

## Forschung und Lehre

# Exploring Rural Well-Being through an Interdisciplinary Lens — The “Shrinking, but Happy” Research Team at the University of Vienna

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### Summary

Japan’s rural areas are facing substantial demographic and structural change. While the negative impact of this development can be traced by objective social indicators, subjective well-being in these communities does not show a clear trend. This interdisciplinary project aims at assessing the interrelations between different dimensions of social relationships and locally salient conceptions of well-being, such as relational well-being, in the structurally average rural Aso region. Applying a mixed-methods approach, we combine quantitative and qualitative research, which enables an integration of both statistically robust associations and case study material with its focus on contextual aspects of well-being. In so doing we demonstrate how a broad interdisciplinary analysis is a promising approach when tackling complex issues such as well-being and social relationships as well as their interplay.

**Keywords:** relational well-being, rural Japan, interdisciplinary research, demographic change, mixed-method approach, community life

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## Introduction

This paper provides insight into the interdisciplinary project “Shrinking, but Happy” at the Department of East Asian Studies of the University of Vienna. This project employs a mixed-methods research design to assess “well-being” in a rural area of southern Japan from multiple disciplinary angles. It shows how, by combining different theoretical and methodological approaches, a fresh understanding can be generated that takes both relational and individual conceptions of well-being into account.

Research on well-being has by now featured prominently in international surveys (including Eurostat 2015 and OECD 2017) as well as in national happiness studies (such as Gallup Healthways 2017 and Haku-hōdō 2014). Due to the sampling techniques used by these studies, it is often not possible to infer regional differences and various other aspects of rural well-being from the data. In addition, comparative regional research tends to draw different conclusions based on discrepant definitions of “rural” and “urban.” Some authors point to higher ratings of happiness in urban areas (Easterlin et al. 2011; Spellerberg et al. 2007; Witters 2010), while others observe higher values in rural areas (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011; Henkel 2015; Sander 2011).

Critical observations of well-being research highlight the importance of social interaction for well-being and its embeddedness in society as a whole, thus challenging the predominant individual focus of psychological approaches. Sociological studies in particular indicate a strong connection between well-being and social embeddedness (Blanchflower and Oswald 2000; Easterlin 2003; Helliwell and Putnam 2004), as well as between well-being and social capital (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Yip et al. 2007), which in turn are seen as characteristics of rural communities (Ziersch et al. 2009). However, vague conceptualization and unidimensional operationalization of well-being limit the generalizability of findings (Holthus and Manzenreiter 2017; Ponocny et al. 2016). Considering recent public and academic debates on shrinking rural areas in Japan (Masuda 2014; Odagiri 2016), we argue that research on social capital and well-being in the countryside is a salient topic in happiness research — especially in rural areas.

We adopt a research design that questions universal conceptions of well-being and accounts for both cultural sensitivities (Uchida 2013) and interindividual differences (Ponocny et al. 2016). We combine four disciplines (Japanese Studies, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology) and two different methodological approaches (qualitative and quantitative) in order to adequately address the complexity of well-being. By focusing on rural areas, we hope to carve out the amplified structural issues and the inherent potential in those communities in terms of well-being.

First, we give a brief overview of the demographic challenges facing rural Japan and the controversies surrounding it in academic discussions. Second, we outline several psychological and sociological approaches to (rural) well-being and social interaction. Third, we introduce our methodological design and its theoretical consequences for a reevaluation of rural well-being.

## Rural Japan in decline

Japanese society is characterized by both a low fertility rate (1.36 in 2020, MHLW 2020a) and a high life expectancy (81.41 for men and 87.45 for women in 2019, MHLW 2020b), resulting in a simultaneously aging and declining population — especially in rural areas. Accordingly, in Japanese research, classifications that use demographic indicators depict a rather gloomy image for the future of the Japanese countryside (Lützelner 2018; Masuda 2014; Ohno 2009). Some of these accounts — especially the reports by former minister Masuda Hiroya (2014) — have been criticized for their possible detrimental impact on local societies. Rather than helping regions struggling with steady out-migration and dwindling populations, they serve to further stigmatize or demoralize them (Odagiri 2014). Other studies suggest using a more nuanced approach to better understand the situation in the countryside, as many of the out-migrants still frequently return to their hometowns to assist their families (Özşen 2020; Tokuno 2015).

