

# Young People Caring for Their Parents: A Collaborative Study in Japan and Sri Lanka

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**Abstract** Population aging is a global problem, but its magnitude and manifestation vary across countries. Japan faces the challenge of a super-aged society, whereas Sri Lanka is experiencing rapid demographic transition: a problem in the Asia Pacific region that needs urgent attention. The degree to which young adults provide support for aging parents depends on their awareness/consciousness of older adults, and differs according to social images that influence intergenerational relationships. This quantitative study investigated young adults' opinions and perceptions toward their aging parents and intergenerational activities, and explored their care consciousness and anticipated challenges. Representative samples of 1064 university students from Japan and 600 students from Sri Lanka (aged 20–22 years) completed a self-administered questionnaire. Students who had an attitude of discrimination toward older people also perceived older adults as having a significant amount of experience and knowledge. They believed in traditional forms of caregiving with social support and appeared to have developed values to prepare themselves to face the challenges of population aging. Overall, female students were more concerned about population aging than male students. However, with the aging population increasing, opinions and social values about older adults face dramatic social challenges, despite maintenance of cultural and religious traditions.

**Keywords** Consciousness, Attitudes, Aging Society, Frail Aged, University Students

## Introduction

Old age sees the onset of many physiological,

psychological, and adjustment problems among older adults. Conflicts among generations may arise as a result of these problems. Successful care for aging people requires the fulfillment of older adults' physical, social, psychological, spiritual, and economical needs and often indicates improved quality of life resulting in decreased morbidity and mortality. This study focused on perceptions and opinions university students (aged 20–22 years) hold relating to their aging parents, and represents collaboration between Japan and Sri Lanka. Japan previously experienced a rapid rate of population aging from 7.0% in 1970 to 14.0% in 1994 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2016). However, Sri Lanka is experiencing population aging in a context of lower incomes and less economic development than what has occurred in countries such as Japan. Although most developing countries continue to have younger populations, Sri Lanka remains an exception (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, Sri Lanka, 2015).

## Demographic Transition and Aging in Japan and Sri Lanka

Of the 127 million people in Japan, 32% are considered to be aging, with Japan ranking first in the world in terms of the percentage of the aging population. Sri Lanka's aging population represents 12.5% of 20 million people, and is ranked 71 (DESA; Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2013). Population aging denotes a shift in the distribution of a country's population toward the older ages. The steady increase in the number of older people impacts the foundation of society, meaning that aging has sociological and psychological impacts as well as being a biological phenomenon. Although aging is

a global problem, its magnitude and manifestation differ across countries. For example, Japan faces the challenge of a super-aged society, whereas Sri Lanka is expecting a rapid increase in population aging in the context of rapid demographic transition. This means that all indicators of the aging process are progressing upwards at a much faster rate than experienced in other Asia Pacific countries.

In many developing countries, a rapid increase in international labor migration among working-age young adults has reduced the proportion of the working-age population and increased the proportion of older adults (Silva, 2014). The proportion of the Sri Lankan population aged 60 years and over increased by nearly 3.3% in 10 years, from 9.2% in 2001 to 12.5% in 2011. By 2041, 24.8% of the Sri Lankan population is predicted to be aged 60 years or above. Between 2010 and 2041, a moderate increase in the Sri Lankan population from 20 to 22 million is expected (about 9%), but the older population ( $\geq 60$  years) is expected to increase by 2.8 million (from 2.5 million in 2010 to 5.3 million in 2041); an increase of over 100% or a doubling of the older adult population. Sri Lanka can therefore expect to have one of the largest aged populations in the Asia Pacific region by 2020. This may be partly attributed to development of welfare services, especially universal free health and educational services, that helped reduce the mortality rate and increase life expectancy in Sri Lanka (DESA, 2013). In Japan, 2014 estimates indicated that 33.0% of the population was aged over  $>60$  years, 25.9% was aged  $\geq 65$  years, and 12.5% was aged  $\geq 75$  years. People aged  $\geq 65$  years make up one-fifth of the total Japanese population, this estimated to reach one-third by 2050 (United Nations Population Division, 2013).

### Elder Care

In traditional Japanese and Sri Lankan cultures, caring for older adults is the sole responsibility of their children. Increased female labor force participation, increased consumer needs, lowering of family incomes, migration to cities and foreign countries (especially in Sri Lanka) have broken down traditions of the extended family system, leaving older adults increasingly vulnerable. However, older adults are valuable repositories of tradition, experience, and wisdom, which if used productively, may influence socioeconomic development and mitigate the negative effects of rapid population aging (Silva, 2014). Traditionally, the care of older people is the concern and responsibility of the family, with older adults considered a blessing to the family. However, the role and status of older adults have weakened as society has changed. In industrialized countries such as Japan and Korea and developing countries such as Sri Lanka, caring for older people has become a serious problem for family caregivers, particularly in the context of increasing poverty, high costs of living, expensive medical treatment, loneliness, and lack of companionship.

