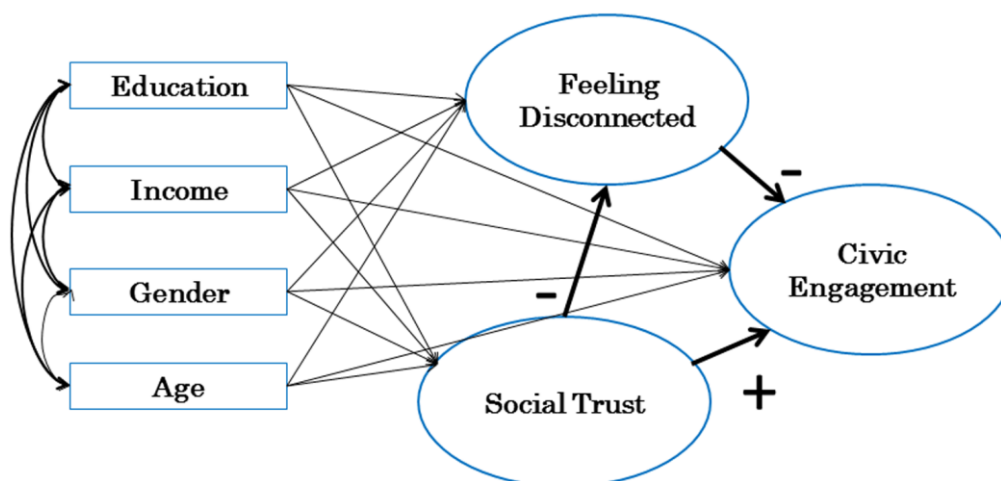


# Feeling Disconnected: Exploring the Relationship between Different Forms of Social Capital and Civic Engagement in Japan

Carola Hommerich



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## **Abstract**

This paper analyzes the role of social connectedness in motivating citizens to take an active interest in society and to engage in communal activities. Japan is used as an example of a society which has been diagnosed with a weakening of social bonds, as well as with an increase in social inequality and precarity in recent years. Structural equation modeling was applied to data of a nationwide survey from 2009, to test the assumption that feelings of disconnectedness from society exert a negative effect on civic engagement that needs to be differentiated from effects of general social trust. Results support this hypothesis and further indicate that it is not socioeconomic precarity per se that lowers chances for civic engagement, but its negative impact on the subjective evaluation of both the quality of social networks and one's belonging to and value for society. As precarity, however, enforces the negative effects of low social capital, this implies that it is especially the socially disadvantaged who are less likely to participate.

## **Keywords**

Social capital, civic engagement, precarity, social trust, disconnectedness, Japan

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## Introduction

As a result of globalization and socioeconomic transformation, post-industrial societies face an increase in social inequality that comes with new risks and uncertainty. A substitution of stable lifetime employment with atypical, precarious forms of employment, a retrenchment of the welfare state, as well as a weakening of social bonds hitherto provided by family or neighbors, lead to economic and social uncertainties (Bauman 2006; Beck 2009; Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Bourdieu 1996; Castel 2003; Giddens 1990; Whelan and Maître 2008). Institutions which hitherto were relied on to give structure and meaning, change shape and lose their integrative power. The resulting individualization of social risks generates experiences of vulnerability and precarity (Misztal 2011; Standing 2011; Wilkinson 2010), affecting growing shares of the populations of wealthy postmodern societies.

In this context, expectations towards civil society to take on tasks previously fulfilled by the welfare state, the company or the family have increased (CIVICUS 2013; OECD 2013; World Economic Forum 2013). However, the same mechanisms that have led to an emphasis on the importance of civil society are claimed to have contributed to a decline in social capital (Putnam 2000). The growing gap between rich and poor is said to have negatively impacted on trust (Uslaner 2002; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), and to have caused opportunities to engage in civic or political activities to be distributed unequally (OECD 2011). Growing shares of the population feel marginalized and disconnected from society (Böhnke 2004).

Using Japan as an example of a society for which a weakening of social bonds as well as an increase of social inequality and precarity has been discussed in recent years (Allison 2013; Ishida 2011; Kankonsōsaigojokyōkai 2012; Kawano, Roberts, and Orpett Long 2014; Miyamoto 2012; Tachibanaki 2011; Yamada 2004), this paper investigates the role of social connectedness in motivating citizens to take an active interest in society, to volunteer their time for others, or to engage in other ways which benefit society at large. What is new, here, is that – whereas most studies focus on an impact of social capital in the form of general social trust and individual networks – the present study includes an additional aspect of social capital by measuring a possible independent (negative) effect of perceived social exclusion on civic engagement.

## Theory and Hypotheses

Before discussing social capital theory and disentangling its different forms as they will be used here, recent developments in Japan relevant to the present study are summed up, to give some context to readers not familiar with the Japanese case.

### **Precarisation and weakening of social bonds in Japan**

Since the mid-2000s, academic and public discourse in Japan has been dominated by two major topics: (a) an increase of social inequality, which has resulted in a shift of self-image from a

homogeneous middle class society to that of a gap society (*kakusa shakai*), and (b) a weakening of social networks, which has led to the creation of the term “society without bonds” (*muen shakai*).

Since the burst of its bubble economy in the early 1990s, Japan has experienced twenty years of economic stagnation. As numbers of unemployed and poor have grown over what has been called the “two lost decades”, and the share of workers in non-regular employment has risen from 15.3 percent (1984) to 36.7 percent in 2013 (*Sōmushō Tōkei Kyoku* 2014), Japan has had to part with its self-image as prosperous, egalitarian middle class society. Adjusting to a new self view, however, takes some time. It was only after the OECD (2008) attested Japan levels of income inequality and poverty above OECD-average that the Japanese government acknowledged growing social disparities and – for the first time – announced an official relative poverty rate in 2009, stating that 15.7 percent of the population fell below the poverty threshold<sup>1</sup>.

