

# Social Support Networks among Urban Japanese Elderly

— Focusing on Their Family Relationship —

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## Introduction

### Background of this study

In contemporary Japan the population is aging at an unprecedented speed, and it is projected that one third to fourth of the population will be 65 years old or older in the 2030's. What the demographic change has brought about is not only changes in the proportion and in the absolute number of older people in the entire Japanese population but also increase in single and aged couple households. Coupled with low fertility rate, growing industrialization and urbanization, today's elderly cannot always expect to have what they used to take for granted from their children and other family members.

This demographic change challenges current welfare policies in two ways. First, it is a premise on which welfare for the aged is based on. That is, it requires shift in the basic assumption of welfare for the aged from the extended family tradition. In other words, social welfare for the aged can no longer consider family members as the primary caregiver. Not much societal attention has been paid to older women. Women have sacrificed themselves as caregivers but nobody has been available to take care of these women. However, increasing number of female in the labor force participation and growing oldest-old population have forced the society to take welfare for the elderly more seriously. Second, the rapid increase in older population brought about an economic concern. That is, the society started to think that older people should be active economic as well as social contributors rather than economic dependents. People have been encouraged to postpone their retirement or to find employment even after

retirement. Older people's volunteer activities for other older people have also been promoted.

Current welfare policies in Japan are not nurturing independence among the recipients but are giving disguised independence. It seems that policy maker are taking advantage such typical Japanese values as "modesty" and "reservation" or "self-restraint". Aging society raises issues of how to cope with disappearing traditional extended family patterns and how to shift ideologies that underlie traditional extended family pattern. The way of thinking that family should take care of any problems surrounding its aging member supported by such Japanese values as "shame (Haji)" and "reserve (Enryo)."

### **Purpose of the study**

In Japan research on older people's families and social life has focused on living arrangement rather than on family and social relationships. Therefore, welfare policies are developed based on the living arrangement. On the other hand, research on older people' life satisfaction and social support networks has been accumulated, searching for welfare policies that guarantee not only life but also quality of life for the elderly. Nurturing independence and the support system is becoming one of the crucial tasks for Japanese social welfare for the elderly. However, research has not examined the extent to which most Japanese elderly rely upon their family. In this paper, we will focus on social networks, especially on family relationship and discuss how we should approach the frame of reference of the elderly in Japan.

### **Methods**

This paper is based on the data collected in two studies, "Cross-national Study of Japanese American Elderly in Los Angeles," (1993) funded by University of California Center for Pacific Rim Studies, and "Study of Japanese Elderly in Toyohashi-shi, Japan," (1994) funded by Japan Foundation for Aging and Health. Both studies administered questionnaires composed of almost the same questions. Similar studies were conducted in the United States on Korean and Chinese Americans, and also in Hong Kong and Vietnam, and some of them were presented at the Fifth Asia/Oceania Regional Congress of Gerontology in Hong Kong, 1995. The two studies discussed in this paper are among such comparative studies of the elderly in the Pacific rim.

The study in the city of Toyohashi is the second of this kind in Japan. The first study was conducted in 1994 in the town of Towa in Yamaguchi Prefecture, where the proportion of the elderly among its population is the highest in Japan (41.5%). Toyohashi is located in one corner of the so-called Pacific Belt, the backbone of Japanese economy, which includes such large cities as Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka. It is a mid-size city with a population of 350,000, and has developed its urbanization with a consistent influx from surrounding areas.

The fact that the city has had very little outflow of its population suggests that, despite the nation-wide industrialization and urbanization, it has maintained the kind of local community in which people grow up and die where they were born. Statistically, Toyohashi is one of the cities in Japan that has the largest proportion of three-generation household (72.5%) among the elderly household. The city not only has Japan's largest port from which Toyota exports its automobiles, but it also yields those agricultural products highest in value, which is one of the indications that the city is economically and socially stable.

Seven hundred and sixty-three men and women over sixty years old in Toyohashi were selected from the city resident list through random sampling method. They were interviewed in September, 1994. Five-hundred and twenty-four, or 68%, in Toyohashi, and 173 in Los Angeles were completed interviews.