Measures to address the structural implications resulting from ongoing out-migration and an aging population have been implemented since the 1960s with little success (Matanle et al. 2011: 24). Debates on local governance (Foljanty-Jost et al. 2013: 49) and decentralization (Hüstebeck 2014: 59) have been intensifying, and several reforms have successively provided the regions with more responsibilities, while not effectively making them more autonomous (Honma 2007). With the developing local social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Avenell 2010: 149) and activities of *machizukuri* (“community development”) and *mura okoshi* (“revitalization of the villages”), demographic matters have become firmly linked to participation activities and well-being alike. Incentives that try to stimulate social capital or social networks underline the importance of social relationships in revitalization policies (Tsutsumi 2011; Ueno 2005).

## Rural well-being

The marked decline that many rural communities have witnessed in terms of structural and economic indicators has typically not been reflected in reduced subjective ratings of well-being. The scientific literature does not present a uniform picture here, but it does point toward a complex relationship between the structural conditions of rural regions and well-being: While some international studies found lower well-being in rural areas in comparison to more urban environments (Easterlin et al. 2011; Spellerberg et al. 2007; Witters 2010), most studies show elevated well-being in rural and small-town communities (Berry and Okulicz-

Kozaryn 2011; Cramer et al. 2004; Fassio et al. 2013; Gattino et al. 2013; Henkel 2015; Sander 2011). With regard to Japan, a cross-prefectural study on rural well-being showed no significant differences (Ōsaka Gasu CEL Enerugī Bunka Kenkyūjo 2011). Research at the local level, such as the Aggregated Kumamoto Happiness Index (AKH 2015), revealed higher rates for certain aspects of well-being in some structurally disadvantaged rural regions of Kumamoto than in more urban regions (Manzenreiter 2018).

Clearly, objective measures of well-being do not represent the full scope of the phenomenon. Richard A. Easterlin's (1974) widely cited work was one of the first to point out the less-than-linear relationship between objective and subjective measures of well-being in the stagnant life satisfaction of growing economies (see also, Diener and Suh 1997). As a result, the growing interest of policymakers in subjective indicators has shifted the scientific focus of well-being studies toward the assessment of subjective scores (Stiglitz 2010). Likewise, for this project, we choose self-reported well-being to clarify what impact social capital in rural communities might have on the actual emotions of local residents in light of the structural changes affecting them. In terms of well-being constructs and operationalization, our approach reflects the fragmented state of well-being research, relying on a broad number of psychometric approaches to quantify well-being on an individual level and aggregate it to the group level with the aim of increasing external validity. In the dominant tradition of hedonic concepts such as examined in "Subjective Well-Being" by Ed Diener (1984), which encompasses the cognitive self-evaluation of life satisfaction and the affective component of happiness, to eudaimonic models such as Carol D. Ryff's "Psychological Well-being" (1989), with its focus on purpose of life, well-being is assessed as a universally applicable construct.

In the context of our regional focus, however, we aim to also take into account specifically Japanese understandings of happiness, if such things even exist. Particularly within the field of Japanese Cultural Psychology, the universal validity of Euro-American well-being concepts has been called into question and complemented by measures that seek to grasp the relational aspects of well-being. We have identified emotional support, interpersonal harmony, and an equilibrium between positive and negative emotions within the concept of "Interdependent Happiness" (Hitokoto and Uchida 2015) as well as the non-eudaimonic elements of *ikigai* ("one's purpose in life," or "what makes life worth living") as originary aspects worth investigating (Kamiya 2004; Mathews 1996).

There has also been extensive critique leveled at these psychological accounts of well-being, coming especially from the Social Sciences, that challenges the focus on the individual level of analysis, the normativity of universalist happiness concepts, and the methods of inquiry employed by dominant psychological approaches (see e.g. Cabanas and Illouz 2019; White 2017). From a sociological perspective, well-being is understood as an experience that is related to historical,

cultural, and societal practices and thus subject to change (Hyman 2014: 16). Well-being in this sense is not a neutral phenomenon, but rather a “way we explain the world and think we ought to function within it” (Ehrenreich 2010: 4). The pursuit of happiness, then, can be assessed as a “societal ‘imperative’” (Hyman 2019: 98) that suggests full personal responsibility for one’s own well-being, while remaining silent about possible societal influences on and conditions for happiness.

