The Mirror of Japan: Aging Citizens, Aging Societies

Robert H. Binstock, PhD, Susan O. Long, PhD
The section on mood disorders is variable: initial chapters on treatment modalities are informative but brief, while later chapters on dysthymia (by Dan Blazer) and the prognosis of depression (by Robert Baldwin) are outstanding. The final section is the weakest, presenting relatively brief chapters on anxiety and psychotic disorders, and an entire chapter on an obscure form of personality disorder not found in standard diagnostic texts. The last chapter, on psychotherapy, is well-written and interesting, but again too brief given the importance of this topic.

Each of these four books can serve as an important tool for professionals involved in the psychiatric care of elderly individuals, in particular in the frontier of nursing homes and other long-term care settings. Both their strengths and weaknesses point to a compelling fact, that long-term care imposes a new function on psychiatric illness. The unique aspects of psychiatric epidemiology, diagnosis, comorbidity, stress, and treatment must be recognized, otherwise the geriatric clinician is wandering into unfamiliar terrain with potentially inappropriate clinical tools. There is simultaneously a legislative mandate through OBRA, a clinical mandate through our chosen career, and most importantly an ethical mandate through our role as mental health clinicians that demands the recognition and understanding of the unique features in this new frontier.

Marc E. Agronin, MD
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry
University of Minnesota School of Medicine
Staff Psychiatrist, VA Medical Center
Minneapolis, MN 55417

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A decade ago, anthropologist Joseph Tobin (1987) raised the question: Why are Americans so enamored with the image of a respected and dependent old age in Japan? In his article, "The American Idealization of Old Age in Japan," he suggested that the insistence on the image of the "honorable elders" in the face of evidence that old age in Japan is often lonely and insecure reflects not so much on academic analysis, but is rather a means through which Americans deal with their own personal concerns about aging in their own society:

If even in Japan, the land of robotics, early retirement, and postindustrial industry, the elderly are not just tolerated but venerated, appreciated, and indulged as they were in premodern times, then Americans can believe that the future need not look so bleak for them. (p. 57)

Americans, Tobin claimed, hold up the idealized image of Japan as a mirror, both to reassure themselves that there is a postindustrial society in which elders are respected and to criticize American society for failing to do the same, regardless of the reality of aging in Japan.

Fortunately, our state of knowledge of aging in Japan has come far since the days in which the image of the "honorable elders" was accepted uncritically by gerontologists (see Palmore, 1975). A counter image to the contented Confucian elder, that of Obasuteyama (in English, see Keene, 1970), the mountain where old women are abandoned, complicates our vision (see, for example, Ariyoshi, 1984; Bethel, 1992; various chapters in Formanek & Linhart, 1997; and Traphagan, 1997). We understand something of the rapid demographic transitions that will make Japan one of the societies with the largest proportion of elderly within the next quarter century (Japan Statistical Yearbook, 1997), and we compare Japanese responses with our own answers to the problem of providing this large group of citizens with medical care and financial security (Campbell, 1992; Iekagami & Campbell, 1996; Ogawa & Retherford, 1993, 1997). But have our motivations for learning about Japanese elderly adults in particular, and making cross-cultural comparisons in general, changed?

Three recent publications dealing with Japanese society and the elderly population have brought me back to Tobin's question about perceptions and motivations. These volumes take up aging in Japanese society from very different starting points. Together, they offer an updated understanding of Japan's aging population. Their contrasting research interests and disciplinary assumptions, in one sense,
complement each other to provide a broad sketch on the contemporary scene. At the same time, their very different topics lead readers to reconsider Tobin's question.

It is interesting to note that nearly all of the authors of the works reviewed here are Japanese. Hence, they are not concerned with protecting Americans' idealization of Japanese old age. Their intent is to portray the realities of old age in Japan. The sketches they offer are of a rapidly aging population, in which most older individuals are healthy and active, and which has the postindustrial world's highest level of labor force participation among those 65 years of age and older. When Japanese elders retire, they do so under a new pension system that allows people to maintain financial independence from their children; when they become ill, they can obtain medical care easily and cheaply, although government attempts to control costs have in recent years begun to threaten that ready accessibility. We see government leaders and bureaucrats who are convinced that, for reasons of demography and sociocultural change, society cannot continue to rely on family caregiving of functionally impaired older persons. At the same time, cultural understandings of the aging process continue to lead to a protective approach toward elderly adults; support ideally (if resentfully) occurs within an intergenerational family context.