## RESULTS

The basic characteristics of the subjects are shown in Table 1. The proportion of

T1. Descriptive Characteristics of Sample by Study Sites

	total		male		female	
	TOYO (N=524)	LA (N=173)	TOYO (N=217)	LA (N=89)	TOYO (N=307)	LA (N=84)
<b>Age(%)</b>						
60-64	26.3	20.8	29.0	24.7	24.4	16.7
65-69	27.1	32.4	31.8	29.2	23.8	35.7
70-74	17.9	24.9	15.2	29.2	19.9	20.2
75+	28.6	22.0	24.0	16.9	31.9	27.4
<b>Marital</b>						
married	69.8	64.7	88.0	82.0	57.0	46.4
widowed	26.5	23.1	10.6	6.7	37.8	40.5
others	3.6	11.6	1.4	10.1	5.2	13.1

those 60-65 years old and 75 years or older among all the elderly in Toyohasi (hereafter TOYO/E) is larger than those among the elderly in Los Angeles (hereafter LA/E). Larger percentage of TOYO/E than LA/E, both men and women, are married but the gender difference is larger than the regional difference. It is important to focus on how regional differences and gender differences intersect in the lives of the elderly. (Hereafter, male and female elderly in Toyohashi and in Los Angeles will be called TOYO/M, TOYO/F, LA/M, LA/F, respectively.)

### Living Arrangement

Table 2 shows the living arrangement of the subjects by type of household,

T2. Living Arrangement by Study Sites

	total		male		female	
	TOYO (N=524)	LA (N=173)	TOYO (N=217)	LA (N=89)	TOYO (N=307)	LA (N=84)
<b>Household Type</b>						
Living alone	13.2	21.4	8.3	7.9	16.6	35.7
Aged couple	23.7	40.5	30.9	51.7	18.6	28.6
Other Types	61.8	36.4	60.4	39.3	62.9	33.3
<b>Live with. (% yes)</b>						
spouse	68.1	63.6	88.0	82.0	53.4	44.0
son	41.4	21.4	31.0	34.8	40.4	27.4
daughter	19.7	14.5	14.3		23.2	
children-in-law	35.3	2.9	30.4	1.1	38.5	4.8
grandchildren	33.0	3.5	26.7	3.3	37.2	3.6
parents	7.1	2.3	9.7	2.2	4.9	2.4
siblings	1.1	1.2	0.9	1.1	1.0	1.2
other relative	2.3	1.2	2.3	0	2.3	2.4
<b>Relatives lives near by</b>						
... (% yes)						
parents	3.1	12.2	3.2	14.6	2.9	9.5
siblings	49.8	61.9	58.1	68.6	44.0	54.7
children	61.6	75.1	58.5	76.5	63.8	73.8
children-in-law	43.1	48.5	38.7	43.9	46.6	53.6
grandchildren	44.2	47.4	35.0	40.5	50.8	54.7
other relatives	47.3	52.0	45.6	49.4	48.5	54.7
<b>Income (%... yes)</b>						
earning	42.7	41.0	50.2	49.4	38.1	32.1
son	13.0	2.4	5.1	2.2	18.6	2.4
daughter	5.3	2.9	1.4	3.4	8.2	2.4
pension	89.7	77.5	88.0	71.9	90.9	83.3
rent/saving	21.6	76.9	28.1	79.8	16.9	73.8
stock	6.5	35.8	8.3	39.3	5.2	32.1

income, and whether they have relatives living nearby. Proportionately more LA/E in general live in single or aged couple household and proportionately more TOYO/E live in other types of household. If we take gender into consideration, those living alone were most often found among LA/F (35.7%) and least often among LA/F (7.9%), followed by TOYO/M (8.3%). LA/M were most likely to be living in aged couple household (51.7%) and TOYO/F were least likely to do so (18.6%). Proportionately more TOYO/E than LA/E live in other types of household, but gender differences were not found.

