

DARING TO TAKE ON FEMALE ROLES: JAPANESE MALE RETIREES AS VOLUNTEER CARERS

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Abstract: In the 1990s, several Japanese men established organizations that incorporate volunteering to provide new directions for older Japanese after retirement. They have encouraged male members to become involved in care work, traditionally the preserve of women. The time that these individuals give to others while in their active third age entitles them to reciprocal help in their frail fourth age, satisfying traditional Japanese ideals of reciprocity.

This paper examines the life of the founder of one of these groups, Takahata Kei'ichi, his organization NALC, and some of the older men within NALC who have become volunteer carers. These individuals are adding support that goes beyond that provided by the long-term care insurance scheme, while gaining personal satisfaction from feeling useful. The post-retirement years can encompass moving beyond previous roles to take on new ones that benefit both the individual and society. The rapid ageing of the Japanese population has been portrayed as posing a threat to the economy, but this view overlooks the contributions retirees can make in their communities. Moreover, the acknowledgement that men can assume the tasks of carers could be said to represent a fundamental shift in the way male and female roles are viewed in Japan.

Keywords: aged care, gender, men, time banks, volunteering

1 INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s two Japanese men, Hotta Tsutomu and Takahata Kei'ichi, established organizations that incorporate volunteering to provide new directions for older Japanese after retirement. In particular, they have encouraged male members to become involved in care work, traditionally the preserve of women. They can be considered part of a social movement among older Japanese to provide new activities and relationships for their fellow seniors in their retirement years through volunteering or low-paid work activities in the community. The time that these individuals give to others while in their active third age entitles them to reciprocal help in their frail fourth age, satisfying traditional Japanese ideals of reciprocity.

This paper traces the background of one of these organizations, which was set up by Takahata and is now known as NALC (Nippon Active Life Club), and examines the way in which male members have come to see involvement as carers as a way of connecting with others. The topic

emerged as a result of a conversation with a man from NALC in the course of the three months of my fieldwork for my doctorate research in 2005 in Japan. The man's obvious enthusiasm for doing care work was quite striking, as was his concern that men were being held back by preconceptions about proper gender roles. The topic of male carers became a sub theme in the chapter on NALC in my PhD thesis (Miller 2008).¹ I did not conduct any formal surveys to gather data, but kept notes on my conversations with time banks members I met, asking them for example about why they had joined the organization and what benefits they thought they derived from membership. For all of them the relationships they made were the most important factor.

Hotta and Takahata both saw the creation of relationships through volunteering as constituting an important part of their organizations. They envisaged that older men who were still active could serve their communities as carers for the frail aged. Their male members have been challenging both gender and age stereotypes in a country where gender roles are more strictly adhered to than in the West and where, up to now, age roles have also been very strictly delineated. Perceptions of what is appropriate both in age and gender terms are slowly changing in an ageing Japan. The acknowledgement that men can assume the tasks of carers could be said to represent a fundamental shift in the way male and female roles are viewed in Japan. The assumption of such work by older men also represents a new care workforce.

The rapid ageing of the Japanese population often has been portrayed as posing a threat to the economy as the ratio of working age workers to older non-working citizens rises. This need not be the case if retirees dare to move beyond the boundaries of former confined roles to contribute to their communities.

2 RESEARCH ON MALE CARERS

To date, the bulk of research conducted on carers has concentrated exclusively on women. Just as gender studies have been largely equated with women's studies (Roberson and Suzuki 2003: 6), care work has been equated mostly with women. Male carers for the aged have been overlooked in

¹ The dissertation covered five time banks with national networks in Japan, as well as a chapter on time banks outside Japan. Male and female issues featured respectively in chapters on NALC and the VLN, a women's organization. They were the two time banks whose members I had personal contact with while in Japan. For an explanation of the concept of time banks, see p. 265.

both Japan and the West because elder care has been regarded as the responsibility and domain of women (Kramer 2004: 3). Male volunteer carers have received the least coverage as literature on older male carers has focused on individuals looking after spouses. In Japan, literature by and about women has enhanced understanding of the arena of women, but understanding of Japanese men has been limited (Roberson and Suzuki 2003: 6).

