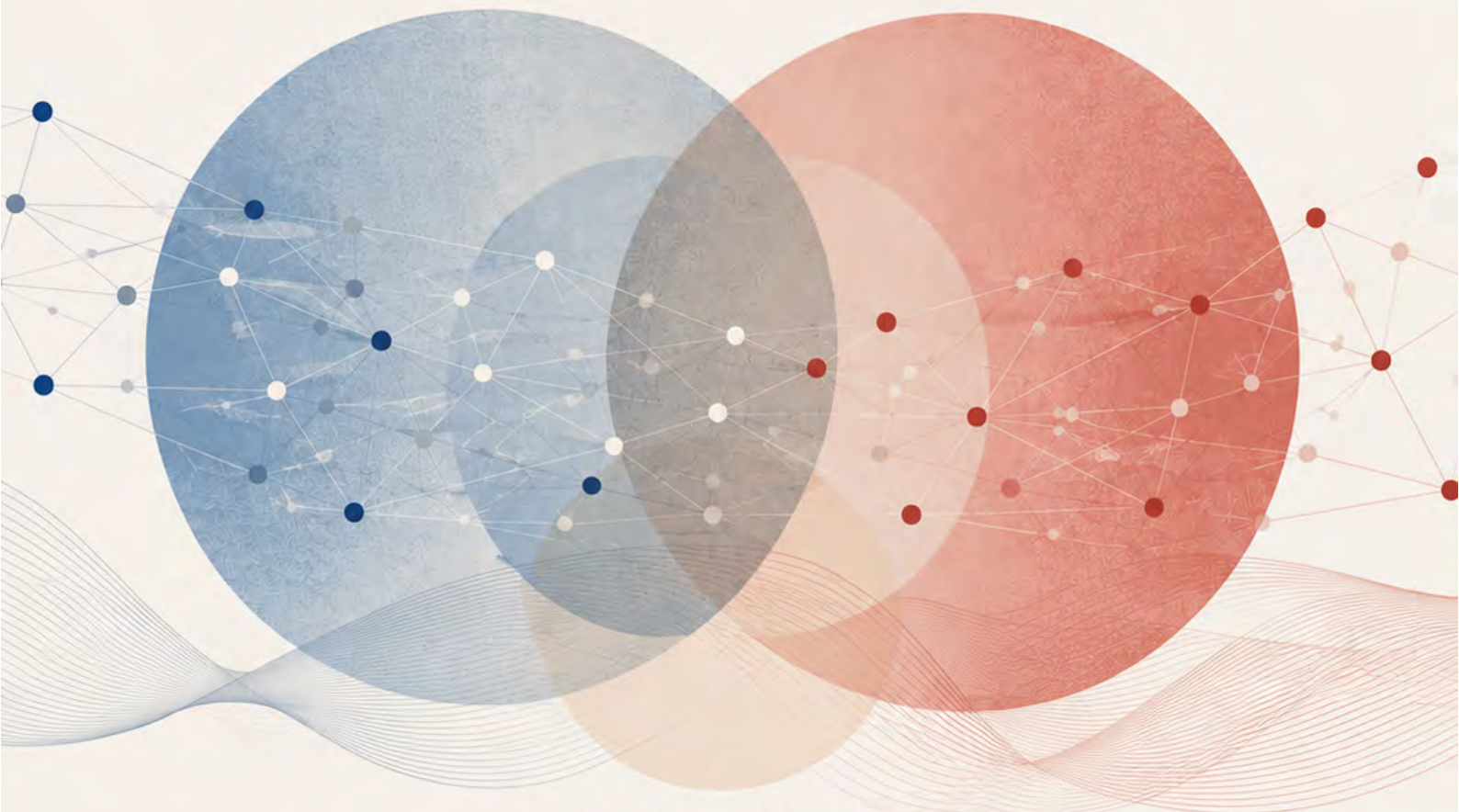


18TH MEETING OF THE
GERMAN-JAPANESE SOCIETY FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES (GJSSS)

SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN TRANSITION

Perspectives from Germany and Japan



17 – 18 SEPTEMBER 2026

CAMPUS BONN, FERNUNIVERSITÄT IN HAGEN

ORGANIZING TEAM

PD Dr. Laura Froehlich, FernUniversität in Hagen
Prof. Dr. Carola Hommerich, Sophia University, Tokyo

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Organizational Information

Venue

The workshop will take place at the Campus Bonn of the FernUniversität in Hagen:

FernUniversität in Hagen

Campus Bonn

Gotenstraße 161

53175 Bonn

+49 228 3078 7450

<https://www.fernuni-hagen.de/stz/bonn/>

Bonn is conveniently located near both Cologne Bonn Airport and Frankfurt Airport.

Getting Here and Parking

Arrival by public transport:

Stop: Hochkreuz/Deutsches Museum – Accessible from Bonn Central Station (Hbf) heading towards Bonn Bad Godesberg, or from Bonn Bad Godesberg station heading towards Bonn Central Station. Tram lines: 16, 63, and 67

Arrival by car:

From the right bank of the Rhine:

Follow the A59 or B42 and take the A562 towards Bad Godesberg at the Bonn Ost interchange. Exit the A562 at the Bad Godesberg exit. Continue on the B9 (Godesberger Allee) towards Bad Godesberg and turn left onto Kennedyallee after approx. 1.4 km. The first cross-street on the right is Gotenstraße; the Bonn Campus is located on the right-hand side after approx. 40 m.

From the left bank of the Rhine:

From the south: Exit the A565 at the Meckenheim-Merl junction and follow signs for Bad Godesberg Zentrum. Turn onto the B9 towards Bonn. After approx. 1.5 km, turn right onto Kennedyallee. The first cross-street on the right is Gotenstraße; the Bonn Campus is located on the right-hand side after approx. 40 m.

From the north: Exit the A565 at the Bonn-Poppelsdorf junction and follow signs towards Bad Godesberg. After approx. 6 km, move into the left lane—following signs for "Deutsches Museum / Wissenschaftszentrum" / "Autofähre Plittersdorf"—and turn onto Kennedyallee. The first cross-street on the right is Gotenstraße; the Bonn Campus is located on the right-hand side after approx. 40 m.