These findings give us some perspectives on how the types of household in which the elderly live changes as they become even older. Four out of ten TOYO/M initially live, or choose to live, with their spouse. One out of these four later live, or choose to live, alone. Four out of ten TOYO/F also live, or choose to live, initially with their spouse, but later, two of these four live, or choose to live, alone and the other two move in with their family such as their children. Six out of ten LA/M and LA/F, respectively, initially live, or choose to live, with their spouse first, but only one of six such LA/M and four out of six such LA/F later live, or choose to live, alone. Proportionately more LA/M than TOYO/M live with their children rather than live alone after their spouse dies. We must not rush to judge, but it seems that TOYO/F and LA/M become more dependent as they age, which indicates that gender and region are not the factor here.

This dependency seems to be related to whether the elderly have relatives living nearby. TOYO/E are most likely in Japan to have relatives living nearby, but LA/E have even closer ties to their relatives. Especially, LA/M (76.5%) are most likely to have their children living close by, followed by LA/F (73.8%), TOYO/F (63.5%) and TOYO/M (58.5%). In general, LA/E are more likely to be living near their children than TOYO/E, but more LA/M than LA/F, and more TOYO/F than TOYO/M are likely to do so. This may be the reflection of the difference in employment opportunities between a big city like Los Angeles and a mid-size city like Toyohashi.

When we look at income, 76.9% of LA/E compared to 21.6% of TOYO/E said that rent/saving was the main source of their income. Stock was the main source of income for 35.8% of LA/E compared to 6.5% of TOYO/E. Not many are financially dependent on their children in general, but relatively more TOYO/E (18.3%) than LA/E (5.3%) depend on their children. However, TOYO/F are especially dependent on their children (26.8%) than TOYO/M (6.5%), LA/M (5.6%), and LA/F (4.8%).

## T3. co-resident Norms by Study Sites

	total		male		female	
	TOYO (N=524)	LA (N=173)	TOYO (N=217)	LA (N=89)	TOYO (N=307)	LA (N=84)
<b>When they get old, elderly should... (yes...%)</b>						
live with children	44.7	8.6	46.1	7.8	43.6	9.5
stay own	26.0	78.0	25.8	79.8	26.1	76.2
not sure/others	28.6	13.3	28.1	12.4	29.0	14.3
<b>If there is no son, elderly should... (yes...%)</b>						
live with daughter	29.6	12.1	28.1	10.1	30.6	14.3
stay own	32.4	56.6	35.5	58.4	30.3	54.8
go to nursing home	17.4	8.7	15.7	7.9	18.6	9.5
not sure/others	19.4	22.5	19.8	23.6	19.2	21.5
<b>old man remarry ?</b>						
(%...yes)	40.3	67.6	34.1	59.6	44.6	76.2
<b>old woman remarry ?</b>						
(%...yes)	31.7	61.3	33.2	61.8	30.6	60.7

Table 3 shows general ideas of the respondents as to who the elderly should live with. By comparing those who are living in single and aged couple households with those who said that the elderly should stay on their own, that is, by subtracting the former percentage from the latter, we could obtain the gap between ideal and reality. Numbers were positive for both LA/M and LA/F (+20.2 and +11.9, respectively) and negative for both TOYO/M and TOYO/F (-14.6 and -9.1, respectively), that is, LA/E think that they should stay on their own, but that there are factors that prevent it, while TOYO/E think that they should live with their children but that they are forced to stay on their own because of the environment that makes it impossible. In other words, staying on their own is considered a positive way of living among LA/E, but among TOYO/E, it is a negative one that should be avoided.

Interesting contrast is seen between TOYO/M and LA/M. It seems that LA/M consider their staying on their own as the state of successful aging, but TOYO/M take it as unsuccessful aging, or are suffering from silent consensus that living alone is not desirable for the elderly. A Japanese proverb says, "Widowers will breed maggots." It should be added that there is a tendency among policy makers in Japan to believe that the elderly who are living alone are in need of care and that living alone is a state of unsuccessful aging. There are also many administrators who have never questioned such a way of thinking.

