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## Recent Studies on Social Networks of the Elderly and of Parents Involved in Child Rearing in Japan

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### Abstract

This article provides a summary and analysis of recent research conducted on social networks formed by the elderly or by parents involved in child rearing in Japan. Following a discussion of methodologies used in these studies and the results of the analysis, this article offers suggestions for future research and investigation of social networks.

### I. Introduction

According to Japan's 2010 Population Census, the elderly accounted for 23.0 percent of the population in Japan. Around 1990, the Government of Japan began to systematically address the problems of providing welfare to the elderly. According to the 1990 Population Census, the elderly accounted for 12.0 percent of the population. Over the course of twenty years, the number of elderly individuals in the population rose by 11.0 percent. Since the early 1990s, the provision of welfare to the elderly has been a serious issue.

Beginning in the 1990s, incidents of child abuse grew in severity. This increase has continued into the 2000s. Child consultation centers (*jidō sōdanjo*) across the country provided 1,101 child abuse consultations in Fiscal Year (FY) 1990 and 44,211 consultations in FY 2009. This increase in child abuse consultations shows that provision of support to parents is necessary to reduce the burdens of child rearing. Reports from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare state that the total fertility rates from 2005 through 2010 range between 1.26 and 1.39. *Kōseirōdō-shō* (2011) recommends that measures addressing low birthrates be taken to help parents experience more favorable conditions for child rearing.

It is difficult to explain the changes to the welfare system of Japan that began in and after the 1990s. The Eight Laws of Welfare (*Fukushi happō*) were amended in 1990 to establish a system aimed at the creation and implementation of substantial welfare programs. After the Laws were amended, the municipal and prefectural governments began to formulate plans for future welfare programs. Goals for these programs included the construction of welfare facilities and the recruitment of manpower needed to staff welfare programs. These actions might be viewed as efforts by the municipal and prefectural governments aimed at the reinforcement of the Japanese welfare system. However, scholars have noted the restraint or curtailment of several welfare programs during the 1990s and the 2000s (Miyamoto 2008; Shinkawa 2005). Owing to the complexity of the welfare situation in Japan, it can be difficult to understand the Japanese welfare system. Several attempts at comprehension may be necessary in order to perform an in-depth analysis of the Japanese welfare system.

One method of analysis that might provide a better understanding of the complex nature of the Japanese welfare system is the investigation of social networks in communities. In Japan, provision of aid by families and neighbors to the elderly or to parents involved in child rearing is occasionally considered an adequate substitute for public welfare programs. From this information, a conclusion can be drawn that social networks, which link an individual with other individuals in a community, can play an important part in the provision of aid to the elderly and to parents involved in child rearing. A less efficient welfare system relies on social networks to provide support to the elderly and to parents involved in child rearing, while a more efficient welfare system provides professionally managed welfare programs to these individuals. For researchers interested in learning about the welfare system in Japan, social networks may prove to be a worthwhile subject for study and analysis.

This article aims to provide an overview and discussion of the results of previous studies conducted on social networks in Japan. Several of the findings of these previous studies will then form the basis for an analysis of social networks and their impact on selected individuals and groups.

## II. Social Networks of the Elderly

This section outlines the results of several studies performed on social networks of the elderly in Japan. It also explains the methodologies used in these studies and results of their analyses.

Kiwaki, Tanayama, and Arai (2011) studied social networks in an urban area by interviewing ten elderly individuals (eight women and two men) who lived alone in Senboku New Town, Sakai City, Ōsaka Prefecture. The interviewees were asked about their residences, work experiences, and social contacts. The interviewees could be divided roughly into three types. Type One consisted of women who had contact with their neighbors. These women were long-time residents of Senboku New Town, had adequate economic resources, and had held jobs for short periods. Type Two consisted of women who had little contact with persons in their neighborhoods but had acquaintances in other areas. In general, such women were short-term residents of Senboku New Town. They enjoyed adequate economic resources and tended to have been employed for a long period of time. Type Three consisted of men who had little contact with either neighbors or persons from other areas. These men were long-term residents of Senboku New Town, had less than adequate economic resources, and tended to have been employed for long periods.

Nobe (2008) focused on a rural area in studying networks of elderly women who lived in Tomi, Kagamino Town, Okayama Prefecture. Tomi, a mountain village, is one of the several areas that have high percentages of elderly residents. Tomi women between sixty-five and seventy-nine years of age were interviewed about their social connections. Nobe found that the average number of persons with whom the women associated was 2.69, 2.19, 0.92, 0.77, and 0.06 for relatives, neighbors, family members, friends, and workplace colleagues, respectively. Nobe found the figures for relatives and neighbors noteworthy.