By now, it has become accepted, that social inequality exists in Japan and that an increasing share of the population is struggling with precarious living conditions (Allison 2013; Ishida and Slater 2010; Kawano, Roberts, and Orpett Long 2014; Shirahase 2014). As big corporations cut back on the extensive welfare packages they used to provide, the Japanese government is confronted with the necessity of taking on the role of provider for the needy and is forced to expand its welfare state (Tachibanaki 2005: 42). Slowly, some reforms are being enacted, major deficiencies, however, remain. The elderly worry about their pension, while the young can hardly hope to reach financial independence (Yamada 2004). Mechanisms of social security and public assistance which were shaped in an era of growth, become dysfunctional, failing to provide for those who are in need (Hommerich 2012).

In 2010, a much discussed TV documentary by public broadcaster NHK further added fuel to the still relatively new debate on inequality and precariousness, as it pointed towards an increase of social isolation in Japan (NHK 2010)<sup>2</sup>. The topic was taken up by economist Toshiaki Tachibanaki in his popular book on “the true colors of a society without bonds” (2011), which was followed by numerous other publications discussing a weakening of social ties (i.e. Genda 2013; Ishida 2011; Kankonsōsaigojokyōkai 2012; Miyamoto 2012).

A disintegration of social networks, however, is not merely a topic used by the media to play on 2007 pointing towards a loss of social capital in three areas of social interaction: the family, the local community, and the workplace (Cabinet Office 2007).

With regard to the family, it is especially changed living arrangements which have caused family ties to weaken: By 2010, a third of all households are made up of people living alone (NIPSSR 2012). This share is projected to increase even further, reaching 37 percent by 2030. Amongst those living alone, the share of elderly people is particularly high. This is partly due to the breakup

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<sup>1</sup> The relative poverty rate is calculated as the share of people with incomes below 50 percent of the median disposable income.

<sup>2</sup> The documentary particularly caused a stir, as it drew attention to rising numbers of elderly people who die alone and are discovered only weeks or sometimes months later, because they lived alone with no or only distant social connections. This phenomenon has been called “lonely death” (*kodokushi*).

of the three-generation household: The share of married children who live with their parents has more than halved over the past three decades, dropping from 52.5 percent in 1980 to 18.5 percent in 2008 (MHLW 2008). As not living together results in less communication amongst family members, this has had a negative impact on the intensity of family relationships (Cabinet Office 2007). What is more, family formation takes place later in the life-course, or – as shown by an increasing share of unmarried 50-year-olds – does not happen at all (NIPSSR 2012). More people stay alone throughout their life.

A similar development can be witnessed regarding ties within the local community. Since the 1970s, relationships with neighbors or the local community have declined: The share of Japanese who is closely associated with their neighbors has dropped from 53 percent in 1975 to 11 percent in 2007 (Cabinet Office 2007). 31 percent of the Japanese believe that ties in the local community have weakened over the past 10 years (ibid.).

Major changes in the Japanese work environment further contribute to a loss of formerly strong networks. In the wake of economic recession, Japanese companies have reduced their core staff and are no longer able to provide all of their employees with the promise of lifelong employment and generous social security packages – hitherto famed characteristics of the Japanese employment system. Instead, they take on non-regular employees, whom they pay lower wages and next to no social security benefits. Working side by side, but under very different conditions, it is difficult for regular and non-regular employees to bond or to develop some kind of team spirit of working towards the same goal. At the same time, regular employees also experience increasing pressure in their workplace and worry about losing their job. As a result, workers feel that communication and mutual help in the workplace have become inadequate (Cabinet Office 2007). This has an impact on the mental health of employees: the perceived lack of communication in the workplace correlates with an increase in mental problems amongst employees (Japan Productivity Center 2006).

This short overview indicates that similar to what is discussed – mainly – for the US as well as for other postindustrial societies, there has also been debate in Japan that – with the weakening of relationships in family, community and at work – individuals have replaced communal activities with social isolation (Nishide 2009: 2). As this means that there is less of a network to fall back on for support than used to be the case, this development aggravates vulnerabilities experienced by the increasing share of the population which is struggling with socioeconomically precarious living situations<sup>3</sup> and increases anxieties among the population at large. Numbers from an annual survey by the Cabinet Office (2013a) confirm an increase of anxieties to be a long-term trend, starting in the early 1990s. Since then, the share of Japanese who experiences anxiety and uncertainty in their everyday life has steadily grown, from 47 percent in 1991 to 66 percent in 2013. Such fears are mainly of an economic nature, with respondents worrying about their livelihood in old age and their income in the future. These numbers indicate that an increasing share of Japanese feels a “nagging sense of insecurity” (Genda 2005) as well as a “social evaluative threat” (Wilkinson and

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<sup>3</sup> As, i.e., described for the group of “solitary non-employed persons” by Genda (2013).

Pickett 2009: 37). Such negative emotions cause psychological stress and – in extreme cases – can result in introversion and social withdrawal (Lantermann, Döring-Seipel, Eierdanz, and Gerhold 2009)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Civic engagement in Japan**

With this rather bleak picture regarding precarious living situations and a weakening of social bonds in mind, it comes as a surprise that an increasing share of Japanese states that they would like to contribute to society in some way. In 1983, in times of economic boom, only 43 percent felt this way. By 2013, however, this share has increased to 67 percent (Cabinet Office 2013b).

