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The Effect of Disaster Volunteer Experience on the Well-Being of Young People in the Great East Japan Earthquake

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The purpose of this study was to examine how the disaster volunteer activities of young people affect the sense of well-being of those engaged in such activities and to obtain suggestions for connecting the findings to a better future for Tohoku. In the U.S., disaster management is divided into four stages: mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery. A series of studies has found differences between eudaimonic and hedonic well-being. At the disaster volunteer sites, problem-solving was done through improved autonomy and collaboration. In addition, there were many opportunities to rethink the meaning and purpose of human life. This kind of environment is conducive for people to build good relationships with others and gain autonomy and a sense of purpose in life, which are considered factors of eudaimonic well-being, which may lead to a lasting sense of well-being in their lives. We conducted a questionnaire survey and interviewed three young people who went to the area and volunteered after the Great East Japan Earthquake. From the interview survey, there was a particular influence on the change in the interviewee's well-being due to their disaster volunteer activities. Furthermore, the impact of the unique environment with the disaster victims and other volunteers they met during the activities was significant, causing them to reexamine the fulfillment of their relationships with others and their purpose in life. On the other hand, after ten years, many issues remain to be addressed to clarify what kind of transformation these disaster volunteer activities have brought about in the lives of these individuals. How to ensure the reliability of emotions, values, and sense of well-being, which are invisible to the naked eye, is an issue for the future. Research on human well-being can contribute to addressing these emerging social issues.

Keywords: disaster volunteer, well-being, disaster utopia, eudaimonia, young people

1. Rationale

The Great East Japan Earthquake may have impacted many people living in Japan, not only the Tohoku region

that suffered tremendous physical damage. Regarding the impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake, which was an unprecedented disaster at the time, investigating changes in lifestyles and views on life and well-being after the disaster, especially among young people in their twenties and thirties, who are the future leaders of Japan, will provide an essential perspective on the future of reconstruction [1].

Ten years have passed since the disaster. To date, many people from all over Japan have entered Tohoku, taken action of their own volition, and established relationships with new people and communities. However, there has been insufficient analysis of the kind of transformation that has been created for these visitors. What happened to young people in their twenties at the time?

As natural disasters have become more frequent in recent years, research targeting young people who go to disaster areas is significant in clarifying the social value of volunteers from various aspects and securing and developing human resources to support disaster recovery.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how the disaster volunteer activities of young people affect the sense of well-being of those engaged in these activities and to obtain suggestions for connecting the findings to a better future for Tohoku.

2. Previous Research – Disaster and Well-Being

There have been many definitions of the word “disaster” since 1930. One of the mainstream definitions of disasters in recent years is that it is the result of contact between the triggers of a disaster and the vulnerability of society, and that the magnitude of impact on society is predicted by the vulnerability of society [2]. In the U.S., disaster management is divided into four stages: mitigation, preparation, response, and recovery [2].

When a disaster strikes, many people visit the disaster area as volunteers. Disaster volunteers are defined as “volunteers, including many young people from outside the disaster area who have no experience as volunteers, who cooperate with the government on an equal footing, and provide organized relief, not only in the immediate af-



Table 1. Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being.

	<i>Hedonic well-being</i>	<i>Eudaimonic well-being</i>
Definition	Happiness in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance.	Happiness in terms of how fully a person is functioning.
Measure	Positive emotions Less negative emotions Life satisfaction	Meaning and purpose, personal growth, optimism, engaged, self-acceptance, positive relationships, environmental mastery, etc.

termath of a disaster but also in the long process of recovery and reconstruction” [3]. In this paper, we will focus on volunteers who entered the area and engaged in disaster relief activities during the emergency response period without the purpose of receiving compensation.

Solnit writes that disasters loosen our servitude to routine procedures and conventions, making it easier to make social and personal changes [4]. The widespread sharing of danger, loss, and scarcity creates a sense of intimate solidarity, helps people overcome social isolation, provides a pathway to intimate communication and expression, and is a significant source of physical and psychological help and reassurance. He called such a situation a disaster utopia, a temporary utopia that occurs immediately after a disaster. Well-being amid disaster comes from the presence of a clear purpose, survival, immersion in service to others, and love of citizenship rather than personal love directed at the individual. This might well be the case.

In addition, Daimon and Atsumi summarized the social situation during a disaster response as a concept of disaster sociology [5]. They summarized the foundational idea of disaster sociology in the U.S. that what happens on the ground after a disaster is collaboration and improvisation, rather than disorderly behavior and chaos with corresponding management and regulation, as is commonly thought.

Since a disaster utopia emerged during the emergency response period after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the young people engaged in disaster volunteer activities in such a unique environment would have been confronted with events they would not usually experience and questions they had never considered. Afterward, their sense of value and well-being may have been transformed.