Early research on men acting as carers appeared in work on redundancy and retirement in the 1980s in the United Kingdom (Neno 2004: 14) and then expanded in the 1990s with what was dubbed the “discovery” of male carers by Fisher (1994: 659). Several journal papers appeared in the latter decade on older men caring for spouses in Japan (Harris and Long 1999; Harris, Long and Fujii 1998). This was shortly after Takahata began his quest in Japan to recruit male retirees as volunteer carers in the community, but mention of his efforts, or those of other time banks with and by the aged, did not appear in English-language research before a book by Nakano (2005) on community volunteers, although others have written in English about seniors providing care through organizations such as the Silver Human Resource Centres (Shirubā Jinzai Sentā) (Roberts 1996).

The role of volunteer carer now taken on by Japanese males was virtually unthinkable prior to the 1990s, as indeed was the idea of families requesting outside help for their aged relatives. However, the role is one which is increasingly condoned, and even encouraged, due to the pressures of social change. The ageing of the population and the growing participation of women in the workforce mean that greater numbers of aged need care, but fewer women are at home to do the task. Uncertainty about how the country will deal with a looming labour shortage in the caring professions may mean a greater readiness to consider men for the duty. Not only older men but also younger men are now likely to become carers for non-kin.²

3 MALE CARERS IN JAPAN

General assumptions about the percentage of male carers for the aged in Japan under-estimate the numbers involved. Unfortunately, there are no figures available on male volunteer carers but there are some on males caring within the family from the 1990s, when male carers were recorded for the first time by the media and officialdom. A 1998 survey by the To-

² Some young Japanese men are working in aged care. When I visited a small home for dementia sufferers in Saitama Prefecture in 2000, I met the enthusiastic young man in charge who said he had found what he wanted to do in life even though the pay was not very high.

kyo Metropolitan Government found that men accounted for what a newspaper later dubbed as a “surprising” 27 per cent of carers for ageing parents or spouses in the metropolis (*Asahi Evening News*, 18 February 1999), while a survey published by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare in 1997 came up with a figure of 15 per cent for the nation as a whole (Harris and Long 1999).³ Despite the shift to greater outside care generated by the long-term care insurance scheme since 2000, the majority of carers still come from within the family.

In the 1990s the resignations of several men in leadership positions to look after their wives gained nationwide media coverage and raised the profile of male carers. One was the 75-year-old mayor of Takatsuki City in Osaka Prefecture who felt that he had accomplished all he could during his time in the post, but that his wife’s condition might improve if he started putting her interests first (Matsumoto 2000). In a society where peer pressure to conform inhibits people from deviating from social norms, the example of such elite men choosing care for their wives over paid employment was an inspiration for other men.

Women are in the majority when it comes to paid carers for the aged. A 2007 survey of employed carers for the aged in various categories found just over 80 per cent to be female, while this went up to 90.8 per cent for domiciliary care workers (KRAS 2007). Estimating how many individuals overall of either sex are now engaged in caring for the aged is difficult. It would need to include both paid and unpaid carers, with some volunteers falling into both categories, including members of two time banks in my thesis which have raised controversy by giving money as well as time points to carers.⁴

In the 1990s male retirees started to take up the challenge posed by men such as Hotta and Takahata to serve as volunteer carers for people in their homes. They followed in the wake of women’s volunteer groups which had begun giving domiciliary care to older Japanese not eligible for government assistance in the 1980s (Tanaka 1996). Housewives and male retirees make up the highest proportion of volunteers overall in Japan (Omori and Yonezawa 2002), they being the people who have the most free time to participate.

The process through which Takahata set up his organization illustrates some of the obstacles that needed to be overcome in the 1990s as older

³ In 2007 men made up 28.1% of spouses acting as main carers for their aged partners at home (Kōsei Rōdōshō 2009).

⁴ Hotta’s organization, the Sawayaka Welfare Foundation (Sawayaka Fukushi Zaidan), for example, includes a monetary remuneration for care volunteers, many of whom are male, although NALC does not.

male volunteers moved into care work for the aged. The following details about Takahata's life have been taken from the two books he has published about his ideas and involvement in volunteering (Takahata 1998, 2000).⁵

4 TAKAHATA KEI'ICHI

Takahata has promoted the idea of male retirees volunteering as carers since the early 1990s. Born in 1929, he followed the standard pattern of life for a company man in Japan until his retirement at the age of 62. He spent his entire working career at Matsushita Electric, which he joined in 1950, rising through the ranks to become an executive director. Takahata displayed a capacity for innovation over that time. During 20 years in the company's central labour union, and as its head for much of that period, he implemented a succession of his ideas that culminated in innovative employment extension plans for older workers and management participation systems. He was one of the earliest advocates for extending the weekend break from one to two days in Japan.

