ORIGINAL ARTICLE

In Search of the Everyday Life of Older People in Japan: Reflections Based on Scholarly Literature

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Abstract The main objective of this paper is to critically examine discourses about old age in Japan, a country with perspectives that are culturally different from the European and American perspectives that tend to dominate the scholarly discourse on ageing. We focus our inquiry on the scientific discourse as representative of a system of knowledge that has a crucial role in determining ways of thinking and perceiving old age. Our literature review is based on a study of academic articles, within the field of gerontology, about the everyday life of older people in Japan that were published in the 10-year period between 1999 and 2009. We apply a Foucauldian gerontology perspective as our analytical tool. The results of our study indicate that there is insufficient knowledge about the everyday life of older people in Japan in gerontological research. We identify a number of discursive practices applied in various research projects that present a one-sided story of old age in Japan. In the conclusion of this paper, we identify a need for interdisciplinary and qualitative studies of old age in Japan that would include voices of older people.

Keywords Old age · Japan · Literature review · Foucauldian gerontology

Introduction

The starting point for this study is a perception of old age as a socially constructed phenomenon. This perspective does not deny the effects of biological processes occurring in our bodies as we are aging. On the contrary, it demonstrates how changes in our bodies are becoming socially relevant. The aged body becomes the object of various practices aiming at putting it in a suitable, socially acceptable place (Green 1993; Hazan 1994; Katz 1996; Vincent 2006). This perspective accentuates the processes of assigning different meanings, roles and positions that are dependent on age. Does the date on our birth certificate determine who we are? Not necessarily.

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People make choices about and respond to the dominant discourses of aging differently. People's lives present various trajectories for aging because societal and individual character- istics interact to shape the life course. Older people's lives are different because their stories vary. Personal stories are born at the intersection of the social and the individual (Reissman 2008). These stories are expressions of how each of us addresses societal discourses. Personal stories present accounts of everyday life through choices made in relation to external discourses. However, the importance of storytelling goes beyond the reporting of choices. Storytelling is a process of meaning making through which people reflect upon and articulate their understand- ings of their own lives and contexts (Langellier 1989). Therefore, even within the same societal context, every person has his or her own version of aging, just as everyone has his or her own personal story to tell.

Our[1] objective in this paper is to critically examine discourse about old age in Japan, a country that is culturally different from Europe and America. European and American perspectives tend to dominate the scholarly discourse on various representations of and meanings associated with aging. We focus our inquiry on scientific discourse as repre- sentative of a system of knowledge that plays a crucial role in determining ways of thinking about and perceiving old age (Katz 1996; Powell 2006). The main aim of our study is to reflect upon the images of old people and their everyday lives in Japan in the gerontological literature.

We limit our area of inquiry to English academic journals in social and social psychological gerontology articles that were published in the last decade (1999–2009) by Japanese researchers or by teams of both Japanese and Western colleagues. We decided to focus on gerontological research due to the well-established links existing between gerontology as a study of old age and the politics of old age. Although aging and old age in Japan has been studied within other disciplines and by researchers from outside Japan, because such research does not have the same impact on Japanese policies as research conducted by Japanese scholars, it does not have as much influence on stories of old age and aging in Japan.

In 2000, Japan introduced significant changes to its aging policy. By focusing on years 1999–2009, we aimed to analyze the literature published shortly before and for several years after a new reform was introduced. The literature search was performed with the use of search engines, such as SocINDEX and Social Sciences Citation Index. Our search terms were: old age, aging, old/older/elderly people, Japan and Japanese. We filtered our search results by selecting only articles that were devoted to the empirical investigation of the everyday lives of older people in Japan. As an analytical tool, we drew upon the Foucauldian gerontology, which inspired our thinking and provided guidance during the analytic process.

The outline of this paper is as follows: First, we provide a brief background describing the situation regarding aging and older people in Japan. Then, we present the core ideas of Foucauldian gerontology. The subsequent section presents the results of our analysis and comments from the perspective of research results from outside of gerontology published in

books and research reports (Commentary sections). Finally, we discuss our main findings and reflect upon them through our own experiences of visiting/living in Japan.