As a matter of fact, Japanese civil society has seen some growth over the past decade. While 2003 only 10 percent stated to participate in some kind of community of volunteer activity, this share has increased to 25 percent in 2012 (Cabinet Office 2003; 2012). This positive trend can be assumed to be connected to the special attention volunteer activity received after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. Up until then, disaster response was understood to be first and foremost the responsibility of the state. Government response to the Kobe earthquake, however, was slow and bureaucratic, which led to thousands of individual helpers – as well as neighborhood associations and nonprofit organization groups – to move in to help (Anheiner and Salamon 1999; Taniguchi 2010). This experience resulted in an increased recognition of the role of civil society, with the government trying to improve the environment in which citizen groups can act (Mitani 2013; Nakano 2000)<sup>5</sup>.

Civic engagement is not only promoted with regard to disaster management. The rapid aging of the population as well as the prolonged period of economic stagnation confront the government with burdens the Japanese welfare state is unable to shoulder alone. Accordingly, the greatest share of nonprofit activities takes place in the fields of health and social welfare, social education and intermediary support (Nishide 2009: 15)<sup>6</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite the positive trend, it is still a much smaller group that actually participates than indicates to want to get involved in communal activities of some kind. Reasons not to participate vary, with time constraints, a lack of interest or information accounting for 69 percent of inactive people<sup>7</sup> (Cabinet Office 2003). 14 percent, however, state to lack opportunities to participate (*ibid.*). This might point to the fact that not all who want to participate are able to do

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<sup>4</sup> An example for such behavior in Japan is the group of so-called *hikikomori*. This term describes adolescents or young adults who withdraw completely from social life, by shutting themselves into their room for weeks, months, or even longer (Zielenziger, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> One important step in this direction was the establishment of the Law to Promote Specific Nonprofit Activities in 1998 (*cp.*, i.e. Pekkanen 2006:22f.). The highly organized volunteer infrastructure that resulted from this could be witnessed after the triple disaster of March 11, 2011 (Avenell, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> For details on specific characteristics of Japanese civil society, please compare: Pekkanen (2006), Taniguchi (2010), Taniguchi and Marshall (2014), Tsujinaka and Pekkanen (2007), Vinken et al. (2010), Wissink and Hazelzet (2012), Yamauchi (2011).

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, there are only numbers from 2003 available regarding this question.



so, for reasons other than not being interested, busy with work or unable to find information on networks or organizations to engage in.

Against the background outlined above, it is possible that some, who under other circumstances would get involved, are restricted from participation due to the precarity of their living circumstances or are held back by the paralyzing feeling of being excluded from the social whole. This will, hereafter, be discussed in the context of social capital theory.

### **Disentangling different forms of social capital**

Since its introduction to the social sciences, the concept of social capital has received considerable attention in sociology, economics and political science. Its most well-known conceptualizations stem from Bourdieu (1980), Coleman (1988) and Putman (1993; 2000). The latter defines it as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (1993: 167). Since then, many scholars have adapted and applied the concept in various ways. With myriad definitions that exist, it has become difficult to understand what social capital actually means, to an extent that it has even been questioned whether social capital can still be seen as an useful concept at all (Bjørnskov and Sønderskov 2013). Therefore, it seems necessary to disentangle different aspects of social capital as they are used for analysis here.

Given its complexity, it has been argued that social capital should be treated as a multidimensional concept (Bjørnskov 2006; Paxton 1999; Requena 2003; Uslaner 2002). In its simplest distinction, resources of social capital can be separated into two components: cognitive and structural (Bain and Hicks 1998, as cited in Krishna and Shrader 2000). The cognitive dimension refers to the subjective evaluation of social relationships, e.g. whether an individual feels he or she can trust others or feels to have someone to rely on in times of need (Han 2014). The structural dimension, on the other hand, pertains to “what people do” (Harpham, Grant, and Thomas 2002: 106), e.g. whether they participate in volunteer activity or engage in other ways that benefit society at large.

### **Civic engagement**

The structural aspect of social capital is here defined as civic engagement, referring to “various activities individuals perform to express their political voice and contribute to the political functioning of society” (OECD 2013:57). As such, civic engagement is thought to have a positive effect not only at the macro level – in enhancing the effectiveness of public policy, but also at the micro level, as it is thought to contribute to an individual’s sense of efficacy and control over his or her life (Barber 2003).

For the present analysis, the author will apply a broad definition of civic engagement. It will be understood as something ranging from having a general interest in community related matters to active involvement in one’s neighborhood or volunteer work.

### **Social trust and feelings of disconnectedness**

Within the cognitive dimension of social capital, analysis here differentiates between a directly tangible social context of social trust, and a broader, more abstract feeling of social affiliation.

The former is usually measured as trust in others and the (subjectively evaluated) existence of a reliable social network (Coleman 1988; Dasgupta and Serageldin 2000; Granovetter 1973; Uslaner 2002). A positive link between resources of social trust and civic engagement has been established in the social capital literature for numerous post-industrial societies, including Japan (Aldrich 2012; Lin 2011, Part 9; Nishide 2009; Putnam 2000; Taniguchi 2010; Taniguchi and Marshall 2014; Vinken, Nishimura, White, and Deguchi 2010; Wissink and Hazelzet 2012).

The latter, on the other hand, refers to a feeling of belonging to the social whole, of being a respected and valued member of society. It is commonly assessed by measuring its absence – meaning that survey questions focus on subjective experiences of marginalization and disconnectedness (Böhnke 2004; Bude and Lantermann 2006; Hommerich, Bude, and Lantermann 2012). Such subjective indicators have been added to measurement tools of social exclusion, since the concept was extended in the early 1990s to not only focus on basic needs and a minimum standard of living, but also on opportunities for social, cultural and political participation (Burchardt, Le Grand, and Piachaud 2002; Sen 2000). Using data for 28 European countries, Böhnke (2004) shows that feelings of marginalization are promoted by the absence of a social network and tend to be stronger at the lower end of the social hierarchy, amongst groups with low incomes and low levels of education. The precarity of the living circumstances enforces the negative impact of low family support and a weak social network on perceived social exclusion.