Takahata greatly admired the founder of Matsushita Electric, Matsushita Kōnosuke, who believed that manufacturers had a social responsibility to relieve poverty and create wealth for society, and not just think about shareholders. Takahata has slightly adapted Matsushita's favourite motto of "Set goals in life" to "Set new goals in retirement" as a source of inspiration for his own group (Takahata 2000: 5).

Some of his inspiration for moving into advocacy for older men came from the United States, where he was posted for several years by Matsushita to examine labour issues in its American factories. The initial source was the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), whose sheer size and ability to lobby government impressed him. He hoped a similar organization in Japan might be able to promote the rights and interests of older people. Takahata lamented the fact that, although Japan's seniors were rapidly becoming a sizeable part of the population, they were not turning into an influential force in politics or society as older Americans had done thanks to the AARP (Takahata 2000: 18–19).

Takahata also admired the way in which the AARP promoted productive ageing and volunteering by the aged (Tanaka and Adachi 2000). According to him, the directions these took drew on the ideas of the founder

⁵ Much of the material for my thesis was drawn from the books by founders of Japanese time banks, all of whom have written quite extensively about their motivations and actions.

of the AARP, Ethel Percy Andrus: that people can continue to be of service no matter how old they are, and in doing so preserve their autonomy, health and sense of purpose in life (Takahata 1998: 20).

In the early stages of his retirement, Takahata held special meetings with fellow spirits from his union leader days to learn their opinions on his ideas for engaging retirees with the community. Some said there were already enough clubs for the aged so there was no need to set up anything new. There was general concern that Takahata's intention to make aged care a key feature of volunteer participation might tend to repel rather than attract members due to the dismal image it conjured up at a time when population ageing was regarded with gloom.

Disheartened by this response, Takahata sought out the sympathetic ear of a man with similar aspirations to his own (Takahata 2000: 27). This was Tanaka Naoki, an activist who has written extensively about volunteering and the aged in Japan. Tanaka offered him assistance through the Chōju Shakai Bunka Kyōkai (Wonderful Ageing Club, WAC), which also seeks to promote active lives for Japan's seniors through community involvement. Tanaka is now a key person in the NPO field.

Takahata had no personal experience of either care work or volunteering. After retiring he set about remedying this by embarking on an intensive study of social welfare issues and volunteer groups to gain the essential background for his venture (Takahata 2000: 24). He envisaged that his new organization would meet community needs for assistance not covered by the government and enrich the lives of older citizens.

Part of Takahata's preparations entailed searching for materials on volunteering. One of the first books he looked at was an introduction to volunteering for company workers by the social commentator and social welfare issue consultant Kihara, who has since written that individuals can volunteer whatever their state of health, giving examples of the bedridden allowing student carers to train on them (Kihara 2005: 14–17). Books on volunteering aimed at men have proliferated in recent years, but Kihara's work was one of the first. With the old ethos of a man living for his company under attack from the mass media, such books offer an alternative, stressing the importance of finding individual motives for life (Mathews 2003: 113). Takahata was also impressed by the writings of Okamoto Yūzō, now a member of the board of NALC, about the lessons that could be learned from treatment of the aged in Denmark.

Around the same time, the Ministry of Health and Welfare was drafting its Gold Plan, which aimed to significantly increase the number of aged care facilities and workers, but which in the event proved inadequate. Takahata received material on the Gold Plan proposals for his home city of Osaka and met with departmental bureaucrats. This made

him aware of the official situation with regard to aged care (Takahata 2000: 25).

Takahata, together with his wife, then enrolled in the lowest grade of home-help course, convinced that if he was going to set up a group of volunteers to aid the frail aged, he should show leadership by gaining at least a basic certification in the field. Knowing that women were usually the only enrollees in such courses, he persuaded three men from study programmes he was running to join him. In a class of 45, they were the only men, the remainder being mostly middle-aged women (Takahata 2000: 31). According to Takahata, it took some courage to enter this female domain. The relatively new qualifications had been introduced by the government only a few years earlier to give the major boost to carer numbers deemed necessary for the coming aged society.