Background- Aging in Japan

To comprehend the situation of older people in Japan, it has been crucial to understand the Japanese family (Anbäcken 1997; Knight and Traphagan 2003). In Japan, family is seen as a basic unit of social life, and it is the family that provides the main grounds for identity construction (ibid, Hashimoto 1996). In the study of aging, the family ideology of *ie*, the stem family, comes to the forefront. The *ie* system was introduced in Japan during the Meiji era, at the end of the nineteenth century (Wada 1995). It was based on patriarchal ideology and included the values of favor and favor redemption adopted from the feudal relationships (ibid.). The system was oriented towards the preservation of the household by connecting the rights of inheritance with obligations of care and support (Kikuzawa 2006). Children (usually, the eldest son) inherited from their parents, and children in turn provided care and support for their parents when they became ill (Anbäcken 1997). This relationship also reflected the Confucian principle of *on*, according to which the younger generation owes a social debt to the older generation (Levkoff 2000).

That system of reciprocal relations was crucial for organizing and providing care for older people in Japan. For a long time, care provided outside the household was stigmatized and associated with a family failure (Anbäcken 1997; Hashimoto 1996). The influence of Confucianism and the ideology of *ie* produced a perception of older people as deserving of respect, care and protection (Anbäcken 1997; Hashimoto 1996). However, there was another side of this protective approach: it assumed that everyone who was older would need help and care and saw the vulnerability of old age as natural and inevitable (ibid.). In this system, every older person was seen through a perspective of need and dependency regardless of whether she or he expressed this condition (ibid). This tradition-loaded approach to old age often resulted in the disempowerment of older people whose only role was to receive care and to withdraw from participation in societal life (Hashimoto 1996; Sodei 1993). Consequently, growing old in Japan meant belonging to a special class of needy people (Traphagan 1998a). This age-segregated system had been found to contribute to the rise of negative attitudes toward older people (Thang 2002) and toward old age itself (Traphagan 1998b).

Cultural values are not static. On the contrary, they change as people's lives transform. Japan, in particular, has experienced rapid social changes that have affected families and images of family life (Hashimoto and Traphagan 2008). A steady decline of filial responsibility for eldercare has been observed in recent years in Japan, accompanied by changes in housing arrangements and a shift from multi-generational households to nuclear ones (Anbäcken 1997; Levkoff 2000). A more flexible and pragmatic approach to eldercare has been proposed (Elliot and Campbell 1993). Studies have consistently confirmed that people's attitudes toward family care (Ogawa and Matsukura 2007; Jenike 2003; Ogawa and Retherford 1997) and multi-generational co-residence (Kaneda and Raymo 2003; Traphagan 2003) are changing, the meaning of caregiving is changing (Long et al. 2009), and people are diverging from a family-based system of eldercare. Furthermore, research indicates that old people play an important role in supporting their family members, particularly during times of economic crisis when they act essential social safety net (Ogawa 2008).

With a significant increase in Japan's population in the last 50 years, aging has become a national issue. Medical care and pension systems have been revised several times to meet the demands of an aging population (Ogawa and Matsukura 2007). Eldercare has been seen as

one of the prime concerns of the subsequent governments (Long 2008). In the 1970s, Japan began building its own model of welfare, the Japanese-style welfare society, which embraced the values of filial piety and respect towards old age (Anbäcken 1997; Knight and Traphagan 2003). Reliance on families as care providers became a hallmark of the new model. However, due to socio-economic factors, this model had to be reconsidered in the 1980s and 1990s (Peng 2002). Moreover, growing women's movements started pressuring the state to revise its family-oriented policies that made women the prime caregivers (Makita 2010). Women began taking an active role in the policy-making process. Their activity brought the concept of "socialized care" to political debates and set the stage for the creation of a new welfare system in which society takes the responsibility for care provision (ibid.) Beginning in 1989, the government released new programs aimed at promoting the health and welfare of older people and offering some relief to family caregivers. These programs culminated in 2001 with the announcement of The New Gold Plan 21 (Tsuno and Homma 2009). The plan specified four main policy objectives for the following five years: revitalizing the image of the elderly, supporting independent living, supporting local communities, and establishing long-term care services (ibid).

The greatest change in the system occurred in 2000 when the Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) system was introduced. This system requires everyone over age 40 to pay a premium to support those in need; thereafter, recipients of care pay 10 % of the total cost of service provisions (Knight and Traphagan 2003). The LTCI system does not provide care or services: it simply pays for care. Users of the system may receive either services or equipment, but not money (Long 2008). The LTCI system secures access to benefits and the needs of older people are assessed on a six-item scale that has an immediate effect on the type and amount of services available (Tsuno and Homma 2009). Services covered by LTCI include both income and outside-home care and assistance (Knight and Traphagan 2003). One of the principal values of the new system is self-care and self-reliance. LTCI focuses on health promotion and training programs for older people to promote active aging-in-place (Lai 2008) or, rather, to prevent the "disease of aging" (Long et al. 2009). Although implementation of the new insurance system varies in different regions and there are some unresolved issues, one of the main advantages of LTCI is its focus on the rights of all older people to receive care (Peng 2002).

