Aging and the Family

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Aging is one of the most critical problems confronting Japanese society in the 21st century. As Japan enjoys the highest life expectancy in the world, the elderly population in Japan is growing very rapidly. There are more than 20 million people over the age of 65, almost one in every five Japanese. By the year 2025, the elderly population will be nearly 35 million people; one in every three Japanese will be old. This is one of the highest ratios of older citizens that any postindustrial society is expected to experience; no society has ever dealt with such a high ratio before. The social resources needed to support the elderly population with social security, health care, nursing care and other services will be unprecedented.

Obviously, longevity is something to celebrate, but when life expectancy grows by as much as 50 percent in a matter of decades, it creates a social problem. Today, acute illnesses that were once lethal have become more containable, so chronic long-term illnesses have become more commonplace. This raises the need for more medical and nursing care facilities. It is ironic that in learning to conquer one set of health problems, we have created another set of problems. Old age is no longer a social bonus.

Aging has wide-ranging consequences for the organization of society. When a society ages fast, there is less time to adjust the social infrastructure to meet the new demands of the changing population. Social expectations and cultural norms regarding rights and responsibilities of citizens must also change in the new environment.

How does aging challenge Japan's salient cultural norms? The cultural ideal of aging in Japan has often been expressed in the multigenerational household and in filial relationships. Filial co-residence, which typically consists of a three-generation household that includes elderly parents, son and daughter-in-law, and grandchildren,

average about half of all elderly households. Although this residential pattern follows the **primogeniture** model that was abolished as long as a half century ago when the postwar **Family Law** was established, it is an arrangement that has continued to be taken up widely in postwar Japan.

The Japanese preference for co-residence has been high, not only because of the obvious economic benefits of pooling financial resources and sharing living expenses, but also because it can offer the kind of security that comes from a preference for predictability. The three-generation household is an entirely concrete and tangible informal social security system that establishes exactly who will do what for the elderly when parents become frail, bedridden or otherwise acutely needy. It is an arrangement that exacts a commitment from co-resident adult children even before the need arises, very early in the family life cycle. This arrangement can create certain knowledge about the definite availability of identifiable primary caregivers when need arises, which has been an essential component of -dependable- security to many Japanese. As many age, they want to and expect to know that they will be cared for by their children. The high rate of filial co-residence in Japan is based on a fundamental desire for security that is part of a worldview that values certainty.

Changes in family composition and mobility have diversified the multigenerational households in kind, but changes in the cultural assignments to care for the elderly has not necessarily kept pace. A significant number of elderly Japanese still prefer to live with their children, and the rate of co-residence also remains high. Even though circumstances today can delay the timing when parents move in with their adult children, like when one aging parent is widowed, multigenerational living prevails as a salient feature of aging in Japan especially compared to other postindustrial nations. The premium placed on predictability and certainty, the unwillingness to leave matters undecided, and the unwillingness to leave help up to voluntary goodwill are important characteristics of the Japanese sense of security in old age.

Even when the timing of co-residence is postponed or delayed to adjust to the new social realities of mobile children, this expectation about what security "ought" to be is still critical for the Japanese vision of old age. Social support therefore centers around filial ties, focused narrowly on one child, especially the co-resident child, and underlying this behavior is the notion that dependency on adult children in old age is legitimate and inevitable. Compared with their American counterparts, the Japanese elderly do not rely nearly as much on their spouse, friends, neighbors, and relatives as they do on their adult children for all types of help. The Japanese support system is not as diversified as in American society where the spouse constitutes the primary tie, friends are indispensable for companionship and sharing confidences, and neighbors and relatives also play an important role in support arrangements. If the American support system is designed to minimize dependence on any one source to enhance the independence of the elderly, then the Japanese approach is one in which there is an inevitably heavy dependence on just one source, the co-resident child.

The relative readiness to accept dependence in old age derives from an assumption that everyone must need help in old age. People perceive needing help in old age as neither a probability nor a possibility, but an inescapable, inevitable part of the end of life. So, eventual need is not something that "might" happen, but something that "will" happen to everyone. When need in old age is inevitable, then the elderly themselves are not responsible for this state of being; they can therefore "legitimately" depend on others to look after their needs. This prospective view of need in old age is therefore a key supposition in the Japanese preference for filial ties.

By monitoring the family status of the elderly, social service stipulations and practices in Japan can also presuppose social obligations. Social services are often organized in a way that reinforces the obligations of family members as caregivers. Social services like home health care, lunch services, and nursing care can be targeted to specific types of elderly people who are deemed needy not only because of their disability, but also

because they do not have family. The eligibility criteria for services in Japan include family status-sometimes implicitly but often also explicitly- adding to other eligibility criteria like income and disability. Family status, like living alone or only with spouse, but without children, can affect the priorities assigned to some people waiting for a nursing home bed, others seeking subsidized lunch services, or those searching for home health aids and other services.

However, we must recognize that binding families to provide such care through obligation and disempowerment also conversely diminishes the families' capacity to cope with the intensity and volume of needs. This makes a genuine solution to the problems in old age difficult to achieve. The true solution would be to diversify the resources by legitimating all forms of help and assistance from a wide range of sources outside the family. To do this would require a fundamental redefinition of cultural expectations and ideals of old age and family. To realize this vision, Japan must prepare to pay for and build a wide range of facilities and human resources as well.

Ultimately, notions of goodness and deservedness-and the rights and responsibilities in the family-need not hinge so much on social approval as they do on our ability to reconcile our egoism and altruism. In this sense, it is time to contemplate an appropriate redefinition for the "good family" that befits the demands of this new century, without taking its boundless exertion for granted.

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Akiko Hashimoto (retired) was Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. Her areas of interest are cultural sociology, comparative and global sociology, collective memory and national identity, generational and cultural change, family and education, aging and social policy.

Suggested Reading

Hashimoto, Akiko. *The Gift of Generations: Japanese and American Perspectives on Aging and the Social Contract.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Traphagan, John. *Taming Oblivion: Aging Bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2000.