However, the pursuit of happiness, albeit socially conditioned, can also not be reduced to its social function, as is clearly shown by empirical qualitative studies on well-being. Mark Cieslik discusses this aspect in respect to “how people work at their happiness, with other people, balancing the good and not so good events over their life course” (2017: 219). Well-being thus encompasses a relational aspect that suggests that an interactionist understanding might better grasp the ambivalence that is both individual and interindividual, as well as having both positive and detrimental effects. A positive experience for one person may be associated with grief for another (Derné 2017: 223, 231).

From a relational Social Science perspective, well-being is a phenomenon experienced through interactions with the social environment, and therefore other people (Derné 2017: 236; Mathews 1996). Hence well-being cannot be isolated from its context, in particular its “structures, affects, materiality, places, other life forms and so forth” (Atkinson et al. 2019: 13). These voices clearly question a purely individual approach to well-being concentrated on the measurability of such a complex experience, demanding instead a framework that pays respect to individual and societal perspectives alike.

## Methods

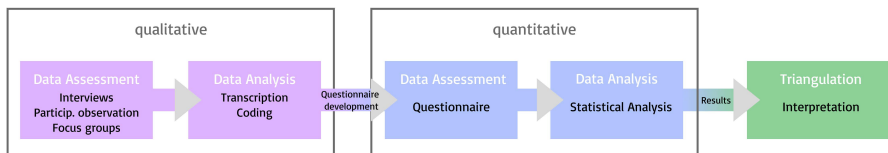
To address the complexity of the concept of well-being, Gordon Mathews (2012) suggests setting up interdisciplinary collaborations drawing on a diverse set of methods. We support his statement by combining qualitative and quantitative approaches and individual (personality, psychology) with sociocultural (network analysis, political participation, community life) levels of analysis. We choose qualitative methods here as their open approach enables us to critically examine our survey data and to ensure a certain level of openness throughout the entire project. On the other hand, introducing quantitative methods helps increase the reliability and generalizability of our findings (Mayring 2001). By considering different ways to evaluate well-being (hedonic and eudaimonic, universal, and culture-specific) and using varying modes of measurement (interviews, observations, surveys), we ultimately aim to increase the construct validity of our research.

This project is thus built on interdisciplinary foundations and encompasses the constructs of “social capital,” “well-being,” and their relationship from the perspective of four scientific disciplines. For the operationalization of the former we follow Lin’s network approach, which reifies social capital as “resources

embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions” (1999: 35). This functions as an “investment in social relations” (Lin 2001: 6) that enhances “profits” and ultimately results in well-being.

Our project follows a mixed-methods design, similar to the sequential exploratory design as suggested by Creswell et al. (2003; see Figure 1 below): Findings from the qualitative research help with the design of the subsequent survey. The findings of both approaches are combined to interpret the quantitative results.

**Figure 1. Sequential exploratory mixed-methods design of this project**



Source: Author’s own compilation, based on Creswell et al. (2003).

Research takes place in the Aso region (see Figure 2 below) of Kyūshū island, continuing the work of the Aso 1.0 project that has influenced research in Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna since the late 1960s (Slawik and Kreiner 1975; Slawik and Linhart 1982). As mobility has greatly increased since the last project was conducted, we have expanded the boundaries of our research, focusing not only on a few marginal villages but on three municipalities that lie within the crater of Mount Aso (the city of Aso, village of Minami Aso, and town of Takamori).<sup>1</sup> This enables us to not only analyze the situation in a few pinpointed locations, but also to draw comparisons regarding disparities within and between these three municipalities.

1 Taken together, these municipalities show a population density of approximately 66 inhabitants per square kilometer, far below the cut-off point of 500 inhabitants per square kilometer in Japan, making them rural by the OECD’s definition (Manzenreiter 2016: 292–294).

**Figure 2. The Aso valley and the Aso volcano as seen from the northern crater**



Source: Photo by the authors.