The 1989 Gold Plan and its 1994 revisions were designed to expand social services to serve as alternatives to family caregiving. And so, amidst new plans for a public long-term care system that will integrate medical and social services, we find an active debate. This debate is not on the issue of government responsibility, which now appears to be broadly accepted in principle (see Ogawa & Retherford, 1993), but on the issues of centralization, standardization, and equity on the one hand, and decentralization, local or community control, and disparity on the other hand.

The Broader Social Context

Of the three books, Kumagai's Unmasking Japan Today, provides the broadest overview. Kumagai, a family sociologist, addresses aging directly in only one section of the volume, placing it in the broader context of current Japanese social problems that also include family change, youth and education, and the role of women. Her argument is that these problems are manifestations of social change, that Japanese society today lies at the intersection of values of tradition and of modernity. In the section on "The Graying of Society," she posits,

As is true for most modern industrialized societies, the aging of the population poses serious problems. But the Japanese situation is again complicated by the coexistence of modernity and tradition within a single social structure. (p. 124)

Kumagai's frame of reference is a widespread Japanese discourse in which modern, progressive, and international ideas and policies, on the one hand, oppose unique Japanese/Asian values on the other. Relying on government statistics, she describes elements that contribute to this "problem" in the 1990s—changes in demography, workforce participation, retirement benefits, and family relationships (coresidence, in particular). Although it is useful to have this compendium of data available in one place in English, her analysis does not take us much beyond the stereotypes that the traditional modern dichotomy imposes.

Public Policies

The Kumagai volume does provide a backdrop for discussions of more specific aging-related issues, such as the policy initiatives discussed in the volume edited by Bass, Morris, and Oka. Published simultaneously by Haworth Press as Public Policy and the Old Age Revolution in Japan and as a special issue of the Journal of Aging and Social Policy (Vol. 8, Numbers 2/3, 1996), it is clearly written for a more specialized audience. The editors are gerontologists with backgrounds in sociology, social work, and economics whose primary interests lie in the area of work and retirement. In his introduction to the volume, editor Scott Bass provides a descriptive summary of aging in Japan. He asserts, "This collection of articles about Japan is an effort to capture some of the vitality of Japanese policy makers and struggles they face in shaping a modern society responsive to its changing needs" (p. 2).

The book is divided into three sections. The first set of chapters by Koyano and Shibata, Okamoto, and Hoshino describes Japan's policies toward medical care and the nation's complex financing of medical and social services for its elderly population. All of these chapters provide useful background information for understanding Japanese policies and services.

In the next section of the book, authors Bass, Rix, Koshiro, and Roberts discuss cultural attitudes, policies, and programs that promote employment of those persons who are beyond the mandatory retirement age and describe the two-tiered public/private pension system. It is interesting to note that this section contains all of the chapters of the book whose first authors are Americans, reflecting American authors' interest in Japanese policy toward the older adults. In some sense, their chapters express their view as outsiders through their more explicit use of comparisons with American policy and their reflections on cultural differences. However, I found the ability of Bass and Rix to deal with culture to be weak. Bass limits his discussion to the one key concept of ikigai (see fuller discussion of this concept in Mathews, 1996) rather than offering a fuller exploration of values and attitudes toward aging, work, and retirement (see for example work by Koyano, 1989, 1996; as well as more ethnographic studies by Plath, 1972; Noguchi, 1990; and Lock, 1993). Rix relies too heavily on partially accurate but overgeneralized descriptions of the Japanese labor
force—women (40% of the work force) are relegated to a footnote and the typical worker seems to be a college graduate employed in a large firm, although such employees comprise a minority of the labor force.

The third section of the book focuses most explicitly on critiques of current policy. Hirayama and Miyazaki argue for the unique service needs of rural areas with high proportions of elderly residents. Adachi, Lubben, and Tsukada propose expanding self-help organizations for community-based services. Kose focuses on the need to improve the safety and convenience of older citizens’ physical environments through housing policy. And Kimura analyzes problems with the Old Plan of the 1990s. This section represents the most original contribution of the book to the English language literature on Japanese aging policy. Overall, despite some unnecessary repetition and inconsistencies in bibliographic style, I found this volume to be an extremely useful collection of essays in understanding Japanese policy and programs.