Older adults are often viewed as inflexible in thought, and considered weak, sick, slow, and childlike (Prakash, 2003). In addition, older adults may feel that they have no role to play, and perceive themselves as a burden to their family, powerless, ignored, unable to contribute in any way, and sometimes an annoyance to younger generations (Prakash, 2003). Attitudes, beliefs, dress, speech, and style are important indicators of old age (Desai & Raju, 2000). Traditionally, older adults in Japan and Sri Lanka were assigned a place of honor and respect, as exemplified by social values and norms, and religious texts and writings referring to children as the caregivers of elderly parents (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2003); United Nations Population Fund and Population Association of Sri Lanka, 2004).

### Consciousness on 'Aging' among University Students

The awareness or consciousness of aging is significant in building intergenerational relationships, and varies among young adults according to the social perceptions they develop about aging. Older adults are often considered resources and repositories of experiences. However, university students also demonstrate negative perceptions and attitudes that influence their relationships with older adults. A society with healthy older adults is likely to be a healthy society in which the knowledge and experiences of older adults can benefit future generations (Somasundaram & Sivayokan, 2005). Bowen and Skirbek (2013) noted that "older people were perceived as more competent in countries where they participated in paid or volunteer work, were independent in life, possessed average education, with equal representation of the genders, with average cognitive abilities" (Bowen & Skirbek, 2013, p. 974). Young adults may develop positive or negative perceptions of older adults, and social perceptions and opportunities are significant factors in building intergenerational relationships and older adult care.

Ageism, defined as negative stereotypes about people of different ages, is common among younger adults and affects relationship building across generations. Merge (2006) found nursing students had negative attitudes toward older adults, with students' personal beliefs, values, culture, experience or observations, and perceptions toward elder care making it difficult to recruit nurses in geriatric nursing. Moreover, Koh (2012) reported that students often perceive caring for older people as an unattractive option; a perception that has considerable influence on their future professional practice. That author noted that "if students are provided with the relevant preparatory advice and support, they may engage in enriched learning experiences, to deliver quality care and develop positive attitudes in caring for older people in their professional practice" (Koh, 2012, p. 16). Reasons cited for the lack of interest in working with older people included poor experiences of providing care for older people, inability to relate to or communicate with older people, and

a perception that such work is depressing and boring (Koh, 2012). The association between aging and disability underpins these negative perceptions of working with older people. When the survey was repeated after graduation, students demonstrated more positive attitudes toward older people and were less likely to express stereotypical attitudes towards aging, suggesting that positive exposure to older people can challenge ageist views (Henderson, Xiao, Siegloff, Kelton, & Peterson, 2008) These previous studies clarified that students' social perceptions may change following direct experiences and opportunities to work with older adults. Therefore, the present study did not focus on students who had experience of working with older adults.

This collaborative study was undertaken by researchers in Japan and Sri Lanka with the goal of investigating and supporting intergenerational relationship building in the Asia Pacific region. This study adhered to the methods described in the research plan submitted to the relevant university in Japan to ensure that comparisons were meaningful. Therefore, in both Japan and Sri Lanka, the same methods were used to explore and compare university students' perceptions and opinions toward their aging parents.

### Objectives

Based on the social context in Japan and Sri Lanka, this study aimed to:

- ascertain university students' opinions and perceptions towards their role in terms of their aging parents;
- explore university students' care consciousness and expected challenges; and
- Identify interest in intergenerational activities.

### Materials and Methods

This study used quantitative research methodology. A stratified random sample of 1064 students was drawn from two states and four private universities in urban areas near Tokyo, Japan. A sample of 600 students was recruited from four national universities located near Colombo city in Sri Lanka (based on faculty, age, sex, and university). The criteria for sampling were almost the same in both countries: urban areas, 50% of each sex, junior or senior university grades, and the number of respondents in relation to the total population (Japan: Sri Lanka = 2: 1). Participants in both samples were aged 20–22 years, with a mean age of 20.2 years in Japanese students and 21.3 years in Sri Lankan students. There were 368 (35%) male students from Japan plus 229 (38.2%) male students from Sri Lanka, and 696 (65%) female students from Japan plus 371 (61.8%) female students from Sri Lanka. This study aimed to include young adults who were about to take up the challenge of caring for aging parents, ascertain their

perceptions and opinions about their parents and the caregiving role that they would take up in future.

### Data Collection

A questionnaire was constructed and pre-tested to investigate students' attitudes toward older adults, opinions about their duty to support their parents, and their degree of interest in population aging. There were 26 general questions covering: participants' family backgrounds; experience of living with aging grandparents; preferences about living with parents before and after marriage; views on economic support, primary responsibility for elder care, and nursing homes; opinions on the traditional form of caregiving and its sustainability; the meaning of "being good" to their parents; interest about the issue of aging; expectations of government; images of older adults, their current situation, and discrimination or prejudice; and awareness of intergenerational activities (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2003; Hosaka & Sodei, 1988). As the effectiveness of the image scale for the aged was confirmed using Japanese students (Hosaka & Sodei, 1988), we only analyzed image scale results for Japanese students. The scale comprised 36 paired-adjective lists, each with seven points. Six factors were extracted using factor analysis with varimax rotation: social extroversion, competence, active independence, happiness, cooperativeness, and mildness/gentleness. A total of three points for each factor, calculated from the three paired-adjective items from the highest to third-highest factor loadings, were identified as the factor scores. Items covering perceptions of older adults were originally selected and listed from the perspective of ageism (Palmore, 2000). In this study, items concerning discrimination or prejudice of the aged were divided into Facts on Aging Quiz-positive (FAQ-positive) and Facts on Aging Quiz-negative (FAQ-negative). After pre-testing and obtaining ethical permission and participants' informed consent, the self-administered questionnaire was distributed to participants. Completed questionnaires were scrutinized before data entry. Data was then encoded, entered into a personal computer, and analyzed by members of the research team from the Department of Social Work, Tokai University, Japan, and the School of Social Work of the National Institute of Social Development (NISD), Sri Lanka.