### **Qualitative operationalization**

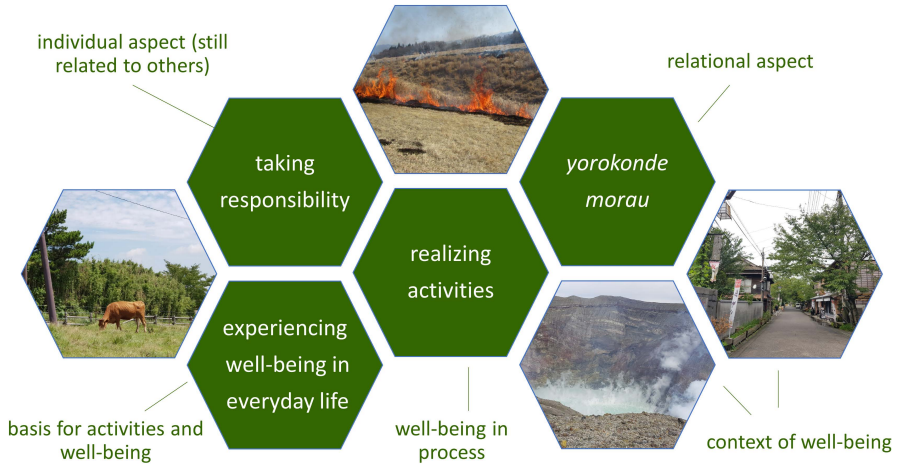
The qualitative research part of this project investigates well-being by using a variety of explorative methods employed during several visits to the field. The two subprojects concentrate on (1) well-being and collective participation in the community and (2) well-being and community life, respectively. The bulk of our data consists of semi-structured interviews based on the MODUL study (Ponocny et al. 2015, 2016), which reveal restrictions to and drivers of well-being based on individual life circumstances that usually go unassessed in quantitative surveys. We have adapted these questions to the specific Japanese rural context, while adding questions on *ikigai*. We conducted our interviews in two phases:

1. February–March 2018: explorative open interviews on well-being and participation aiming to identify important community issues  
September–October 2018: semi-structured interviews and a focus group on well-being and participation in the community; collection of material on activities (pamphlets, flyers, documents)
2. March–August 2020: semi-structured interviews and focus groups on well-being, community life, and social relationships on a local level

By now we have transcribed the interviews carried out in 2018 and used initial coding (Charmaz 2014) followed by focused coding allowing us to identify main categories. These categories show how well-being can be experienced in participatory activities as a social phenomenon that is simultaneously linked to the specific local conditions of the rural (see Figure 3 below). In addition, we have constructed a “happiness profile” for each interviewee that contains the most

relevant aspects of their well-being (Flick 2018: 74–75). These profiles help to discuss the overall categories identified in conjunction with the individual narratives, and also provide an overview of some of the relevant contextual information about the interview situation.

**Figure 3. Categories developed for the first subproject on well-being and collective participation in the local community**



Source: Photos and figure by the authors.

In these initial rounds of interviews, many of our respondents explained the notion of sharing well-being with others by making them happy. This understanding — often termed *yorokonde morau* (“to have someone feel happiness”) by interviewees — shows how relationality is a central feature of their individual well-being. It follows that even individual accounts of well-being are nevertheless subject to a complex net of interactions with human actors and with the nonhuman environment. To our interviewees, the abundant natural surroundings and cultural background in particular seem to be reference points for identity and *ikigai*, while at the same time highlighting how they are contested: Not all respondents share the same understanding of what the region should look like in the future and the specific role they themselves play in shaping the community.

During the second phase of qualitative research, we planned to gain more detailed insight into community life and social relationships on a local level by partaking in community activities, such as village road maintenance, festival preparations, and public gymnastics for the elderly. However, as COVID-19 brought community life to a complete halt during the first two weeks of our stay in March 2020, we had to adjust our methods to fit the new circumstances. Hence, we decided not to investigate community life itself, but how people talk about it via semi-structured interviews and focus groups. During these interviews participants were encouraged



to speak freely about their relationship with the community they lived in, starting with their immediate neighborhood and ending with their municipality and the Aso region as a whole. Questions addressed their participation in and opinion about community activities and groups (*kumi*), interactions within their immediate neighborhoods (*tonari gumi*),<sup>2</sup> their perceived standing within the local community, and the ways in which their surroundings may or may not influence the happiness they perceive and experience. Further questions about participants' everyday lives, worries, and problems, as well as about hopes, happiness, and priorities, were asked. In inquiring about their community as well as their everyday lives and the things that concern them, both positively and negatively, we hoped to get a sense of our participants' lives, not just as individuals but as part of their local community.