Parking options:

Accessible parking: directly at the building; other parking: in the surrounding area

Food & Drinks

Drinks (water, soft drinks, coffee, tea) will be provided during the meeting, with snacks available during coffee breaks. Lunch (vegetarian and vegan options available) will be served during the meeting. The conference dinner will take place on September 17 (19.45) at the restaurant "[Em Höttche](#)" (traditional Rhenish cuisine, address: Markt 4, 53111 Bonn). At the dinner, water will be included, additional drinks are to be paid separately.

Presentation Format

Presentations are given in 30 minute-timeslots (we suggest a 20-minute presentation followed by discussion). Please bring your slides on a USB stick for upload before your session.

Social Event

As an optional activity after the official conference program, we will visit the [Beethoven-Haus](#) in Bonn (Bonngasse 20 and 24-26) on September 18. This is the birthplace of the famous composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827). We will have guided tours (duration: 1 hour) of 10 persons each. Participation in the visit to the Beethoven Haus in Bonn needs to be paid individually by both members and non-members (participation fee: €15).

Time Table

Thursday, September 17

09:00 – 09:15	Registration
09:15 – 09:30	Welcome Remarks
09:30 – 11:00	Session 1: Social Relations in Comparative Perspective
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 – 13:15	Session 2: Relationships Across the Life Course
13:15 – 14:00	Lunch
14:00 – 15:00	Round Table Session & Plenary Discussion
15:00 – 16:30	Session 3A: Politics, Media, Governance, & Collective Action
16:30 – 16:45	Coffee Break
16:45 - 17:45	Session 3B: Politics, Media, Governance, & Collective Action
17:45 – 18:00	Short Break
18:00 – 19:00	GJSSS Member's Assembly
19:45	Conference Dinner

Friday, September 18

09:00 – 11:00	Session 4: Loneliness and New Forms of Social Connection
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 – 12:45	Session 5: Memory, Heritage, and Collective Identity
12:45 – 13:45	Lunch
13:45 – 14:45	Session 6: Digitalization and Social Transformation
14:45 – 15:00	Closing Remarks
15:00 – 15:30	Transfer to Beethoven Haus
15:30 – 18:00	Guided Tours Beethoven Haus

Interactive Formats

Round Table Session

17.09., 14:00 – 14:30

During the Round Table Sessions, we will address the characteristics, chances, and challenges in research across Germany and Japan. We will split up into smaller groups and meet at different “round tables”. Based on the participants’ preferences, we will cover the following topics:

- Funding Opportunities
- Cross-Cultural Methods (e.g., materials, data collection, data analyses)

Plenary Discussion

17.09., 14:30 – 15:00

During the plenary discussion, we will summarize what the groups have discussed during the round table session. We will also discuss how to move forward with research focused on Germany and Japan, for example concerning:

- Forming collaborations (joint research ideas, opportunity to collect data)
- Recruiting junior researchers
- Country-specific or general challenges for research in Germany and Japan

Session Schedule

Session 1: Social Relationships in Comparative Perspective

17.09., 09:30 – 11:00

Gisela Trommsdorff (University of Konstanz)

Social Relations in Transition: A Culture-Psychological Perspective

Laura Froehlich (FernUniversität in Hagen)

Perceived Gender Inequality predicts Gender Stereotypes across 25 Countries, including Germany and Japan

Julia Dellori (University of Cologne)

The Attractiveness of Foreign Employers in the Transition from University to Work – the Case of German Multinational Companies (MNCs) in Japan

Session 2: Relationships Across the Life Course

17.09., 11:15 – 13:15

Jule Bach (University of Heidelberg)

Children's Development of Faithful Imitation in Japan and Germany: A Comparison across Different Tasks and Age-Groups

Theo Pach (University of Jena)

When Parents Turn into Children: The Pedagogical Shift of Post-Adulthood

Kazue Haga (Waseda University)

"Ageing at Home" and Possibilities for Elderly People to Ask for a Little Help in Daily Life

Akira Tokuyasu (Hosei University)

Changes in Social Relationships as Observed through Funeral Practices

Session 3A: Politics, Media, Governance, and Collective Action

17.09., 15:00 – 16:30

Yuki Abe (Kumamoto University)

Changing Social Understandings of Japan's Security Policy: Growing Activity and Loosening Constraints?

Christian Oberländer (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg)

From Media to Politics in Japan: A Relational-Theoretical Approach to the Historical Sociology of the Mediatization of Politics

Andrea Hamm (Weizenbaum Institut e.V.)

How does Civic Tech Help to Design Cross-Sector Relationships? Insights from Japan

Session 3B: Politics, Media, Governance, and Collective Action

17.09., 16:45 – 17:45

Axel Klein (University of Duisburg-Essen)

Change of Social Context Within New Religious Movements: The Case of Sōka Gakkai

Asako Takashima (The Japan Institute of International Affairs)

Mapping the Pathways from Political Discontent to Populist Mobilization in Germany and Japan

Session 4: Loneliness and New Forms of Social Connection

18.09., 09:00 – 11:00

Carola Hommerich (Sophia University)

The Social Context of Loneliness in Japan: Preliminary Findings from a Nationwide Survey

Johannes Beller (Medical University Lausitz)

Time Trends in Loneliness in the Second Half of Life: Divergent Developments in Emotional and Social Loneliness in Germany (1996-2023)

Barbara Holthus (German Institute for Japanese Studies, DIJ, Tokyo)

The Turn to Non-Human Relationships in Japan: Multispecies Entanglements

Masato Kimura (Toyo University)

Touchless, Cashless, and Decaf Society: On the Consequences of Social Distancing

Session 5: Memory, Heritage, and Collective Identity

18.09., 11:15 – 12:45

Akira Watakabe (JSPS/Kyoto University)

The Scope of Dark Tourism Studies in Aging Societies: A Comparative Perspective on High-Mortality Contexts in Japan and Germany

