

Building Social Systems to Support the Participation of Elderly Persons

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1. Introduction

A national debate has been underway on how to save the pension and long-term care insurance systems. Naturally, as people grow older, their financial livelihood and health needs change fundamentally from those of the working age generation. This means that society must enhance its safety net to better meet the contingencies of old age.

However, in approaching aging issues, the limitations of the present policy approach — which essentially regards aging as a disability — are becoming increasingly clear. Aging is creating a critical need to find ways in which healthy and willing elderly persons can contribute to society. This calls for a comprehensive approach that facilitates participation of elderly persons in society, allows the elderly to contribute their skills to society, and builds a foundation enabling the elderly to live independently. Once this system is in place, society can then better support the elderly when their health or financial conditions deteriorate.

In this paper, we discuss survey results that show an inclination toward independent living in old age, and particularly focus on the demand for participation in society among the elderly. We then consider the need for positive forms of support for daily life from a perspective other than the prevailing disabilities oriented approach.

2. Image of Retirement Life

People have different ideas regarding at what age one becomes “old.” Policies on aging generally define old age as 65 and above, while the public pension system regards 60 as the retirement age.

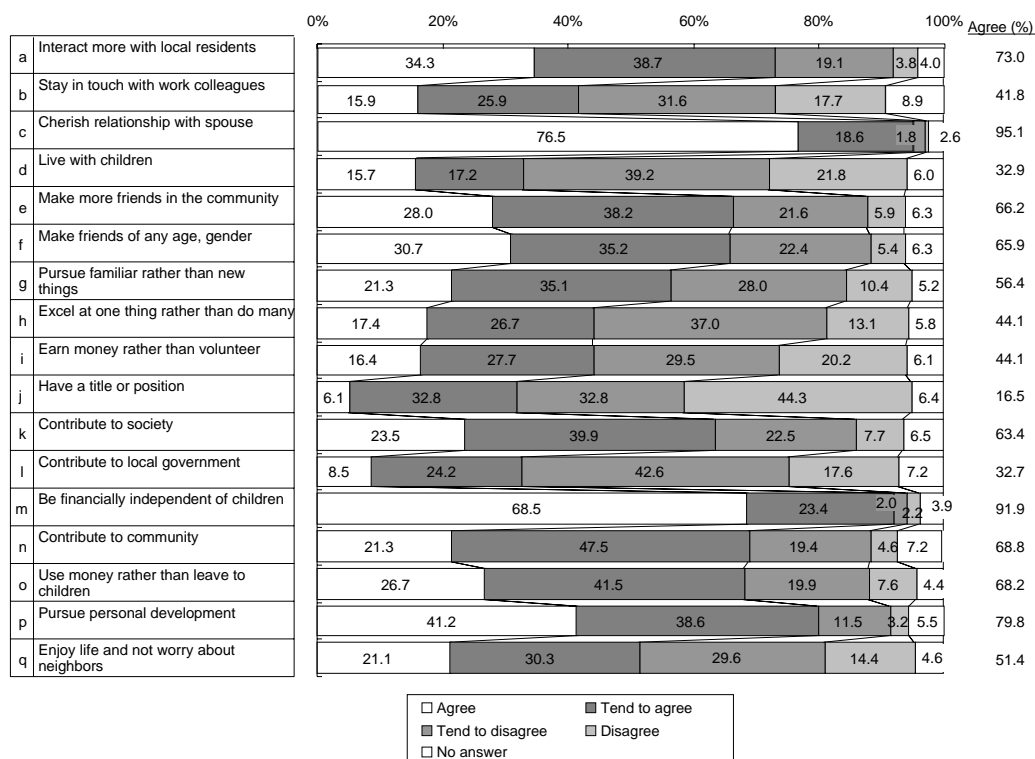
In our survey, commissioned by the city of Yokohama, 68.4% of respondents feel that old age begins no earlier than at age 70, with the general consensus that people in their 60s are not old.¹ Moreover, the older the respondent, the later they say old age starts: over 30% of persons in their early 70s feel that old age begins no earlier than at age 75.

The Yokohama survey asked respondents to assess 17 statements regarding how they want to spend their old age (Figure 1). Overall, the highest agreement rates (“agree” plus “tend to agree”) are for cherishing spousal relationships (95.1%) and being financially independent of children (91.9%). Notably, the proportion who agree unequivocally is as high as 70% for both statements, indicating the strong desire to be physically and financially independent.

Regarding statements about social participation, strong needs are shown for pursuing personal development (79.8%), and for social interactions such as interacting with local residents (73.0%), making friends in the community (66.2%), and making friends regardless of age or gender (65.9%). By comparison, the desire to actively maintain contact with colleagues (41.8%) is relatively weak, indicating that people prefer to seek new forms of participation in the community to maintaining old contacts from work.