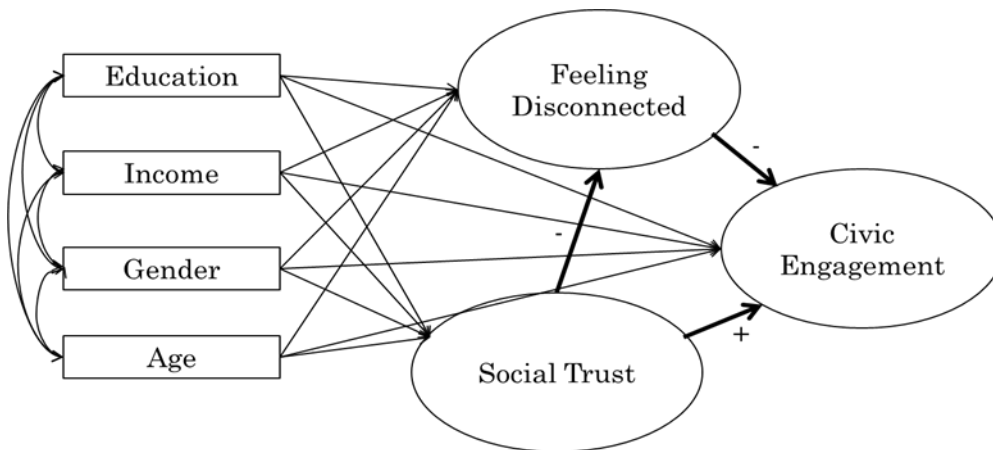
In spite of being identified as an important factor with regard to capabilities to participate in society, there are still hardly any studies which specifically investigate a possible effect of subjectively perceived exclusion on civic engagement. For Germany, Böhnke (2006) shows a negative correlation between feelings of marginalization and voting behavior, which is enhanced by the precarity of the objective living situation.

An investigation of the interrelations of social trust, feelings of disconnectedness and civic engagement, however, is yet missing. The goal of the present paper is to fill this gap. It aims at a better understanding of how the cognitive and structural dimensions of social capital are interrelated. It is also the first study to investigate feelings of marginalization and their impact on civic engagement in an Asian society.

### **Research Hypotheses and Theoretical Model**

The overarching research question is summed up in a theoretical model to be tested using a structural equation model (SEM) (figure 1). The main relationships of interest are shown by the bold arrows indicating the hypothesized relationships between social trust, feelings of disconnectedness and civic engagement. The oval shape implies that they are latent constructs which are not directly observed, but measured through other observed variables, which will be explained in more detail below.

Figure 1: Hypothesized path model



As outlined above, a positive link between social trust and civic engagement has been established in the literature. Therefore, the author expects that trust in others and a tangible social network results in higher involvement in communal activities. Accordingly, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows:

**H1:** Higher resources of social trust lead to higher levels of civic engagement.

The more abstract feeling of not being a full member of society is hypothesized as something that exists separately from trust in a tangible social network. Based on results by Böhnke (2006) mentioned above, the author expects stronger feelings of disconnectedness to result in lower interest in social events and less active engagement in communal activities:

**H2:** Stronger feelings of disconnectedness result in lower levels of civic engagement.

Again drawing on Böhnke (2004), the author expects social trust and feelings of disconnectedness to be related: A person that is a member of a closely knit social network will be less prone to feel excluded from the social whole. Accordingly, it is expected that trust in a tangible social network will alleviate isolation fears:

**H3:** Higher resources of social trust result in weaker feelings of disconnectedness.

As a logical consequence of H2 and H3, it is expected that higher resources of social trust alleviate the impact of social disconnectedness on civic engagement. Hence, the author hypothesizes that the impact of social trust on civic engagement is partially mediated by feelings of disconnectedness, with a lack of social trust enhancing the effect of social isolation, and high levels of social trust alleviating it:

**H4:** The impact of social trust on civic engagement is partially mediated by feelings of disconnectedness.

To control for the demographic and socioeconomic context, gender, age, education and income are included in the model. For these four structural variables a relationship with social trust, feelings of marginalization and civic engagement has been discussed in the literature cited above. For some relationships, however, results remain inconclusive. Therefore, in order to control for all possible direct and indirect effects of the demographic and socioeconomic context as measured by

the four variables used here, all possible paths to social trust, feelings of disconnectedness and civic engagement are included in the hypothesized model.

## **Methodology**

### **Data**

The data used for analysis was collected in a nationwide postal survey in September 2009. Two-stage stratified random sampling was used to draw an original sample of 5000 respondents from the population registry. With a response rate of 32.7 percent, 1633 questionnaires were collected for analysis. Comparison with the original sample as well as with the data of the 2005 Japanese Census shows that the realized sample gives a good model of Japanese society in terms of gender, age, and region.

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Before testing the hypotheses, the data were screened for univariate and multivariate outliers. Examination of histograms and scatterplots indicated that there were no serious violations of the assumptions of normality. Most scales showed to be positively or negatively skewed and departed from zero kurtosis. However, in light of the underlying constructs measured, this was to be expected. As the overall sample size was well above the threshold of 200 cases recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell (2013:80), this did not make a substantive difference to the analysis. Bootstrapping was used to obtain the significance levels and confidence intervals of the indirect and total effects. As this procedure is not available with incomplete data, cases within the data set that included missing values were deleted from the analysis. The delimited data set contained 1347 cases.<sup>8</sup> Data analysis was carried out using AMOS for SPSS 20.0.

Before summarizing the results of the statistical analysis, the indicators used to construct and test the SEM are described.