### Ethical Considerations

This study was implemented by the Council of Tokai University in 2014 based on the ethical guidelines compiled by the Japanese Society for the Study of Social Welfare, the research implementation plan, and on ethical clearance granted by the Council Subcommittee on Research and Ethics of the NISD in Sri Lanka (2014).

### Data Analysis

After completion of data collection, all questionnaires were scrutinized and approved for encoding and data entry. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 21 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Next, the data was tabulated and inferences drawn using statistical tests. Chi-square tests (p-values) were used to examine students' attitudes toward older adults and the degree of correlation among males and females. The degree to which students' primary attributes affected their attitudes toward older adults and the duty to support their parents, and the degree of interest in population aging were also analyzed.

### 3. Results

This study examined factors that influenced students' consciousness about supporting their aging parents, their perceptions of older adults, and their level of concern about population aging. Findings derived from data gathered in both countries are presented below.

**Table 1.** Details of Participants' Family Members

Family members	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				$\chi^2$ test	Probability
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	(1) vs.(2)	
Father(alive)	<b>1041</b>	97.8	<b>23</b>	2.2	<b>552</b>	92	<b>48</b>	8	32.015	p=0.000
Mother(alive)	<b>1048</b>	98.5	<b>16</b>	1.5	<b>589</b>	98.2	<b>11</b>	1.8		n.s.
Grandfather(alive)	<b>749</b>	70.4	<b>315</b>	29.6	<b>136</b>	22.7	<b>464</b>	77.3	351.005	p=0.000
Grandmother(alive)	<b>989</b>	93	<b>75</b>	7	<b>323</b>	53.8	<b>277</b>	46.2	351.98	p=0.000
Grandparents alive with them	<b>379</b>	35.6	<b>685</b>	64.4	<b>395</b>	65.8	<b>205</b>	34.2	140.768	p=0.000

Table 1 presents the composition of participants' families in Japan and Sri Lanka. Although there was little variation in living parents, there was a notable difference regarding living grandparents between the two countries. This is consistent with the World Health Organization (2012) report on life expectancy at birth, which placed Japan among the top 10 countries with an average life expectancy for females of 87 years and males of 80 years. Interestingly, 65.8% of students in Sri Lanka had lived with grandparents before they entered university compared with 35.6% in Japan, highlighting the existence of extended families in Sri Lanka. Chi-square tests showed living grandparents were significant in terms of the attitudes of male and female students in both countries (p=0.000).

**Table 2.** Belief that Children Should Live with their Parents after Marriage

Responses	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				$\chi^2$ test	
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	(1) vs. (2)	Probability
1.Better to live separately away from one's parents as long as one can.	154	14.5	910	85.5	11	1.8	577	96.2	66.98	P=0.000
2.Better to live together with one's parents as long as one can.	113	10.6	951	89.4	374	62.3	214	35.7	511.425	P=0.000
3.Better to live separately while one's parents are doing well and live together once they are in poor health.	254	23.9	810	76.1	98	16.3	490	81.7	11.727	P=0.001
4.Better to live together with one's parents once they become a widow or widower.	70	6.6	994	93.4	16	2.7	572	95.3	11.422	P=0.001
5.Frequent mutual visit while living separately would be best.	379	35.6	685	64.4	86	14.3	502	83.7	82.534	P=0.000
6.No idea.	94	8.8	970	91.2	15	2.5	573	95.5	24.263	P=0.000

In total, 62.3% of Sri Lankan students believed it was better to live with parents as long as possible compared with 10.6% of Japanese students (Table 2). This highlights the adherence to traditional family systems in Sri Lanka and the more independent nature of Japanese industrial society. Students from Japan thought that it was important to maintain constant relationships with their parents by frequent visits (35.6%), and live with parents if their parents become incapacitated (23.9%) or widowed (6.6%). These responses highlight cultural and economic differences between Japan and Sri Lanka.

**Table 3.** Preferences about Residing with Parents

Responses	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				$\chi^2$ test	
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	(1) vs. (2)	Probability
1.Yes	105	9.9	959	90.1	532	89.6	62	10.4	1023.29	P=0.000
2.Not yet decided.	674	63.3	380	35.7	54	9.1	540	90.9	463.567	P=0.000
3.No	285	26.8	779	73.2	8	1.3	586	98.6	169.555	P=0.000

As indicated in Table 3, a majority (89.6%) of Sri Lankan students preferred to live with their parents, whereas only 9.9% of Japanese students reported such a preference.