Akimasa Suganuma (Kyushu Sangyo University; visiting researcher at Ruhr-University Bochum)

Circulating Tradition: School Trips and the Social Reproduction of Cultural Heritage in Modern Japan

Wolfgang Pape (CUNCR, EAA, Brussels)

International Relations Often Fail, While Interpopular Relations Prosper for Peace

Session 6: Digitalization and Social Transformation

18.09., 13:45 – 14:45

Fabian Schunk (University of Heidelberg)

Reconfiguring Social Relationships in Virtual Contexts: The Role of Anthropomorphism in VR and AI

Sandra Töpfer (University of Applied Sciences Neubrandenburg)

Granted Autonomy: Pedagogical Relationships Between Aspiration and Reality in Digital Capitalism

Abstracts

Session 1: Social Relationships in Comparative Perspective

Social Relations in Transition: A Culture-Psychological Perspective

Speaker: Gisela Trommsdorff (University of Konstanz)

Social and cultural changes have frequently been an explicit topic in past meetings of the GJSSS. However, the issue of social relations has been discussed rather implicitly. Since social relations are part of human cultures, a culture-psychological approach may be useful for studying transitions in social relations. This may be even more appropriate when the question arises whether at all and in which way social relations are undergoing transitions. Accordingly, I will first discuss some aspects of a) social relationships and of b) socio-cultural changes in Japan and Germany as prioritized in our previous meetings. Second, starting from the observation of major global changes, I will raise questions of a) whether, how, and in which way social relations (on the micro-level) are undergoing transitions, b) whether these transitions are affected by (changes in specific) cultural contexts, c) whether these transitions are part of, reflecting, and/or reinforcing such changes, and d) what the meaning of these transitions is with regard to the future development of social relationships (and respective cultural contexts). Third, I will refer to an example of empirical research in the transition of parenting, focusing on patterns of transition. The person-centered approach allows for an improved understanding of the dynamics of stability and change in the patterns of transition patterns, e.g., whether unidirectional or nonlinear patterns emerge. Therefore, transition research may use a person-centered beyond a variable-centered approach for examining transition patterns (e.g., for two or more time points). In my conclusion, I will suggest to extend transition research on social relations by interdisciplinary research including culture-informed theoretical and practical approaches, starting with German- Japanese comparisons of parenting as an example for social relations in transition.

Perceived Gender Inequality predicts Gender Stereotypes across 25 Countries, including Germany and Japan

Speaker: Laura Froehlich (FernUniversität in Hagen)

Research has demonstrated that men are associated with agentic traits, whereas women are associated with communal traits. Social role theory attributes this to the fact that men and women can be observed in different social roles (i.e., division of labor) that require agentic and communal traits (e.g., worker vs. homemaker, police officer vs. nurse). This theoretically postulated link has been tested with country-level indicators of the division of labor or more generally gender inequality. However, social role theory focuses on what people actually perceive. For a more accurate test of the relation between the division of labor and gender stereotypes regarding agency and communion, we created a new measure of perceived gender inequality. In a study conducted in 25 countries around the globe ($N = 6169$), participants evaluated gender inequality in different areas including the labor market as well as unpaid work within the household and care activities. Gender stereotypes were measured along the A(gency)-B(eliefs)-C(communion) dimensions. Results showed that in 23 of the 25 participating countries – including Germany and Japan - men were associated more with agency than women, while women were associated more with communion

than men. Furthermore, in all participating countries, perceived gender inequality predicted gender stereotypes in agency and communion: The greater the perceived gender inequality to the disadvantage of women, the stronger the association of men with agency and women with communion. We also tested whether gender stereotypes in turn predict gender differences in social preferences, but found no gender differences across all countries. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

The Attractiveness of Foreign Employers in the Transition from University to Work – the Case of German Multinational Companies (MNCs) in Japan

Speaker: Julia Dellori (University of Cologne)

Co-Author: Matthias Pilz (University of Cologne)

Many German MNCs operate in Japan, with their labour market position determined by their perceived attractiveness to potential employees (Chiavacci, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Pilz, 2025). In cross-national contexts, these perceptions are shaped by social, cultural and institutional frameworks (Froese et al., 2010). This study takes an innovative approach, adopting a dual perspective by examining Japanese students as potential applicants and German subsidiaries in Japan as employers. Drawing on person–environment fit (PE-fit) theory (Kristof, 1996), the study addresses three research questions: Which characteristics make German MNCs in Japan attractive from the perspective of Japanese students and German companies? Which skill expectations do Japanese students perceive from German companies and which skills do these companies actually require? How do both stakeholders assess their mutual fit?

Using a most-different design and a qualitative approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with German subsidiaries (n=10) and Japanese students (n=42) in the metropolitan areas of Tokyo-Osaka-Kobe. Findings show that although German MNCs are generally perceived as attractive employers, attractiveness and perceived fit do not coincide. Students and companies report a demands-abilities misfit. Students feel underprepared regarding English proficiency, practical skills, and confidence to express opinions, while companies describe graduate profiles as overly theoretical, lacking creativity, leadership, and autonomous thinking. Beyond this skill-based misfit, students also perceive a supplementary misfit rooted in the tension between their collectivist value orientations and the individualistic organisational culture associated with foreign employers. Both stakeholders locate its origins in structural incongruences between the Japanese education system and the competency expectations of internationally operating German firms.

A further key finding is that Japanese students do not distinguish between German MNCs and foreign companies in general, whereas companies actively differentiate themselves. This asymmetry reduces German employers' visibility and discourages potentially suitable applicants. At the same time, German MNCs remain an attractive career alternative for individuals misaligned with the local employment context.

The study contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of PE-fit in cross-cultural settings, highlighting that attractiveness and fit in the transition from education to work are subjectively constructed, societally and institutionally embedded, and must be analysed along multiple fit dimensions.