Kawai (2008) investigated households that contained only two elderly individuals in Yomitan Village, Okinawa Prefecture. Questionnaires including items about friends and acquaintances were distributed to each household. One question asked, "Do you have any friends or acquaintances with whom

you get along in your daily life?” In response, 86.3 percent of the heads of households and 90.8 percent of the family members answered “Yes.” Another question asked, “Who is your closest friend or acquaintance?” The majority of the responses from the household heads (35.5 percent) and family members (41.9 percent) were “a neighbor.”

One concern expressed by Ishikawa, Shimizu, and Yamaguchi (2007) was related to the differences found in social networks in four types of areas within a city. Ishikawa et al. examined the relations in social networks of residents aged between sixty and seventy-four years in a certain city and the characteristics of their places of residence. The city was divided into four types of zones: agricultural areas, old residential areas, new residential areas, and mixed areas of agriculture and new residences. Interviews with residents were the primary source of data in this study. An analysis of variance revealed notable differences in the social networks of residents in all four types of zones. The residents of agricultural areas and old residential areas had more solidly constructed social networks than did the networks of residents of the new residential areas and the mixed areas. Cross tabulation showed that residents in the agricultural areas tended to be more willing to support the elderly than residents in the other areas were. Correlation coefficients for the data indicated that residents whose social networks included more people were more likely to prefer informal support for the elderly over public welfare programs for the same.

The results of the analyses conducted by Kiwaki et al., Nobe, and Kawai may reflect features of the areas where elderly individuals live. The degree of urbanism or ruralism of residences appears to be a determinant of the solidity of elderly individuals’ social networks. As Ishikawa et al. showed, however, places of residence can have features other than urbanism and ruralism. Old and new residential areas exert a variety of other effects on their residents’ social networks. The various components that determine the characteristics of residences can be indicators of social networks.

Kiwaki et al. showed that gender distinctions led to differences in social networks. In addition, differences can be found among elderly women. Women who had been employed for long periods enjoyed social networks that extended to distant areas, while women who had held jobs for only

short periods enjoyed cordial relations with their neighbors. Accordingly, conclusion can be drawn that the former occupations of elderly individuals, rather than gender, have a greater influence on social networks. In general, there are more housewives and fewer househusbands in Japan. Gender seems to exert an indirect influence on social networks, while occupations can directly affect such networks. Thus, various direct determinants should be given careful attention in the analysis of these networks.

Nakai et al. (2011) highlighted the relationship between education and participation in social activities or social networks. They administered questionnaires to residents in Kinki Region (Kyōto, Ōsaka, Hyōgo, Shiga, Nara, and Wakayama Prefectures) between twenty and sixty-four years old. Data culled from the questionnaires were then used for the analysis. Cross tabulation showed that highly educated persons tended to take part in club, learning, and volunteer activities. An analysis of variance revealed that highly educated persons were more likely to have large social networks. Nakai et al. noted that their research focused solely on the influence of educational levels. They did not study the influence of age, matrimony, or occupation on social networks.

The impact of education is one of the many factors that attract the interest of scholars who study social networks. Research on the relationship between an individual's educational background and his or her social network can offer meaningful suggestions for ways to improve educational systems. However, in the study of factors that influence social networks, an individual's educational background might be an indirect factor compared with age, marriage, and occupation.

The extent of urbanism or ruralism may also be an indirect indicator. Ishiguro (2010) investigated whether the findings of Fischer (1982) applied to Japan. Fischer studied the features of urban areas in the USA. One characteristic identified was that friends, rather than relatives or neighbors, were the more important members of urban dwellers' social networks. Fischer also found that the locations of friends in urbanites' networks were spread over large areas. Ishiguro studied data obtained from questionnaires distributed among individuals who lived in all parts of Japan (except those living on isolated islands). A cross-table analysis and regression

analysis showed that the level of urbanism bore little relation to the main members of urban dwellers' networks and to the extent of urbanites' networks of friends. Fischer revealed that the degree of urbanism exerted little effect on the quantity of support that urban dwellers obtained. Ishiguro's analysis confirmed that this finding was also true in Japan.

Factors that vary according to the extent of urbanism or ruralism might indirectly influence social networks. However, some of these factors might also directly affect such networks. In order to perform a rigorous analysis of the structure of social networks, researchers must closely observe and study both the above types of factors.

