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Title	Creating community in an ageing society : the elderly as providers of non-profit communal services
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Citation	Journal of the Graduate school of Letters, 8, 63-71
Issue Date	2013-03
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/52325
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	04_MORISHITA.pdf



Creating community in an ageing society: the elderly as providers of non-profit communal services

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Abstract: Japan is a rapidly ageing country. The population over the age of 65 accounted for 7.1% of the total population in 1970, but increased to 14.5% in 1994, 21.5% in 2007, and 23.3% in 2011, rendering the country the most aged the world over⁽¹⁾. For some 20 years after 1970, the elderly were altogether considered as having health-related problems, unproductive, and mere beneficiaries of various social welfare services. However, as the fact that more than 80% of the elderly have no severe health problems has come to be widely recognised, due attention has been paid to positive aspects of life of the elderly; the elderly can and do play active roles in society, particularly in the context of neighbourhood.

From the perspective of community sociology, this paper discusses some of the issues and challenges related to social participation of the elderly in Sapporo. The discussions will utilise both survey and qualitative data the author has collected through official statistics and field research by means of participant observation in addition to a series of semi/un-structured interviews with neighbourhood associations and elderly participants in locality-based activities.

The elderly in urban areas are generally keen to participate in society. As Japan continues ageing, it is necessary to propose ways of their social participation that can reinforce and/or be alternatives to the conventional one via the neighbourhood association. In the case of Sapporo analysed later, the elderly utilise their knowledge and skills in a non-profit and intergenerational fashion. The present paper puts forward this ‘non-profit communal social participation’ of the elderly as a model of community building and examines it with a view to contributing to the research in this subject area.

(Received on November 19, 2012)

1. Social risk facing the elderly in a ‘shrinking and ageing society’

Kaneko (2011a) argues that Japan is a shrinking and ageing society characterised by 1) decreasing birth rates; 2) ageing population; and 3) shrinking total population. For instance, although Sapporo’s population is still slowly increasing with incoming populations from other parts of Hokkaido, the total fertility rate of 2009 was as low as 1.09 and it is expected that the total population will start to decrease from around 2015. As for the percentage of the elderly, it was

already 21.2% in 2012 and is expected to reach as high as 25% in 2015.

The composition of population is the foundation of society and thus such drastic change has had significant consequences. One of them in relation to the elderly is to do with the shrinking size of the family; the number of elderly people who live either alone or only with their spouse has increased. As of 2009, the number of such households was more than 10 million (Cabinet Office, 2010). As often warned, one latent dysfunction of this is that when these people experience health problems that require professional care/services, many of them will likely lose contact with their friends and even society. This is a social risk facing the elderly in small-sized households.

Further, particularly with regard to the elderly living alone, more than 40% of male and 30% of female have conversations with others only twice or thrice in a week; around 25% of male and 10% of female do not have anyone to rely on in difficult times; some 20% of both male and female barely communicate with others; and more than 20% of male and about 10% of female do not interact with neighbours. These elderly people without much interaction with others do not feel their life is as worthwhile as those with do. In Sapporo, the number of households of single elderly people soared from 6,200 in 2005 to 8,200 in 2010, and is expected to reach 9,400 in 2015.

It is against this background of macro-level changes of population composition that micro-level issues around social isolation and death in isolation facing the elderly as social risks are addressed (Kuroiwa, 2007).

2. Locality-based safety net for the elderly

In preceding studies, it has generally been agreed that locality-based social safety net for the elderly consists of the following components: 1) self-support; 2) assistance from friends, relatives, and acquaintances; 3) help from the neighbourhood; 4) health and personal care purchased from private businesses; and 5) public social welfare services. However, although often overlooked, it is reasonable to include another component, that is, 6) services from non-profit organisations, given the increasing number of such organisations⁽²⁾. As each of these has specific functions, combining multiple components is necessary to deal with individual cases with different needs. That is, the utility of the locality-based protection of elderly people's welfare depends on how inclusive the safety net can be.

In relation to such protection with the safety net, it is important to mention the difference between 'loneliness' and 'social isolation'. The former means negative feelings felt subjectively due to no or loss of interaction with others, whereas the latter refers to no contact with family members or others, as observed objectively. In other words, even if an elderly person is seemingly in social isolation in a given locality, it does not simply follow that s/he is lonely; s/he may have meaningful and intimate personal networks outside the locality. 'Self-neglect', which denotes not attending to basic needs and/or tending appropriately to any medical needs⁽³⁾, is another important issue in this context. On the one hand it should not be considered self-neglect when the elderly choose to remain in isolation (Tatara, 2004), on the other hand they may be incapable of attending to problems due to lack of external assistance (Tsumura, 2006); the latter case is a problematic social isolation.

