

Original Paper

Research on the Lives of Elderly Japanese People Living in Germany — Particularly Those Who Plan to Stay in Germany Permanently —

Hiromitsu MIHARA*

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Abstract

This study aims to analyse the lives of elderly Japanese people who plan to reside permanently in Germany. Questionnaires were sent to 89 Japanese people currently residing there. Generally speaking, the older the subjects were, the less stress they felt about not returning to Japan, even as they entered the last stages of their lives. Most respondents, regardless of their age, did not plan on entering German nursing homes, but rather indicated that they would like to stay in their own homes and receive Japanese meals through a meal service program. In addition, the respondents expressed a desire for physical care provided by Japanese careworkers or by German careworkers who can speak Japanese. From these results it can be seen that a Japanese meal service program and a Japanese language physical care system is desired by, and needs to be established for, elderly Japanese people in Germany.

Introduction

This study aims to analyse the lives of elderly Japanese who plan to reside permanently in Germany. The Japanese are an aging society and the aged in Japan's population are increasing rapidly in Japan. New nursing homes and hospitals for the aged are being established everywhere in Japan and social welfare services for the aged are being offered to them and their families.

But the increasing aging Japanese population consists not only of Japanese people in Japan but also includes Japanese people who have been living in Germany for a long period of time. Soon, a social welfare system that takes into consideration cultural differences will be needed for Japanese people in foreign countries. There are some reports about the mental health of Japanese people who live in foreign countries[1-4]. But not much has been reported about elderly Japanese people who live in foreign countries.

It is generally known that there are some nursing homes in the U.S.A., Canada, and Brazil for elderly people of Japanese origin. I personally visited a nursing home for elderly Japanese people in Seattle in America in August 2000. The nursing home was established in 1976 and about 60 elderly Japanese have lived there and received Japanese and Asian care service by Japanese, Korean and Filipino careworkers.

Minemoto [5,6] has also reported about a nursing home for elderly Japanese in Brazil. But there are no such nursing homes for elderly Japanese in Germany or other European countries. The reason for this

* School of Nursing
Yamaguchi Prefectural University
Yamaguchi, 753-0011, Japan

is that there is a longer history of Japanese emigration to North and South America than to European countries. Also the scale of the immigration was much greater to the Americas than to Europe, and there are many Japanese-Americans, Japanese-Canadians, Japanese-Brazilians etc.

I have begun researching the lives of elderly Japanese in Germany, because I lived for some time in Germany and I have some Japanese friends who asked if I would undertake this research. It was their hope that through this research a social welfare system for elderly Japanese people residing in Germany and other European countries would be established.

In particular, I will investigate the kind of life-style elderly residents hope to lead, e.g., how they feel about meals, communication, etc.

Method

The subjects were 89 Japanese people planning to reside permanently in Germany. 87% were female, and 13% were male. Their ages ranged from 31 to 80 and the mean age was 52.2. About 70% of the subjects were over 50 years of age. Most subjects had entered the last stage of their lives. Their occupations were as follows: 30.3% housewives, 15.7% translators, 9.0% musicians, 5.6% officeworkers, etc. 60% were international couples (a Japanese married to a German), and 40% were Japanese couples. 84.3% of the subjects held Japanese nationality, 14.7% held German nationality. About 80% of the subjects had resided in Germany for 10 years or more. About 90% plan to continue residing in Germany and about 50% plan to continue residing in Germany permanently.

Questionnaires were sent to these people in Germany. The questionnaires consisted of items divided into two categories: (A) their life-style in Germany (the availability of Japanese foods, Japanese newspapers, visits to other Japanese elderly people, etc) and (B) their plans for life in old age (returning to Japan, entering German nursing homes, places of interment, etc).

Results

A. Life-style in Germany

(1) Do you eat Japanese food for dinner?

Most subjects answered "frequently" and half of them ate Japanese food every day. About 98% of the international couples also ate Japanese food for dinner. It can be seen from this result that eating Japanese food for dinner is very important for elderly Japanese living in Germany.