Takahata completed the three-month course – a total of 50 hours spread over meetings one day a week, with half the curriculum devoted to practical work. The time spent on techniques and practice taught a great deal to this former company man who had relegated all household-related tasks to his wife in customary Japanese fashion.

He undertook practical work through introductions from an aged care facility. He was asked to do shopping and washing for an older woman living alone in a two-storey dwelling. These were novel duties for a Japanese male. His gender did prove a benefit when he had to help a semiparalysed man into a bath and then dress him before getting him back into a wheelchair. Takahata took pride in managing to communicate with a female dementia sufferer who did not respond to the spoken word but revealed an enthusiasm for singing when he chanced to try to engage her with karaoke. Takahata also participated in a two-day cooking course, which he said marked his first encounters with a kitchen. The whole experience brought him into a new sphere (Takahata 2000: 32–33).

Once he had achieved helper certification, Takahata then did the rounds of places where branches of his anticipated organization might be established. These included Osaka City and other cities in Osaka Prefecture such as Takatsuki and Sakai, as well as Nara Prefecture and Kyoto. Wherever he went, he met with a barrage of questions from prospective male members. The most common included whether men really could do care work or whether families would accept care workers who were strangers into their homes. They also wanted to know if people without qualifications could be of any service and if there would be compensation for any injuries incurred in participating.

Meetings paving the way for preparations for branches were full of such misgivings about possible future activities. Those present were all inexperienced in volunteering and care giving, just as Takahata had been

at the start. Thus he felt an obligation to respond to every query to clear up any misconceptions. The knowledge and expertise gained from completing the carer course helped him greatly in this regard. He was living proof that men could be involved in care work. Takahata could inspire by example – essential for a leader in a care-giving NPO, according to one book on the new manifestations of such organizations (Tanaka, Asakawa and Adachi 2003).

Takahata committed himself to going to offer his assistance and support to any place where even one person showed an interest in setting up a branch. His goal grew to engage older Japanese with society, drawing on their skills, qualifications and capacities throughout the regions, with care for the aged positioned as a pivotal undertaking. His ambition was to achieve a nationwide network in order to enable an exchange of ideas for volunteering under the time banking system to cover as many people as possible.

Although Takahata's main aspiration was to attract retirees, he realized that a better tactic might be to draw in people during the pre-retirement period when they were contemplating how to spend their new free time after leaving work. Since this period began when individuals reached their fifties, recruits were to be sought in that age group from the ranks of company employees and civil servants.

The next concern was to attract a substantial attendance and media publicity for an inaugural meeting to spread the message about the new group to a wide audience. Takahata wrote individual invitations to around 1,500 trustworthy persons from his own New Year card list, showing a personal touch using a calligraphy brush, and slipped a pamphlet about his proposals for the group into the same envelope. Over one-third replied that they would come to the event. He then approached the mass media to solicit coverage. Providentially for him, many of the young reporters who he had liaised with as a union leader had gone on to become section heads in newspapers and TV stations. They were very happy to accede to his requests. All the major newspapers thus featured introductory articles about the new organization and its founder (Takahata 2000: 39).

Takahata then sought financial support from various organizations and companies with which he had connections from his former professional life. Some presidents of small and medium-sized firms said they were too hard pressed by the recession to grant business funds but dipped into their own pockets to make a small contribution. Since retiring from Matsushita, Takahata has drawn on the connections he made in his working life, both within his company and throughout corporate Japan, to help build up his organization. In particular, he has called on

OBs (a Japanese adaptation of the English expression “old boys”) from his own firm to help spread the group right across Japan (Takahata 2000: 38).

The first meeting of the inaugural group was held on 20 April 1994. It was packed with retirees, with the overflow filling the corridors outside the hall. About 100 people had to leave because there was no space to accommodate them (Takahata 2000: 39). Soon after the group started, it had recruited 700 members from all around the country.

This was at a time when the ageing of the population was portrayed in the media and by government figures as posing a future catastrophe for a country suffering from recession; there was nothing positive to be said about it. The public image of aged care was very bleak and there was some trepidation that this would discourage people from joining Takahata’s new group. Thus he was taking on quite a challenge. His mission may have been aided by demographic change, however, leading to a greater readiness to consider men as carers due to worries about a declining workforce and birth rate.