LTCI and other recent policies on aging in Japan have contributed to the change in attitudes among older people. Although attitudes towards financial and personal care dependence on family members began changing at different points in time, it is clear that older people see these dependencies as undesirable. Instead, they have shifted their expectations towards a publicly financed system of support (Yamato 2006).

Method: Foucauldian Gerontology

Foucauldian gerontology has roots in postmodern approaches to aging, which developed in response to the growing diversity and multiplicity of experiences and meanings of old age (Powell 2001). Age is seen as a contested category that has no fixed meaning (Katz 1996). "Aging is a site upon which power games are played" (Powell 2006). In this context, the main objective of Foucauldian gerontology is to inquire into systems of knowledge and power in relation to old age (Katz 1996). For instance, the development of gerontological knowledge provides an example of how old age has been 'problematized" and how various ideas concerning the conceptualization of old age have influenced the lives of older people (ibid).

Foucauldian gerontology centers on the production of various images of old age and its consequences for the lives of older people (Powell 2001). It is interested in the mechanisms

that accompany the birth of certain types of knowledge and how older people are affected by this process (ibid). It attends to the process of the discursive construction of aging among various disciplines, professionals and welfare systems (Powell and Biggs 2003; Powell 2002). Therefore, the concepts of discourse, power and knowledge are at the core of Foucauldian gerontology (Powell and Biggs 2003). Foucauldian gerontology adopts various tools developed by the French discourse theorist.

Foucauldian gerontology often refers to archaeological and genealogical analyses and their importance for the study of aging. Whereas the former investigates discourse at a certain point in time and provides a snapshot of the production of truth about aging, the latter intends to show the origins of particular discourses and their procedural character (ibid.). An example of genealogical analysis can be found in the study of Biggs and Powell (2001), who used a Foucauldian toolkit to analyze changes in social welfare in relation to old age. Their analysis reveals how various assumptions related to old age and social work influence the care, service practices and organization of older people's lives. Through the processes of medicalization, welfarization and marketization, old age has been assigned various values, and different roles have been ascribed to older people (Biggs and Powell 2001). However, the unbalanced power relationship that impinges on older people's voices remains constant. In this sense, aging does not exclusively belong to a person or a society; rather, its image is built at the intersection of both. Therefore, aging identity becomes a function of the interacting forces of biomedicine, lifestyle and welfare (ibid).

In this paper, we draw on the archaeology of discourse to shed light on the current gerontological discourse about older people in Japan. We are interested in identifying the type of knowledge about older people in Japan that is put forth in the analyzed articles. Consistent with a Foucauldian perspective, our interest in knowledge is an inquiry into its two key elements: statements and visibility (Powell and Biggs 2003). Therefore, we focus our analysis on two sets of questions. First, which topics are investigated and which themes emerge in the research process? Second, who takes part in the research and what is the position of older people in the process? We present the results of our analysis under four headings: "a cultural trap", "in search for a cure", "activities of daily life" and "old age and gender". These thematic clusters represent various aspects of the everyday lives of older people in Japan, as presented in the examined studies.

Results

What is the story of aging in Japan and what are older people in Japan like according to gerontological knowledge? Answering this question has been far from simple, and we can point to several difficulties encountered during the literature search. The combination of keywords "older people", "elderly", "ageing" and "Japan"/"Japanese" with the field of gerontology very often led us to articles devoted to the aging policy and care system in Japan. However, it also led to a rich body of literature on the medical aspects of aging and health-related issues, including inquiries of factors contributing to longevity, mortality and good health. Due to the scope of this paper, not all these studies were included. However, several studies referenced in this paper, indicate the main trend and line of argument presented in these type of articles.

There is paucity of gerontological studies that examine the stories of older people. Older people are seldom asked to tell their own stories of aging in Japan in such studies. Instead, rigorous sets of questions presented in numerous questionnaires and national surveys are deemed to reflect the lives of Japan's older population. The key topics that dominate

gerontological research on aging are family, care and functional abilities. Thus, old age and older people are mainly considered in terms of care, as objects rather than subjects.

In the subsequent sections, we provide a more detailed description of our findings. In the Commentary portions, we reflect upon our findings through the perspective of research from outside gerontology, mainly from anthropology, sociology and ethnology.

A cultural trap?

The majority of analyzed articles investigating the situations and lives of older people in Japan are conducted in the family context, and family relationships are presented as the main explanatory factors for understanding aging in Japan. Co-residence and the care burden emerge as the common traits that seem to guide gerontological research on aging. The ideology of *ie* is a recurrent reference in this context.