**Table 4.** Economic Support for Aging Parents

Responses	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				$\chi^2$ test	Probability
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	(1) vs. (2)	
1. Provide economic supports at all costs.	271	25.5	793	74.5	423	70.9	174	29.1	323.826	P=0.000
2. Depend on my economic condition, however I would provide some support.	656	61.7	408	38.3	173	28.9	424	71.1	163.329	P=0.000
3. Could not provide economic supports under severe economic conditions.	110	10.3	954	89.7	5	0.8	592	99.2	53.567	P=0.000
4. Social supports such as pensions, should be provided.	27	2.5	1037	97.5	4	0.7	593	99.3	7.283	P=0.007

In Japan, 25.5% of students believed in providing economic support to parents at all costs compared to 70.9% of students in Sri Lanka (Table 4). This shows that the traditional social value of providing economic support for aging parents continues in the modern social context. In addition, 61.7% of students in Japan and 28.9% in Sri Lanka were concerned about their financial capability to help their parents, but believed in providing some support for parents. Overall, most students (about 87% in Japan and 99% in Sri Lanka) had positive attitudes toward providing economic support for aging parents.

Table 5 presents students' views about taking care of their aging parents' daily life needs. More students in Sri Lanka (41.7%) than Japan (11.3%) believed that children should take care of parents' daily life needs. In both countries, about 40% of students thought that children should take care of parents for the most part, with social support provided when children were unable to take care of parents.

**Table 5.** Taking Care of Aging Parents' Daily Life Needs

Responses	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				$\chi^2$ test	Probability
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	(1) vs. (2)	
1. Their children should take care of them	120	11.3	944	88.7	250	41.7	350	58.3	204.893, df=1	p=0.000
2. Both their children and society should take care of them	443	41.6	621	58.4	106	17.7	494	82.3	99.698, df=1	p=0.000
3. Children should take care of them for the most part, and social support should be provided when children aren't able to take care of them.	423	39.8	641	60.2	240	40	360	60		n.s.
4. Society should provide support and children should supplement what society cannot provide.	76	7.1	988	92.9	0	0	600	100		n.s.
5. All of the supports should be provided by society.	2	0.2	1,062	99.8	5	0.8	595	99.2		n.s.

Interestingly, only 0.2% of Japanese and 0.8% of Sri Lankan students considered society to be the main service provider for older adults' daily life needs. This indicates that young adults still believe in family members (particularly children) being responsible for the care of aging parents' daily life needs.

**Table 6.** Taking Care of Aging Parents in Poor Health or Bedridden as the Sole Caregiver

Attitude	Japan(1)								$\chi^2$ test (3) vs. (4)	Probability	Sri Lanka(2)								$\chi^2$ test (5) vs. (6)	Probability
	Male(3)				Female(4)						Male(5)				Female(6)					
	Yes		No		Yes		No				Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1. I would take care of them at all cost.	116	31.5	252	68.5	225	32.3	471	67.7		n.s.	186	81.2	43	18.8	322	86.8	49	13.2		n.s.
2. I would hire caregivers.	29	7.9	339	92.1	41	5.9	655	94.1		n.s.	35	15.3	194	84.7	45	12.1	326	87.9		n.s.
3. I would take them to a nursing homes.	87	23.6	281	76.4	128	18.4	568	81.6	4.116	P=0.043	0	0	229	100	0	0	371	100		
4. I have no idea..	136	37	232	63	302	43.4	394	56.6	4.115	P=0.043	9	3.9	220	96.1	7	1.9	364	98.1		n.s.

Table 6 shows that in Japan, 7.9% of male and 5.9% of female students believed in employing caregivers to support their parents, with this belief held by 15.3% of male and 12.1% of female students in Sri Lanka. In both countries, more females than males believed in taking sole caregiving responsibility at any cost (31.5% of males vs. 32.3% of females in Japan; 81.2% of males vs. 86.8% of females in Sri Lanka). Overall, Sri Lankan students had higher rates of positive responses in terms of providing care at all costs than Japanese students.

**Table 7.** Seeking Institutional Care for Aging Parents

Attitude	Total								$\chi^2$ test (1) vs. (2)	Probability
	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)					
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1.It is impossible for family members to maintain care giving responsibilities.	424	39.8	640	60.2	13	2.2	587	97.8	281.326	p=0.000
2.Any efforts should be done in order to avoid it.	495	46.5	569	53.5	377	62.8	223	37.2	40.922	p=0.000
3.The sons or daughters adopting these ideas are undutiful to their parents.	26	2.4	1,038	97.6	162	27.1	438	72.9	230.851	p=0.000
4.I have no idea..	119	11.2	945	88.8	58	9.7	542	90.3		n.s.

Table 7 indicates that the majority of participants did not consider institutional care (e.g., nursing homes) appropriate for aging parents (Japan, 46.5%; Sri Lanka, 62.8%). In addition, 2.4% of Japanese and 27.1% Sri Lankan students thought that sons and daughters who have such thoughts are not dutiful to their parents. However, 39.8% of Japanese and 2.2% of Sri Lankan students believed in seeking institutional care if family members were unable to maintain caregiving responsibilities. The strong attitude toward avoiding institutional care in both countries suggests that the impact of traditions that uphold the honor of the family is being challenged.