Preliminary observations show a shift in people's perceptions of their local community. As a growing number of individuals experience migration at some point in their lives (either because they left their hometown to acquire an education or job experience, or because they grew up in a different part of Japan), how they think about boundaries is changing. While until a while ago local communities had been the core of social life, providing mutual support and community sustainment, people now have social connections all over the country (or world), gathering help and support from outside their local community and banding together with people with a similar mindset — rather than those who live nearby — in order to achieve their goals. Similarly, there seems to be a change happening in the way people think and talk about their own well-being — the more “global” their way of thinking about community, the clearer their understanding of happiness. Some participants who have been strongly tied to the local community since childhood told us that they had never thought about their own happiness prior to the interview. On the other hand, interviewees with diverse social ties within and outside their local community seemed to reflect very deeply upon their own personal happiness as well as about happiness in relation to their surroundings and to other people.

Well-being in this sense must be analyzed as an experience that is subject to change due to both societal and global influences. This echoes the hybrid nature of rural areas as outlined by Michael Woods (2007). Different (e.g. urban, local, global) conceptions of rurality thus can be linked to different lifestyles (Takeda 2020) that are, as we argue, ultimately also tied to distinctive approaches to well-being. Well-being, therefore, can be continuously negotiated, changed, and integrated into people's lifestyles. As we will see, these observations have implications for our quantitative operationalization.

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2 *Tonari gumi* are a set of about eight households that would usually work together during community activities. Due to demographic change they have lost some of their functions by now, but still represent an important unit when talking about community life.

## **Quantitative operationalization**

The focus of our quantitative research project is roughly divided into (1) a sociological emphasis on social-level predictors of well-being such as social networks and (2) a psychological emphasis on individual-level predictors of well-being such as personality, thus bringing together the social and individual levels of analysis.

The goal of the quantitative approach is to put numbers on the phenomena observed in the qualitative studies, and thereby validate the qualitative findings. Specifically: (1) gathering high-volume data to make representative statistical inferences about the association of interesting variables and well-being while controlling for confounding variables; (2) the use of reliable instruments with high test validity that enable us to draw comparisons with other regions and prior studies in this field, complemented by our own scales to fill in the gaps identified by the qualitative studies; and, (3) aggregating high-volume individual data to the level of communities and sociodemographic groups to create a replicable macro perspective of the region that is further removed from the research subject and therefore less susceptible to observer bias.

To capture the scope of well-being as broadly as possible without becoming redundant in terms of the constructs employed, our comprehensive approach is derived from the “needs theories” of Evolutionary Psychology. The satisfaction of each of the basic human needs is then measured by corresponding well-being constructs that cover the whole range of supposed needs, while avoiding unnecessary overlap. Our chosen assessment method is a self-report questionnaire, administered to a full survey of multiple villages in the region with different structural-demographic statuses, thus achieving a large sample size and enabling intraregional comparisons. In the process of questionnaire development, we first received explorative input from the qualitative research team. This included feedback from a pretest of the well-being constructs under consideration, specifically on how they fit to local understandings of well-being, and from a pretest of response behavior to select items of the questionnaire in the qualitative interviews. This helped with the mapping of locally salient predictors and elements of well-being as well as of contextual factors (local living conditions, natural environment), and with the adjusting of the questionnaire to the specific locale of the study region with respect to respondent demographics, timing, and on-site partners helping with its implementation.

As part of the sequential working process during the initial stages of the project, data assembled by the qualitative research team directly led to a number of revisions being made to the basic framework of the questionnaire, which was then fine-tuned in a collective effort by the whole group. The data that initiated changes ranged from the reported major impact of natural disasters such as the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes, to the general significance placed on the local environment in terms of well-being, to the concerns of locals regarding the

construction of a cattle barn inside the town limits — all examples of issues that provided the impetus to include questions, for example, on environmental domain satisfaction. The salience of individual life events on well-being that was detected in the interviews also prompted the inclusion of a control item intended to measure the impact of acute extraordinary restrictions on well-being that could temporarily compromise self-evaluations.

In a similar vein, negative aspects to close social ties became apparent — which called for them to be assessed separately in the survey. Well-being reported as a result of participation in local activities led to the inclusion of several items assessing “volunteer activism.” The relational nature of well-being emphasized in many interviews further stressed the importance of including the Interdependent Happiness questions, while the desire for self-realization expressed by many younger interviewees is meant to be assessed by items on *ikigai* and “autonomy orientation.” In addition, we include the type of “migrational background” (U-turn versus I-turn) as a sociodemographic variable, while also controlling for the “relevant group of close relatives outside the immediate household or community but within driving distance” to capture nuances of migrant well-being identified in our qualitative research.