Session 2: Relationships Across the Life Course

Children's Development of Faithful Imitation in Japan and Germany: A Comparison across Different Tasks and Age-Groups

Speaker: Jule Bach (University of Heidelberg)

Young children reliably imitate actions that are causally irrelevant to achieving a goal, thus showing overimitation (OI). The current study examines how OI and other forms of faithful nonsense imitation (FNI) vary between children in Japan and Germany. Four- to seven-year-old children in Germany and Japan (N = 80 each) watched the experimenter (1) demonstrating goal-irrelevant actions to retrieve a reward from a transparent container (Container Task; classic OI paradigm), (2) choosing counterintuitive colors for coloring natural objects (Picture Task), and (3) showing goal-inconsistent behavior to build a tower from paper-tissue packages (Tower Task) before the imitation phase started. Despite cultural differences in their attitude towards conformity and interdependent self-construal, children from both countries revealed comparable imitation rates and age trends across all three tasks. Imitation rates were highest and even increased with age for the Container Task, whereas they were much lower and even decreased for the other two tasks. These findings suggest that OI and FNI substantially vary with children's age and task-characteristics. Contrary to our initial expectations, these variations remained highly stable across different cultural backgrounds.

When Parents Turn into Children: The Pedagogical Shift of Post-Adulthood

Speaker: Theo Pach (University of Jena)

The increase in life expectancy in modern societies is driven by medical advancements as well as the growing professionalization and institutionalization of elderly care. However, alongside the desire for longevity comes an increased risk of disease, including neurodegenerative conditions such as dementia. This challenges not only the affected individuals in their ability to live independently, but subsequently their caregivers, e.g. nursing staff and, moreover, close relatives. Therefore, the following abstract focuses on the pedagogical shift that occurs when parents turn into children.

While Higgs and Gilleard (2015) refer to the final period of life as the "fourth age", following a "third age" of autonomous retirement, I propose the conception of a heteronomous "post-adulthood". This derives from the perspective of pedagogical anthropology, as the misfortune of dementia significantly disrupts the lifelong educational processes of the "homo educandus" (Wulf & Zirfas, 2014). On an intrapersonal level, dementia leads to gradually unlearning biological, psychological and social skills required for a self-determined life. On an interpersonal level, in this case focusing on family members, dementia requires descendants to take on the role of a caretaker for those, who biologically, psychologically and socially have been their original caretakers during child- and partially adulthood. In these situations, the entire family dynamic and its usual pedagogical hierarchy are pressured by the need to reverse parental roles.

Although the "Benefits of Being a Caregiver Scale" (BCCS) also recognizes positive effects in the act of caregiving (Pendergrass et al., 2023), linking elderly care to pedagogy highlights key challenges on an intra- and interpersonal level. For this reason, the paper contests the current

scientific and social understanding of adult education by applying the German distinction between "Bildung" (education/literacy) and "Erziehung" (upbringing/parenting). The concept of "Erwachsenenerziehung" (adult parenting) can be used to explain possible difficulties within elderly care as a family responsibility, which is still quite common in Japan (Lee, 2016) and Germany (Bohnet-Joschko, 2020), and attempts to offer support for those affected actively and passively by dementia.

“Ageing at Home” and Possibilities for Elderly People to Ask for a Little Help in Daily Life

Speaker: Kazue Haga (Waseda University)

This contribution explores options for elderly people to ask for small amounts of support in their daily lives. In countries in which the number and also the proportion of elderly people are increasing, how people live their daily lives in older age is an important social issue. Many people wish to stay in their own homes as long as possible (“ageing at home”). Even though elderly people are still autonomous they gradually need more and more help with small tasks in their daily lives, such as changing a light bulb.

Conventionally it has been family members who have given support to others in the family who need help. However, family structure has been changing: multi-generational families are no more the common form, and families have fewer children. Consequently, family members often cannot provide enough support for each other. There have to be alternatives to family support providers. In this contribution the contemporary situation is explored referring to the 10th Comparative study on the lifestyle and values of senior citizens (Dai 10 kai kōreisha no seikatsu to ishiki ni kansuru kokusai hikaku chōsa), produced by the Japanese Cabinet Office.

The study provides insights into the question of who or what are alternative support providers for elderly people in daily life. It was conducted in 2025 in Japan, Germany, the USA and Sweden. Not only in Japan but also in the other countries, family members are still someone whom elderly people mostly wish to depend on; nevertheless, they also explore alternatives. Friends and neighbours are the most frequently chosen alternative. However, the relationship with neighbours is also changing. For example, in Japan, neighbourhood associations which provide mutual help for members no longer work effectively. Neighbourhood relations need to be managed in a different way which is appropriate for the present situation, and suitable management styles attempted. Interestingly the approach differs from country to country. Japanese and German approaches are compared in this contribution.

Changes in Social Relationships as Observed through Funeral Practices

Speaker: Akira Tokuyasu (Hosei University)

Funerals constitute sites in which social relationships centered on the deceased are symbolically manifested. These relationships extend beyond family and kinship ties to encompass a wide range of connections, from public to private, including occupational affiliations, local communities, and networks of friends and acquaintances. Moreover, funerals possess a multifaceted character: they retain elements of traditional mortuary rituals grounded in territorial and blood ties; they include

formalized expressions of condolence within public relationships; and they also provide a space for the articulation of personal grief rooted in private intimacy.

In recent years in Japan, there has been a transition from the long-dominant form of funerals—characterized by strong elements of community- and kinship-based traditions and public ritual, and attended by relatively large numbers of participants—to smaller-scale ceremonies attended only by family members and relatives, or by a limited number of close friends and acquaintances. Although the COVID-19 pandemic served as a significant catalyst, this trend had already begun prior to the pandemic and has continued without substantial alteration thereafter.

This transformation in funeral practices is closely related to changes in social action and social relationships concerning how mourning and the sense of loss for the deceased are socially expressed and shared. This report presents an analysis of the sociological factors underlying these changes.

Session 3A: Politics, Media, Governance, and Collective Action

Changing Social Understandings of Japan's Security Policy: Growing Activity and Loosening Constraints?