Uchida et al. reported the impact of the Great East Japan Earthquake on the life behavior and well-being of young people [1]. The results showed that more than half of the young people who responded to the questionnaire experienced some form of change in their outlook on life and values, with a tremendous increase in a tendency to consider social relationships and daily life as meaningful. As a result, it was found that one group who thought about the earthquake had a higher sense of well-being after the earthquake than the other who did not consider it. Moreover, this difference tends to increase after the earthquake.

A series of studies have found that eudaimonic and hedonic well-being are different [6]. Hedonic well-being is

defined as happiness in terms of the attainment of pleasure and avoidance of pain [7]. It focuses on subjective well-being, measured in terms of more positive emotions, less negative emotions, and greater life satisfaction. Eudaimonic well-being defines happiness in terms of how fully a person functions. It has been operationalized as variables such as the six dimensions of psychological well-being [8], happiness and meaningfulness [9], and self-actualization and vitality [10]. For eudaimonic well-being factors, more items are indicated in **Table 1**.

At disaster volunteer sites, solving problems was done through improvised autonomy and collaboration. In addition, there were many aftershocks at the site during the emergency response period, providing many opportunities to rethink the meaning and purpose of human life. In this kind of environment, people can build good relationships with others and gain autonomy and a sense of purpose in life, the latter which is considered to be a factor of eudaimonic well-being, which may lead to a lasting sense of happiness throughout their lives.

3. Analysis: Interview

3.1. Survey Overview

Prior research suggests that the emergence of the unique environment of a disaster utopia during the disaster response period may have led to a transformation in such factors as “purpose in life,” “relationships with others,” and “autonomy,” which are considered to be factors of happiness.

Therefore, we conducted a questionnaire survey and interviewed three young people who went to the area and volunteered after the Great East Japan Earthquake. To examine the correlation between the factors of well-being and the content of volunteer activities, we selected three young people who had been involved in disaster relief volunteer activities at different times and for different periods. One of them (Mr. A) visited the disaster area around a year after the earthquake and engaged in learning community support activities for children for an extended period. Another removed rubble for one week immediately after the earthquake (Mr. B), and the third (Mr. C) entered the disaster area three months after the earthquake and has been engaged in various volunteer activities according to the needs of the area until now. Both Mr. B and Mr. C entered the disaster area three months after the earthquake

Table 2. The questionnaire and variations.

Element	Mr. A	Mr. B	Mr. C
Positive emotions	○		○
Less negative emotions	○		
Meaning and purpose in life	○		○
Autonomy	○		○
Personal growth	○	○	○
Environmental mastery	○	○	○
Positive relationships	○	○	○
Self-acceptance	○		○
Optimism	○		
Engaged			○
Contribute to others	○	○	○
Being respected	○	○	○
Self-respected	○	○	○

and were involved in various volunteer activities to meet local needs.

The questionnaire was designed to “investigate the impact of young people’s volunteer experiences on their sense of well-being.” The questionnaire survey asked the participants about their time in Tohoku, the duration of their time there, and the content of their activities, as well as the factors that affect their well-being, as shown in **Table 2**. The questionnaire asked the participants whether there was any change in the above factors compared to before the volunteer activities. The author developed a questionnaire by referring to questions used in prior studies [11, 12]. Interviews were then conducted based on the questionnaire to find out how each element had changed, what the factors were, and specific stories.

3.2. Interview

3.2.1. Mr. A (18 Years Old in 2011, First-Year College Student, Male)

Mr. A participated in a volunteer bus tour in December of 2011. In Higashimatsushima City, Miyagi Prefecture, he listened to the stories of the disaster victims and helped with an exchange event at a temporary housing facility. In the summer of 2012, he became a volunteer bus tour operator and planned and implemented a tour to Kesennuma City, Miyagi Prefecture. In 2014, he began working as an intern at a Kesennuma-based non-profit organization (NPO), where he lived and supported the learning community for a year.

Until then, he had placed much importance on his title and his achievements, and even after the Tohoku disaster, he had only participated in volunteer activities to put something on his resume that would be advantageous for employment. He mentioned two situations in which he felt that his sense of values had changed while engaging in volunteer activities: the first was when he heard the post-disaster stories from the disaster victims. The second was when he finished the learning community support activities with which he had become involved. The experience of building relationships with local children and

seeing their joy at the end of the activity led him to place importance on relationships with others. Of all the factors that influenced well-being, he was most strongly influenced by relationships with others. He concluded that his relationships with others during his time as a disaster volunteer transformed his meaningful purpose in life. In these terms he went from focusing on creating his title and achievements to valuing the importance of creating something exciting for others and being able to help them when they are in trouble. It has also changed his employment opportunities.