A strong need is also felt for finding new roles in society and using one’s experience and skills to contribute to the community (68.8%) or do socially significant things (63.4%). Alternatively, some want to make use of their experience and skills to pursue familiar rather than new things (56.4%).

Figure 1 Desires for Life in Old Age



Notes: (1) Respondents were asked to assess statements regarding how they want to spend their old age.
(2) Only responses of persons with spouses were collected for statement C; only responses of persons with children were collected for statements D, M, and O.

Source: NLI Research Institute, *Yokohama Survey of Social Participation in Old Age* (1999).

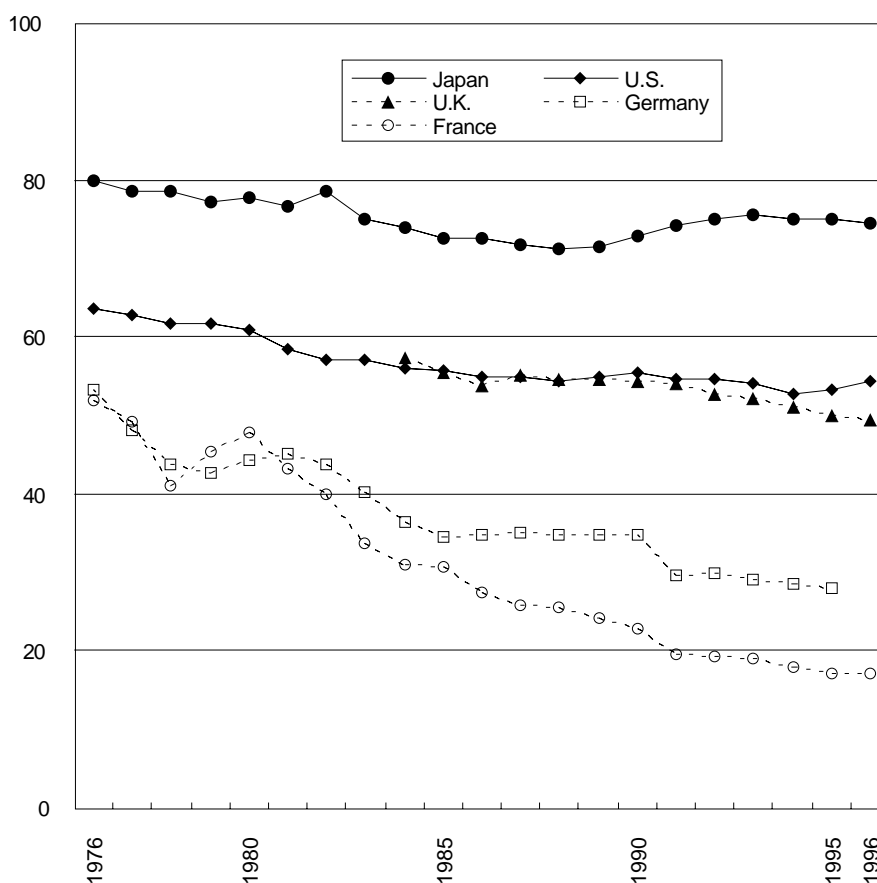
3. Status of and Need for Jobs After Retirement

As seen above, people generally regard the 60s decade as an extension of their active career period, and want to participate in society by expanding interactions and making use of their experience. There are many forms of social participation. We first look at the most typical form of participation – working.

Generally, salaried workers reach a major turning point in life at the retirement age of 60. As men begin to retire, the employment rate declines from 90% among 50-year-olds to 70% among 60-year-olds. In addition, those who continue working experience changes in employment and occupation, often becoming self-employed or working for their family business.

Nonetheless, compared to other industrialized countries, the proportion of elderly people in Japan who keep working remains high due to a strong work ethic (Figure 2).²

Figure 2 International Comparison of Labor Participation Rates for Persons Aged 60-64



Note: Germany includes only former West Germany until 1991.

Source: OECD, *Labour Force Statistics*.

In the survey, a large proportion of both men (85%) and women (57%) said that they want to keep working after age 60. Asked until what age they want to work, 30% of men and 40% of women said age 65, another 30% of men and 20% of women said age 70, and approximately 30% of both men and women want to keep working for as long as possible. Thus a large proportion of people want to work at least another five to ten years after reaching the retirement age of 60.

Reasons cited for working after age 60 include financial reasons such earning a livelihood, as well as other reasons such as achieving a sense of fulfillment, maintaining health and well being, and making use of one's experience.

While people in the west enjoy retirement as freedom from work, people in Japan tend to carry a strong work ethic into their old age. However, the persistent work motivation, attributable to differences in lifestyle, should be viewed as an asset in the rapidly aging society.