Thus it is legitimate to utilise particularly the last three components of the safety net to deal with social isolation that requires organised services. Yet, various issues have made efforts of protection for the elderly a difficult task (Kawai, 2010). In fact, how to tell apart cases that need services and those that do not, and when and how to intervene for protection is a challenge today; it has been reported that it is increasingly difficult even for public services providers to approach the elderly who are apparently isolated, because it is hard to gather information necessary to judge suspected cases of isolation or self-neglect, due to the sensitive issue of privacy, as well as because some elderly people reject any form of approach or intervention. There is no easy answer to the question of whether or not goodwill intervention in the private domain of the elderly is necessary. This constitutes a major challenge for the locality-based safety net designed for the protection of the elderly from facing isolation as a social risk. As a result, they may possibly fall out of the safety net and become/remain isolated without anyone's knowledge.

The above in turn implies that there is a need for means whereby the elderly reduce the social risk through participating in society by themselves and with others, which is in relation to the first three components of the safety net and thus those judgemental questions in the other three components do not arise. In fact, this is the rationale for the following discussions that consider the prospect of elderly people's social participation in this increasingly ageing society.

3. Rethinking social participation of the elderly: from the perspective of community sociology

Relevance of locality-based community

It is widely recognised that community, which is a key sociological concept, can have significantly positive impacts on the quality of life of the elderly (Kaneko, 2012). This is because it is considered to provide elderly people with chances of interaction with people other than their own family members. It can then contribute to building meaningful relations and networks with others based upon trust and reciprocity. Far apart from the myth of inactive elderly people which was prevalent a few decades ago, it is now recognised that the vast majority of healthy elderly people can and do take up social roles in local community (Hiroi, 2009). As noted earlier, active social participation makes it possible for the elderly to prevent risks of social isolation for and by themselves.

This paper concisely puts forward this key sociological concept of community as a locality-based entity which develops through 1) gathering under common purposes and objectives; and 2) accumulation of shared activities and experiences; and eventually fosters 3) a sense of belonging and attachment to the locality⁽⁴⁾, and bases the following discussions on it.

Sapporo's framework for community-building

Given the relevance of locality-based community to the quality of life which the elderly enjoy, this section first briefly examines the Sapporo municipal community building framework.

Community does not happen automatically. In other words, it needs some agency to initiate the process of community building, and a variety of agencies can contribute towards community building today. In the case of Sapporo, community building efforts centre around the neighbour-

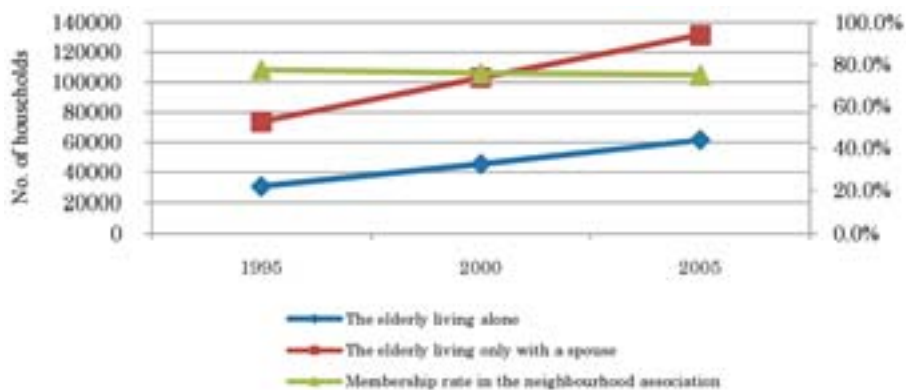
hood association. There are some 2,200 of them in Sapporo and more than 70% of all the households in the city are in membership. Throughout Japan, the neighbourhood association has had crucial functions in a number of aspects of residents' daily life within localities (Yoshihara, 2011). It is therefore reasonable that Sapporo officially places the association as the central agency for community building.

As Hasebe (2006) indicates, the key feature of community building efforts in Sapporo is the existence of 87 Community-building Centres inaugurated in 2004. In each district, they disseminate community-related information and facilitate collaboration among community-building agencies, such as neighbourhood associations, non-profit organisations, and the like.