(2) How often do you have the opportunity to telephone Japanese people in Germany?

About 90% answered "frequently", and half of them telephoned every day. They had many opportunities to telephone each other.

(3) How often do you have an opportunity to visit with other Japanese people?

About 90% answered "frequently", and about 30% of them visited them every day. About 60% visited other Japanese two or three times a week. Most subjects had much contact with each other.

(4) Do you have a chance to read Japanese newspapers ?

About 72% answered "frequently". About 33% read newspapers every day, and about 40% read newspapers two or three times a week. About 25% answered "rarely" or "never". It is supposed that these people live in very rural areas where people can not buy Japanese newspapers or they do not buy them, because they are very expensive.

(5) Do you have any opportunities to watch satellite broadcast television programs from Japan?

39.3% answered "frequently" or "sometimes". 58.5% answered "rarely" or "never". We can see that

there is not such a wide difference in the answers.

(6) How often do you feel stress from living in Germany?

About 60% answered “frequently” or “sometimes”. The subjects’ age significantly influenced the results. The older the subjects were, the less they felt stress ($x^2=34.752$, $p < 0.05$). Because older subjects have stayed longer in Germany, they are more able to adjust themselves to German culture than younger subjects. Younger subjects are more critical of German culture than older subjects. Therefore, younger subjects feel more stress than older subjects.

About 25% of the subjects answered that they felt stress when they had communication problems in their interactions with German people. Another 25% answered that they felt stress when they felt cultural differences. This shows that cultural differences influenced the answers of the subjects.

(7) How often do you feel fatigue from living in Germany?

46% answered “frequently” or “sometimes”. 57% answered “rarely” or “never”. It can be seen from this result that there is not such a wide difference in the answers. But 20% of the subjects who answered “frequently” and “sometimes” felt fatigue when they spoke German and ate German food. It seems that cultural differences influenced the answers of the subjects.

B. Plans for Life in Old Age

(1) Will you return to Japan when you are old?

About 30% answered that they would not return to Japan. About 50% gave “no answer”. But the subjects’ age significantly influenced the results ($x^2=59.489$, $p < 0.001$).

The older the subjects were, the less likely that they would return to Japan even when they entered the last stage of their lives. It is supposed that elderly subjects have more friends and acquaintances in Germany than in Japan because they have lived there longer. International couples also indicated that they would not return to Japan.

(2) Do you plan on entering a German nursing home for the aged when you become very old?

About 50% answered that they did not plan on entering German nursing homes for the aged. It seems that they do not have a good impression of German nursing homes for the aged, and they think that the life-style of people living in German nursing homes for the aged is different from that of Japan and there would be no private life for them there.

(3) Would you live in a German nursing home for the aged if you could live there in a life-style similar to that of Japan (e.g., if you could speak Japanese there, you could eat Japanese food, etc)?

About 50% of the subjects answered that they would live in a German nursing home for the aged if they could live a life-style similar to the one described in the question. However, whether the question was put to a Japanese couple or to an international couples significantly influenced the results ($x^2=6.2937$, $p < 0.05$). More international couples than Japanese couples indicated that they did not want to live in a German nursing home for the aged. This shows that international couples do not have a good impression of nursing homes for the aged.

(4) Would you rather live in your own home than in a German nursing home for the aged when you become very old?

About 64% answered that they could live better in their own home. But there is a significant difference between the answers of Japanese couples and of international couples ($x^2=7.3947$, $p < 0.05$). More international couples than Japanese couples indicated that they would rather live in their own house. It seems as if international couples reject nursing homes for the aged.

(5) What kinds of care do you hope to receive when you become very old ?

Over half of the subjects answered that they would hope to receive Japanese meals through a meal service program. About 25% indicated that they would like to receive physical care provided by Japanese

careworkers or German careworkers who can speak Japanese. 63% of international couples also desired Japanese meals. 20.4% hoped for physical care provided by Japanese. It can be seen from these results that most subjects would like to maintain contact with Japanese culture even when they become very old.