## T4. Social Networks of Family and Neighborhood by Study Sites

	total		male		female	
	TOYO (N=524)	LA (N=173)	TOYO (N=217)	LA (N=89)	TOYO (N=307)	LA (N=84)
<b>Family</b>						
Close members(3+)	74.6	74.0	75.1	73.1	74.9	75.0
weekly contact	51.4	83.2	44.7	87.6	56.1	78.6
<b>Friends/Neighbors</b>						
Close members(+3)	55.8	49.7	59.4	47.2	53.1	52.4
weekly contact	44.8	61.9	36.5	58.4	50.9	65.5
<b>Confidant(%...always)</b>						
Has a confidant	48.5	64.7	40.1	56.2	54.4	73.8
Is confidant	33.6	23.7	33.2	20.2	33.9	27.4
<b>How close ?</b>						
<b>1. comfort ?...always</b>						
Immediate Family	57.4	39.3	54.4	37.1	59.6	41.7
Extended Family	42.2	19.7	39.2	14.6	44.3	25.0
Friends/Neighbors	38.2	17.3	32.3	15.7	42.3	19.0
<b>2. willing to listen ? (always)</b>						
spouse	44.1	34.1	57.1	48.3	34.9	19.0
Immediate Family	49.2	37.6	41.0	29.2	55.0	46.4
Extended Family	31.5	21.4	26.7	16.9	34.9	26.2
Friends/Neighbors	27.9	17.9	19.4	13.5	33.9	22.6
<b>3. financial assist to</b>						
...a great deal						
children	7.3	11.0	9.2	12.4	5.9	9.5
Extended Family	0.6	0.6	0.9	1.1	0.3	0.0
Friends/Neighbors	0.4	0.0	2.3	0.0	0.7	0.0
<b>4. financial assist from</b>						
...a great deal						
children	18.1	30.1	15.2	32.6	20.2	27.4
Extended Family	4.6	11.0	3.7	13.5	5.2	8.3
Friends/Neighbors	1.5	3.5	0.9	5.6	2.0	1.2
<b>Who Rely on in sick ?</b>						
<b>1. Rely on ?...a great deal</b>						
spouse	47.1	52.0	69.6	67.4	31.3	35.7
children	58.0	45.7	53.0	43.8	61.6	47.6
Extended Family	26.0	24.9	24.9	28.1	27.0	21.4
Friends/Neighbors	16.2	11.0	15.2	12.4	16.9	9.5
<b>2. Most reliable person</b>						
spouse	50.6( 3.2)	59.0( 1.2)	75.1( 2.3)	77.5( 0.0)	33.2( 3.9)	39.3( 2.4)
children	38.0(73.1)	26.0(64.2)	17.5(77.4)	12.4(64.0)	55.4(70.0)	40.5( 2.4)
Extended Family	3.6( 8.4)	8.7(18.5)	2.8( 6.5)	7.9(22.5)	2.2( 9.8)	9.5(14.3)
Friends/Neighbors	0.6( 3.4)	3.5( 8.1)	0.0( 2.0)	1.1( 3.4)	1.0( 3.9)	6.0(13.6)

( )=% of second person

### Social Networks and Support

Table 4 presents the size and frequency of the respondents' social networks with their family and with friends/neighbors by looking at how many of them have three or more close family members and members and friends/neighbors, and whether they have a weekly contact with them. It also shows the degree of mutual support between the respondent and immediate family, extended family and friends/neighbors.

No differences were found among the four groups of elderly as to how many of them have three or more close family members/relatives. In all four groups, people were less likely to have three or more close friends/neighbors than three or more close family members/relatives, but the gap was smallest among TOYO/M (-15.7%) and largest among LA/M (-25.9%). It seems that LA/M have the weakest tie to the local community.

However, we should perhaps focus more on the frequency of communication than the size of their social network. Both men and women in Los Angeles have much more communication with their family/relatives. Especially, twice as many LA/M have weekly contact with their family/relative as TOYO/M. More LA/E than TOYO/E have more communication with their friends/neighbors. TOYO/M are least likely to have frequent contact with family/relative and friends/neighbors and seem to be living in isolation.