Here, the efficacy of this framework will be considered in relation to elderly people's social participation, referring to an example of Higashi Shiroishi District. In this district, the Committee for Community Building was founded at the Centre in March 2006. The Committee involves public schools, PTAs, and private business associations, among others. But its main body is the Alliance of Neighbourhood Associations representing 16 neighbourhood associations in the district and the president of the Alliance also leads the Committee. Most of the core members of the neighbourhood associations are elderly males who had seldom participated in locality-based activities before retirement. In fact, not only in this district but also in all the other districts in Sapporo, there is a significant correlation between the percentage of the elderly population and the membership in neighbourhood associations⁽⁵⁾. This implies that neighbourhood associations function as important intermediaries between the elderly and the local society. In this sense too, the current placement of neighbourhood associations in the framework for community building makes sense.

However, there are a few problems with the municipal community-building framework in question. First, despite the rapid increase in the number of the elderly living alone or with a spouse, the aggregate membership in neighbourhood associations in Sapporo has been declining (see Figure 1).

Second, regardless of the high membership rate of the neighbourhood associations of over 70%, the vast majority of the members do not participate in activities. Figure 2 below shows a



Source: Official statistics of Sapporo (various years)

Figure 1: Number of the elderly living alone/with a spouse, and the aggregate membership in neighbourhood associations in Sapporo (1995-2005)

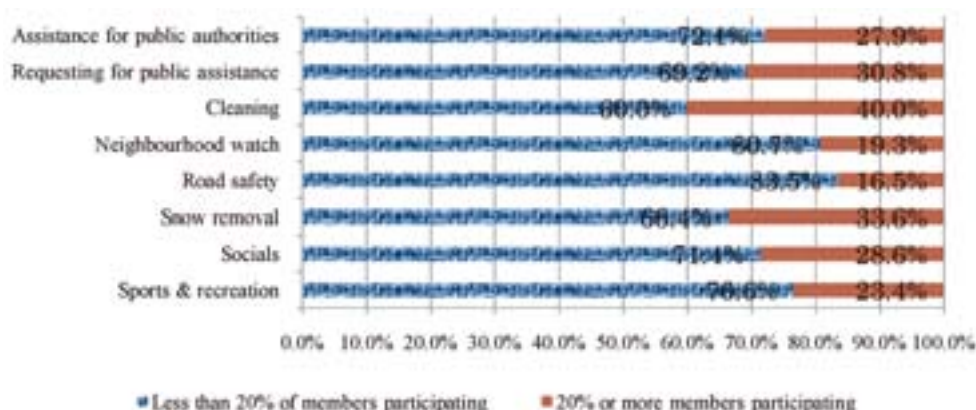
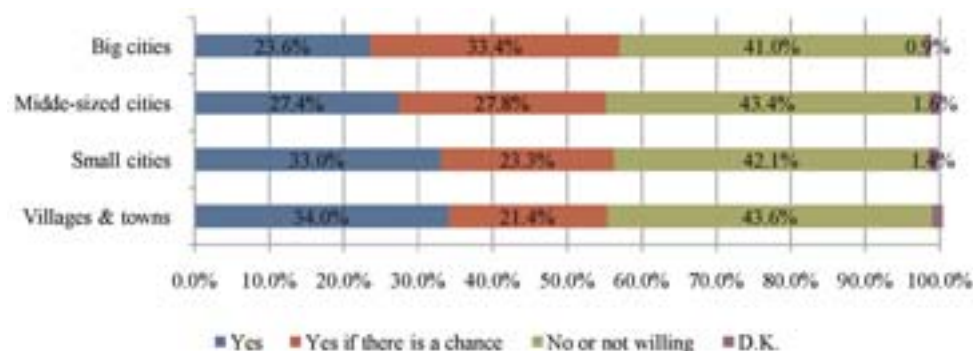


Figure 2: Participants in selected activities of neighbourhood associations

list of activities by neighbourhood associations selected from Sapporo's statistical data of 2009⁽⁷⁾.

The changing composition of population partly explains the decline of activities. In Higashi Shiroishi, several intergenerational activities, such as sporting events and summer festivals, have been suspended due to the decreasing number of children. As a result, regular activities are limited to monthly distribution of public information booklets, cleaning, rubbish collection, and snow removal. This has in turn decreased common purposes and objectives for collective activities, thereby making it difficult to build community via the neighbourhood association.