Speaker: Yuki Abe (Kumamoto University)

Japan's security policy has undergone a drastic transformation since the end of the Cold War, shifting from a restrained posture rooted in anti-militarism to one encompassing a broader range of military activities. This evolution has been analysed through the lens of 'normalisation' — that is, the extent to which Japan can pursue military policy at a level comparable to that of other states.

While the existing literature has examined Japan's normalisation primarily from a military perspective, this presentation approaches it from the underexplored standpoint of democratic governance. By applying Robert Dahl's concept of polyarchy — structured along two continua, 'participation' and 'contestation' — it argues that the former is largely fulfilled, as representatives elected through free and fair elections form the government and determine public policy. However, the latter — contestation — is not necessarily secured: meaningful opposition to governmental decisions, understood here as substantive oversight of executive power, is not fully guaranteed. As Japan has historically distanced itself from military engagement, effective mechanisms to scrutinise and constrain the government's handling of such matters have not been firmly established. Given that Japan's evolving security policy has been benchmarked against other 'normal' democracies, both democratic and military standards ought to be considered. On this basis, this presentation argues that Japan's normalisation remains incomplete.

From Media to Politics in Japan: A Relational-Theoretical Approach to the Historical Sociology of the Mediatization of Politics

Speaker: Christian Oberländer (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg)

This paper aims to strengthen the sociological dimension of historical research on the mediatization of politics in modern Japan by applying the theory of relations as a macro-sociological framework

for analyzing transitions from the media sphere into politics. While relational sociology and interactionist approaches often ground sociological explanation in interpersonal interaction and micro-level exchange, the theory of relations developed in critical dialogue with both relational sociology and the work of Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes relations primarily at the macro level. Society is thus understood not merely as the emergent outcome of intentional interaction, but also as a structure that forms “behind the backs” of actors through positional relations, institutional sequences, and circulation paths across distinct relational structures.

Building on the quantitative and historical findings of earlier Japanese research, this paper reconsiders the phenomenon of “mediatization of politics” through the lens of relational theory. Earlier research has identified patterns of transition according to region, education, occupational background, and media sector. Other existing scholarship has proposed several typologies of media-politician trajectories, including party-affiliated opinion journalists, newspaper proprietors, political reporters, and celebrity media figures.

The present study analyzes how actors circulated from journalism and media business into politics and whether these transitions produced stable or unstable circulations within the political relational structure. Particular attention is paid to the problem of “double inscription” into new institutional sequences and to the role of political parties, campaign organizations, and media visibility in enabling stabilization within politics. Comparative reference is made to international examples such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose transitions from media into politics illustrate both structural obstacles and mechanisms of successful relational stabilization.

By viewing the research findings of historical media studies through the lens of macro-relational sociology, this paper proposes new theoretical and comparative perspectives for the typology of media-to-politics trajectories and for a broader sociological understanding of the mediatization of politics.

How does Civic Tech Help to Design Cross-Sector Relationships? Insights from Japan

Speaker: Andrea Hamm (Weizenbaum Institut e.V.)

Co-Author: Yuya Shibuya (Weizenbaum Institut e.V.)

Civic technology refers to the use of technology to enhance the relationship between citizens and their government(s), it is developed by various companies, (civil society) organizations and community initiatives (The Knight Foundation, 2013). However, many civic tech initiatives’ struggle to overcome barriers posed by siloed working cultures across different sectors, which is also one reason for the initiatives discontinuation (Hamm et al. 2024). The societal impact of civic tech depends on designing cross-sector collaboration with varying stakeholders. “Boundary spanners” are individuals who ensure that collaboration runs smoothly by maintaining contacts with partner organisations and strengthening interpersonal trust at the interface between the partner organisation and the home organisation (Williams, 2002; Satheesh et al. 2023).

In Japan, the civic tech scene has grown steadily. For several years, Code for Japan is a non-profit and head organization promoting civic technology and open data in Japan by bundling local and thematic groups nation-wide and organizing regular meetings and summits. Many civic tech initiatives collaborate in a participatory and decentralized way, by fostering “open principles” of e.g.

open source and open knowledge enabling cross-sector collaboration. In Japan civic tech initiatives used to be citizen-led, but in past years also government-led initiatives are promoted (Nippon.com, 2022). Japan provides a particularly insightful environment for the study of boundary work in civic tech as (1) the Head of Code for Japan has also a position in a national government agency, and (2) one of the most renowned Japanese universities managed to receive funding for a five-year research program on civic tech design.

This qualitative study reports on ethnographic insights, interviews and desktop research to develop an understanding on how civic tech initiatives in Japan developed new models for boundary work and how boundary spanners act. Our findings show how civic tech communities in Japan developed dedicated programs and activities to build cross-sector relationships, keep an active community, and collaborate with public institutions. We conceptualize from the data, the model of boundary work in civic tech that allows for translation and collaboration between individuals who previously lacked a common understanding of the other.

Session 3B: Politics, Media, Governance, and Collective Action

Change of Social Context Within New Religious Movements: The Case of Sōka Gakkai

Speaker: Axel Klein (University of Duisburg-Essen)

Co-Author: Gill Steel (Doshisha University)

Sōka Gakkai is Japan's largest organized New Religious Movement (NRM) and has been a major actor in the country's political system because of its highly mobilized members and their support of the LDP-Komeito alliance (1999-2025). This contribution will investigate the social changes within the NRM which brought about the break-up of the political alliance and also have a considerable impact on how the organization functions within. Our findings are based on interviews, ethnography, and an original survey of Gakkai members.

Mapping the Pathways from Political Discontent to Populist Mobilization in Germany and Japan

Speaker: Asako Takashima (The Japan Institute of International Affairs)

Why does political discontent take different forms in different democracies? In Germany, anti-establishment grievances have crystallized into electorally significant populist parties — most notably the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which secured 20.8% of the vote in the 2025 federal election. In Japan, comparable levels of political dissatisfaction have produced neither a consolidated populist party nor a coherent anti-elite movement of equivalent scale. This divergence constitutes the central puzzle of this paper.

