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A Survey of Social Support Networks in a Depopulating Japanese Village

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ABSTRACT: Japanese rural areas are depopulating and the proportion of the elderly is rapidly increasing as young people are migrating to urban areas. There are less and less public services because of the financial difficulty of the local governments. The study explores what makes their lives sustainable under such circumstances, with a particular focus on social capital. The subject of the study is a mountainous village in Kochi prefecture, Japan, where about 800 people live in 300 households, with the rate of elderly people is over 30%. To explore (1) the elements that constitute the well-being of different types of people, and (2) the relational ties through which they acquire those elements, a social network analysis has been employed. A face-to-face questionnaire survey was carried out with the whole adult population (age 16+), by visiting each household in the area. Two methods for social capital and social network data gathering, namely resource and name generators, were combined into a single instrument. This paper reports Dandan-club, a residents association trying to vitalize the village, plays an important role to keep the residents’ daily lives comfortable.

Keywords: aging society, rural area, social network

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently Japan has become an aging society and been faced with depopulation. Japanese rate of the elderly (age 65+), which is 23.1% (2010), is the highest in the world: 12% in USA, 16% in UK (2005 both) and 20% in Germany (2006). Depopulation especially in the rural area is very serious. Mountainous villages become Genkai-sharaku, a village where the rate of the elderly is more than 50%, one after another. The local governments in such areas have financial difficulties and provide the people with less and less services. It is supposed that the cooperation with residents is more important while the public services are shrinking one after another. The objective of this study is to show the social network between the residents in a village and how they acquire resources which are necessary for their daily lives through the social network. It is also the objective to specify who has a centrality in the social network and clarify the living in a mountainous village more in detail.

Two methods for social capital and social network data gathering, namely resource generator and name generator, were combined into a single instrument. Based on the qualitative data gathered through the pilot study, 16 items were selected as the resources that would potentially be relevant to the inhabitants'
lives. The respondents were asked if they had an access to a resource, what the name of the person whom they get it from was, and if they could get it by themselves. Geographical coordinates of all respondents’ locations were also recorded.

2. RESEARCH PLACE

The subject of this study is Choja, a mountainous village in Niyodogawa town in Kochi prefecture (Figure 1). The rate of the elderly in Choja is 32.3% (2009) and about 800 people live in 300 households (2009). The rate of the elderly is not so high in comparison with that in Niyodogawa town; 47.6% (2009) because people in their around thirties live in construction company housing in Choja. The village is on steep sides of mountains, so it takes many ups and downs to move in the village.\(^{1,3,4}\)

Figure 1 Location of Choja

Figure 2 Settlements in Choja

Choja has a lot of residents’ associations such as fishing, hunting and badminton associations. Dandan-club is one of them. It maintains rice terraces in Choja and holds some festivals there to vitalize the village. This study analyzes a role of the Dandan-club members in the network.

3. METHODOLOGY

To show the social network between the people in Choja and the way of acquisition of resources which are necessary for their daily life, resource generator and name generator, which are known as methods for measuring social capital quantitatively, were combined.\(^5\) \(^6\) As what helps the life in the mountainous village should be known in this study, the resources which are necessary for the daily life there were firstly defined by analyzing the interviews to the people in Choja. In the part of resource generator, it is asked if the resource can be accessed, who the resource supplier is and if he or she is a relative. The access to a resource could be regarded as an index of easiness to live. In the part of name generator, it is asked what the name of the resource
supplier is in order to draw the social network between the people in Choja. As this survey was carried out with the whole adult population in Choja (age 16+), the whole social network for the acquaintance of the necessities for their daily life could be shown by putting all respondents’ ego-network together. Each resource is asked how necessary it is to define which resource is necessary for the people in Choja.

4. SURVEY IN CHOJA

4.1 Pre-survey

It is important to select really necessary resources for the people in a mountainous village and make a questionnaire. Past interview data is analyzed qualitatively and interviews to the 14 leaders in the settlements in Choja and some people there were held from 13/9/2011 to 18/9/2011.

The rough numbers of households, people and the elderly in each settlement were grasped. It was found that the people naturally help each other, beasts and birds such as boars, monkeys and crows are very harmful and many hobbies take root in nature, for example, fishing in a river and hunting. There are 25 residents’ associations and Dandan-club is one that tries to revitalize the region and takes root in Choja.

Through the interview results, 16 resources were chosen so as to minimize the burden of the respondents and cover as all functions of daily life as possible. 16 resources are shown in Table 1.

4.2 Main survey

This survey was carried out in order to specify the resources necessary for the residents’ daily lives and how they gain the resources through the social network between the residents. The results can show how belonging to residents’ associations and the individual attributions such as age, sex and living settlement influence gaining the resources and the social network. Then this study tries to suggest how to make the life in Choja comfortable.

