, 2016; NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, 2018; Honda, 2020); (2) critique of the psychological-versus-structural dichotomy, including Drake and Guhin's (2021) analysis of achievement ideology and alienation as a partial bridge; (3) mobilization of Rosa's (2013) social acceleration theory—the threefold acceleration, the acceleration/de-acceleration dialectic, and alienation—as a temporal-structural framework. Following Igarashi's (2025) principle of "keep it abstract, keep it equal," Japan is treated not as a culturally exceptional case but as a most acute site for theorizing a structure latent in social orders grounded in capitalist modalities.

Results and Discussion: The paper presents three interconnected findings.

First, the coexistence of high skill attainment, low well-being, and rising life meaning cannot be captured by psychological or structural frameworks alone. It is reconceptualized as an *existential crisis*: a structural phenomenon where the pursuit of life meaning generates suffering, both mediated by the same accelerative temporal regime. Educational achievement intensifies rather than resolves this crisis—consistent with

Honda's (2020) demonstration that Japanese hyper-meritocracy demands continuous existential demonstration of "ability" rather than the accumulation of discrete achievements, making high educational attainment a site of perpetual self-justification rather than existential settlement.

Second, the psychological-versus-structural dichotomy is itself a symptom of the missing temporal dimension. Structural perspectives, treating credentials as guarantors of socioeconomic position, overlook suffering experienced processually; psychological perspectives, focusing on individuated experiences, fail to grasp that suffering is societally pervasive while life meaning simultaneously rises. Rosa's theory provides an integrating concept: subjects who synchronize with accelerating tempos experience life meaning through resonance with the accelerating world, while synchronization itself generates suffering as a structural cost. Suffering and meaning are co-produced effects of the same temporal structure, not opposing experiences. This reframing dissolves the dichotomy by relocating both poles within a single temporal-structural mechanism.

Third, although the existential crisis appears most acutely in Japan—where hyper-meritocracy, post-growth inertia, and accelerative pressures converge—the underlying structure is latent in social orders grounded in capitalist modalities under late modernity. The Japanese case is theoretically generative precisely because it renders visible a structure obscured in less acute contexts. For sociology of education, this reframing introduces the missing temporal dimension into youth suffering research, opening new questions: How does educational time-structure (curricular acceleration, examination tempos, credentialing rhythms) shape youth's existential condition? How are educational inequalities mediated through differential synchronization with accelerating tempos?

The paper concludes by signaling implications for educational policy and theory. Reframing youth suffering as an existential crisis rather than psychological vulnerability resists the individualization of structural problems that characterizes contemporary neoliberal educational discourse. Further articulation of the existential crisis mechanism and its integration with research on educational inequality are needed. The contribution is threefold: extending Rosa's framework to youth's existential condition; introducing temporal-structural analysis into educational sociology of youth suffering; and offering a framework in which a local phenomenon—the Japanese paradox—generates global theoretical visions, in line with the Focal Meeting theme.

Keywords: Social Acceleration Theory; Existential Crisis; Youth Suffering; Sociology of Education; Critical Theory

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