Existing research has addressed either the supply side of populism — how political actors deploy populist discourse — or the demand side — why voters hold populist attitudes. Yet the mechanism connecting the two remains undertheorized: under what conditions does diffuse discontent become populist mobilization, and why does this conversion fail to occur in some advanced democracies? This paper addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Germany and Japan, two consolidated democracies facing structurally similar pressures — economic inequality,

demographic stress, and eroding trust in mainstream parties — but producing markedly different political outcomes.

Drawing on the Manifesto Project Database supplemented by original text analysis of party leader speeches and official party communications, we map the discursive profiles of key political parties across both countries. For Germany, we analyze AfD, Die Linke, BSW, CDU, and SPD across the 2013–2025 electoral cycle. For Japan, we examine Nippon Ishin no Kai, Reiwa Shinsengumi, Sanseito, the LDP, and the CDP from 2012 to 2025. We score each party's communications along four populist dimensions derived from Engesser et al. (2017) — people-centrism, anti-elitism, popular sovereignty, and out-group exclusion — and examine how shifts in discursive profiles correspond to electoral outcomes.

Three preliminary findings emerge. First, populist electoral success in Germany correlates not simply with the presence of anti-elite rhetoric, but with its sustained intensification alongside out-group exclusion — a combination largely absent in Japan's electoral discourse. Second, BSW's collapse below the 5% threshold despite maintaining populist rhetoric suggests that discursive supply alone is insufficient — the organizational and contextual conditions under which populist appeals are made critically shape their electoral impact. Third, Japanese parties classified as populist candidates exhibit discursive profiles closer to technocratic reformism than to the people-versus-elite framing dominant in European populism research, raising fundamental questions about the cross-cultural validity of existing measurement frameworks.

These findings suggest that the pathway from discontent to populist mobilization is mediated by discursive structure rather than grievance intensity alone, and that the German-Japanese divergence reflects not an absence of demand but a difference in the political language available to channel it.

Session 4: Loneliness and New Forms of Social Connection

The Social Context of Loneliness in Japan: Preliminary Findings from a Nationwide Survey

Speaker: Carola Hommerich (Sophia University)

Co-author: Masayuki Kanai (Senshu University)

Loneliness has emerged as a major social and political issue in Japan. In 2021, the Japanese government appointed a Minister in Charge of Loneliness and Isolation and established a dedicated government office to address growing concerns about social isolation and its consequences for individual well-being and social cohesion. While loneliness has attracted increasing attention from researchers and policymakers alike, less is known about how loneliness is embedded in broader patterns of social connectedness and subjective well-being in contemporary Japan.

This paper presents preliminary findings from a new nationwide survey conducted in Japan in summer 2026 as part of an international comparative project on social and subjective well-being across eight Asian countries. The Japanese survey includes the 6-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, which is also administered in the Korean and Taiwanese surveys, allowing future comparative analyses of emotional and social loneliness across the three societies. In addition, the survey measures subjective well-being and multiple dimensions of social capital, including social support, interpersonal trust, social interaction, and community engagement.

The presentation will provide an initial overview of loneliness in contemporary Japan and examine how emotional and social loneliness are related to subjective well-being and social connectedness. By situating loneliness within a broader framework of social capital and well-being, the study contributes to current discussions on quality of life and social cohesion in contemporary Japan.

Time Trends in Loneliness in the Second Half of Life: Divergent Developments in Emotional and Social Loneliness in Germany (1996-2023)

Speaker: Johannes Beller (Medical University Lausitz)

Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a public health concern in ageing societies, yet research often treats it as a uniform construct. Emotional loneliness arises from the absence of a close attachment figure, while social loneliness stems from a lack of broader social integration and belonging. This study examines whether these two dimensions have followed different trajectories among adults in the second half of life in Germany over nearly three decades. Drawing on eight waves of the German Ageing Survey (DEAS, 1996-2023; N ~17,000 individuals aged 40+), multilevel models with population weights are used to trace developments in both dimensions over time. Emotional and social loneliness were found to move in opposite directions. Emotional loneliness rose significantly over the observation period, with a pronounced peak in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social loneliness, by contrast, declined modestly but consistently. These divergent trends were masked when loneliness was analyzed as a single composite score, which showed only a small overall increase. This pattern suggests that the nature of loneliness among people in midlife and beyond is changing. The decline in social loneliness may reflect improvements in social participation and network integration over recent decades. The simultaneous rise in emotional loneliness, however, points to growing deficits in the perceived quality and intimacy of close relationships. Structural changes in partnership and family life, increasing individualization, and possibly the displacement of deep personal exchange by more superficial forms of communication may contribute to this development. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have amplified these trends rather than created them. Taken together, the findings underscore that aggregate measures of loneliness can obscure consequential shifts beneath the surface and that future research and policy efforts should attend more carefully to the distinct relational needs that emotional and social loneliness reflect.

The Turn to Non-Human Relationships in Japan: Multispecies Entanglements

Speaker: Barbara Holthus (German Institute for Japanese Studies, DIJ, Tokyo)

Japan is undergoing profound demographic and social transformations — declining fertility, rising rates of single-person households, delayed or foregone partnership formation, accelerating urbanisation, and a widely diagnosed loneliness epidemic — that are fundamentally reshaping the landscape of social relationships. This paper argues that the growing significance of human-animal relationships in Japan must be understood as both a symptom of, and a response to, these structural shifts.

Since 2022, the annual number of pets newly welcomed into Japanese households has surpassed the number of children born. Surveys consistently indicate that the majority of pet owners regard

their animals as family members, creating so-called multispecies families: household units in which humans and animals are bound together through reciprocal care work, emotional interdependence, and shared participation in everyday and ritual life. Drawing on the family sociological framework of "doing family," the paper examines how human-animal boundaries are being blurred — visually, behaviourally, and emotionally — through practices such as pet dressing, inclusion in religious rites like hatsumōde and shichi-go-san, and the construction of pets as "loneliness cures."

The paper draws on qualitative and quantitative data, including statistical, survey data, a discourse analysis of blog posts and television drama, qualitative data from extended participant observation, and interviews with pet owners and animal welfare activists.