5 NALC

NALC uses a system known as time banking that fosters volunteer work and encapsulates reciprocity. A donor of help becomes entitled to be a receiver in return. For each hour of time that a member gives, they bank an hour that can be traded for assistance later on. Local coordinators keep records of individuals who offer or require services and match them up, with all work valued equally. Time banking helps build social capital by increasing social interaction in communities, a fact documented in literature on time banking in the West (Cahn 2000; Seyfang 2004). It ties in with a new view in Japan that sees volunteering not as something done by the fortunate for the less fortunate but as an exchange of help among equals.

Care for the aged has been one of the main services offered by time banking groups since they first emerged in Japan in 1973. Over that time, attitudes as to who could give the help have changed. Mizushima Teruko, the founder of the world’s first time bank in 1973 in Osaka, believed that the aged were the most entitled in the community to receive care. However, she did not regard older people as being able to give help and her membership was female only (Miller 2008). The idea that older Japanese, and older men in particular, could act as voluntary carers for non-kin only began to be put into practice in the 1990s. This coincided with the beginnings of public social acceptance for families receiving care for their elders from outsiders.

As of March 2009, NALC had 139 branches across Japan and over 26,500 members. Takahata, like other leaders of time banks with national networks, sees the greatest good coming from expanding membership to the point where it is accessible to everyone in Japan.⁶ The current five-year goal of NALC is to expand to 300 branches and 60,000 members.

The majority of NALC members are retirees, with the largest age group being those in their sixties, but there are also substantial numbers in their fifties. NALC now also targets younger people and the middle-aged as a way of ensuring the long-term survival of the organization and also to help raise the level of volunteering in Japanese society overall. Until recent years, over half the membership was male, an unusual feature for a volunteering group in Japan, where women have formed the majority of volunteers. In 2000, males made up 51 per cent of members (Tanaka and Adachi 2000: 43), but by 2005 a NALC leaflet gave the figures as 44 per cent male and 56 per cent female. Since 2005 there has been a faster rise in female membership than male. In 2009, women accounted for 66 per cent of membership and the average age of members had risen from the original 62 to 67 (Takahata 2009: 1). People are encouraged to join as couples, with the membership fee for a couple being the same as that for an individual. This represents an unusual approach in Japan, where couples usually lead separate social lives and do not share friends.

Takahata freely acknowledges that older women have less need or incentive to join NALC than older men because they possess better social networks (Takahata 1998: 219). He regards persuading older people to join as couples as being an effective way of bringing in male retirees who have lost social ties after leaving work and thus engaging them with others.

NALC has a network of branches across Japan and two headquarters, one being in Osaka where it was first established and the other in Tokyo. It remains a grassroots organization despite its size, and all work done within it is on a voluntary basis. Branch offices usually begin in the homes of coordinators and some later shift into public centres or rented premises. NALC fosters a broad spectrum of activities that aim to use the volunteer expertise of members to contribute to society. In particular, it supports giving assistance to both the oldest and the youngest Japanese. NALC also engages in research into the lives and needs of middle-aged and older Japanese. These include using the voices of older Japanese to promote policy improvements for the protection of their interests.⁷

⁶ There has been discussion between time banks about making their time-earned points freely interchangeable between different organizations, but this has yet to eventuate.

⁷ See the NALC website at: <http://nalc.jp/> (accessed 4 March 2009).

6 MALE CARERS IN NALC

Many NALC men seem eager to assume the role of carer, even if they are not sure how to go about it since their wives or daughters-in-law have traditionally performed this role. There may be unique challenges for men in getting into care work because of the way they have been socialized (Kramer 2004: 5). Takahata and Hotta have both argued that this need not be an obstacle if men can adopt a new outlook on life and learn new skills.

Comments of male NALC members, both to me personally and in branch pages on the Internet, indicate that even though they want to enter care work for the aged they face scepticism about their suitability because of their gender. The notion that care is something for which women possess special skills can serve to keep men out or restrict them to those areas considered fitting "male" duties (Yamashita 2006: 10–11). A study of younger male carers for children notes that many Japanese women would prefer childcare to remain a purely female activity (Ishii-Kuntz 2003). Thus male NALC members aspiring to take on care work may meet with resistance. For while they share some similarities with men providing care within families, their circumstances place them in a dissimilar position.