LA/F are most likely to consult someone before making an important decision (73.%) and TOYO/M were least likely to do so (40.1%). More women in both Toyohashi and Los Angeles are likely to confer with others than their male counterparts, and more LA/F are likely to do so than their Japanese counterparts. When it comes to giving advice to others, more TOYO/E than LA/E are relied upon. TOYO/F (33.9%) are most likely to be someone's confidante than LA/M (20.2%).

TOYO/E are more likely than LA/E to have a confidant(e) and to be someone's confidant(e) at the same time.

Ageism seems to be more prevalent in Los Angeles than in Toyohashi. Among all four groups, more people consult someone than they are consulted, but this gap is highest among LA/F ( $73.3-27.4 = 45.9$ ), followed by LA/M ( $56.2-20.2 = 36.0$ ), TOYO/F ( $54.4-33.9 = 20.5$ ), TOYO/M ( $40.1-33.2 = 6.9$ ). It is difficult to judge whether the fact that more LA/E than TOYO/E have a confidant(e) is indicating that LA/E are more psychologically dependent or that they have better communication with others. However, we could perhaps conclude that the fact that LA/E are less likely

to be asked for advice means that LA/E are not as relied upon by others as TOYO/E and that the latter may take more pride in their lives in the local community.

Table 4 also shows the extent of mutual support relationship in terms of psychological and financial support for and from family members, relatives, and friends/neighbors. The most striking finding is that TOYO/F were most likely to have psychological support for and from every relationship, while LA/M were least likely to do so. More LA/E than TOYO/E did have frequent contact with family and friends, but TOYO/E seem to have stronger mutual support with each relationship.

Both TOYO/E and LA/E receive, rather than give, financial assistance from others, but LA/E are more likely to do so. Especially, one out of three LA/M is receiving financial support from their children as well as from relatives, and friends/neighbors.

We also asked who is the most reliable person when they are sick. Regardless of the region, men rely most often on their spouse and women on their children. If second most reliable person is included, LA/E tend to rely more on relatives (siblings) and friends/neighbors than on children. When asked how much they can count on each relationship when they are sick, more TOYO/E than LA/E said that they can count on each relationship, only exceptions were more LA/F than TOYO/F said that they can count on their spouse and more LA/M than TOYO/M said that they can count on relatives.

## Discussion

We chose the elderly in Toyohashi as the subject of our study on the hypothesis that they have a stable family and relative network. Since Toyohashi has the highest proportion of three generation household in Japan, we assumed that TOYO/E would have a considerably strong social network not only with family members and relatives but also in the local community. However, as we went on comparing the two regional groups, we realized that a family/relative network and a local community network are two different things and that it was necessary to examine what the connection was between these two kinds of network. For example, there was a wide gap between TOYO/E and LA/E as to whether they think they should stay on their own. This gap raised a question whether their current living arrangement is the result of a willing choice or of a reluctant one (or no other option was available). Which choice is the

basis of their relationship with family? With friends and neighbors? In order to answer such a question, social psychological studies are needed that differentiate the two kinds of network; one which was created by an individual who is trying to build a constructive relationship with others including their family and the other which was created by someone else.

Remarriage in the old age is another issue related to the above discussion. Numbers shown in Table 3 regarding remarriage reflect the tendency to regard staying on one's own as an important value. By comparing two groups of the elderly, this study has inevitably taken into consideration such themes as Japan versus the United States, mid-size city versus large city (stability versus mobility). It has also tried to compare the elderly in a relatively homogenous society and those in a diverse society. Above all, we recognized the importance of gender as a factor of analysis. We often encountered larger gender differences than regional differences. A typical example is the type of household in which the elderly live. This leaves room for further examination into what kind of special characteristics this gender gap accompanies in the family/relative and local community relationships of the elderly.

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\*written in Japanese

#### APPENDIX

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