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THE GIFT  
*of*  
GENERATIONS

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*Japanese and American Perspectives  
on Aging and the Social  
Contract*

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AKIKO HASHIMOTO

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# The Gift of Generations

Japanese and American Perspectives  
on Aging and the Social Contract

AKIKO HASHIMOTO  
*University of Pittsburgh*



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*The Gift of Generations* is an inquiry into the different cultural meanings of giving and deserving help in two aging societies. Postindustrial societies today contend with population dynamics that have never before existed. As the number of older people grows, countries must determine how best to provide for the needs of this population. The constraints are real: Fiscal and material resources are finite and must be shared in a way that is perceived as just. As such, societies confront the fundamental question of who gets what, how, and why, and ultimately must reappraise the principles determining why some people are considered more worthy of help than others. This study systematically explores the Japanese and American answers to this fundamental question.

f 13.31

To my father and my mother,  
Hashimoto Kōzaburō, and Hisako

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

– Dylan Thomas

Learn to adore it in your heart  
The silver hair on your head.  
Of all the riches  
That I can find in this world  
Nothing can equal  
In price, no matter how dear,  
The silver hair on your head.

– Ryōkan

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## Preface

HOW are people made *deserving* of help? How do different cultures define the meaning of giving and worthiness of the people who “ought” to be helped? This book explores these questions by comparing Japanese and American helping arrangements and support systems. Drawing on 2 years of fieldwork, the study analyzes the cultural and structural conditions that shape the “social contract” in the case of the elderly. My analysis draws attention to the symbolic dimension of this social contract and focuses on the importance of cultural assumptions and social assignments that create the conditions of deservedness.

There is more to the phenomenon of giving and deserving help than goodwill and meeting others’ needs. People seemingly give help even when it is not in their interest to do so. Reciprocity also seems to matter, even when people act out of generosity. I believe that the key explanations are found in the regulation of values and interests entailed in the practice of the social contract. The cross-cultural design of this study offers an opportunity to explore systematically these values and interests in social support. My purpose is to understand how culture and society shape giving, both theoretically and empirically.

This framework derives from an analysis of comparative patterns of support, the different conditions in which support is perceived to be successful or unsuccessful, and the degree to which different values and interests are prioritized in helping arrangements. I explain the cross-national differences by comparing the definitions of vulnerability, security, dependency, reciprocity, protection, intervention, entitlement, and obligation; I also account for the similarities by comparing the social practices of designating rights, responsibilities, credits, and debts.



## *Preface*

The study draws on fieldwork from two communities where I lived as a participant observer. The two sites I selected – Odawara City in Kanagawa Prefecture, and West Haven City in Connecticut – are comparable communities in size, demographic profiles, and socioeconomic conditions. In addition to the information from participant observation, I obtained systematically comparable data from 49 case studies and 471 survey respondents. Data collection for this project started in the early 1980s, but the core values and interests that I examine nevertheless do not change easily. If anything, the question of the social contract in contemporary societies has become even more significant in the intervening years.

Chapter 1 introduces the central themes of the study – deservedness, vulnerability, and responsibility – and maps out the theoretical perspective of the book. Chapter 2 sets the scene for the study by introducing the reader to the two communities. In Chapter 3, I explore the different social designations of rights and responsibilities in the public domain, by examining the relationship between the individual, the family, and the state as expressed in Japanese and American social policies. In the following three empirical chapters, I analyze the helping practices in the private domain, to explore the workings of entitlement, obligation, protection, intervention, reciprocity, and fairness in the support relationship. Chapter 4 examines the different patterns of interaction in the giver–receiver relationship. In Chapters 5 and 6, I present the viewpoints of the elderly themselves. In the next two synthesis chapters, which contain the heart of my argument on values, interests, and symbolic equity, I bring together the different layers of findings in a theoretical framework. Chapter 7 identifies and discusses the key cultural assumptions that shape the support practice. Chapter 8 discusses the social assignments of rights, responsibilities, credits, and debts that establishes symbolic equity in the giver–receiver relationship. Finally, Chapter 9 offers a summary and some reflections on the implications of the study. Details of research methods can be found in the appendix.

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## *The Social Designation of Deserving Citizens*

### THE PRIVATE DISCOURSE: EXPECTATIONS OF VULNERABILITY

**D**OROTHY Turoski<sup>1</sup> is a 74-year-old woman who lives in a public housing complex for the elderly in the city of West Haven, Connecticut, 80 miles to the northeast of metropolitan New York. She packed chicken at the local poultry factory for 28 years before retiring from her job, and now lives in a subsidized one-room housing unit of this complex on a small Social Security income. Dorothy has some difficulty moving around because of arthritis, and she has lived here alone for 7 years.

