

# Sense of Autonomy and Community Interaction Among Young Adults—Survey Results

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## 1. The Role of Young Adults in Communities

Community interaction—especially in the form of voluntary civic activities—first became prominent in the mid 1980s, when local residents began grappling with community issues and participating in building local communities.

This trend received a big boost from the Awaji-Hanshin Earthquake of 1995. Volunteers played a key role in aiding and supporting disaster victims, and their efforts gained broad social recognition. Another major advance occurred with the implementation of the NPO Law in 1998, wherein organizations that address community and social issues came to be socially recognized, expanding the opportunities for such activity.

Since communities are made up of multiple generations ranging from children to the elderly, it is important that residents of each generation interact to represent their particular needs and awareness. However, according to one survey, the average age of persons engaged in civic activities is rather high at 52; only one in ten is in the 18-34 age group.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the structure of daily living and awareness of young adults have been changing. The term “parasite single” has gained parlance to describe young adults, particularly in metropolitan suburbs, who “remain unmarried after graduating from school, live with and depend on their parents for basic needs.”<sup>2</sup> Being dependent on their parents, these young adults enjoy a lifestyle beyond their own means. There is deep concern that this dependence weakens their sense of autonomy and reduces their interest in the community.

If young adults are indeed losing their sense of autonomy and interest in the community, we need to fundamentally alter how we deal with issues affecting the future of communities.

To help clarify the situation, this paper analyzes the results of a survey we conducted called *Survey of Lifestyle and Awareness of Young Adults in the Tama District*, commissioned by the

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<sup>1</sup> Quality of Life Bureau, Economic Planning Agency, *Survey of Civic Activities From the Perspective of Individuals (2000)*.

<sup>2</sup> Masahiro Yamada, *Parasaito shinguru no jidai (The Parasite Single Era)*, in Japanese, Chikuma Shobo, 2000.

Tokyo Municipality Governance Research Committee.<sup>3</sup> We examine young adults from three perspectives:

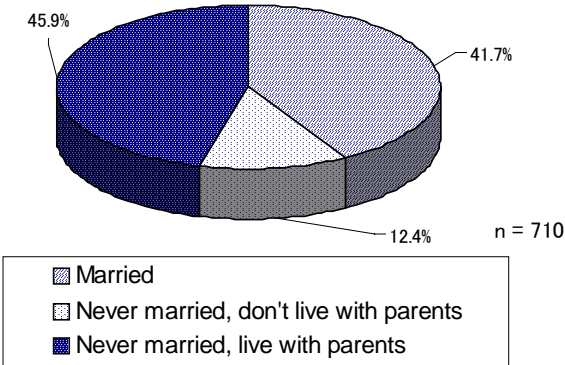
1. Do young adults actually have a low sense of autonomy?
2. Do young adults actually have little interest in the community?
3. Is their sense of autonomy correlated with their interest in community?

## 2. The Survey Sample

The survey sample consists of 710 men and women, aged 20 to 34, who live in the Tama District and are not students. Because the awareness of this age group toward marriage and other matters are in transition, we separated the sample into three groups based on marital status and living arrangements: married, never-married and live without parents (away from home), and never-married and live with parents (at home).

The first group accounts for 41.7% of the sample (296 persons), the second group for 12.4% (88 persons), and the third group for 45.9% (326 persons; Figure 1).

**Figure 1 Sample Composition by Marital Status and Living Arrangements**



Of the never-married persons, 21.3% live without parents, while the other 78.7% live with parents. By comparison, the latest national census in fiscal 2000 shows that the nationwide proportion of never-married, one-person households in the 20-34 age group (which corresponds to the second group) is 30.9%, which is higher than in our sample.

<sup>3</sup> Survey team members are Emiko Takeishi, Akio Doteuchi, and Akemi Tsukada. The survey was conducted in August 2001 using the following sampling method. Tama district was divided into five blocks (south Tama, southern part of north Tama, northern part of north Tama, western part of north Tama, and west Tama). We randomly selected one city from each block (Hachioji-shi, Chofu-shi, and Higashi Kurume-shi, Akishima-shi, and Ome-shi respectively), and then randomly selected 3,000 persons aged 20-34 from family registries in correlation with each city's population and sex composition. Surveys were distributed and collected by mail. We received 809 valid responses for a collection rate of 27.0%, with 709 responses remaining after excluding students.

### 3. Low Sense of Autonomy?

To determine the sense of autonomy of young adults with respect to both financial matters and daily living, we measured six items.<sup>4</sup> Responses were evaluated on a point system, and divided the sample into a high and low-scoring group for both daily living and financial autonomy (Figure 2).