In the past when the average life expectancy was under age 70, retirement at age 60 helped to maintain Japan's system of long-term stable employment, appropriately called "lifetime employment." But now that the average life expectancy is above age 80 for women and 77 for men, the retirement age of 60 forces people to retire prematurely.

4. Other Needs Regarding Social Participation

Besides working to earn a living, social participation includes activities that contribute to society, the pursuit of interests, and recreational activities. A book entitled *After Retirement* (1999, Iwanami Shoten editorial staff) describes in journal format different ways people are enjoying a fulfilling retirement life: returning to school, volunteering, pursuing hobbies, or moving to a tropical island.

According to the survey, over half (58.7%) of respondents are presently engaged in social activity, mostly involving educational, hobby and recreational activities either alone or with others. Among persons 65 or older, over 20% are engaged in activities that contribute to the neighborhood such as local councils, while few participate in volunteer activities and NPOs (non-profit organizations).

Social activity needs in the future are high as expected for activities such as sports and hobbies. What is notable, though, is that future needs are actually higher than present participation rates for volunteer activities such as serving elderly and disabled persons (8.4% presently do, 19.6% want to) and volunteering in international exchange, environment, and youth pro-

grams (4.1% presently do, 16.6% want to). In addition, there is strong interest in contributing to the community by working with others toward a common goal including NPOs (3.1% presently do, 9.4% want to), and becoming a community administrator such as a *minsei-iin* (2.4% presently do, 8.7% want to; Figure 3).

Figure 3 Present Status and Future Needs Regarding Social Participation

	(Multiple response) (%)											
	Active (or plan to be)	Study, play alone	Study, play with others	Religious activity	Political activity	Serve on neighborhood committee	Serve in official position	Join goal-oriented org. (NPO)	Volunteer—help elderly, disabled	Volunteer—environment, youth, etc.	Other	No answer
Present activity status (by age)												
Total	58.7	39.4	65.3	6.2	0.9	16.3	2.4	3.1	8.4	4.1	2.0	0.3
45 - 49	56.4	39.7	63.7	4.7	0.9	10.3	1.7	3.4	9.0	4.7	3.4	0.4
50 - 54	60.7	36.3	69.5	8.9	1.0	11.3	1.0	2.4	8.2	3.8	1.7	0.0
55 - 59	56.8	43.0	63.2	5.4	1.1	18.8	1.8	3.6	9.7	5.1	0.7	0.4
60 - 64	63.0	39.8	68.0	4.9	0.4	16.5	3.0	3.0	9.0	2.3	2.6	0.0
65 - 69	56.9	41.7	61.0	8.3	0.5	22.0	1.8	3.2	7.3	6.4	2.3	0.5
70 - 74	57.8	35.9	64.7	4.1	1.2	21.2	5.3	3.5	7.1	2.4	1.2	1.2
Desired future status (by age)												
Total	63.5	37.3	54.4	2.2	1.4	19.8	8.7	9.4	19.6	16.6	0.9	0.3
45 - 49	69.6	35.6	56.7	0.7	1.4	15.6	6.6	8.7	23.5	23.9	1.4	0.0
50 - 54	70.1	39.2	51.9	1.5	0.6	16.9	9.2	11.9	23.7	19.0	0.3	0.6
55 - 59	68.2	36.0	53.8	2.1	1.2	18.3	6.3	9.6	23.7	18.6	1.2	0.0
60 - 64	68.5	33.6	60.6	1.4	1.7	22.8	11.4	10.7	14.9	13.1	0.3	0.3
65 - 69	54.6	44.0	47.4	5.3	1.9	28.7	11.5	8.1	12.9	11.0	2.4	0.0
70 - 74	42.2	37.9	55.6	4.8	2.4	18.5	7.3	3.2	11.3	5.6	0.0	0.0

Source: *Yokohama Survey* (1999).

Only 13.6% cite no obstacles regarding work or social activity. Time is a constraint either due to the lack of time (23.4%) or scheduling problems (22.7%). In addition, needs might also be thwarted by lack of opportunity (22.6%) and lack of information (11.4%).

Combining the needs for working after age 60 and social activity, almost half (46.2%) want to work and participate in social activity. Another 20.2% want to work, while 16.3% want social activity, and less than 10% want neither. This suggests a retirement life that balances the desire for work and social activity. In addition, there is a strong latent demand for work and social activity among persons not presently active in either (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Present Status and Future Needs for Social Participation

(%)

	Sample size n	Demand for activity			
		Work & social activity	Work only	Social activity	No activity
Total	2501	46.2	20.2	16.3	9.6
Men	1179	56.3	24.9	7.5	5.6
Work & social activity	482	64.3	22.0	8.1	3.3
Work only	371	53.4	30.2	7.8	5.4
Social activity only	175	58.9	19.4	9.7	7.4
No activity	113	40.7	35.4	2.7	13.3
Women	1313	37.5	16.0	24.3	13.3
Work & social activity	378	55.3	17.2	19.8	3.2
Work only	243	44.9	25.9	19.8	7.4
Social activity only	419	29.6	6.9	36.0	20.5
No activity	186	19.4	23.7	21.5	28.5

Source: Yokohama Survey (1999).