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The main survey was carried out from 13/11/2011 to 28/11/2011 for all residents in Choja (age 16+). The questioners visited each house and interviewed all people in the household for about 10 minutes. Only for the people living in the company housing, the questionnaires were handed out and collected later. The number of the people answered was 430 and the response rate was 79.0%; apart from the people in the company housing; they are 372 and 84.4%, respectively. The number of households, residents (age 16+) and respondents in each settlement is listed in Table 2.

The questionnaire is divided into two parts. One is for a family and the other is for an individual. The part for an individual is also divided into three parts; about individual attributions, about belonging to residents’ associations and about resources. The question list is shown in Table 3.

5. RESULTS

5.1 About respondents’ attributions

45% of the respondents are male: 55% of them are female. The number of females is a little more than...
that of males. The age of respondents and Dandan-club members is shown in Figure 3. The average age of the respondents is 60.4. As the people in the company housings are young, the average age except them is 64.8. The respondents’ birthplace is shown in Figure 4. The number of people born in Choja is almost the same as that of people born out of Choja. The number of people of each span living in Choja of respondents and Dandan-club members is shown in Figure 5. The rate of people belonging to some groups is shown in Figure 6. More than the half respondents belong to some groups.

5.2 Dandan-club

Dandan-club is a residents’ association which maintains and beautifies the rice terraces in Choja and takes advantage of the rice terraces to hold some festivals so as to vitalize the village. As 71 people of the respondents belong to Dandan-club, it is a very big group in Choja.

The age of Dandan-club members is shown in Figure 3. Many members are at the age of 60~74 while no member is under 39 years old. Most members are after retirement. 37% of Dandan-club members are male; 63% of them are female. Female members are more than male ones.

The birthplace of Dandan-club members is shown in Figure 7. Members born in Choja are little more
than ones born out of Choja.

The years living in Choja of Dandan-club members are shown in Figure 5. The years living in Choja of Dandan-club members show almost the same tendency as respondents’ except for less than 20 years.

5.3 Analysis of access to resources

The number of accesses to resources means a respondent’s comfort of living. The number of people of each number of accesses to resources is shown in Figure 8. Many people have 12-14 accesses to resources. The average number of accesses to resources is 11.08. It can be said that most residents in Choja have enough accesses to resources.

The average of the number of accesses to resources by belonging to Dandan-club is shown in Figure 9. The average of the number of accesses to resources by each span living in Choja is shown in Figure 10. After living in Choja for more than 10 years, the average of the number of accesses to resources is little changed.

As the residents in Choja secure accesses to resources on average, they live comfortably.
5.4 Analysis of centrality in the social network

Social network between residents drawn by the result of the survey in Choja is shown in Figure 11. One square means one male and one circle means one female in the figure. The coordinate in the figure is obtained by GPS data. The nodes’ settlements are distinguished by using different colors. Many ties between settlements can be seen.

Indegree and betweenness are indexes measuring the centrality in a network. Indegree means the number of arrows to the respondent on a network. In this study, indegree expresses how reliable the respondent is. Betweenness means the degree of the respondent’s being on the shortest path between random pair. In this study, betweenness expresses how the respondent links a resident to another in the social network. If the person is not on the any shortest link between residents, the betweenness is 0; if the person links all pairs in the network to each other, betweenness becomes 1.

The number of people of each indegree is shown in Figure 12. Many people have 1–2 accesses to resources. The maximum indegree is 23. The average indegree is 2.78.
The number of people of each betweenness is shown in Figure 13. Many people have less than 0.01 betweenness. The average betweenness is 0.011.

Only few people have especially high centrality in both indegree and betweenness. This may be characteristic of a mountainous village.

The average of indegree by belonging to Dandan-club is shown in Figure 14. The average of betweenness by belonging to Dandan-club is shown in Figure 15. Both indegree and betweenness get high by belonging to Dandan-club. Belonging to it contributes to make the whole residents’ living comfortable.

The average of indegree of each span living in Choja is shown in Figure 16. The average of betweenness of each span living in Choja is shown in Figure 17. Especially in the years living in Choja are less than 30 years, the centrality of Dandan-club members is much higher than that of respondents in both indegree and betweenness. This means that people coming from outside of Choja can contribute to make the residents’ life comfortable by belonging to Dandan-club.
Figure 16 Average of indegree of each span living in Choja

Figure 17 Average of betweenness of each span living in Choja

Through this result, it would be helpful to get people out of the village and have them belong to a residents’ association rooted in the area in order to keep the life of entire Choja residents comfortable.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described the survey on social capital in a mountainous village. The method combining resource generator and name generator can show the role of a residents’ association rooted in local area in a mountainous village. The following are concluded from the analyses of survey.

- Belonging to Dandan-club has little to do with improvement in accesses to resources or comfort of living. Most residents have enough accesses.
- By the method combining resource generator and name generator proposed in this study, social network between residents in Choja was successfully drawn.
- Belonging to Dandan-club has much to do with improvement in the centrality in the social network. Improvement in the centrality contributes to make whole residents’ lives in the village comfortable.
- The centrality can be high by belonging to Dandan-club even though they live in the area for a short time.

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