(6) Would you visit a Japanese senior citizens' club if one were established in Frankfurt or Koeln?

About 60% answered "no answer" or "no". It is supposed that there are no opportunities for them to visit such facilities, because they live in rural districts far away from big cities like Frankfurt and Koeln or have no interest to visit such facilities.

(7) Will you choose a Buddhist ceremony for your own funeral ceremony?

About 50% answered "no answer". They have been influenced by the Christian religion in Germany. About 20% answered "yes". These subjects have not been able to forget the traditional Japanese religion.

(8) Where would you like to be interred?

About 40% answered "in Germany". These subjects have become attached to German society because they have lived there for a long time. The 20% who answered "in Japan" showed their desire to return to Japan.

Discussion

We can clearly see from these results how elderly Japanese who plan to reside permanently in Germany live. Most subjects visit Japan once or twice a year and regularly eat Japanese food for dinner. Furthermore, they have chances to visit with other Japanese people. Interestingly, most subjects including international couples eat Japanese food for dinner. Minemoto[5,6] reports that elderly Japanese people in Brazil show much yearning for traditional Japanese food, e.g., Sushi and Sashimi, even when they had relatively few memories of Japan from their youth. Ueda[7,8] has also reported that having Japanese food for dinner is very good for the mental health of Japanese students who study in foreign countries. Japanese food is a very important element in the lives of elderly Japanese people who live in foreign countries. The older the subjects were, the less desire they showed to return to Japan even when they entered the last stage of their lives. Regardless of this fact, they still yearn for Japanese food. It is supposed that elderly subjects have more friends and acquaintances in Germany than in Japan because they have lived there for a long time. An elderly Japanese lady explains her experience: "Most of us want to visit Japan as long as our parents are alive because our parents are very glad when we visit Japan. But, if our parents are dead, we do not visit Japan any longer, even when we have some siblings, as siblings have their own lives, and they are not as glad as parents when we visit." Most Japanese living in Germany lose their desire to visit Japan if their parents are dead.

Furthermore it is generally said that elderly people have a tendency to go on living in places where they have stayed for a long time. This tendency influenced the answers of subjects who said that they would not return to Japan. Elderly Japanese people desire to stay in Germany, even though Germany is a foreign country for them. However, most subjects do not desire to enter German nursing homes. In particular, even elderly international couples who have adjusted themselves to German society do not wish to enter German nursing homes. They do not seem to have a good impression of them. Some subjects did, however, answer that they would live in a German nursing home for the aged if they could live there in a life-style similar to that of Japan. This shows that some elderly Japanese people yearn for Japanese culture.

Some subjects indicated that they would like to visit Japanese senior citizens' clubs, but about 40% answered "no answer". If Japanese senior citizens' clubs were really to be established in Frankfurt or Koeln and if there were an opportunity to have contact with other elderly Japanese, more subjects might have answered that they would like to visit a Japanese senior citizens' club. Therefore, it is necessary to

verify how the answer of the subjects would change if Japanese senior citizens' clubs were really established.

About 40% hoped to be interred in Germany. It might be natural for them to be interred in Germany, because they have lived there for a long time and have more friends, and memories there than in Japan. But 20% hoped that they would be interred in Japan. It is necessary to think if their interment in Japan will be really possible when they are dead.

From these results it can be seen that a Japanese meal service program and a Japanese language physical care system offered in the homes of the elderly is desired by and needs to be established for most elderly Japanese people in Germany. The cooperation of Japanese restaurants and Japanese families might be needed in a Japanese meal service program.

Most subjects do not want to enter German nursing homes. But if they develop senile dementia or become bed-ridden, and cannot live alone in their own home any more, nursing homes will be needed for them. However, because of the cost, it is difficult to establish a nursing home in Germany for only elderly Japanese people. Elderly Japanese people who develop senile dementia or become bed-ridden will need to enter a German nursing home. In such cases, elderly Japanese groups and families may ask German nursing homes for Japanese or Asian meals and physical care provided by Japanese careworkers or German careworkers who can speak Japanese.

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