Despite high levels of anthropomorphisation and emotional investment, non-human family members however continue to occupy a structurally fragile position within family units and society at large: they are after all excluded from adequate legal protections and large-scale social surveys do not recognize the need to ask for non-human family members. This presentation aims to make a call for sociology in Japan (and Germany alike) to formally recognise multispecies families — including, in time, robotic companions such as Aibo, Lovot and Moflin — as a meaningful unit of social life, and to incorporate non-human family members into census and survey data in order to better understand contemporary well-being and loneliness.

Touchless, cashless, and decaf society: On the Consequences of Social Distancing

Speaker: Masato Kimura (Toyo University)

Recent advancements in communication technology have expanded contactless interaction, a trend further accelerated by the behavioral norms adopted to avoid crowding during the COVID-19 pandemic. What consequences will this have for modern society?

In this presentation, I will describe several distinctive phenomena and changes occurring in our daily lives and workplaces through the application of remote communication, touchless technology, and cashless payment systems.

What is the social function of the acts of going to others, meeting them directly, and gathering—acts that sociologists have long considered to be the foundation of social relations? R. Jacobson's theory of semiotics has placed particular emphasis on the "contact" function of language, in addition to its functions of self-expression, making appeals to others, and denoting objects.

Offices, which were premised on gathering in person, are now literally being replaced by remote conferencing systems such as Microsoft Office or Google Meet. However, in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, the main obstacles to remote work were the tradition of using personal seals (inkan) to guarantee the authenticity of documents, and the pre-meeting approval processes known as "ne-mawashi [lit. root grounding]" and "rin-gi," a sort of hierarchical unanimous decision making. Supervisors had to come into the office, risking infection, just to affix their seals. While the introduction of electronic seals helped resolve this issue, it faced criticism for potentially destroying the traditional seal-making industry.

In this technologically advanced country in the Far East, cashless payments are similarly less advanced than in neighboring nations; however, this is due to the trust in cash and the high level of public safety—factors that should, in principle, be welcomed. On the other hand, the expansion

of online payments has led to the disappearance of human cashiers in stores, as well as the adoption of contactless wedding gifts (shûgi) and funeral offerings (koden). Traditional rituals involving physical contact, as well as the exchange of tokens of gratitude and monetary gifts, are now becoming transactions that cannot be completed without paying a 3–5% intermediary margin to financial institutions.

These preferences for social distancing, which keeps people away from physical contact and social interaction, has also transformed delivery systems to default to “leave-at-door” options, and is even distancing people from friendships, romantic relationships, sexual experiences, and family formation. While there was a boom in marriage-matching services following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, the number of marriages and traditional Japanese weddings—which plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic—has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

In this way, the emphasis on social distancing appears to be clearly transforming our society itself. S. Žižek has dubbed the characteristics of a technology-dominated late modern society—one that avoids risk while reaping only the benefits—a “decaffeinated society.” Drawing on traditional communication theories and social criticism, I would like to examine how non-face-to-face interactions have transformed our society and offer prospects for how they will continue to do so in the future. And in turn, I will focus what challenges sociological interaction analysis—which has traditionally been grounded in face-to-face interaction and intimate physical interaction—must now address.

Session 5: Memory, Heritage, and Collective Identity

The Scope of Dark Tourism Studies in Aging Societies: A Comparative Perspective on High-Mortality Contexts in Japan and Germany

Speaker: Akira Watakabe (JSPS/Kyoto University)

An aging society brings about a shift in the recognition of death. Death becomes normalized and integrated into everyday life in contemporary society. From this perspective this presentation focuses on dark tourism. This is tourism to visit the sites associated with death, for example war remains, concentration camps, buildings destroyed by a tsunami. In the 2020s, many tourists visit these sites. For instance, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum continues to set new record highs in visitor numbers. This indicates that dark tourism has become a mass phenomenon based on this recognition of death.

This presentation, at first, provides a review of dark tourism theories in Japan. The discussion started mainly after 2011, the year of great earthquake and the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident. The review reveals a possibility and a limitation of these theories. The possibility is that dark tourism creates opportunities to discuss problems arising from the distortions of modernity through, for example, war or disaster. The limitation is that the possibility is applicable only when the narrative provided by the nation-state aligns with the phenomenon. In Japan, war remains can be discussed with this framework, however slums cannot.

Next it discusses the media coverage of two dark tourism sites, Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima and Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. These sites contain various conflicts. In Hiroshima, Peace Memorial Park is recognized as “sacred area” and mass media argue that local

people require the memorial day for “silent prayer.” However, every year political demonstrations using microphones are held. The case of Berlin faces the problem of stratification of Holocaust victims, because this site commemorates only Jews without other victims. While memorial sites which argue “not repeating” face conflict with people who deny the value, for example, extreme right, they face also conflict between people who agree with it.

In conclusion, dark tourism is characterized by modernity. It is both the limitation and the possibility of dark tourism studies. Additionally, the existence of conflict dark tourism sites indicates that many people recognize the importance of the issue of “death in the modern age”.

Circulating Tradition: School Trips and the Social Reproduction of Cultural Heritage in Modern Japan

Speaker: Akimasa Suganuma (Kyushu Sangyo University; visiting researcher at Ruhr-University Bochum)

In contemporary Japan, increasing social diversity has led to a renewed negotiation of the boundaries of “Japaneseness.” In this context, “traditional culture” has become a key site through which inclusion and exclusion are articulated. This paper examines how such “tradition” is circulated and socially reproduced within changing social relationships.

Focusing on the development of school trips in modern Japan, the study analyzes how cultural heritage appreciation became institutionalized. School trips function not merely as educational practices but as social mechanisms that mediate intergenerational relations and standardize shared cultural perceptions. Through these practices, specific ways of seeing and experiencing cultural heritage are transmitted and reproduced across generations, particularly in relation to how collective cultural experiences are standardized through mobility and education.

The analysis draws on a unique body of archival materials, including internal documents of the Japanese National Railways, private railways, guidebooks, and educational sources. These materials allow us to trace how cultural practices circulated within institutional and infrastructural frameworks and became socially stabilized. Rather than reducing this process to top-down ideological imposition, the paper highlights how repetition and circulation sustain the social reproduction of cultural practices.