Autonomy in daily living relates to attitudes toward living with parents and depending on them for daily needs such as household chores, while financial autonomy relates to financial dependence on parents.

**Figure 2 Autonomy Items and Grouping Method**

Autonomy items	
Type of autonomy	Item
Daily life	Prefer freedom of living with parents *
	As long as parents are healthy, I don't mind if they attend to me. *
	Parents want children to stay as long as possible, even after age 20. *
	Don't have negative image of "free albeiter" or "parasite single." *
Financial	Don't want financial support from parents after age 20.
	Financially independent children shouldn't live with parents after age 20.

Data collection method	
Responses	Agree strongly / Agree / Tend to disagree / Disagree
Evaluation method	Evaluated on a scale of 4 (high) to 1 (low) autonomy For marked items (*), "disagree" indicates high autonomy.

Grouping method	
High-score group	Autonomy in daily life: 12 or more points Financial autonomy: 6 or more points
Low-score group	Autonomy in daily life: 11 or more points Financial autonomy: 5 or more points

Looking at autonomy in daily living for the three groups (married, never-married and live without parents, and never-married and live with parents), we found little difference between married persons and never-married persons who live without parents (Figure 3). However, of never-married persons who live with parents, 74.5% are in the low-scoring group, indicating a strong dependence on parents in daily life.

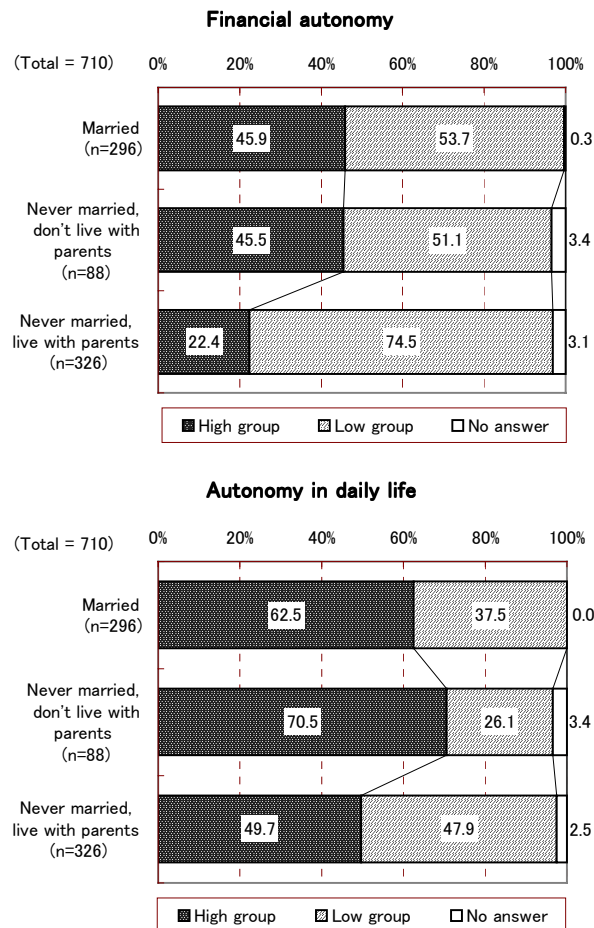
Regarding financial autonomy, never-married persons who live without parents have the

<sup>4</sup> The six items were selected on the assumption that sense of autonomy in daily living and finance are measured separately. Using principal factor analysis, we extracted two factors: factor 1 affirms living with and depending on parents for daily living in general, while factor 2 affirms financial autonomy from parents

largest high-scoring group (70.5%).

Our results thus show that sense of autonomy in daily living and finance depends heavily on whether young adults live at home with parents.

**Figure 3 Sense of Autonomy**



#### 4. Low Interest in the Community?

##### (1) Present and Potential Community Participation

We next examine the present status and future intentions of young adults regarding their participation in social activities.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding present participation, married persons tend to participate more (28.7%) than never-married persons (live without parents 19.3%, live with parents 16.9%; Figure 4). This is

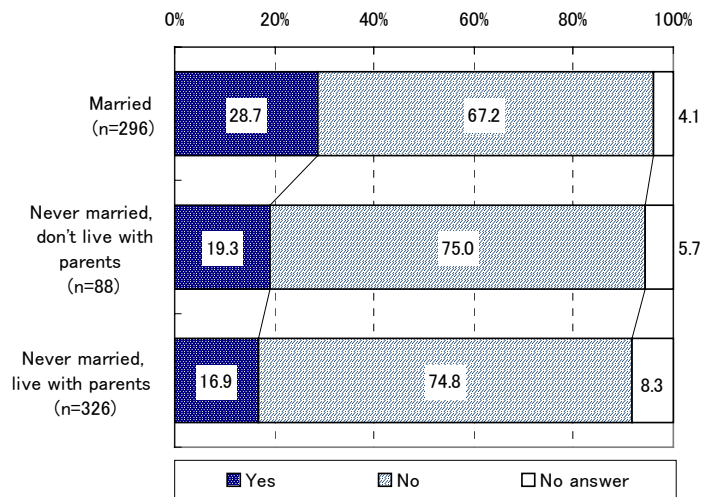
(financial autonomy). The eigen value is at least 1, and cumulative contribution rate is 47.5%.