Although it is acknowledged that cultural norms related to co-residence and filial piety are changing in Japanese society and that people diverge from traditional arrangements (Takagi and Silverstein 2006; Takagi et al. 2007), older people are often presented as representatives of traditional thought, which is incoherent with the surrounding reality (Takagi and Silverstein 2006; Okuno et al. 1999). In the present context, this factor serves as a reason for stress, depression and even suicide. There seems to be a link between older people's attitudes towards these norms and their current living arrangements. For instance, older people co-residing with their children express their appreciation of filial piety to a higher degree than those living alone (Takagi et al. 2007). However, it is stressed that co-residence is the most desired form of living arrangement among older people and is in clear opposition to the values held by the younger generations (ibid; Takagi and Silverstein 2006).

This type of cultural determinism, which presents older people as victims of their own cultures who are not able to act upon the surrounding reality, can also be found in the study of social services utilization by older people, where reluctance to use home help services is discussed in terms of family traditions (Tsukada and Saito 2006). Although there is a high awareness of available services among older people (Shibusawa et al. 2001), their usage of these services is not high. They point to the element of "strangeness" as the main reason.

Commentary

Attitudes towards home help services have been researched in many countries, and it has consistently been demonstrated that such decisions may not be influenced by national culture as much as by a more universal image of bodywork and its implications. As also demonstrated, financial issues may be equally important in decisions about the use of public services (Yamato 2006). There may be many similarities between Japan and other countries. Examples from comparative studies between Japan and Australia (Kendig et al. 1999) and Japan and Sweden (Anbäcken and Nitta 2008; Anbäcken 2011) indicate that decisions concerning family and professional care are often affected by similar feelings and situations. As Schultz Lee (2010) notes "the reality of caregiving decisions is much messier" (p. 665) than mere references to cultural norms. Long (2006), studying the end of life decisions, draws similar conclusions. She illuminates the need to look at such decisions as social processes that involve different actors, take place in various situations and result from a number of interacting aspects of people's lives. This call for a research approach would acknowledge an active role of old people in their own lives and offer an insight into processes of change that accompany all of us. As Traphagan (2008, 2009a) demonstrates in his ethnographic studies of societal changes taking place in Japan and their influence on

the everyday lives of older people, older people actively respond to new realities, and their choices result from a variety of complex factors. Therefore, they cannot be perceived as mere victims of cultural norms. Kawano (2004) applies this insight to the example of pre-funerals in Japan. Her research presents pre-funerals as practices that older people actively employ to resist the oppressive discourse of dependency and to express their sense of agency and independence.

In search of a cure

The depression rate among older people in Japan is relatively high compared to other countries (Sukegawa et al. 2003). Many factors contribute to this situation. In a study of older people who had recently changed their place of residence, Saito et al. (2007) demonstrate that the prevalence of depression tends to be higher among "movers" than "non-movers". Kikuzawa (2006) adds another dimension, accentuating the association between functional limitations and depressive symptoms in Japan. Compared to the situation in the US, where depression in old age is usually associated with poor socioeconomic status (ibid), functional ability appears to be an important factor that determines the well being of older people in Japan.

Functional ability and independence have been found to be key factors for assessing people's life satisfaction (Sato et al. 2002) and subjective image of health as well as predicting life expectancy (Konno et al. 2004), which in turn, has an impact on mortality (Ishizaki et al. 2006). Although these studies indicate that functional ability may be important for older people in Japan, they are more prescriptive than explorative. These studies focus on the generalization and standardization of practices relevant to maintaining health among the elderly population.

Researchers have related social capital (Ichida et al. 2009) and social engagement (Kondo et al. 2007) to good health and good functional capacity. Health-related aspects are used to assess the value of a given social activity. A pragmatic and solution-centered approach appears to dominate gerontological thinking about various aspects of social life; religious behavior has even been examined to gauge its effect on stress reduction (Krause et al. 2002) and as a potential cure or a health-enhancing factor. Studies have consistently revealed that health affects the social relations and support of older people in Japan (Janewic et al. 2000) as well as their living situations (Brown et al. 2002). Particularly in the case of older Japanese women, illness may reduce the quality and frequency of social relations although it triggers more support, particularly instrumental support (Janewic et al. 2000). Brown et al.'s (2002) study indicates that good health increases the probability of living alone, whereas poor health has the opposite effect.