I do nothing. There's nothing to do here. I haven't got none, no friends. There's plenty of days I don't see anybody. I don't know anybody here. I don't go to City Hall [senior center], I don't know anybody here. . . .

My husband died. My two daughters died. My son had a stroke. He is paralyzed. He's in a wheelchair. For three and a half years, I was away taking care of my daughter. I used to go at eight o'clock till four when the kids came home from school. When she died, it seemed that everything in me died. Because I didn't care anymore. She suffered so much. . . . I got all her children, but they're not very nice. They don't come to see me or anything.

On a Sunday, the parking lot is full when they come to see their grandmother or their mother, but there's nobody there for me. . . .

1 Names, occupations, and other details identifying interviewees quoted here and in subsequent chapters have been altered to protect their anonymity.

## *The Gift of Generations*

Lots of times I wish I was 60 again. I'd be happy. I'd be working. I'd be doing something again. I could work now but I'm afraid. When I get up in the morning, I just can't hurry up and run around, because I'd fall. I'm all aches and pains now; if I had to go to the doctor for this, I'd have to go everyday. . . .

I don't know where I'd go. I haven't got no money. I'll go to a convalescent home. That's where lots of people go from here. I don't know what they do when they go to a convalescent home. . . . I would be the lucky one to get one that wouldn't be very nice – because I'm not a very lucky person.

We begin this book with four women – two Japanese and two Americans – who talk about the realities of later life in different environments. They are all in their late 60s or early 70s and have worked throughout their lives; but each person is different in how she defines the boundaries of her vulnerability, and in the expectations she sets for others to meet her needs. Their hopes and disappointments echo not only different expectations of dependence and independence in old age, but also their different standards of evaluating how one becomes in need of, and deserving of, protection at such a time.

Dorothy's bitterness and sense of betrayal help us understand that her most acute vulnerabilities lie with her family relationships. Her laments focus on her children, none of whom are now available to love and care for her. Her husband died 15 years ago, as did her two daughters. Of her two surviving sons, one is wheelchair-bound, and the other is hospitalized for a drinking problem. After all of the care she gave to her children, none of *their* children, in turn, feels that she now deserves the same in later life. Dorothy feels deprived and depressed, even though public support is available to meet her most basic financial needs. To shield herself from further disappointments, she has secluded herself in a small apartment, and does not take the opportunity to socialize with neighbors and peers in the same building. Her expectation for old age is utterly unmet, as she now resigns herself to the idea of eventually moving to a nursing home, a contingency that she feels is, totally undeserved. She sees herself as a person who has been dealt a bad hand – and as deserving better.



### *The Social Designation of Deserving Citizens*

The public support provisions for the elderly<sup>2</sup> that Dorothy takes for granted – subsidized housing, public meal programs, transportation services, a range of nursing homes – are not as readily accessible to her Japanese counterparts. In Japan, those without family support must seek their old-age security through alternative means. Yamada Shizu,<sup>3</sup> also in her early 70s, lives in a rental unit in Odawara City, 50 miles to the west of metropolitan Tokyo. She has worked at the local fish-processing factory for 16 years, and now lives with her husband, a lacquer craftsman, in a two-room apartment. Like Dorothy, Shizu has arthritis and moves with some difficulty, but she has recovered from a hip operation. Shizu's strategy for old age has taken an entirely different direction from Dorothy's: It is focused on willfully masterminding the invention of family as a safety net. As we carry out the interview, she hugs and talks to her favorite doll, Toto-chan, made in the likeness of a 2-year-old baby girl.

I do nothing all day. I used to like making cloth flowers. I gave them away, but I ran out of people to give them to – so, I don't do it anymore. I like singing, so I sing here by myself to the background music tape, *karaoke*. I don't like places where there are lots of people I don't know. I don't like talking with people I don't know. . . . I love television; I like watching baseball; and then there's wrestling, but I love baseball.

We adopted a nephew who married a niece. They are the children of my sisters, and they are cousins. The adoption was arranged 15 years ago.

They're very good to us. They live in Saitama with three children. We bought them land in Saitama, built them a house. That was part of our understanding, part of the adoption. We're old-fashioned people, always working hard and preparing for the future.

This holiday, the Golden Week, they said they'd come to fetch me if I wanted to go. I called them this morning and told

2 Throughout this book, the term elderly refers to persons over age 65, unless otherwise noted.

3 Surnames precede given names for all Japanese respondents.