**Table 8.** Sustainability of Traditional Norms

Responses	Total								$\chi^2$ test (1) vs. (2)	Probability
	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)					
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1.Yes,it should be sustained ,because it is a very good social custom.	<b>231</b>	21.7	<b>833</b>	78.3	<b>442</b>	73.7	<b>158</b>	26.3	429.963	P=0.000
2.It is not a good thing.	<b>87</b>	8.2	<b>977</b>	91.8	<b>9</b>	1.5	<b>591</b>	98.5	31.59	P=0.000
3.It does not fit modern society.	<b>424</b>	39.8	<b>640</b>	60.2	<b>50</b>	8.3	<b>550</b>	91.7	187.064	P=0.000
4.I have no idea..	<b>322</b>	30.3	<b>742</b>	69.7	<b>99</b>	16.5	<b>501</b>	83.5	38.453	P=0.000

A majority (73.7%) of Sri Lankan students believed in sustaining traditional social values and norms by taking care of aging parents while living with them (Table 8). In contrast, only 21.7% of Japanese students shared this belief.



**Table 9.** Meaning of “Being Good to One’s Parents”

Responses	Total								$\chi^2$ test (1) vs. (2)	Probability
	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)					
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1.Companionship or frequent visiting.	<b>689</b>	64.8	<b>375</b>	35.2	<b>286</b>	47.7	<b>314</b>	52.3	46.18	P=0.000
2.caregiving.	<b>199</b>	18.7	<b>865</b>	81.3	<b>271</b>	45.2	<b>329</b>	54.8	132.57	P=0.000
3..Supporting them economically.	<b>170</b>	15.9	<b>894</b>	84.1	<b>23</b>	3.8	<b>577</b>	96.2	55.183	P=0.000
4..Living independently without any supports from one’s parents..	<b>630</b>	59.2	<b>434</b>	40.8	<b>78</b>	13.1	<b>522</b>	86.9	335.148	P=0.000

As indicated in Table 9, the meaning of “being good to one’s parents” differed by country; 64.8% of Japanese and 47.7% of Sri Lankan students felt that this meant companionship or frequent visits, whereas 18.7% of Japanese and 45.2% of Sri Lankan students understood it to mean caregiving. Over half (59.2%) of the Japanese students agreed that being good to one’s parents meant “living independently without any support from one’s parents,” whereas only 13.1% of students in Sri Lanka agreed with this item.

**Table 10.** Seriousness of the Problem of Population Aging in Japan and Sri Lanka

Issues	Japan (1)				Sri Lanka (2)				Total (3)			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Japan		Sri Lanka	
	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Very serious issues.	<b>283</b>	76.8	<b>560</b>	80.5	<b>91</b>	39.7	<b>219</b>	59.1	<b>843</b>	79.2	<b>309</b>	51.5
2. No idea.	<b>81</b>	22.1	<b>133</b>	19.1	<b>130</b>	56.8	<b>134</b>	36.1	<b>214</b>	20.1	<b>264</b>	44.1
3. No problem.	<b>4</b>	1.1	<b>3</b>	0.4	<b>8</b>	3.5	<b>18</b>	4.8	<b>7</b>	0.7	<b>26</b>	4.4
Total	<b>368</b>		<b>696</b>		<b>229</b>		<b>371</b>		<b>1064</b>		<b>600</b>	
Probability	$\chi^2$ test: n.s.				$\chi^2$ test: 24.525,df=2,p=0.000				$\chi^2$ test: 145.018,df=2,p=0.000			

In total, 79.2% of Japanese students and 51.5% of Sri Lankan students thought that population aging was a very serious issue. However, 20.1% of Japanese and 44.1% of Sri Lankan students were unaware of the magnitude of the problem. In Sri Lanka, more female students agreed the aging population was a serious issue than male students ( $p=0.000$ ).

**Table 11.** Perceptions/Images of Older People in Japan and Sri Lanka (Multiple Responses)

Image of older people	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				$\chi^2$ test	Probability
	Yes		No		Yes		No			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	(1) vs. (2)	
1. People who are in poor health both physically and mentally and have anxiety about it.	774	72.7	290	27.3	478	79.7	122	20.3	9.868	$p=0.002$
2. People who have a good amount of experience and knowledge.	730	68.6	334	31.4	229	38.2	371	61.8	145.61	$p=0.000$
3. People who are addicted to something of interest that uses plenty of time.	444	41.7	620	58.3	44	7.3	556	92.7	218.995	$p=0.000$
4. People who are not free from traditions.	315	29.6	749	70.4	82	13.7	518	86.3	53.651	$p=0.000$
5. People who are isolated and have very few relationships.	272	25.6	792	74.4	87	14.5	513	85.5	27.756	$p=0.000$
6. People who have less income and have anxiety about it.	260	24.4	804	75.6	34	5.7	566	94.3	92.914	$p=0.000$
7. People who contribute to society, volunteering and performing community services.	184	17.3	880	82.7	62	10.3	538	89.7	14.752	$p=0.000$
8. People who have healthy daily lives.	179	16.8	885	83.2	23	3.8	577	96.2	60.697	$p=0.000$
9. People who are satisfied with their lives economically, having savings and their own houses.	176	16.5	888	83.5	22	3.7	578	96.3	60.663	$p=0.000$
10. Useless people who do not work anymore.	35	3.3	1029	96.7	23	3.8	577	96.2		n.s.