Commentary

The above findings may reflect the social policy discourse in Japan, which, in light of demographic and family changes, aims to "rescue" families from the caregiving burden and make older people more active (Peng 2002). Aging, in this context, is seen as a disease that can be treated and/or prevented. However, researching topics of aging from the perspective of learning, Hori and Cusack (2006) demonstrate that older people participating in educational activities do not view aging as horrible. Instead, they tend to perceive it as a natural process that may include positive aspects. Similarly, authors contributing to the interdisciplinary volume "Faces of Aging", edited by Matsumoto (2011), illuminate older people's voices and their understanding of life in old age. Research participants in studies included in that volume are presented as agents who have something important to say and who differ from each other as their stories vary. One of the contributors, Bower (2011), emphasizes that

gerontology needs more such descriptive studies to avoid the "prescriptive" view of aging that dominates this discipline of study.

Activities of everyday life

It is apparent that older people in Japan are involved in variety of activities and have many roles to fulfill, including diverse family roles, participation in voluntary organizations and work activity (Kikuzawa 2006). Self-employment and post-retirement occupational activities are common among older people. Nearly 50 % of older people are engaged in one of these activities (Raymo et al. 2004). This phenomenon is usually discussed in terms of structural factors such as economic impact and political participation (ibid). However, one study has taken a closer look at the meaning of this trend. Weiss et al. (2005) conducted a study on participation in the Silver Human Resource Center (SHRC). The SHRC was established in 1974 to help retired people find jobs, but organizing various social activities for older people is an equally important activity of the SHRC (ibid).

   In the referenced study, research participants were asked about the role of the SHRC in their well being, specifically its relevance for *ikigai,* a Japanese term equivalent to "life worth living" (ibid). The results of the study indicate that research participants associated *ikigai* with having a social place; however, only men described a positive association between SHRC employment and social place. The authors of the study discuss these findings in terms of the socialization patterns of Japanese women and men, claiming that work has more meaning for older men than for older women.

Commentary

A change of research design may produce very different results on similar issues. For example, contrary to Weiss et al.'s quantitative approach, Willcox et al. (2007) apply qualitative methods based on extended ethnographic engagement in the field and demonstrate the importance of work in the lives of older women. These authors center their investigation on the meaning of *basho-fu* weaving (a representative textile art of Okinawa) for older women. Through five women's stories, *basho-fu* weaving emerges as an activity that provides *ikigai* (a sense of meaning in life), establishes connection with other people and is important for survival (ibid). It becomes an essential source of symbolic capital for these women and brings them respect and social acceptance (ibid). Furthermore, the stories provided by these women reveal diverse life courses, choices and living conditions, although they operate within the same cultural context. These stories demonstrate that people who share a culture may not have the same values and lifestyles, and their stories are replete with words such as independence, activity, joy and pleasure, which are seldom included in survey sheets and questionnaires addressed to older people. Similar values have been observed in a different context among older people who engage in online activity. Kanayama's (2003) ethnographic study explored the experience of belonging to a virtual community. Research participants talked about enjoyment, entertainment and new friendships. The ability to connect with others and exchange ideas, thoughts and feelings has been found to be one of the most important elements of the online experience. These results are similar to results from a study of gateball participation among older Japanese people, where social interaction and communication with others were as important as the physical and mental exercise provided within the framework of the game (Traphagan 1998c).

   These three last studies demonstrate an important value that transcends the examined activities: being together and interacting with people of the same age. Older people find these interactions refreshing and liberating, and communication among their own peer group

emerges as a life-enhancing experience. In her study of older Japanese women's life stories, Matsumoto (2009) reaches a similar conclusion. Her study emphasizes the value of peer meetings for older people as an important opportunity to discuss a variety of topics, including life difficulties and personal problems. The peer group encourages the active process of negotiating individual perspectives and finding creative ways of dealing with difficult situations through the use of humor. Matsumoto (2009) breaks with the dominant view of old people as miserable, instead stressing the self-agency and independence of older people in creating their own images.

Similarly, members of the Old Persons' Club who were interviewed about elder suicide in Japan stressed that the OPC was a place where one could talk freely and be understood (Traphagan 2004) among friends. Although the meaning of friendship among older people in Japan has not been explored, preliminary research indicates that friends are those with whom older people share and enjoy interests and hobbies (Suguwara 2003). Suguwara's research (2003) demonstrates that the lives of older people are not bound to family members. There are other significant people in the lives of older people, and there are friends who allow older people's true selves to emerge (Suguwara 2003). What are these "true selves" of older Japanese people? Levy's (1999) cross-country comparison of attitudes towards aging, indicated that, compared to people in the US and China, older Japanese people have the most positive image of themselves but they have the most negative image of other older people. However, there is lack of studies that demonstrate a dynamic relationship between the various "selves" of aging and the resources people use to build a positive image of their lives.