3.2.2. Mr. B (24 Years Old in 2011, Freelance Writer, Male)

From April 1 to 11, 2011, he spent ten days volunteering in Ishinomaki City, Miyagi Prefecture. He stayed in one tents, removed rubble and cooked food, and did not contact people in the disaster area. In June 2011, he entered Kesennuma City, Miyagi Prefecture. He had a friend who had volunteered in Kesennuma City before he entered his base. He stayed there for a week, organizing relief supplies and cleaning evacuation centers, and also had the chance to visit affected areas and listen to victims’ stories. He cleaned up even a tiny area, which gave him a sense of accomplishment and usefulness.

His sense of values changed not because of the activities but his connections with local people and the insights he obtained from other volunteers. The people living and working there were something he could never have imagined from the volunteer activities he had participated in in the past. The aftershocks that occurred during the activities made him feel close to death; the local people who were grateful and welcoming to the volunteers and the volunteers who continued to work there all made him question what he would do with his life. While his friends continued their activities in Tohoku, Mr. B did not stay but went abroad to pursue his dreams.

3.2.3. Mr. C (Unemployed Male, Age 24 in 2011, Immediately After Returning from Studying Abroad)

Mr. C studied in Australia after graduating from university and returned to Japan on March 1, 2011. After the earthquake, he went to Miyako City, Iwate Prefecture, in June 2011. He started working at a volunteer center set up by the Council of Social Welfare. He continued our activities while sleeping in volunteer accommodation at the community center. After removing rubble and mud, helping people move into temporary housing, supporting communities in temporary housing, and creating places for children to live, he established a non-profit organization in February 2013. He changed his activities based on what was needed and what he could do while understanding the local community’s needs. Currently, he is continuing his activities as the manager of the NPO and is developing projects to create a system for local youth to work for the local community.

Before the disaster, he pursued his own objectives, but now wanted to leave something behind for the victims and their children after the disaster. In his volunteer activities, he felt that his role and importance were high, and that there was work that he could do because he was the one. He had a strong feeling that his actions could change something, which continues to this day. As for adapting to the environment, he had to be careful not to let his volunteer activities impose on others. After establishing the NPO, his volunteer activities became a social instead of a personal activity, and he felt happy to be a member of the community as he tried to do more than he could complete on his own. He believes that this helped him understand and accept his limitations. He felt more positive emotions when he volunteered than he does now as an NPO. He was able to directly feel a sense of accomplishment and gratitude, as he could solve visible problems one by one. He gained some things from the volunteer activities, but more than that, after his experience of putting himself in the extraordinary place of the disaster area he began to think about the purpose and meaning of his life. Even more than his daily activities, he was greatly influenced by the people with whom he was involved.

4. Discussion

From the interview survey, there was a particular influence on the change in the interviewee's well-being as a direct result of their disaster volunteer activities. Furthermore, the impact of the unique environment with the disaster victims and other volunteers they met during the activities was significant, causing them to reexamine the fulfillment of their relationships with others and their purpose in life. A story conveyed from a disaster victim can induce listeners to engage in transformative learning [13]. Furthermore, it was shown that more factors changed for Mr. A and Mr. C, who stayed in the disaster area for a long time, interacted with others, and thought about and developed their activities, than for Mr. B, who worked for a short time on a predetermined task. This suggests differences in the timing of the disaster volunteer activities, the conditions of the disaster area, and the nature of activities.

On the other hand, after ten years, many issues remain to be addressed to clarify what kind of transformation disaster volunteer activities have brought about in the lives of these individuals.

One issue is that there was difficulty in remembering and answering how things had changed based on what had happened ten years ago. How to ensure the reliability of emotions, values, and sense of well-being, which are invisible to the naked eye, is an issue for the future. We need to carefully examine the subsequent life choices of the participants and determine if the disaster volunteer program influenced these choices. Due to the effects of the new coronavirus, interest in health is increasing nationwide. Research on human well-being can contribute to addressing these emerging social issues.

Now that ten years have passed since the Great East

Japan Earthquake, we believe it is time to reflect on the social impact of the disaster volunteer activities on the subsequent lives of the young people who engaged in such activities at that time to see if there was any impact on their lasting well-being. Including new hypotheses that emerged from this survey, we would like to clarify how volunteer activities after the Great East Japan Earthquake affected people by carefully examining the questionnaire items and improving the accuracy of the survey. If the results contribute to the well-being of the people, we would like to use them in education and community development in Tohoku to help people live a more prosperous life. It is hoped that this will lead to a better future for Tohoku.

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