Our survey has revealed a strong need to work and participate in social activities after retiring. We must acknowledge this need and move quickly to set up a system that encourages elderly persons to participate in society and lead fulfilling lives.

5. Support Systems of the AARP

The activities of the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) are highly instructive in identifying ways to enable social participation among elderly persons. The AARP has 3.3 million members, publishes *Modern Maturity*, the world's largest magazine with a circulation of 20 million, and exercises considerable influence in formulating and implementing public policies throughout American society. The association offers services directly to members as well as community services through its members, and enjoys a sterling reputation.

The AARP's diverse range of activities, briefly described in Figure 5, provide its members many opportunities for social participation.

While ostensibly an association of retired persons, one third of its members still lead active careers. The association has consistently fought to promote the employment of elderly persons. It played an important role in the passage of the age discrimination law of 1967, and continues to fight against age discrimination by monitoring conditions and participating in law suits. Moreover, it strives to change negative perceptions toward elderly persons regarding their ability to work. For persons seeking work, the association also offers counseling and training programs.

The AARP is run by a staff of approximately 2,000 paid employees and between 200,000 to 400,000 unpaid volunteers. Thus the association itself is a huge source of volunteer opportunities for elderly persons. Leadership training programs are offered to enhance the quality of volunteers. The association also maintains a talent bank of volunteers over age 50 to fill requests for volunteers with qualified persons.

Volunteer programs enable members to contribute to the elderly community in many ways, including helping to file tax returns (public subsidies are also provided), offering driver's education courses, supporting persons who have lost their partner, and assisting in buying homes.

By providing the above opportunities for social participation, the AARP fully lives up to its motto: "to serve, not to be served."

Figure 5 Activities of the AARP

	Description
Membership & organization	3.3 million members age 50 and over; 5 regional offices nationwide 21 state offices, 4,000 local chapters, and almost 2,000 paid employees
Annual membership fee	\$8
Activities	
Employment support	Campaign to eliminate age discrimination and bias against elderly job counseling and referral, vocational training
Volunteer Center	Volunteer talent bank, connections with local programs, leadership training, forums
Community services	Legal services, driver's education for elderly
Other services	Group health, life, and automobile insurance, discounts on medicine, hotels and restaurants, publications

Sources: Japan Federation of Labor Unions, *The AARP Challenge* (1997); AARP home page; news articles.

6. Conclusion

Recently, an increasingly common view advocates aging as a strength and asset. Robert Butler, president of the International Longevity Center, has proposed the concept of "productive aging."

There is a tendency to think that elderly persons who can work and function vigorously do not need any support. But no matter how motivated and able they are, there are limits to what individuals can do alone. If people get together and form a network, they can multiply their power by many times. The source of power for the AARP lies in its 3.3-million members, which creates economies scale in services its provides members and forms a vast data base for

introducing people to jobs and volunteer opportunities. In addition, support for social activity helps maintain physical and mental health in old age. Thus the merits far exceed the costs. Furthermore, the economic effects of support systems are magnified by NPO activities that are socially significant because they fill the gaps between market provided services.

One year has passed since the implementation of Japan's NPO law, which provides volunteer organizations corporate status and supports their activities. During this time, over 1,000 certifications have been issued nationwide, and organizations that draw on the contributions of experienced retired persons have also appeared. In addition, the establishment of an association for elderly persons in Mie prefecture in February 1995 has been followed by others which serve as a type of consumer cooperative supporting elderly persons in work and social activity. Local governments are showing an interest in these organizations as a means for elderly persons to volunteer in welfare work, create jobs, and develop a sense of fulfillment. In April 1998, Matsushita Electric Industries began a fund to support volunteer activity that provides up to ¥250,000 to NPOs in which employees, their spouses, and retired employees consistently participate. Thus far funds have been provided to over 100 organizations. Companies are thus starting to support their employees and retired employees.

However, such activities are still isolated and few. Considerable time and effort will be needed for a network of support to be created throughout the society.

Notes

1. The *Yokohama Survey*, commissioned by the city of Yokohama, was conducted from January to February 1999 on a sample of 5,000 men and women residents from age 45 to 74.
2. See the 1997 *White Paper on Labor* for an analysis.