A Generational Perspective

Of the three volumes, Hashimoto’s The Gift of Generations is the most theoretical, the most explicitly comparative, and the only one in which we meet elderly adults as people rather than as statistics or objects of policy. The author is a sociologist interested in the question of support for the elderly population because of what such support indicates about the relationship between power and meaning, between policy and behavior. With data from more than two years of surveys, interviews, and participant observations in comparable cities in Japan and the United States, Hashimoto asks about the nature of the social contract, which guarantees regularized giving even though continued support of older adults is not in the economic interests of the younger generations.

Hashimoto concludes that culture matters, not in the sense of identifying particular traits such as dependency, but in the symbolic credits and debts that define entitlement (emphasized in the American model) and deservedness (emphasized in the Japanese model). The comparison she draws out is both concrete and philosophical. We not only gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between culture and policy in Japan, but also a greater appreciation of the extent to which American values influence both the expectations of citizens and the making of policy in this country (for fuller discussion of strengths and weaknesses of this volume, see Long, 1997). Although policy is not her focus, Hashimoto’s work also helps us understand the more subtle reasons behind the direction in which current Japanese policy toward the elderly population is moving.

The Mirror of Japan

But we must return to the question of why we should be interested in aging in Japan. The number of books on the topic that have been published in English in recent years suggests that there is a market. Certainly Japan’s economic status as a world leader has brought increased awareness of that society to the American public through greater media attention and interpersonal contact. Although this awareness has brought with it increased knowledge, I am not certain whether it has brought much greater understanding of Japanese culture. Many Americans continue to view Japan in terms of positive and negative cultural stereotypes. They see only the images of close families caring for their elderly relatives or selfish individuals who abandon their grandparents figuratively, if not literally. Japan continues to be idealized or villainized in the American popular imagination.

Do these three volumes help us to use the mirror of Japan more wisely? I believe that those by Bass et al. and Hashimoto will, for the most part, help interested gerontologists go beyond mythical images to gain a deeper understanding of aging and policy. The chapters by Rix and Bass in the Bass et al. volume continue the tradition of looking to Japan to serve as a mirror that can show Americans how to do things better. The image that is reflected no longer is that of dependent, honorable elders, however, but of healthy, active older adults enjoying the fruits of creative and farsighted policy.

Kumagai uses the mirror to show an implicit and idealized international model which, if Japan could only emulate, would solve the “problem” of the aging society. She speaks within a dominant discourse of Japanese bureaucrats, academics, and social critics who accept without question absolute contrasts between tradition and modernity, international and Japanese. Yet who is Kumagai’s intended audience? Published in English, the book’s sales do not seem dependent upon Japanese readers looking to solve the problems of their society by purging everything old-fashioned, though this is the tone of her book. Rather, the book allows Americans to continue to see Japan as holding on to remnants of tradition despite the onslaught of social change. Thus Kumagai’s mirror presents a clear and simple—but distorted—image, regardless of the side from which it is viewed.

In contrast, the criticisms of the Japanese authors and Roberts in the Public Policy volume cloud the image in the mirror because they present a more realistic picture of Japan, which forces us to look more deeply at the image. Their interests are not in looking for positive alternatives to U.S. policy (as the book’s editors do) but in improving policy and services in their own country, Japan. They provide excellent descriptions of Japanese policies and programs as of the mid-1990s, which are sure to be useful to gerontologists, but for the most part they are interested in critically assessing the motivations of the bureaucrats and the impact of these policies on Japanese society.

Hashimoto’s useful comparative approach points the mirror in both directions simultaneously, providing an on-the-ground view of the elderly population and aging policy in Japan for Americans, as well
as a similar view of the United States for Japanese. The well-researched, explicit comparison is an obvious, but seldom achieved, method for gaining insight into our own society. Hashimoto’s mirror shows complex images of both societies that preclude simple answers but offer much light for reflection.

These three books indicate the growth of gerontological interest in cross-cultural communications and comparisons since Tobin made his observations a decade ago. The variety of questions asked and frameworks utilized in these volumes provide us with a number of alternative images to use to understand aging in both Japan and the United States. They also provide us with abundant material with which to continue to ponder Tobin’s question.

Susan O. Long, PhD
Associate Professor of Anthropology
Department of Sociology
John Carroll University
University Heights, OH 44118

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