Note) Image of older people consists of FAQ-positive (No. of items: 2, 3, 7, 8, 9) and FAQ-negative (No. of items: 1, 4, 5, 6, 10)

In total, 72.7% of Japanese and 79.7% of Sri Lankan students thought older adults had poor physical and mental health, and anxiety stemming from those problems (Item 1;  $p=0.000$ ) (Table 11). In both countries, the dominant perception was that older adults possessed a good amount of experience and knowledge (Item 2: Japan, 68.6% vs. Sri Lanka, 38.2%). An image of older adults as being bound by tradition was held by 29.6% of Japanese and 13.7% of Sri Lankan students (Item 4). Over 25.6% of Japanese and 14.5% of Sri Lankan students also perceived older adults as isolated and enjoying few social relationships (Item 5). Relatively few students perceived older adults as people who contribute to society by

volunteering and performing community services (Item 7; 17.3% of Japanese and 10.3% of Sri Lankan students). Overall, many students held a negative image of older adults, with the ratios of participants who responded “yes” to these items were higher in Japan than in Sri Lanka. Japanese students may be particularly concerned with the problem of population aging because they carry heavier economic, mental, and physical burdens as caregivers based on Japan’s super-aged society.

**Table 12.** Treating Older Adults Well in Japan and Sri Lanka

Attitude	Japan				Sri Lanka				Total			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Japan		Sri Lanka	
	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Agree.	50	13.6	56	8	37	16.2	49	13.2	106	10	86	14.3
2. Partially agree.	176	47.8	336	48.3	129	56.3	192	51.8	512	48.1	321	53.5
3. Agree a little.	136	37	276	39.7	55	24	123	33.2	412	38.7	178	29.7
4. Disagree completely.	6	1.6	28	4	8	3.5	7	1.9	34	3.2	15	2.5
Total	368		696		229		371		1064		600	
Probability	$\chi^2$ test: 12.194, df=3, p=0.007				$\chi^2$ test: 6.861, df=3, p=0.076				$\chi^2$ test: 18.073, df=3, p=0.000			

Table 12 shows students’ attitudes toward appropriate treatment of older adults in Japan and Sri Lanka. Overall, students’ attitudes were similar in both countries, with a tendency to treat older people well in their communities shown by 58.1% of Japanese and 67.8% of Sri Lankan students.

**Table 13.** Opinions on the Existence of Discrimination and Prejudice in Japan and Sri Lanka, with Reference to Age

Responses	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				Total(3)			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Japan		Sri Lanka	
	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Yes, very many	42	11.4	50	7.2	104	45.4	174	46.9	92	8.6	278	46.3
2. Yes, they do.	133	36.1	229	32.9	105	45.9	181	48.8	362	34	286	47.7
3. Sometimes.	142	38.6	326	46.8	20	8.7	16	4.3	468	44	36	6
4. Very few.	44	12	86	12.4	0	0	0	0	130	12.2	0	0
5. Not at all.	7	1.9	5	0.7	0	0	0	0	12	1.2	0	0
Total	368		696		229		371		1064		600	
Probability	$\chi^2$ test: 12.471, df=4, p=0.014				$\chi^2$ test: n.s.				$\chi^2$ test: 526.235, df=4, P=0.000			

We examined students’ attitudes toward discrimination against and prejudices about older adults. There were high levels of discrimination and prejudice in Japanese and Sri Lankan

social contexts (Table 13). There was a significant correlation ( $p=0.000$ ) between the understanding of discrimination/prejudice against older adults and the perceptions of aging in both countries.

**Table 14.** Interest in Intergenerational Exchanges

Responses	Japan(1)				Sri Lanka(2)				Total(3)			
	Male		Female		Male		Female		Japan		Sri Lanka	
	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. Yes.	182	49.5	390	56	133	58.1	280	75.5	572	53.8	413	68.8
2. No,specific interest.	170	46.2	283	40.7	94	41	90	24.3	454	42.6	184	30.7
3. No.	16	4.3	23	3.3	2	0.9	1	0.3	38	3.6	3	5
Total	368		696		229		371		1064		600	
Probability	$\chi^2$ test: n.s.				$\chi^2$ test: 20.271,df=2,p=0.000				$\chi^2$ test: 43.831,df=1,p=0.000			

We investigated students' interest in intergenerational exchanges (Table 14). A significant percentage of students (Japan, 53.8%; Sri Lanka, 68.8%;  $p=0.000$ ) had an interest in intergenerational exchanges. In Sri Lanka, 75.5% of female students had positive attitudes toward intergenerational exchanges compared with 58.1% of male students ( $p=0.000$ ). In the Japanese sample, positive attitudes toward intergenerational exchanges were similar in females and males (56.0% vs. 49.5%).

**Table 15.** Partial Correlation Coefficients Matrix among 5 items: Interest, Attitude, Discrimination, Intergenerational Exchange, and Knowledge about the Aged and Aging (statistically controlled for age and sex).