### **Demographic and socioeconomic indicators**

To control for the demographic and socioeconomic context, gender, age, educational level and income were included as exogenous variables. The descriptive statistics of the demographic and socioeconomic indicators are displayed in table 1. Gender was coded as 0 for males and 1 for females. Age was assessed as a continuous variable and grouped into four age groups to display the sample distribution. The self-reported annual household income was adjusted for household size with an elasticity of 0.5 to reflect the individual financial situation (Förster and D'Ercole 2009:

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<sup>8</sup> An estimation of the model with incomplete data would exhibit less bias than excluding cases with missing values from the analysis (Byrne 2010: 359). However, an estimation of the model with missing values only yielded marginally different results than with the delimited data set. Therefore, the author decided to proceed with the data set from which missing data had been deleted.

7–8). Four income groups were formed to display the income distribution of the sample, which are based on the median annual household income of 2,240,000 yen published by the MHLW for 2009.<sup>9</sup> Educational levels were assessed by asking for the highest educational level achieved, ranging from middle school as the lowest, and post-graduate education as the highest level.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of demographic and socioeconomic indicators

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male (=0)	670	49.7
	Female (=1)	677	50.3
Age	20–34 years	238	17.7
	35–49 years	366	27.2
	50–64 years	426	31.6
	65 years and older	317	23.5
Education	Middle school	165	12.2
	High school	620	46.0
	Junior college	242	18.0
	University – undergraduate	286	21.2
	University – graduate, PhD	34	2.5
Income	<1.120.000 Yen	290	21.5
	≥1.120.000 Yen <2.240.000 Yen	197	14.6
	≥2.240.000 Yen <3.360.000 Yen	369	27.4
	≥3.360.000 Yen	491	36.5

### Social trust (ST)

Social trust was measured using four statements which respondents were asked to rate on a 7-point-scale from 1 “does not apply to me at all” to 7 “strongly applies to me”:

1. I can trust most people. (ST1)
2. In times of trouble, I can rely on someone. (ST2)
3. If I worry about something, there is someone who helps me. (ST3)
4. I can definitely trust my friend’s promise. (ST4)

Whereas the item “I can trust most people” (ST1) relates to generalized social trust, the other three items measure trust in the existence of a social network to rely on in times of need. The

<sup>9</sup> The lowest income group earns less than 1,120,000 yen. This corresponds to less than 50 percent of the official median income in 2009, which is the threshold set by the Japanese government to define relative poverty. Respondents who fall into this category are highly likely to face socioeconomic difficulties. Middle incomes are divided into two groups with incomes ranging from 1,120,000 to 2,240,000 yen (50–100 percent of median income) categorized as lower middle, and incomes ranging from 2,240,000 to 3,360,000 yen (100–150 percent of median income) grouped as upper middle of the income range. The highest income group earns over 3,360,000 yen, which equals more than 150 percent of the median income.

latter were included, as previous research indicates that Japanese have higher trust in particular relations and often score low on generalized social trust (Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994). With a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.77 the four items showed internal consistency and, thereby, acceptable reliability. The mean values indicate that – as expected – trust in tangible social relations was slightly higher than generalized social trust (table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for social trust

Variable	n	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
I can trust most people. (ST1)	1347	4.31	1.19	1	7
In times of trouble, I can rely on someone. (ST2)	1347	4.56	1.23	1	7
If I worry about something, there is someone who helps me. (ST3)	1347	4.97	1.14	1	7
I can definitely trust my friend's promise. (ST4)	1347	4.79	1.12	1	7

### Feelings of disconnectedness (FD)

To capture feelings of being disconnected from society, a scale measuring perception of social exclusion was used. The scale was developed in Germany (Bude and Lantermann 2006; Lantermann, Döring-Seipel, Eierdanz, and Gerhold 2009) and used in the Japanese context for the first time. It consists of six items which increase by the severity of the isolation experience, measuring overall feelings of not belonging to the social whole, fears of not being recognized as a contributing member of society, up to an experience of subjective exclusion. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.91 indicates high homogeneity, so that the scale can be considered reliable also in the Japanese context. The six statements were rated on the same 7-point-scale as the social trust items:

1. I am worried that society leaves me behind. (FD1)
2. Society does not care about me. (FD2)
3. I feel like I do not really belong to society. (FD 3)
4. I do not see a place in society in which I am being taken seriously. (FD4)
5. I feel that nobody needs me. (FD5)
6. I feel excluded from society. (FD6)

This construct will hereafter be called "feelings of disconnectedness". The means of the items decrease by the degree of severity of feeling of disconnectedness (table 3), implying that less respondents feel excluded (4.1 percent<sup>10</sup>) than worry about being left behind by society (18.6 percent<sup>10</sup>).

<sup>10</sup> Share of respondents who replied affirmatively.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for feelings of disconnectedness

Variable	n	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
I am worried that society leaves me behind.( FD1)	1347	3.31	1.41	1	7
Society does not care about me. (FD2)	1347	3.33	1.34	1	7
I feel like I do not really belong to society. (FD3)	1347	3.08	1.34	1	7
I do not see a place in society in which I am being taking seriously. (FD4)	1347	3.16	1.34	1	7
I feel that nobody needs me. (FD5)	1347	2.91	1.40	1	7
I feel excluded from society. (FD6)	1347	2.45	1.23	1	7

### Civic engagement (CE)

As dimensions of participation are manifold and individuals can engage in society in various ways, measuring civic engagement is not an easy task. For this study, a broad measure of civic engagement was applied. Respondents were asked about actual volunteer activity as well as about a more general involvement in society, in a sense of taking an interest in matters that concern their immediate neighborhood or society at large. The following three items were used which respondents rated on the same 7-point-scale as above (Cronbach  $\alpha = 0.70$ ):

1. I volunteer my time for other people. (CE1)
2. I take an interest in what happens in my neighborhood (CE2)
3. I get involved when something goes wrong in society. (CE3)

A comparison of the means indicates that an interest in the immediate neighborhood was higher than participation in volunteer activity or a more general interest in societal matters (table 4).