Old age and gender

In many studies mentioned so far, gender has been suggested as an important factor for understanding the research results, particularly for studies examining various aspects of health, functional ability and care (Janewic et al. 2000; Takagi and Silverstein 2006; Sukegawa et al. 2003; Shibusawa et al. 2001; Kikuzawa 2006; Kondo et al. 2007). However, in these studies, gender is understood in terms of sex; the results are simply divided into female and male responses. For instance, the division between male and female is clearly stated in a study measuring the relationship between social support and subjective health. Although authors Okamoto and Tanaka (2004) state their goal of examining gender difference, they conclude their study with sex-dependent factors. A similar approach to gender differences is presented in a study of cognition of social capital (Aihara et al. 2009). Although these studies do not problematize the concepts of gender and age, they do indicate that living situations may differ among older women and older men in Japan. Older women tend to be at a higher risk of depression and suicide (Sukegawa et al. 2003). Although older women are more aware of available services (Shibusawa et al. 2001), they are also more reluctant to use these services than men are (Tsukada and Saito 2006). Women participate in community activities (Aihara et al. 2009) to a greater degree and receive more support (Okamoto and Tanaka 2004), but there are men for whom these two dimensions positively affect their self-assessment of their health (ibid) and cognitive capital (Aihara et al. 2009).

Commentary

As indicated above, little, if anything, is known about the everyday aging experiences of older men and women. The intersection of gender and age in Japan remains an underexplored area of research. The study by Willcox et al. (2007) is one example of research that brings questions of aging and gender to the forefront of analysis. Similarly, Traphagan (2000b) provides an account

of one aspect of life among older men. His research focusing on various religious behaviors demonstrates how these behaviors may influence the aging experience and context for the lives of older Japanese men. He analyzes this phenomenon in terms of the reinforcement of paternalistic values, particularly those of gerontocracy. The practice of segregation based on age indicates that religion may have variety of meanings in people's lives and social organization (ibid). It also suggests that the system of age-based segregation often interacts with gender. This subject merits further research addressing the intersections of age and gender in the lives of older people and the organization of social life.

Discussion

The main objective of this paper has been to examine the current gerontological literature on older people in Japan and to consider the everyday lives of older Japanese people. One of the obvious features of the gerontological discourse on old age in Japan is its medicalization, characterizing aging as a disease that needs to be cured and/or prevented. This finding is consistent with earlier discussions held by Traphagan (2000a; 2004), who also reflected upon the medical side of the discourse on aging in Japan. However, this conceptualization of old age also exists in Western gerontology, and it has long affected scholars' thinking about the lives of older people (see Katz 1996). This "medical gaze" produces knowledge about aging that is strongly influenced by medicine and gives health professionals power over the lives of older people (Biggs and Powell 2001).

Aged body

Ohnuki-Thierny (1989) found that a view of the body and health is rooted in the early lives of Japanese people. Children are raised with awareness of bodily circumstances, and society is shaped by this focus on body, health, and care. Compared to Swedish society, life in Japan seems to revolve around issues of health and illness to a much greater degree. "Take care so you don't catch a cold" is a common expression passed from one generation to another in Japan. Consequently, what the Swedish perspective perceives as "minor alignments" (such as colds) that may be self-treated at home, are a reason for hospital visits in Japan. Medical authority holds a strong grip on Japanese society in general, not exclusively among older people (cf Anbäcken 1997; 2002).

In their ethnographic study, Young and Ikeuchi (1997) demonstrate how fears concerned with the aging body and mind are expressed in religious "business": temples sell amulets that aim to protect the buyer from requiring care. Dementia is an example of a disease that is feared of mainly because of the risk of becoming overly dependent on family. Dementia and being bedridden are conditions that older people and their caregivers should actively fight against (Traphagan 2009b). During her field studies in Japan, in 1990, Anbäcken could observe such practices. Preventive measures such as, "netakiri zero sakusen", the campaign to eliminate being bedridden, were emphasized on various levels in society and local elder centers were covered with posters communicating such messages to all. The aged body was presented as the problematic body (and mind), causing nuisance ("meiwaku"). A great part of the responsibility to respond was placed on shoulders of older persons and their caregivers, who often were the family members. Traphagan (2000a) discusses this further using the example of *boke*, a socially constructed concept describing the state of senility in old age. Traphagan (2000a) demonstrates that such conceptualizations result from age-structuring practices that portray older people as different from the rest of society.