Theoretically, the paper reconsiders the concept of “invented tradition” by shifting attention from origins to processes. It proposes the concept of “tradition adrift” to capture how traditions are continuously circulated, reconfigured, and reproduced within changing social relationships.

By linking circulation and reproduction to the transformation of social relationships, this paper contributes to broader discussions on nationalism, heritage formation, and the dynamics of tradition, while also offering perspectives that can be extended to comparative contexts, including Germany.

International Relations Often Fail, While Interpopular Relations Prosper for Peace

Speaker: Wolfgang Pape (CUNCR, EAA, Brussels)

“We the peoples ...” are the opening words of the preamble of the UN Charter. Yet the “people”, the sole sovereigns in our democracies, find formal representation in the UN only as “nations” recognised by the other “nations”, already members of this “Westphalian” club, like Germany and Japan. Ironically, it was the drawing of borders in East Asia by European colonisers in the 17th century that led to “international” law (Hugo Grotius). It then ruled on claims to maritime access (Mare Liberum) against the rights of colonial settlements on land. Subsequently, not only wars between nations but also waves of globalisation with peaceful people, ideas and goods moving beyond borders are indiscriminately called “international” in a conceptual conflation. The social relations from people-to-people, i.e. interpopular connections, correctly ought to be distinguished from those between nations that often have led to conflict; as well as private law (e.g. contracts) differs from public law (treaties). This distinction is especially relevant for Germany and Japan, which were once seen as instigators of war but now rely significantly on trade and other relations (e.g. GJSSS). The numberless and growing interpopular exchanges in commerce, tourism, the Internet and civil society prosper in peace, while purely international relations often fail and even lead to war. However, interpopular NGOs etc. – although operating across borders – as judicial persons can still legally register only at the national level in Germany and Japan (except ‘Societas Europaea’; future ‘EU Inc.’), where they are liable, while they are increasingly contributing important expertise to stakeholder coalitions for the global good across borders (e.g. at COP, ICANN; already since 1919 at ILO).

In analogy to Robert Schuman’s introduction in 1950 of the coal and steel industries into public supranational governance (ECSC) for lasting peace in the EU, legitimate cross-border NGOs should be progressively recognised within transnational public law and included in global governance decision-making (cf. proposals by A.Guterres) to advance failing multilateralism of merely many nations towards inclusive omnilateralism, governance omnibus, for and by all people.

Session 6: Digitalization and Social Transformation

Reconfiguring Social Relationships in Virtual Contexts: The Role of Anthropomorphism in VR and AI

Speaker: Fabian Schunk (University of Heidelberg)

Co-Authors: Natalia Lipp (Heidelberg University), Isabel Donle (Heidelberg University), Cornelia Wrzus (Heidelberg University)

Digital technologies increasingly mediate social life, as emerging forms of interaction in immersive virtual reality (VR) and AI-driven communication reshape how individuals experience and perceive social relationships. This talk examines how anthropomorphism, the tendency to attribute human-like characteristics to non-human agents, functions as a key psychological mechanism in structuring social expectations, emotional responses, and relational outcomes in virtual environments across cultural contexts. Drawing on two complementary studies, we investigate the role of anthropomorphism in social interactions within VR and conversational AI contexts. The first study uses cross-cultural survey data from 785 adults across Germany, Japan, the United States,

and India to explore whether and how individual differences in anthropomorphism, rejection avoidance, and loneliness relate to expectations towards adopting VR for social interaction. Results underline that anthropomorphism is a strong predictor of expecting social benefits from using VR, which in turn drive intentions to use VR for social purposes. Cultural comparisons further indicate higher anthropomorphism tendencies and stronger VR usage intentions among Asian participants compared to Western participants. The second study uses an experimental design to examine how a conversation with an anthropomorphized chatbot, presented in a human-like manner as opposed to a chatbot with a more technical framing, influences emotional responses and trust towards the chatbot in a German sample. By integrating these findings, this talk identifies both individual and cultural differences in the propensity to use digital technologies such as VR and AI to fulfill social needs. In particular, participants from Asian cultural contexts show a higher tendency anthropomorphize technology as compared to participants from Western contexts, and stronger anthropomorphism is associated with more favorable attitudes towards using virtual technologies for social purposes. This contribution thereby highlights how culturally embedded psychological processes shape the role of emerging technologies in social life, offering comparative insights relevant to both Germany and Japan.

Granted Autonomy: Pedagogical Relationships Between Aspiration and Reality in Digital Capitalism

Speaker: Sandra Töpfer (University of Applied Sciences Neubrandenburg)

Pedagogy claims nothing less than the ability not only to preserve the possibility of humanity but also to further advance it as a process of humanization. To live up to this claim, German pedagogy is now increasingly striving to place the social constitution of the self at the center of pedagogical reflection and action. As a result, pedagogical action would aim less at forming the “correct” individuality of the self and more at responding to the self’s dependence within a social coexistence that is constituted from the very beginning.

However, in order to do justice to the inevitable social nature of the (developing) human being as conceived here, education cannot rely solely on addressing this in its own theoretical reflections. In practice, educational practice also requires safe social spaces that make human development and life possible in the first place. The question here is to what extent these spaces currently exist.

Wars, hate crimes and acts of violence, terrorist attacks, the imperialism of authoritarian states, the complete collapse of established, order-creating political structures, dysfunctional economic developments and crises, rising unemployment, social inequality, and upheavals currently make social relationships appear crisis-ridden and precarious. These crises pose major challenges for pedagogy, since successful education, upbringing, and pedagogy find their prerequisites and limits in prevailing social conditions and are thus, like those conditions, increasingly under pressure.

In my contribution, I would like to explore, from a German, but also Japanese inspired perspective, the question of what understanding of the self and the other is currently being debated in German pedagogy and what the current social conditions for pedagogy look like in practice. I am particularly interested in the effects of digital capitalism on social and pedagogical relationships.

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