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for civic engagement

Variable	n	Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
I do something for others (e.g. volunteer activity). (CE1)	1347	3.56	1.78	1	7
I take an interest in what happens in my neighborhood (CE2)	1347	4.72	1.28	1	7
I get involved when something is going wrong in society. (CE3)	1347	3.55	1.30	1	7

The correlation matrix for all independent variables is displayed in table 5. Multicollinearity was not a problem, as the inter-correlations did not exceed .90 (Tabachnick and Fidell 2013).

Table 5: Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables (n = 1347) (Note: \* P <.05, \*\* P <.01)

Variable	M	SD	FD1	FD2	FD3	FD4	FD5	FD6	CE1	CE2	CE3	ST1	ST2	ST3
FD1 I am worried that society leaves me behind.	3.31	1.41												
FD2 Society does not care about me.	3.33	1.34	.61**											
FD3 I feel like I do not really belong to society.	3.08	1.34	.61**	.74**										
FD4 I do not see a place in society in which I am being taking seriously.	3.16	1.34	.54**	.72**	.72**									
FD5 I feel that nobody needs me.	2.91	1.40	.46**	.55**	.57**	.66**								
FD6 I feel excluded from society.	2.45	1.23	.56**	.59**	.64**	.66**	.67**							
CE1 I do something for others (e.g. volunteer activity).	3.56	1.78	-.08**	-.17**	-.16**	-.21**	-.14**	-.08**						
CE2 I take an interest in what happens in my neighborhood.	4.72	1.28	-.05	-.15**	-.14**	-.16**	-.17**	-.13**	.37**					
CE3 I get involved when something is going wrong in society.	3.55	1.30	-.08**	-.18**	-.17**	-.20**	-.12**	-.07*	.60**	.40**				
ST1 I can trust most people.	4.31	1.19	-.10**	-.16**	-.11**	-.17**	-.17**	-.14**	.16**	.18**	.19**			
ST2 In times of trouble, I can rely on someone.	4.56	1.23	-.09**	-.15**	-.14**	-.18**	-.21**	-.16**	.09**	.12**	.10**	.39**		
ST3 If I worry about something, there is someone who helps me.	4.97	1.14	-.21**	-.24**	-.23**	-.26**	-.29**	-.28**	.15**	.15**	.17**	.41**	.53**	
ST4 I can definitely trust my friend's promise.	4.79	1.12	-.14**	-.16**	-.13**	-.16**	-.21**	-.19**	.11**	.15**	.16**	.50**	.38**	.54**



## Statistical Analysis

For the empirical test of the research hypotheses the theoretical model was translated into a structural equation model (SEM). Other than a multiple regression analysis, the SEM-approach allows for the simultaneous modeling of a number of multivariate relationships and for the estimation of direct as well as indirect effects which are mediated through other variables in the model. Further, it is possible to incorporate both observed (manifest) as well as latent variables, which allows for a more accurate estimation of the measurement error of the latent constructs (Byrne 2010: 3). As the analysis is based on cross-sectional data, it is important to keep in mind that the variables do not have a temporal order. Assumptions of a causal order of the associations between variables are developed from theory (Schumacker and Lomax 2010: 48).

### Fit indices

The following six indices of goodness-of-fit were used to appraise the model (Bagozzi and Yi 2012): the Chi-square statistic; the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), which reports the average amount of misfit for a model per degree of freedom (Steiger 1990); the Tucker-Lewis-Index (TLI) (or non-normed fit index) which rewards model parsimony and penalizes model complexity; the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler 1990) which functions as an indicator of relative non-centrality between a hypothesized model and the null model of modified independence; and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) which is the square root of the average square residuals. As conservative cutoffs, Hu and Bentler (1999) recommend the following values:  $RMSEA \leq 0.06$ ,  $TLI \geq 0.95$ ,  $CFI \geq 0.95$ , and  $SMRS \leq .08$ . Marsh et al (2004), however, claim that the following standards still indicate an acceptable fit:  $RMSEA \leq 0.07$ ,  $TLI \geq 0.92$ ,  $CFI \geq 0.93$ , and  $SMRS \leq .07$ .

### Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To evaluate construct validity a two-step approach was used, assessing the measurement model first, before moving on to the simultaneous estimation of the measurement and structural model (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Brown 2006) lent support to the argument that for all latent variables the chosen items measure the respective construct they were assigned to (Goodness-of-fit of the measurement model:  $\chi^2(102) = 642.236$ ,  $p = .00$ ,  $RMSEA = .063$  (90% CI = .058 to .067),  $CFI = .935$ ,  $TLI = .914$ ,  $SRMR = .037$ .)<sup>11</sup>

### Structural Equation Model

The structural equation model was estimated based on the assumptions of maximum likelihood. Six of the relationships included in the initial hypothesized model did not contribute to the model. There was no significant impact of education on social trust and civic engagement. Income was not

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<sup>11</sup> Detailed results are available from the author upon request.

