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978-0-521-55520-3 - The Gift of Generations: Japanese and American Perspectives
on Aging and the Social Contract

Akiko Hashimoto

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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.

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AKIKO HASHIMOTO

University of Pittsburgh



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

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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.

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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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