The points above indicate that being members of neighbourhood associations does not necessarily mean the elderly are actively involved in activities. Thus, it is useful to suggest ways of social participation of the elderly that are supplementary and/or alternative to the conventional way of participation via the neighbourhood association. In relation to this, there are encouraging data regarding elderly people's attitude towards the neighbourhood. Figure 3 shows that the elderly in urban areas are interested in joining locality-based activities significantly more than their counterparts in smaller localities are⁽⁶⁾. It is legitimate to expect that if there are opportunities for participation, the elderly will be willing to take advantage of it. The following section will present one example of such locality-based initiative whereby the elderly play an active role.



$\chi^2=42.02$, $df=9$, $p<0.01$: (Source) Cabinet Office 2009

Figure 3: Elderly people's willingness to participate in locality-based activities

An example of alternative ways of social participation of the elderly

As discussed above, it is meaningful to consider the possibility of alternative ways of elderly people's social participation because it will help the elderly to find opportunities for interaction with others in their locality. Thus, there has been research on active roles the elderly play in various cultural, sporting, and even agricultural activities (Sugioka, 2009; Matsumiya, 2011). Some of such recent research discusses prospects for the ageing society referring to the possibility of social networks arising from elderly people's activities. This marks a very important leap from the past myth of elderly people's inactiveness. However, although it highlights the activeness of the elderly, its primary focus is on active elderly individuals engaged in various activities, but not on the communality of their activities. This paper therefore examines below a type of elderly people's social participation contributing to community building.

In the Soen area of Sapporo, there is a network for assisting young parents with children under school age (referred to as the Network below). The number of married couples with young children in the area fast increased, due to the construction of a number of new family-use residences. There was growing demand for assistance with childcare supplementary to inadequate public services and facilities; provision of such services became the common purpose shared among the elderly in the area. Against this background the Network was created in 2009 by some of the long-term elderly residents in the area who had been members of locality-based groups, such as neighbourhood associations and children's welfare improvement committee. The Network is completely detached from the neighbourhood association and now consists of 8 drop-in play facilities, 12 medical establishments, 8 nurseries, and 2 cafés. Some of its activities include children's plays, socials for mothers, and workshops on childcare.

As considered earlier, the common purpose is at the beginning of community building and in the Soen area it was followed by shared activities and experiences among the participants in the Network. For instance, one of the drop-in play facilities opens once or twice every month in a spacious room at a Buddhist temple in the area and each time a total of 100-120 parents and infants gather. This is run by 45 members of staff including elderly core members. Among the elderly are former police officers, nurses, nursery teachers, and schoolteachers, as well as housewives. Their experiences and knowledge are highly appreciated and they provide young parents with tips and advice on childcare during the free playtime. The elderly and parents with children have opportunities for interaction and build trust in one another through regular play sessions and frequent events, thereby gradually accumulating shared activities and experiences; this constitutes the second phase of community building.

By participating in this Network, parents meet new people, make friends, exchange information, and have their children socialised in an intergenerational manner. Likewise, the elderly can also take roles in managing the Network, meet people, and give advice on childcare based on their own experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, both of them, in other words, long-term residents and new residents, become acquainted so they have conversations and exchange visits in the neighbourhood. As some participants say, they feel connected through children regardless of the length of residence. These feelings of connectedness with others contribute to the quality of life of the participants including the elderly, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and attachment to the area. In addition, one latent function of the Network is that particularly the elderly are

protected from isolation because they are regularly contacted by other staff members regarding events and activities of the Network.

More specifically regarding the elderly, it is legitimate to point out the following implications: 1) Locality is a place concerning all residents, including the elderly. Identifying common purposes/objectives in such context can facilitate interaction and integration among residents; 2) The elderly can not only play an active role in locality-based activities but also in creating intergenerational social relations; 3) Locality-based social roles and relations have positive impacts on the quality of life of the elderly who generally experience losses of social roles as they retire or their children become independent; 4) The elderly's feelings of responsibility and belonging to their locality stem from their past locality-based activities, length of residence, experiences, and knowledge; 5) They are willing to and requested to offer their knowledge and experiences for the well-being of the locality; 6) Locality-based social relations can foster trust among residents and facilitate regular and casual interaction in the neighbourhood, thereby reducing risks of social isolation which the elderly might otherwise face.