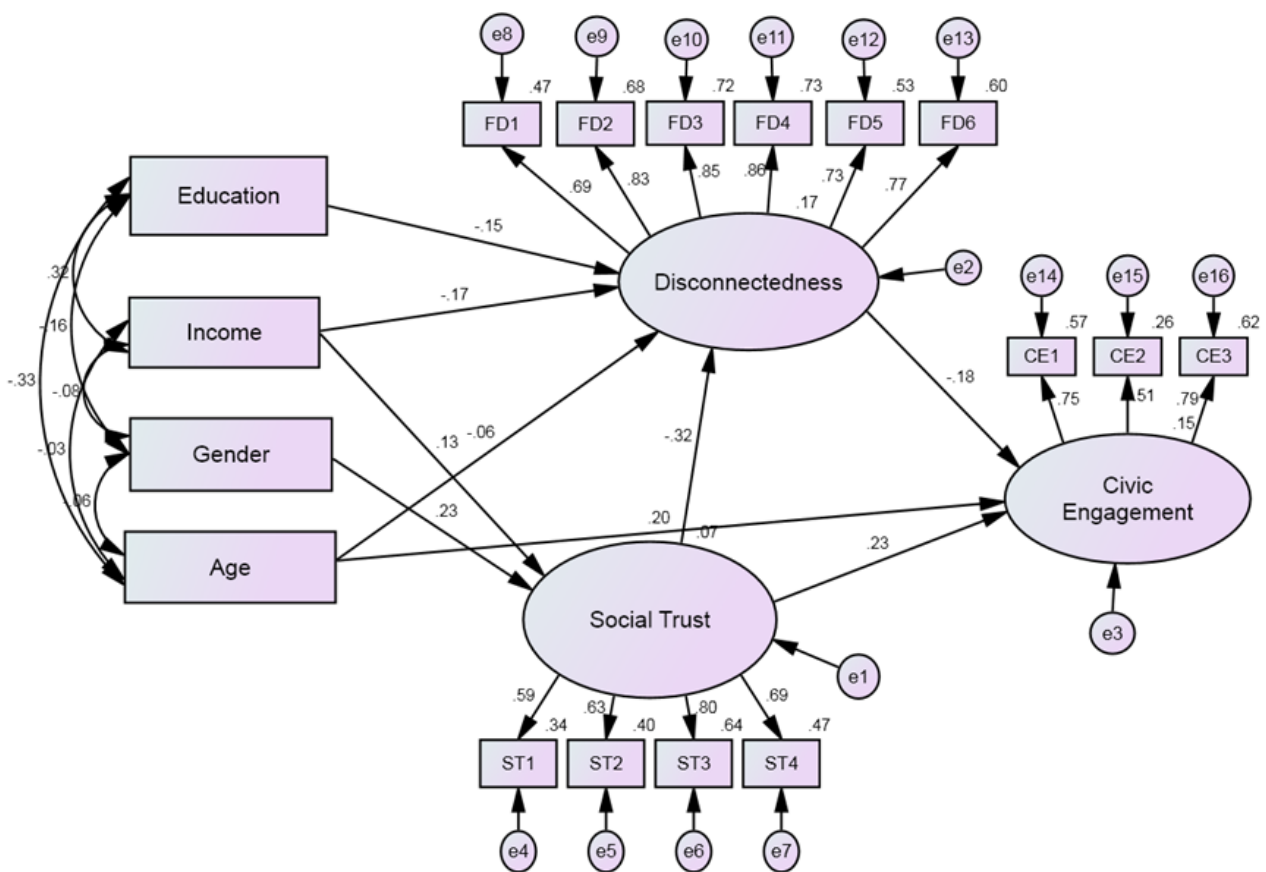
linked significantly with civic engagement. Gender was linked significantly only with social trust, whereas feelings of disconnectedness as well as civic engagement did not differ significantly by gender. Lastly, age had no significant connection with social trust.

The model was respecified without these six linkages, in favor of parsimony. The measurement results were only slightly improved, with no change in CFI values and minimal improvement in RMSEA, TLI and SRMR. However, as it made for a clearer visual experience, the respecified model became the model of choice for the hypothesis test. Discussion, however, will also include implications of the removed non-significant paths.

### Hypotheses Test

The four hypotheses were tested based on the results yielded by the respecified model (figure 2). Table 6 presents the direct, indirect and total standardized effects of each variable in the model on the three latent constructs.

Figure 2: Respecified structural equation model showing standardized path coefficients



Goodness of fit indices:  $\chi^2 (108) = 653.654, p = .00, RMSEA = .061 (90\% CI = .057 \text{ to } .066), CFI = .935, TLI = .918, SRMR = .038.$

Table 6: Direct, indirect, and total standardized effects on social trust, feelings of disconnectedness and civic engagement

	Social Trust			Disconnectedness			Civic Engagement		
	Direct	Indirect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Total	Direct	Indirect	Total
Education				-.15***		-.15**	.03**		.03**
Income	.13***		.13**	-.16***	-.04**	-.21**	.07**		.07**
Gender	.23***		.23**		-.07**	-.07**	.07**		.07**
Age				-.06*		-.06*	.20***	.01*	.21**
Social Trust				-.32***		-.32**	.23***	.06**	.28**
Disconnectedness							-.18***		-.18**

Note: \* P <.05, \*\* P <.01, \*\*\* P <.001<sup>12</sup>

Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 were supported by the results of the SEM analysis, as all three relevant relationships were significant and their direction concurred with the hypotheses:

- The total effect of social trust on civic engagement (.28) was positive, indicating that higher resources of social trust lead to higher levels of civic engagement (H1).
- The effect of feelings of disconnectedness on civic engagement was negative (-.18), lending support to hypothesis 2 that stronger feelings of social disconnectedness result in lower interest in social events and less active engagement in communal activities (H2).
- In concurrence with hypothesis 3, the relationship between social trust and feelings of disconnectedness was also negative (-.32), indicating that trust in a tangible social network alleviates isolation fears (H3).

The assumptions of hypothesis 4 that the impact of social trust on civic engagement is partially mediated by feelings of disconnectedness were also supported by the results: Part of the total effect (.28) was mediated by feelings of disconnectedness (indirect effect of social trust on civic engagement = .06) (H4). This means that 31.5 percent of the effect of feelings of disconnectedness on civic engagement can be attributed to resources of social trust, with higher resources resulting in more, lower resources of social trust in less engagement in communal activities.