Questions	Japan (N=1060)					Sri Lanka (N=591)				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. Interest in the issues of aging										
2. Discriminations or prejudices toward the aged	-0.09 $p<.01$									
3. Interests to intergenerational exchange activities	.32 $p<.01$					.24 $p<.01$	.10 $p<.01$			
4. Facts on Aging Quiz(FAQ) including positive knowledges about the aged	-0.07 $p<.05$	.10 $p<.01$	-0.14 $p<.01$			-0.10 $p<.05$		-0.18 $p<.01$		
5. Facts on Aging Quiz(FAQ) including negative knowledges about the aged		-0.17 $p<.01$	.10 $p<.01$	-0.08 $p<.01$					-0.07 $p<.10$	
Significance level: $p<.10, p<.05, p<.01$	;age and sex were controlled									

Inter-correlations among items covering “interest in the issue of aging societies,” “discrimination or prejudice toward the aged,” “interest in intergenerational exchange activities,” and “FAQ (positive and negative) knowledge about the aged” were analyzed using partial correlation coefficients (controlled for age and sex). In the Japanese sample, “interest in the issue of aging” showed statistically significant correlations with “discrimination or prejudices toward the aged,” “interest in intergenerational exchange activities,” and “FAQ-positive.” The Sri Lankan sample showed similar results.

### **Perceptions of the Terms “Elderly Person” or “Senior Citizen”**

When the scores for discrimination/prejudice toward older adults were higher, the scores for each factor were statistically significantly lower. We also found that when scores for interest in intergenerational exchange items were higher, scores for each factor were statistically significantly higher. Furthermore, when FAQ-positive scores for the five items shown in Table 11 were higher, scores for each factor were statistically significantly higher; however, FAQ-negative scores for the items in Table 11 were significantly lower. These results indicate that young adults’ positive attitudes and affirmative behaviors regarding older adults tended to create more comfortable and better conditions for aged people in their daily lives, perhaps through intergenerational activities between young and older adults and through aging education in schools (Kaplan, Kusano, Tsuji, & Hisamichi, 1998).

## **Discussion**

### **Students’ Opinions and Images about Aged Parents**

In Japan, students commonly reported that “frequent mutual visits while living separately would be best” (35%), whereas the majority (62%) of Sri Lankan students reported it was “better to live together with one’s parents as long as one can.” Students’ preferences about residing with their parents varied between the two countries, with a majority of Sri Lankan students (about 90%) indicating they would prefer to live with their parents compared with about 10% of Japanese students.

Interestingly, views on taking care of aging parents’ daily life needs differed between the two countries. More Sri Lankan students believed that family members (particularly children) should be responsible for the care of aging parents’ daily life needs at all costs (about 42% in Sri Lanka vs. about 11% in Japan). In addition, Sri Lankan students tended to have a higher ratio of positive responses to items concerning taking care of aging parents in poor health/bedridden as the sole caregiver than

Japanese students (about 84% in Sri Lanka vs. about 32% in Japan).

Students in both countries held strong attitudes towards avoiding seeking institutional care, which suggests the impact of traditional beliefs that uphold the honor of the family which is being challenged. Positive responses for the item “any efforts should be made to avoid it [institutional care]” were most common in both countries (about 47% in Japan; about 63% in Sri Lanka). In terms of “children should support their parents while living with their parents,” more students in Sri Lanka (about 74%) agreed that this “should be sustained because it is a good social custom and a traditional norm” than in Japan (about 22%). This suggests that many Sri Lankan students continue to believe it is the responsibility of families to perform traditional functions of care for aging parents.

The cultural and economic differences between the two countries were evident in students’ responses, which highlighted the industrial and independent nature of the population in Japan compared with the traditional dependent culture in Sri Lankan families. Overall, young adults’ opinions and perceptions toward their parents in Sri Lanka differed from those in Japan. In the Japanese context, this may be explained by changes in the civil code after World War II; children’s responsibility for supporting and caring for aging parents was strictly determined from the beginning of the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to 1945 (the end of World War II), but this responsibility eased during the period after the war (Yokoyama, 2000). In contrast, children’s responsibility for supporting and caring for their aging parents at any cost remains strictly delineated in the Sri Lankan cultural and religious context. However, changing family structures in Sri Lanka are likely to have a social impact for aging parents. The traditional extended family has undergone dramatic change, and Sri Lanka has an increasing number of nuclear families. In addition, the trend of migration to urban areas and other countries for work and education is likely to become widespread and be accompanied by a change in the traditional function of the family as a social institution. In particular, the function of providing care for aging parents in the family environment has been challenged by this structural change in traditional extended families. If older adults are helpless in their own family and home environments, they will be compelled to leave their hometowns and migrate to urban areas to receive care and support from their children (Dhanapala & Yaguchi, 2015). This means that Sri Lankan families may experience drastic changes in consciousness and behaviors in supporting and caring for aging parents, despite the traditional function of the family as a social system.

### **Interest in the Problem of Population Aging**

We found that overall, students’ consciousness of the issue of population aging were similar in Japan and Sri

Lanka, with interest in this issue almost the same in both samples (81.4% in Japan; 80.7% in Sri Lanka). This suggests that university students in both countries had similar levels of knowledge and concern about the problem of population aging despite different views about the seriousness of Sri Lanka's aging society and Japan's super-aged society.

Participating students in Japan and Sri Lanka indicated they understood the magnitude of the problem of population aging. Aging was regarded as a serious problem; however, significantly more female students in Sri Lanka felt that it was a serious issue than male students (males about 40% vs. females about 60%). This might be because daughters have a greater burden of support and care for aging parents than sons. In contrast, male and female students in Japan showed similar attitudes towards the magnitude of the problem of population aging (males about 77%; females about 80%). This might reflect a belief that males and females in Japan are responsible for an equal care burden for aging parents.