Male relatives who provide only auxiliary help for their families tend to engage in more peripheral tasks than those performed by women. They may confine themselves to work where physical strength is required, such as lifting and moving spouses in and out of beds, baths or cars, and bathing. However, men who are sole carers are required to do everything, necessitating the acquisition of new skills (Long and Harris 2000). Thus the role of the volunteer male carer, who provides what may be best described as respite care, is quite different from that of the family male carer who devotes the majority of his waking hours to the task in the same way as female relatives.

One of the most popular – and accepted – tasks for NALC male volunteers is as drivers for the aged and infirm to and from hospitals and clinics or day-care centres. This was the case for one man who spoke to me. He told me that, while he had spent a year after retiring to acquire helper qualifications only to find that there was no demand for his services, he was still glad he had completed the course. Just having done it was enough as it gave him a sense of accomplishment.

Where he could be of service was as a driver. He spent much of his volunteer time giving lifts and had taught himself how to handle the disabled and infirm by spending intervals trying to manoeuvre around in a wheelchair himself and experimenting with different ways to help a person with a disability in and out of a car. It seemed that for him being a carer involved learning new ways to see the world and to extend himself.

Where couples join the organization together, the presence of the wife can help to ease a husband into new areas. One 63-year-old man became disheartened when, after six months with the group, he was still not entrusted to go out and provide care, but made to handle the phones for calls requesting female carers. He was fulfilling a long-held ambition to be a volunteer that had been constrained by lack of time before he retired. He insisted that his wife join the organization with him, the irony being that, while he was sidelined, she immediately received numerous call-outs for aged care having looked after her father-in-law. Eventually the couple found a job they could do together, helping a woman operator of a small bar who had been confined to a wheelchair following a traffic accident and needed assistance at night. The husband aided the woman in setting up the place while his wife assisted her in dressing and putting on make-up (NHK 1999: 83).

Time banking systems enable members to transfer time banking points across generations, allowing members to fulfil family obligations they are unable to meet personally. One man attracted to NALC by the benefits offered by the time banking system derived his greatest benefit from being able to fulfil his filial duties to his parent in his regional hometown a long way from the city where he worked. When his father died leaving his 85-year-old mother alone, he asked her to come and live with him. But she did not want to leave her friends and acquaintances, saying the loss of such relationships might result in a slide into dementia. She preferred to stay in a place she was accustomed to, and since she was still healthy there was no need to worry. After his mother experienced health problems from which she needed time to recuperate, the man transferred many of the 90 hours he had accumulated from care work to his mother. Four local volunteers saw to her meals, cleaning, and transport to and from a clinic. His mother was grateful for the help and also for gaining people to talk to. The man was glad because he could fulfil his filial duty and could in turn repay the aid by caring for the parents of someone else in his own area (Takahata 1998: 36–39).

Care provided by male volunteers can also extend to children. The male coordinator of a new NALC branch near Tokyo told me he thought the best way to ensure the long-term future of the organization was to create intergenerational links through older Japanese providing help with children. This would not be viable in the long term unless more young people, such as parents, were persuaded of its merits. He had started a toy hospital workshop in which men mended toys for children. It was proving very popular with the participants, with the group meeting several times a month, but he also wanted to move into doing care work with children.

Much has been written about the phenomenon of male retirees who leave the paid work which has consumed their lives, and then find themselves with nothing to occupy their time. One such man says he solved this problem by joining NALC, getting out of the house where he feared he was causing too much stress for his daughter-in-law by hanging around all day (NHK 1999: 80–81).

It would be illuminating to know how the wives of these male volunteers feel about their husband's contributions as carers, and whether these new skills are shared at home as well as in the community.⁸ That, however, remains to be investigated by another study. The impact of longer-term time bank involvement on personal lives can be seen in the case of women who have been active in the Volunteer Labour Network (VLN) since its early years in the mid-1970s. Some of them told me that the group has been their strongest support in recent years, although they added that this was through the friendships derived rather than services received. This could also be the case for male retirees in NALC who might benefit most from finding new relationships within the group to replace those lost from the workplace.