In practical terms, the initial interviews called attention to the problem that a full survey would be complicated by both formal and informal community structures, such as the exclusion of migrant and other marginalized households from local administrative structures, as well as the necessity of shortening the questionnaire further and improving legibility in order to increase the response rate given the aging demographic of the study region. However, it would eventually turn out that another, entirely unforeseen factor would interfere more substantially with the practical implementation of the survey. As the COVID-19 situation in Japan was developing, it became increasingly clear that survey data would be all but impossible to collect in person within the planned timeframe. Therefore, in order to secure funding for the online implementation of the questionnaire with the help of a survey company in Japan, major revisions to the research design had to be made. However, reaching out to the ageing local demographic with an online survey did not seem to be a viable option, while distribution by mail exceeded the funding available for the slated sample sizes. Accordingly, the scope of the quantitative research was broadened to a nationwide comparison of urban and rural environments via online survey.

Even though some of the microscale regional focus is lost as a result in this part of the study, the extant qualitative and explorative elements of the collaborative research remain firmly embedded in the local specifics of the Aso region. At the same time, the quantitative data can now give a more comprehensive overview of rural well-being and its various aspects as they relate to individual resource networks, values, and personality in Japan. The quantitative team will now investigate whether patterns detected in the case of Aso are reflected in nationwide

findings, and place them in the greater context of Rural Sociology and Cultural Psychology.

This change in focus provides an additional level of analysis, while at the same time being grounded in the immediacy of a concrete case example. Specifically, we now have the ability to include major urban centers in our study. Thereby we can increase variance between our areas of reference, and as a result carve out the “rural” more distinctly by contrasting it to “urban” Japan. Oversampling the number of respondents classified as “rural” furthermore allows for stronger inference of urban-rural differences than was previously possible from existing nationwide studies on well-being. Despite the inherent limitations of online surveys, our nationwide sampling now helps to generalize findings beyond the scope of the Aso region alone and extend the implications of our findings to the Japan-wide scale.

Meanwhile, the benefits of a sequential workflow remain in place. Following data collection and analysis, the findings are again integrated with the qualitative material for a final triangulation. This — along with the valuable input and advice from fellow researchers in the department, senior researchers in the fields of Japanese Studies, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology, as well as from regional experts — helps capture well-being and its local and nationwide contexts both broadly and in a multipronged fashion not otherwise imaginable.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have introduced an interdisciplinary approach to rural well-being that uses a mixed-methods framework including both qualitative and quantitative analyses. While research on well-being is usually conducted using either quantitative surveys designed for large-scale comparison or centered around a sociological critique of positive psychology in general, we strive to integrate the strengths of both traditions to elaborate how well-being in rural Japan could be conceptualized more holistically.

Our qualitative findings enable us to firmly establish the salience of the social context in rural well-being with the relational understanding of *yorokonde morau* (“to have someone feel happiness”) that permeated many of the interviews held. This is in line with the criticisms of sociological well-being studies leveled at the “individualization” of well-being. The harmonious coexistence of this relational well-being conception and the ego-focus of self-realization found in our analysis right down to the level of the individual bears great potential significance for well-being studies within Cultural Psychology that thus far have tended to situate the two in opposition to each other.

In terms of upcoming research, we hope to complete our quantitative assessment by next year and integrate the findings into our existing qualitative data. However, the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected the progress of our

interdisciplinary project. The indispensable field research of the qualitative team has been significantly curtailed and had to undergo significant adjustments to fit the new circumstances. Due to the cancellation of all public events through the end of 2020, we had to rearrange part of our qualitative studies to rely on data gathered by interviews and focus groups instead of via personal observations, as had been planned. Further, the lockdown and subsequent entry restrictions placed on foreigners by the Japanese government have inhibited the team from beginning the quantitative survey and follow-up interviews. These obstacles have been overcome by transcribing and analyzing some of the data and amending parts of the questionnaire in light of the findings, further transforming our research design from what was initially a concurrent focus to a decidedly sequential affair. In doing so, we were able to develop a framework to assess well-being via different theoretical approaches as well as methods of inquiry that take into account both relational and individual aspects.

Against the backdrop of transforming rural areas and their increased connectedness to external — meaning national and global — influences, we expect that this combined research design will provide a more nuanced understanding of rural well-being in Japan.

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