<sup>5</sup> While community refers to the locale where people live, current or intended participation in social activities is not restricted to the local community.

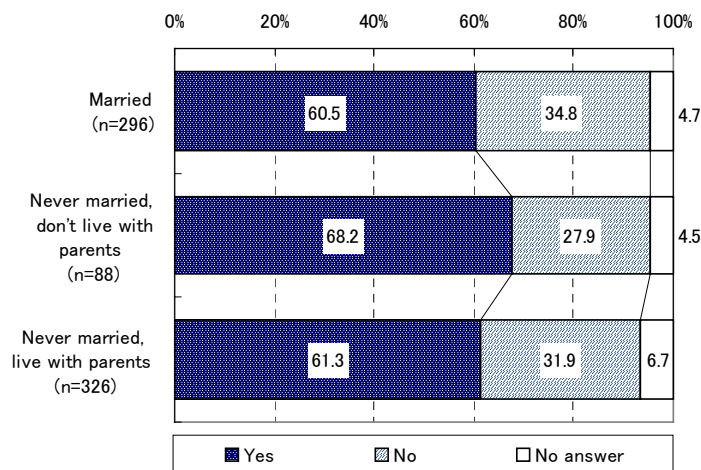
attributed to their participation in PTA, neighborhood and other local groups.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding future intentions, at least 60% in all groups intend to participate, which is quite high compared to the present status. In particular, never-married persons who live without parents have a strong intention (68.2%; Figure 5).

**Figure 4 Present Participation**



**Figure 5 Intention to Participate**



## (2) Community Awareness

The survey contains five items measuring the community awareness of young adults. We compiled the results in the same way as with the sense of autonomy (Figure 6).

<sup>6</sup> Of married persons currently participating in social activities, 36.5% do so in the PTA, and 50.6% in neighborhood and other local groups. However, these results are statistically insignificant due to the small number of participants.

**Figure 6 Community Awareness—Items and Grouping Method**

Items measured	
We should do what we can regarding community issues that affect us.	
We can change the community.	
Community issues such as child care and long-term care should be left up to public entities.	
I want to do my part to improve my community.	
I am interested in information about my community.	

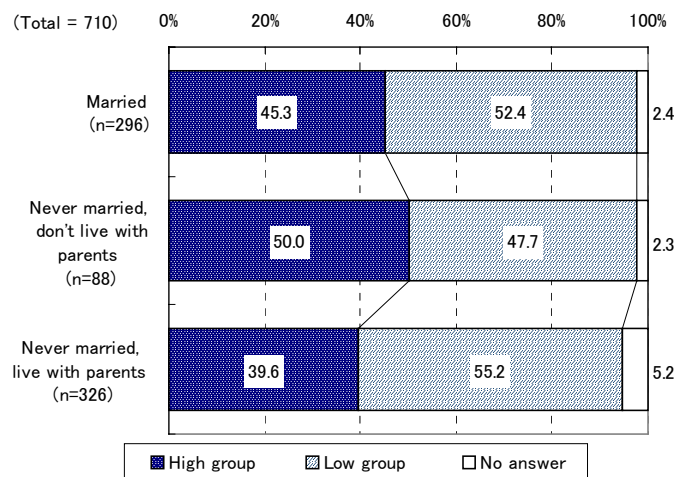
Data collection method	
Responses	Agree strongly / Tend to agree / Tend to disagree / Disagree
Evaluation method	Agree strongly (4 points); Tend to agree (3 points); Tend to disagree (2 points); Disagree (1 point)

Grouping method	
High-score group	15 or more points
Low-score group	14 or less points

Looking at the aggregated results by married, never-married and live without parents, and never-married and live with parents, we found a large high-scoring group among never-married persons who live without parents, and a small high-scoring group among never-married persons living with parents (Figure 7). The latter group thus appears to have less community awareness than the others.

**Figure 7 Community Awareness**



We next analyze responses to the five items (Figure 8). For the four items other than “I believe our efforts can change the community,” the average score is approximately 3 points, indicating a generally affirmative attitude.