### III. Social Networks of Parents Involved in Child Rearing

Parents involved in child rearing may receive support from members of their social networks. Like studies on the social networks of the elderly, research on the determinants of parents' social networks should include direct influences on the networks. However, there are some differences between social networks of parents and social networks of the elderly. Therefore, the analysis of parents' social networks requires the use of certain methodologies. This section will provide a summary of recent studies conducted on parents' social networks to help clarify how parents' networks can be analyzed.

Kim (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of mothers' networks for child rearing in Japan and South Korea. Questionnaires were distributed in Japan and South Korea to mothers raising children between the ages of three and six years. The mothers were asked to identify individuals with whom they discussed child rearing. The respondents identified many individuals. Application of Quantification Theory Type III elucidated persons that mothers' networks included. There were several points in common between the mothers' networks in Japan and South Korea. The most important and consistent individuals appearing in mothers' networks in both countries were the husbands of the respondents. The respondents' parents and parents-in-law were also important members of the mothers' networks in both countries. One difference between the respondents in Japan and South Korea was that more than half of the Japanese respondents listed

mothers with whom the respondents became acquainted at kindergartens or day nurseries as members of their networks, while only about 20 percent of the South Korean respondents regarded such mothers as members of their networks.

Another noteworthy finding was that respondents' neighbors did not tend to be the main members of the Japanese networks. Those regarded as main members by the Japanese respondents were husbands (69.7 percent), mothers at kindergartens or day nurseries (54.5 percent), one's parents (52.5 percent), one's parents-in-law (51.5 percent), old friends (45.5 percent), kindergarten teachers or nurses (33.3 percent), and neighbors (27.3 percent).

Satō (2011) studied fathers and mothers' social networks. Questionnaires were distributed to fathers and mothers of children at two day nurseries in a certain city. Respondents were asked how helpful they found members of their social networks. Many respondents answered that they regarded their relatives as cooperative. These relatives were the respondents' spouses (a little less than 90 percent), parents of the respondents or of the respondents' spouses (70–80 percent), and siblings of the respondents or of the respondents' spouses (45–50 percent). The other helpful network members were friends from respondents' school days (55 percent), friends at respondents' workplaces (58 percent), friends with whom respondents became acquainted through respondents' children (55 percent), nurses at day nurseries (60 percent), and neighboring friends (38 percent). These results show that parents tend to be more dependent on other individuals in their social networks and less dependent on neighbors.

The above studies reveal one notable characteristic of Japanese parents' social networks: such parents tend to have weak links with neighbors. This characteristic makes parents' networks notably different from the social networks of the elderly.

Toyoshima (2011) focused on the above phenomena, examining social networks in Usuki City, Ōita Prefecture, in order to determine relationships between the number of neighbors in residents' networks and residents' participation in social activities. Questionnaires were distributed to Usuki residents between the ages of twenty and seventy-five years. Toyoshima found

that older individuals tended to have more frequent meetings with neighbors and work colleagues than did younger individuals. In general, parents involved in child rearing tend to be younger individuals. The results of Toyoshima's analysis suggest that parents involved in child rearing have less contact with their neighbors than the elderly do.

Because parents' main helpers in child rearing are their close relatives, scholars analyzing parents' social networks should pay attention to the composition of parents' families. Using indicators that are directly related to parents' relatives in the analysis can reveal information about the parents' circumstances, particularly their child rearing practices.

Municipal governments and private organizations often implement programs that provide parents with opportunities to interact with other parents (Tomoda et al. 2008). Because these programs can influence parents' social networks, they should be covered in an analysis of these networks. Manabe et al. (2011) studied gatherings of parents and their babies or infants in Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture. A nonprofit organization arranged gatherings during which parents interacted with each other. Interviews with participants following the gatherings revealed that many parents received little support from their relatives or neighbors. This finding implies that parents' social networks often include persons living at a distance from parents' houses. Research on parents' networks should be conducted to investigate the range and distance their social networks may cover.

#### IV. Conclusion

This article summarizes the results of recent studies on the social networks of the elderly and of parents involved in child rearing. The article then analyzes the summarized information to find useful topics for future research on social networks. Social networks can provide the elderly and parents involved in child rearing with useful substitutes for government welfare programs. Future research should focus on a variety of indicators that directly influence social networks. Future researchers should assume that the social networks of the elderly and those of parents involved in child rearing differ. For example, the elderly may have solid links with their neighbors, while parents involved in child rearing may have fewer neighbors but



more friends living far away in their social networks.

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