Unique features of the Network: implications for community building

Considering the case of the Soen area, it is legitimate to argue that community, which develops through: 1) gathering under common purposes and objectives; and 2) accumulation of shared activities and experiences; and eventually fosters 3) a sense of belonging and attachment to the locality, has materialised.

There is yet another, most unique and key feature of this type of community building. It is the fact that the elderly commit themselves to community building in a non-profit manner. The concept of non-profitability should be differentiated from the similar concept of volunteering which is often paid (Kaneko, 1996). In the example of the Soen area, the success of community through the Network owes a great deal to its non-profitability in the sense of the following: 1) Free-of-charge activity breaks the psychological barrier of potential/participants; 2) The focus of the activity can remain solid and stable with no profit-seeking; 3) The elderly are highly appreciated because of their non-profit contribution to the area; 4) It can promote openness and maintain inclusivity and fairness of the activity; and 5) It is possible to take advantage of insurance schemes and public grants for non-profit community activities for participants' safety and activity development.

The paper argues that this model of community is different from other types of elderly people's social participation in the sense that the efforts are directed towards community building rather than for self-satisfaction/fulfilment. This 'community building through non-profit communal social participation of the elderly' is illustrated in Figure 4. As shown, the basis and drive of the model lies in elderly people's sense of belonging and attachment to the locality which was already in place at the beginning of the community-building process.

To sum up, the example of the Network indicates a need to pay attention to the following, often overlooked points in community-building in urban contexts. That is, the elderly can play a crucial role in creating community through their knowledge and experiences, due to social relations and sense of belonging and attachment which they have fostered through past locality-based activities. Therefore, to encourage elderly people's participation, it is crucial to identify

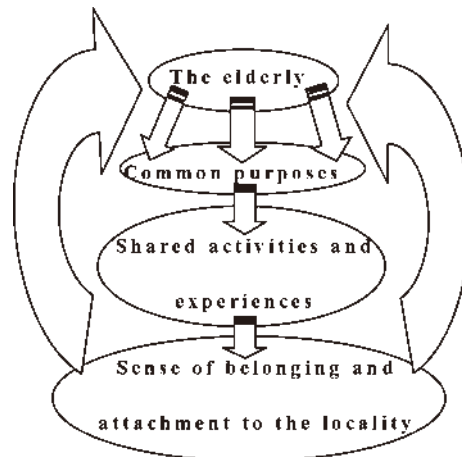


Figure 4: Community-building process through social participation of the elderly

and work towards common purposes that can be shared in the beginning of community-building.

Conclusion

In the shrinking and ageing society of Japan today, social isolation is a major risk for the elderly. Accordingly the locality-based social safety net has been crafted and promoted, considering the elderly as beneficiaries to be protected. Yet as discussed above, they can not only actively participate in society but also contribute to community building utilising their knowledge and experiences, thereby reducing the risk by themselves.

The conventional way of locality-based participation has been via the neighbourhood association, and this is still so in the case of Sapporo. This is reasonable in some ways but it should be noted that there is a need for other ways of participation when it comes to the elderly. In the example analysed, the elderly with accumulated locality-based social relations and sense of responsibility initiated and participate in the community building process in the neighbourhood, with the key feature of non-profitability of their activities. Because of this feature, community has materialised through the accumulation of shared experiences and activities under the common purpose, thereby fostering the participants' renewed/fresh sense of belonging and attachment to the locality. In the coming years, therefore, the model of the community based on elderly people's non-profit communal participation suggested here seems to have a key to reducing risks of social isolation.

Once again, it needs to be highlighted that the case of the Soen area owes its success to the elderly long-term residents as the core members. In other cases where such locality-based social resources are limited or populations are highly mobile, therefore, there are important issues of how community can be initiated, built, and maintained. This indicates areas for further research.

[Endnotes]

(1) On top of this, all of the first baby boomers will have retired in 2015 and the number of the elderly will be about

33 million and the percentage will be in the region of 26%.

- (2) There are more than 1,000 non-profit organisations in Sapporo and many of them conduct activities for the elderly.
- (3) Self-neglect often causes life-threatening problems.
- (4) This is to avoid extensive theoretical discussions of community.
- (5) $r = .62$, $p < .10$.
- (6) This is an analysis of the statistical data on the Elderly People and Locality-based Activities conducted by the Cabinet Office of Japan in 2009.
- (7) The selection was made on the basis of Parsons' AGIL paradigm.

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