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Conflicting views on elder care responsibility in Japan



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ABSTRACT

I examine the attitudinal ambivalence created by conflicting social expectations regarding parent-child devotion, filial obligation and family membership, and gender norms in a national population of Japanese adults. I ask: in a context of rapidly changing family and elder care norms, how do different beliefs and attitudes overlap and conflict and how are they related to elder care preferences? I analyze data from the 2006 Japanese General Social Survey and use Latent Class Analysis to identify latent groups in the population defined by their beliefs and examine the relationship between class membership and elder care preferences. I found variation in the population with respect to the measured beliefs as well as a relationship between patterns of beliefs and choice of elder caregiver. I found conflicting expectations regarding elder care responsibility in one latent class and this class also expressed elder care preferences that conflict with at least some of their strongly held beliefs.

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1. Introduction

How is the responsibility for care work determined in families when traditional norms of caregiving responsibility are in flux? An extensive literature discusses the feminization of care work and adult daughters' responsibility for caring for aging elders. In the context of East Asia, care work is feminized but norms of filial obligation and family membership place the responsibility of elder care on adult sons and their wives. In this paper, I examine how beliefs about gender, parent-child devotion, and filial obligation and family membership overlap or diverge and how patterns of these beliefs are related to attitudes about appropriate elder caregivers. This work highlights the existence of conflicting social norms related to elder care and sheds light on how families think about care responsibility in a context of changing gender and family norms and of shifting elder care responsibility from the private to the public sphere. Broadly speaking, it reveals the ways in which individuals and families think about elder care in a context of conflicting social expectations that emerged as a result of uneven social change.

1.1. Theories of care work responsibility

Different sociological theories provide alternative perspectives on who bears the greatest responsibility for elder care in families. According to hierarchical compensation theory, there is a hierarchy of preferred caregivers in families with other caregivers stepping in when the care recipient's ideal caregiver is not available to provide assistance (Lin et al., 2003). In Japan, sons' families, and the family of the eldest son in particular, have traditionally held more responsibility for caregiving than

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married daughters. In practice, it has typically been the wife of the eldest son who provides the bulk of assistance to aging parents (Sodei, 1995).

The hierarchical compensation model of caregiver selection is based on norms of filial obligation and beliefs about gender. Children are obligated to “repay” their debt of gratitude to their parents through the provision of elder care and, if they fail to provide care, children may be sanctioned for their lack of filial piety by relatives (Stein et al., 1998; Ogawa and Retherford, 1993). For these reasons, children are preferred as caregivers compared to other relatives and non-kin who do not have these ties of obligation to the older adult (Lee, 2010). In addition to filial obligation, beliefs about gender are an important influence on the choice of family caregivers.

In both the U.S. and Japan, care work is a gendered task performed primarily by women (Finley, 1989; Dwyer and Coward, 1991). A debate exists as to whether this gender gap in care work is attributable to structural or cultural factors, or to a combination of both (see, e.g., Sarkisian and Gerstel, 2004). Structural explanations focus on the constraints related to the different employment characteristics of men and women (Risman, 1998). Men have typically worked in more demanding, time-intensive paid work than women, for example, and therefore have been less likely to perform unpaid family care work. These theorists argue that when men and women occupy similar structural positions, they will provide similar amounts of care (Sarkisian and Gerstel, 2004).

Other gender and family scholars focus on cultural factors in explaining the gender gap in care work. Men and women perform their gender through the care work done (or avoided) in families (Calasanti and Bowen, 2006; Ferree, 2010; West and Zimmerman 1987). This performance of care work in families by women naturalizes care work as gendered and the gendering of care work is further reinforced by occupational segregation and wage discrimination (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001). These patterned bases of inequality reinforce the expectation that women will serve as caregivers in their families—women have on average relatively less to lose (in terms of income and career status) than their male counterparts in devoting time and energy to the care of elders. Whether based on structural differences or cultural factors, it is clear that socially structured and, hence malleable, gender relations permeate the social institutions of family and work and shape who will perform care work in families.

Hierarchical compensation and gender models of care work depict caregiving decisions as following clear cultural guidelines for the selection of a family caregiver based on gender and filial obligation. However, other research on caregiving draws attention to the conflict and ambivalence (Connidis and McMullin, 2002; George, 1986) associated with caregiving.

1.2. Attitudinal ambivalence

Attitudinal ambivalence refers to the existence of conflicting beliefs held by an individual (Craig et al., 2005). Past research has examined attitudinal ambivalence with respect to the issues of abortion (Alvarez and Brehm, 1995) and gay rights (Newby-Clark et al., 2002) when an individual holds conflicting beliefs (between beliefs about gender and religion or morality and personal freedom, for example). A distinction exists between sociological and psychological ambivalence (Sjoberg, 2010). While psychological ambivalence is rooted in individual personality, sociological ambivalence refers to conflicting normative expectations rooted in the social structure (Merton and Barber, 1967; Sjoberg, 2010). Although the existence of these conflicting expectations, or potential ambivalence, may lead to unpleasant feelings, or felt ambivalence, this is not necessarily always the case (Newby-Clark et al., 2002).

Connidis and McMullin (2002) applied the concept of sociological ambivalence to the case of elder care. They argued that intergenerational ambivalence arises because of contradictions embedded in the social structure: there is increasing egalitarianism and acceptance of women working in the labor force but, at the same time, persistence in the gendered division of labor, creating ambivalence for women in particular in negotiating elder care decisions. Seltzer et al. (2012) analyzed the ambivalence surrounding intergenerational coresidence based on the conflict between independence, self-reliance and an emphasis on family ties in the U.S. and Aronson (1992) investigated sociological ambivalence in the context of the conflict arising for caregivers in Canada between femininity/care and autonomy. Other research has looked at the contradictions among social norms governing elder care, without explicitly referencing the concept of ambivalence. According to George (1986, p. 68): “certain widely accepted norms concerning responsibilities of family members toward each other may set the stage for conflict, ambiguity, and/or discomfort concerning appropriate caregiving behavior in the family context.” In the case of George’s (1986) research, this conflict arose between norms of reciprocity and norms of solidarity, both of which govern family relationships and influence caregiving. The current research builds on these past studies by examining the potential attitudinal ambivalence resulting from the existence of conflicting expectations rooted in the social structure for caregivers in Japan.

1.3. The case of Japan

The co-existence of norms of filial obligation and family membership emphasizing the role of the eldest son and cultural beliefs about care work as women’s work make Japan a particularly appropriate case for the study of ambivalence in caregiving. The cultural rules of the Japanese *ie* family system prioritize sons as permanent members of the family. According to Ochiai (1997), the *ie* family system is “a corporate body which owns household property, carries on a family business, and emphasizes the continuity of the family line and family business over generations” (58–9). Under the rules of the *ie* family system, the eldest son and his wife were expected to live with and provide care to aging parents and, in return, his family

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