However, regarding the survey item, “our efforts can change the community,” all groups have low average scores. This indicates that while young adults have interest and the desire to engage in the community, many have doubts as to whether they can make a difference in the community.

**Figure 8 Average Scores for Community Awareness Items**

(Unit: points)

	<b>Married (n=296)</b>	<b>Never married, don't live with parents (n=88)</b>	<b>Never married, live with parents (n=326)</b>
Total	14.4	14.6	14.0
We should become involved in community problems that are close at hand.	3.1	3.2	3.1
We can change the community.	2.4	2.5	2.4
We should leave community problems such as child care and long-term care to public entities.	2.9	3.0	3.0
I want to do my part to improve my community.	2.8	3.0	3.0
I am interested in information about my community.	3.2	3.0	3.0

Excludes blank responses.

**5. Relationship Between Sense of Autonomy and Community Awareness**

Finally, we examine the relationship between sense of autonomy and community awareness. Figure 9 shows cross-aggregated results for sense of autonomy in daily living and finance, and community awareness by marital status and living arrangement.

For married persons, community interest appears to be unaffected by sense of autonomy in daily living or finance.

For never-married persons living without parents, among those with a high sense of financial autonomy, 53.2% have a high score for community awareness, compared to only 39.1% among the low autonomy group.

Moreover, for never-married persons living with parents, 45.1% of the high-scoring financial autonomy group have strong community awareness, compared to 35.3% of the low-scoring group. Similarly, strong community awareness is seen in 47.9% and 38.7% of the high and low-scoring groups for autonomy in daily living, respectively.

Among married persons, there is no apparent relationship between sense of autonomy and community awareness. However, among never-married persons—particularly those living with parents—the high autonomy group also has a high score for community awareness.

While we could not confirm a causal relationship, sense of autonomy and community awareness appear to be closely connected.

**Figure 9 Relationship Between Sense of Autonomy and Community Awareness**

(Unit: %)

	Autonomy		Community awareness			
			High group	Low group	No answer	Total
Married (n=296)	Financial	High group	46.5	50.8	2.7	100.0
		Low group	43.2	55.0	1.8	100.0
	Daily life	High group	44.9	52.2	2.9	100.0
		Low group	45.3	52.8	1.9	100.0
Never married, don't live with parents (n=88)	Financial	High group	53.2	43.5	3.3	100.0
		Low group	39.1	60.9	—	100.0
	Daily life	High group	50.0	45.0	5.0	100.0
		Low group	48.9	51.1	—	100.0
Never married, live with parents (n=326)	Financial	High group	45.1	51.9	3.0	100.0
		Low group	35.3	60.3	4.5	100.0
	Daily life	High group	47.9	49.3	2.8	100.0
		Low group	38.7	57.2	4.1	100.0

Excludes blank responses.

**6. Improving the Relationship Between Young Adults and the Community**

Our results suggest that sense of autonomy and community awareness are related. The more independent young adults are, the stronger is their interest in the community, and the larger is the role they can be expected to play in the community.

On the other hand, we also found that parasite singles—never-married persons living with parents—have a low sense of autonomy and community awareness. The sense of autonomy in daily living and finance is stronger when they live away from parents (including by marriage). However, it is difficult to argue for the need for greater autonomy based only on our results.

Thus we need to consider why having a strong interest in the community and desire to participate do not necessarily lead to actual participation.

In an open-ended question on the survey, many survey participants called for more opportunities to participate, more information, and more venues of activity. Some typical responses are: “Although I was certified in college as a social education manager and am keenly interested in community activities, I have difficulty finding opportunities to participate;” “I want to see more publicity on the problems communities face,



countermeasures being taken, and ways that individuals can cooperate;” and “Where I live, the civic center is the only hall available. So many projects designed to make music accessible inexpensively to the public are thwarted by the fact that the civic center is too large and expensive.”

Local governments need to lay the groundwork for participation by listening to the voices of young adults through surveys and other sources, actively disseminating information on community issues, and having young adults help manage and operate existing public facilities and other activity venues. While young adults may harbor a strong interest in the community, they still need to have their desire and initiative stimulated.

Moreover, our interviews revealed opinions such as, “It would be good if my social activities count for something when I look for a job;” and “It would be good if activities were not strictly voluntary, but paid out some money.” If community activities can help jobs and careers, or be sources of income, young adults otherwise disinterested in the community would find reason to participate.

For this to happen, society as a whole must build a consensus that would reward young adults who engage in voluntary activities. Participation and collaboration in community activities ought to always be a positive experience for young adults, and boost their sense of autonomy as well.

Establishing a virtuous cycle—in which the community nurtures a sense of autonomy in young adults, who in turn stimulate the community—appears to be instrumental in having young adults play an important role in the community.