As previously mentioned, a clear link seems to exist between research and social policy discourse in Japan. Newly implemented policy programs tend to focus on fighting the "disease of aging" (Long et al. 2009). Within this context, older people are expected to follow certain regimes and exhibit lifestyles preferred by the policy discourse. Health promotion programs for older people in Japan aim to determine the type of exercise that would be the most beneficial for aged bodies from a medical or fitness point of view. Andersson and Nitta (2008) found a difference in their comparison between groups of Japanese and Swedish older people exercising, in which a Swedish gymnastic group leader welcomed participants to "come and join however you feel, you can always sing along the music or have fun gossiping or something" (ibid, 260), whereas a Japanese leader emphasized the physical exercise: "Please be conscious of health and keep exercising anytime and anywhere as much as possible" (ibid). The first author participated in one such session for older people who volunteered to take part in a three-month exercise program combined with research. Aside from thorough medical check-ups, participants were not asked about their feelings and opinions towards the program. Older people were seen in terms of aged bodies. In a study that examined the effects of water exercise for older people, the authors discussed their results in terms of physical functioning that usually "declines with aging" (Sato et al. 2007, p.1584). It is also a common practice for nursing students to wear "old age simulators" during their training, including special glasses that obscure their vision as well as heavy backpacks and various devices on their knees and elbows to give them "a better perspective on aging" that they can later apply in their work.

Care recipients and the burden of care

Another substantial area of research on aging in Japan is social and aging policy. The literature on this subject appears to dominate gerontological inquiries into the social aspect of aging, and care-related issues are at the forefront of investigations. Co-residence, care provisions, family relations and social support systems are very often at the center of research interest. Many researchers in this area focus on the structural factors and macro-level analyses of societal factors. In the articles analyzed for this study, the "problem" approach to aging and older people is implicitly evoked. This seems to be in line with the overall social policy perspective that sees old age as a social problem to be managed (Long 2008).[2] The discourse of "apocalyptic demography" (Vincent 1996) transcends policy debates and can readily be found in journal articles. Many of the papers analyzed for this study begin their discussions by stressing how "rapid" and "huge" demographic changes in Japan affect society. The welfarization of old age, which sees old age as a burden (Biggs and Powell 2001), seems to be a prevalent theme of both research on aging and social policy towards aging in Japan.

This focus on care issues is directly related to the earlier mentioned emphasis of gerontological research investigating the effects of aging in Japan on the role of family. Consequently, in the public and academic discourses older people seem to exist only through their family and care relations, and these determine their lives and identities. In such analyses, older people are often portrayed as victims of both culture and their own views. Similarly, social policies perceive older people through the perspective of family. In light of the "low-birth society" problem (Roberts 2002), older people are seen as threats to the policies promoting procreation.

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[2] Anbäcken (2013) discusses policy and ideology in similar terms in a chapter in *New Tools in Welfare Research*, edited by Elisabet Cedersund and Ellinor Brunnberg.

The meaning of stories

Gerontological knowledge about aging and older people in Japan is often produced without older people themselves. Although older people were research participants in all articles analyzed for this paper, there were a few research projects in which the voices of older people were considered and their stories were appreciated. Welfare and science seem to undermine the importance and relevance of older people's views, opinions and feelings. One may read various stories about older people in Japan but not, in most cases, stories told by older people themselves.

What does it mean, then, to grow old in Japan? What does the everyday life of older people look like? Very little is known about this subject within the context of geretonological research. Such research conducted within the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural science, which invites older people to tell their stories and provides an insight into older people's ways of thinking and feeling (see Traphagan 2004; Kanayama 2003; Willcox et al. 2007; Matsumoto 2011; Long 2006), but those studies also raise many questions that merit further investigation. Older people certainly value and enjoy the company of others, social interaction and connection. Older people frequently report that they can only talk about everything with their peers (Traphagan 2004). When we visited several places where older people met, we heard similar opinions. The meeting day was important to everyone, people dressed nicely, and some wore make-up. The days when they met were seen as celebrations. Taking into account the societal discourse on aging, these meeting points may be seen as safe havens for people. One of the participants told us that these weekly meetings made her feel free and able to simply enjoy herself. As Traphagan (2004) noted, such places bring relief to people whose lives are enmeshed in relations of dependency and care. These comments reveal that older people in Japan want to enjoy their lives and to be happy, and they seek various ways of achieving these goals. Even if family and care are important, these elements are only a fraction of their lives. Little is known about the lives are of older people or how they are constructed and lived.