### Intergenerational Activities

We investigated students' interest in intergenerational exchanges. In both countries, a majority of students indicated an interest in such exchanges (about 54% in Japan and about 69% in Sri Lanka). However, both sexes in the Sri Lankan group had more positive responses toward intergenerational exchanges than the Japanese group (males: about 58% in Sri Lanka vs. about 50% in Japan; females: about 76% in Sri Lanka vs. 56% in Japan). These results indicated that in both countries, females had a more positive attitude to intergenerational exchanges than males. Over 70% of students agreed that older adults are in poor physical and mental health and have anxiety about their health. Over 60% of students who were affirmative (approving) of the attitude of discrimination also agreed with the idea of older adults as people with a good amount of experience and knowledge.

In summary, many young adults believed in traditional forms of caregiving with social support, and they appeared to have developed perceptions and opinions to help prepare them to face the challenges of population aging. In both Japan and Sri Lanka, female students were more concerned about population aging. However, most students indicated they were prepared to take up a caring role for their aging parents rather than place them in an institution that provided formal care. In terms of ageism, young adults' reported perceptions that affirmed the prevalence of prejudice. In Sri Lanka, they were not aware of the concept of "active aging," which refers to continuing to work and participating in events in their regional communities during old age.

Awareness/consciousness about population aging among young adults differs according to the social perceptions they develop about aging, and is significant in

building intergenerational relationships. Although older adults are considered to be resources and repositories of life experience, some negative perceptions and attitudes still prevail. However, the literature suggests that positive exposure to older people can challenge ageist views (Kusano, Watanabe, Uchida, Yasunaga, & Yamanouchi, 2015).

## Conclusions

This study focused on university students' consciousness about supporting their aging parents, and their concern about the problem of population aging. The present study provides a foundation for further in-depth studies on these issues. Our study only touched the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of perceptions and opinions university students hold about supporting aging parents. We found that students are strongly influenced by the traditions and customs of their country. Our findings also raised a number of issues for formulating and amending appropriate social policy for the welfare of older adults in Japan and Sri Lanka. Some important implications of this study are:

1. There is a need to conduct more quantitative and qualitative studies among young adults across both countries, as the present samples drawn from cities had limitations. The opinions of rural young adults may differ markedly from those of urban young adults. Furthermore, research on self-image and social images of older adults may enrich future studies in Japan and Sri Lanka.
2. This study provided adequate evidence for the continued belief in the extended family system as a foundation for family-based care in Sri Lanka, with a majority of students holding favorable views toward living in an extended family after their marriage. In contrast, Japanese students preferred living in nuclear families and visiting aging parents. Further, more male students indicated they would live with parents after their marriage than female students, demonstrating the influence of the cultural ethos in both countries.
3. The economic aspects of university students' perceptions were typical of young people from many Asian countries. Students in both countries had positive attitudes toward providing economic support to aging parents. However, there was a slight sex-based difference with more male students favoring the provision of economic support to aging parents than female students. Overall, students believed that family members (particularly children) should be responsible for the care of aging parents' daily life needs.
4. The tradition of children as the sole caregivers of bedridden parents persisted among a large proportion

of students (about 60% in Japan and about 85% in Sri Lanka). In both countries, a similar number of students (40%) indicated that children should take care of daily chores for aging parents and advocated social support. This could be interpreted as creating a dilemma in terms of families being unable to provide total care, or viewed as a belief that social support should meet new challenges. However, this is opposed to students' strong belief that institutional care should be avoided (about 47% in Japan, about 63% in Sri Lanka), and suggests that there are some uncertainties in students' attitudes toward family-based care giving with social support.

5. Care needs to be "age-friendly," as exemplified by participating students' opinions on the meaning of "being good to one's parents" when taking up responsibility for the care of older adults. This suggests policies that enhance the full participation of older adults are needed to support age-friendly measures. Our finding confirmed that students were indifferent to social support and should be considered important in terms of super-aged and aging societies by promoting engagement with older adults among university students.
6. This study indicates that Sri Lankan students are significantly less aware of active aging, and perceive older adults as being in poor physical and mental health and anxious about their health. Students expressed concern about elderly parents, and tended to be aware of the magnitude of the problem of population aging. Further, in both countries, female students were more interested in aging issues.
7. A significant proportion of students agreed there is age-based prejudice/discrimination in society. This study draws attention to the need for greater awareness about issues related to the care of older adults, and highlights the need for meaningful interventions on matters related to older adults and their families at the university level.
8. The evidence cited above underscores the importance of social perceptions, good communication, familiarity, and living/working together as vital in developing relationships with and consciousness about older adults. Regular/frequent communication with aging parents and providing care for them should be considered as enhancing dignity, promoting the rights of older adults, and improving consciousness/awareness among university students about supporting aging parents. This collaborative study is significant as it yielded encouraging results that may help change university students' perceptions about aging and promote positive intergenerational relationships. To achieve this, measures need to be implemented that allow university students to frequently interact with the older generation, while eschewing age-based discriminatory attitudes. This

will help young adults learn about and view older adults more positively, which is important as older adults need to be in contact with younger generations to avoid being "out of sight and out of mind."

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