7 RECIPROCITY AND TIME BANKS

Caregiving within organizations such as NALC has the capacity to reach people who might otherwise be reluctant to call for help and, in particular, to accept it from men. The reciprocity fostered by time banks appeals to the traditional values of older Japanese. Brought up to feel uncomfortable about receiving aid without giving something back in return, they also regard mutual help within communities as a social virtue. Time banks fulfil both these needs by providing a framework within which individuals and couples can exchange services, and by fostering greater involvement in the community among male retirees. They give male retirees who have lost their roles in the paid workforce a place where they can feel useful and also prepare for a time when they may have to call on others.

The general Japanese belief that old age inevitably entails a need for help (Hashimoto 1996) could be said to inculcate a readiness in people to acknowledge that they will reach a time when they need assistance. For-

⁸ I first became interested in NALC through hearing about it from a close female friend who helped set up a branch, but have never discussed gender issues in the group with her. She has since become too busy to be involved with NALC after gaining a full-time position as a care manager. My other contact with NALC members was with men.

merly, it was assumed that this aid would come from female relatives, but now it can also be from paid or volunteer helpers. The coming of frailty in old age has been feared, because it has brought the threat of dependency without the opportunity to engage in reciprocity (Traphagan 2000: 5), involving a shift from reciprocity to dependency that occurs in the relationship between a carer and the relative they are caring for (Arber and Gilbert 1989: 114). James Dowd, the first sociologist to apply social exchange concepts to ageing, held the status of the aged to be defined by the balance between their contribution to society and the cost of social support for them (Dowd 1975). He assumed this resulted in an inevitable negative outcome as people lost their ability to give back as they aged. Time banks can reverse this tendency.

In the words of the founder of time banking systems in the United States, Edgar Cahn, time banks “create an ethos of reciprocity because each hour spent creates both an expectation and indebtedness; life ceases to be a series of one-time encounters and becomes a non-linear cycle epitomized in the folk saying, ‘What goes around comes around’” (Cahn 1999: 501). He describes this as constituting a form of social capital, because it creates beneficial social networks among people who would otherwise have been unconnected.

Some studies of time banks in the West see the low use of accrued credits by aged volunteers as an indication that reciprocity is not an important motivator for their involvement, with older members there saying their motivation comes from deriving pleasure in giving (Dentzer 2003; Collom 2005). One of the biggest problems facing Japanese time banks, including NALC, is finding people who want to receive assistance since those with ambitions to give far exceed those who want to receive. The challenge for the NALC coordinators who arrange for exchanges of help is to attain an even balance between the two.

The Japanese long-term care insurance (LTCI) scheme constitutes a new form of reciprocity between government and the people. The fact that benefits can be seen as “coming from one’s own past contributions rather than other people’s taxes” (Campbell 2000: 92) means that recipients of services under the scheme can feel entitled to them within a circle of reciprocity. Moreover, attitudes toward receiving care from outside the family have changed as a result of its introduction. By making care a universal right of all citizens aged 65 and over, paid for partly by a levy on everyone aged 40 and over, the policy has eliminated the social stigma that formerly clung to seeking help from outside the family.

The LTCI scheme has also opened up the delivery of services to private profit and non-profit services, including groups such as NALC. It has thus fostered greater public acceptance of receiving care from volunteers. It has

been aided in this regard by the NPO law, which has made volunteering organizations far more financially viable and bestowed official recognition on their contributions to the community. The introduction of these laws has hastened new measures to deal with the changing needs of an ageing society (Miller 2008: 108).

8 CONCLUSION

A best-selling novel by Murakami Ryū (2000) depicts Japanese youth disillusioned with older Japanese seceding to form a new state. They dismiss the old as lacking the capacity to do anything more than cling to dreams of the past. One of their leaders describes Japan as a place that has everything except hope. Male leaders of older Japanese such as Takahata are attempting to create hope in an ageing Japan by giving their contemporaries new roles in life, which include acting as carers.

In 1995 the feminist gerontologist Sodei Takako wrote that the burden of care for the elderly should be shared within family and the community, criticizing the fact that care had been left up to women in Japan. She concluded that in the 21st century “caregiving will cease to be a women’s issue and become everyone’s issue” (Sodei 1995: 227). The efforts of organizations such as NALC seem to be making this a reality.

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