Johansson et al. (2008), Anbäcken and Kinoshita (2008) and Anbäcken et al. (2008) arrive at similar conclusions. Older people in Japan and Sweden can express their views and perspectives on everyday life and can reflect upon existential issues. This is true for older people with and without good health, those living at home and those who live at care facilities. People may not socialize with others at care facilities because they have nothing in common with them or because dementia damages communication. Other people may value talking with others regardless of the context (ibid).

It is apparent that the societal discourse on aging in Japan damages the image of old age and the identities of older people. The production of care recipients and burdensome bodies seems to be the main discursive practice of social policy discourse. A similar trend can be seen in gerontological research on older Japanese people. Therefore, there is a need for a new type of research that would abandon the "dilemma" approach in favor of emphasizing the "human face" of older people (Blackwood 2003). One approach to this research would be to accommodate personal stories of aging told by older people themselves. By telling their stories, older people would be able to demonstrate their own views and perceptions of their lives, aging and life in contemporary Japan. They could present their own stories of what it means to grow old in Japan. In addition to benefiting society, such research could enhance the lives of older people. The process of telling stories has been found to have healing effects, which could restore the socially damaged identities of older people in Japan. Anbäcken (2011) emphasizes the need to be given opportunities to tell of one's own story and to make a life review for the wellbeing at the end of life. Many studies have long been undertaking that task outside gerontology. Some of the key works referenced in this paper

are exemplary in this respect. They reveal various life courses and lifestyles chosen by older Japanese people to demonstrate that their lives do not revolve only around issues of care and health. Most importantly, they bring forward an image of human beings who undergo changes and have various experiences. They exemplify, to use Katz's terminology, a "nomad science" (1996) that, in contrast to state (royal) science, is free from the influences of national policies and that gives voice to the people. Nomad science is flowing, radical and indefinite. Katz (1996) argues that it is only through nomad science that the diversity and heterogeneity of old age can be revealed. Such nomad science is open to exploring new areas and perspectives. For example in her recent study Long (2012) reflects upon the meeting between human and non-human within the context of aging, and makes suggestions for further research exploring the role of technology in mitigating the experience of aging in Japan.

Reflecting upon the results of this literature review, it seems that the situation of older people in Japan is not easy. Many discourses impinge on their sense of being and dignity. As the research indicates, in addition to long lives, older Japanese people are known for poor mental health leading to depression and suicide. These can be symptoms of the individual struggle against societal discourses that remove older people from the social sphere and assign them to the family sphere. Levy (1999) noted that, consistent with the main characteristics of the Japanese mind, older people may separate themselves from the outside discourse and focus on the private construction of the self. Is this really the case?

When visiting and communicating with older people in Japan (both verbally and non-verbally), we saw diverse stories of individuals enmeshed in the everyday reality of old age. Social policy and gerontological discourse about Japanese aging largely present old age as a constant with a fixed meaning. According to that discourse, there is one experience of old age, and everyone's experiences of growing old are the same. Yet, when we met older Japanese people, we met individuals, including people who had unique stories to tell and who were different from one another. During these meetings, Wilińska met a woman whose life, when observed from the perspective of research results and social policy discourse in Japan, seemed to be successful. She had good relations with the family with whom she lived, good health and friends; she participated in community center meetings and she was engaged in meaningful activity (gardening, in her case). Yet, some moments in her story displayed sadness. The literature analyzed here cannot fully explain her sadness.

The gerontological literature reviewed in this study rarely addresses existential issues. Life is presented from a minimalistic perspective and seems to be a combination of several activities that have no deeper meaning or essence. Gerontology has largely avoided the topic of death (Johnson 2009). In contrast, Long (2006) and Anbäcken et al. (2008) found that when these issues were addressed specifically, many older people voiced thoughts about their approaching death and the meaning of their lives. They were striving for a "good death" (Long 2006), and they also expressed their desire to have a good life: "I think I cherish my life…I wish to live until my life runs out" (Anbäcken et al. 2008, p 227). The cross-cultural study on older people in Japan and Sweden (Anbäcken and Kinoshita 2008) demonstrated that when we did not start by comparing a Japanese and a Swedish way of life, but began our study instead by analyzing individual cases regardless of origin, we found some unexpected similarities. For instance, despite different socio-cultural views on couplehood for the generation of older people studied, when separated through placement of one of the spouses in a care facility, both Japanese and Swedish couples tried to maintain the relationship, albeit showing affection in different ways. Although these differences could be understood in light of certain sociocultural traits embedded in family systems, such as Japanese arranged marriages versus Swedish "love-marriages", the differences were in accordance with the

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