### Additional results

The inclusion of the demographic and socioeconomic indicators yielded additional results regarding civic engagement, which will be discussed in the light of previous findings.

Whereas various previous studies report a positive relationship between level of education and different forms of social or political participation (as i.e. discussed by Mitani 2013; Taniguchi 2010; Wilson 2000), a direct path from education on civic engagement included in the initial hypothesized model turned out not to be significant. It was, hence, dropped from the structural equation model in the respecification process. There was also no significant link of education with

<sup>12</sup> P-values of the indirect and total effects relate to bootstrap 90% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

resources of social trust. An indirect, albeit small positive effect of education on civic engagement (.03) was fully mediated by feelings of disconnectedness.

Similarly, the model did not yield a significant direct effect of income on civic engagement. As evidence for the influence of income on civic engagement is mixed and remains inconclusive (Mitani 2013), this result is not easy to interpret. At first sight, it contradicts resource theory, which assumes that people with higher income are able to dedicate more time to communal activities as their affluent resources enable them to. There is, however, an indirect positive effect (.07), with the impact of income on civic engagement being mediated by social trust and feelings of disconnectedness.

Using education and income as predictors for socioeconomic vulnerability, these results imply that it is not the socioeconomic precarity per se that restricts individual opportunities for social or political participation, as for example indicated by findings of Taniguchi (2010). Instead, it is via its impact on whether or not an individual is able to feel as full member of society and on his or her resources of social trust that the precariousness of living circumstances influences chances of civic engagement. Lower income and lower educational levels result in stronger feelings of disconnectedness (effect of education = -.15, effect of income = -.21). Lower financial resources are accompanied by lower social trust (effect of income = .13). What is more, the precarity of the living circumstances enforces the negative impact of low family support and a weak social network on perceived social exclusion: 19 percent (-.04) of the total effect of income on feelings of disconnectedness are mediated by social trust. These results confirm the findings of Böhnke (2004) in the context of Japan.

Effects of gender and age on social and political participation have also been discussed in the literature. Results, however, are mixed depending on definition and measurement of civic engagement and remain inconclusive, as discussed i.e. by Mitani (2013) and Taniguchi (2010). Using a broad measure for civic engagement, this study finds no direct impact of gender on whether or not a person has a general interest in community related matters and is actively involved in the neighborhood or in volunteer work. An indirect effect indicates that women are more likely to engage in communal activity (.07), as they have stronger social networks than men. Regarding age, there is a clear direct impact on civic engagement that implies that participation increases with age (.21).

## **Discussion**

The aim of this paper was to analyze the role of social connectedness in motivating citizens to take an active interest in society and to engage in communal or volunteer activities which benefit society at large. Thereby, it hopes to add to a better understanding of factors promoting civic engagement - a topic of high pertinence, at a point in time at which expectations towards civil society in postindustrial nations grow, while resources of social capital are said to be declining.

Japan was used as an example of a society for which a weakening of social bonds together with an increase in social inequality and precarity has been discussed in recent years.

Based on data of a nationwide survey from 2009, analysis results support the assumption that perceived subjective exclusion has a negative effect on social and political participation that needs to be differentiated from effects of general social trust and trust in individual networks. The empirical test of the hypothesized model also confirmed a positive impact of social trust on civic engagement – a result that is in line with the existing literature. Its total effect, however, was partially mediated by feelings of disconnectedness, in the sense that higher resources of social trust alleviate the negative impact of feelings of disconnectedness on civic engagement, while low resources of social trust enforce it.

The inclusion of income and education in the model as indicators for the precariousness of the living circumstances yielded additional results, which contribute to the literature on precarity and social exclusion. Outcomes indicate that it is not the socioeconomic precarity per se that leads to lower chances of civic engagement, but its negative impact on the subjective evaluation of both the quality of social networks and one's belonging to and value for society. This is not to say that the objective living circumstances do not matter for chances of civic participation. On the contrary, the model implies that precarity enforces the negative effects of low social trust and feelings of disconnectedness on civic engagement. This means that it is especially the disadvantaged and marginalized, who are less likely to participate in communal actions and, thereby, are unable to voice their needs.

In light of the developments outlined for Japanese society, this implies that even if civil society has seen some growth in recent years, participation chances are distributed unequally. With a growing share of the Japanese population experiencing socioeconomic anxieties, feeling isolated and doubting their value for society, this result has implications for public policy. If responsibilities are increasingly shifted from state welfare to civil society, public policy not only needs to ensure that there are enough citizens who are willing to take on such tasks, but also, that there is equal opportunity to participate. As the results of this research imply that resources of social trust as well as the ability to feel to belong to the social whole are decisive for whether or not an individual will take an interest in communal activities, public policy needs to focus on three areas: (a) the reduction of actual precarities, (b) a revitalization of social bonds, and (c) a reduction of factors which induce feelings of disconnectedness. This research indicates that the latter are to a certain extent determined by the precarity of the living circumstances and the quality of a social network available. A more detailed analysis, however, is necessary to achieve a deeper understanding of the mechanisms behind such feelings of marginalization.

### **Study limitations**

While findings of this study yield noteworthy results, several limitations need to be acknowledged. As analysis is based on cross-sectional data, an assumed causality cannot be tested. To assess both, the direction of the causality as well as the extent to which the structural outcome shapes the social context evaluated, it would be desirable to validate the results with longitudinal data.

To capture the objective precarity of the living situation more thoroughly, additional variables need to be introduced to the model, i.e. controlling for type of employment, marital status and household structure.

With regard to a more general sociological discourse on civic engagement, it would be desirable to test the assumptions of the model presented here for Japan in other societal and cultural contexts. This could yield insight on whether the negative impact of perceived social disconnectedness on civic engagement might be stronger in collective oriented society than in more individualistic societies.

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