

Cross-Cultural Comparison on Age-Friendly Cities: Akita, Japan and Columbus, Ohio

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Abstract

Reason: This research will help bridge the cultural gaps in aging studies. Japan is on the forefront of our aging world and we need to take this opportunity to learn from their experiences. This research will primarily focus on the differences in our approach to a similar problem and how that may be affected by differing cultures.

Problem: Lack of comparison material on the international approaches to Age-Friendly Cities.

Methodology: Compared Baseline Assessment Reports from each city for their interview questions and methods. Then compared how the results affected their priorities in each domain. Lastly, an interview with a cultural expert was conducted to clarify any cultural significance.

Results: Columbus's focus went primarily to actions that could be solved through city environment changes because that's where they found the greatest need. However, Akita had few concerns about housing and transportation in comparison. This drastic difference is affected by the cultural difference in priority of the group versus the individual.

Implications: This research can help interpret how action items in each city's Age-Friendly Initiative may or may not be culturally translatable.

Keywords: Age-Friendly City, International Aging, Aging in Japan, Cross-Cultural Comparison

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Introduction

Age-Friendly City projects started being established all over the world after the W.H.O. adopted the program. When looking at an aging world, it is imperative that we learn from each other on a global level. With the great demographic shifts toward an older population beginning to unfold, we have an opportunity to peer into the solutions provided by other countries. Using Age-Friendly city projects can show us how culture affects the actions taken to help older adults. Accounting for culture also allows us to predict what actions may not be as translatable in a different country. With Japan being at the forefront of this great demographic shift, it is imperative that we learn from their experiences.

Methodology

Firstly, one must begin by choosing the two cities to compare. Columbus was the first and easy choice because of this author's work within their Age-Friendly Initiative for some months and they had a good foundation to build on. The major concern was choosing a comparative city in Japan. One major concern would be accessible and translatable data. When looking through Japan's Age-Friendly Cities on the W.H.O. website, an important point is a comparable population size. Columbus has a population of around 900,000 (8), whereas a lot of the populations of available Age-Friendly Cities in Japan ranged from 7,500 to 450,000 (6). With that in mind, a city was chosen from the higher end of options with Akita's population being around 311,000(6). Akita was named one of the "advanced" cities by the W.H.O. which led to many more case studies and articles to access. They also were one of the few cities in Japan with an AARP International affiliate. This means both cities were working under the same affiliate. It also provided access to more pre-translated materials.

Looking at the time frames of the research was also important to note. Especially, with all the changes that came with Covid, and how long, or how many cycles each city has been through. Columbus started their first cycle in 2016 (3) and Akita began in 2011(6) and had their second cycle in 2017(9). The Columbus 2016 cycle and Akita 2017 cycle, although not both their first, are a better match for comparison, in order to avoid too many discrepancies due to Covid. This being Akita's second round, also allowed the implication of their own Index to provide further insight into data that may be lacking.

What exactly are we comparing in these two cities? Originally, the goal was to review the Action plans of their Age-Friendly City Initiatives, however, their action plans are based on the needs of their community. This led to including and prioritizing the Baseline Assessment reports as the primary source of materials. The focus will be on the questions asked, why they were asked, and how this direction, as well as the direction of the results, may be affected by the culture of each community.

There are some factors to keep in mind that also affect the cities' differences outside of cultural factors. This includes the population, as previously mentioned, and the number of older adults in proportion to the population. Akita is 37.4% over the age of 65 (6), and Columbus is 11.7% over 65 (6). Akita was also named an "advanced" age-friendly city by WHO, which doesn't necessarily skew any results but should be kept in mind when forming conclusions. Finally, a major factor to be noted in the economic or financial factors that will not be addressed in this work. These are of course still affected by culture. How communities

choose to fund programs is still affected by the people, but will not be the focus of this research.

When finding and reviewing the material, The Columbus Age-Friendly Findings Report for 2016 was easily obtained. Now, Akita was a bit more difficult. It first started with the W.H.O. website to see what data and for what years were readily available. After searching for more thorough work, the Akita city website was found, which had a page on Age-Friendly City Initiative. This is where the “Akita City Age-Friendly City Citizen Awareness Survey Results” was pulled from. However, it still lacked the level of detail that Columbus provided, so the “Akita City Age-Friendly Index” results from 2014-2017 were added to suffice.

Finally, as a non-Japanese individual, a Japanese native reviewed my work to clarify any major cultural misunderstandings there may have been. An interview with Professor Teppei Kiyosue of The Ohio State University was conducted for his perspective.

Results

Domain Differences

The Domain Structure chosen by Akita and Columbus also differed greatly. Columbus decided to combine “Respect and Social Inclusion” with “Social Participation” and add “Safety and Emergency Preparedness”. This extra Domain will not be addressed because there is a lack of material in Akita to compare with and it is outside of the scope of the typical Age-Friendly City Program. However, it does touch on the culture of Columbus. Concerns with staying as independent as possible, even in the event of an emergency, are a priority for them. Columbus provides many programs and resources to the community, but the goal is not to make older adults feel reliant on the community rather the community provides the space for them to be self-sufficient. Akita’s domain structure in comparison, although they stuck with the main 8 domains in their Index results, their questionnaire had flexibility in the categories. An unmentioned category for Akita’s questionnaire was their “Life” category. They followed up the questionnaire by asking “do you feel your life has purpose?”. This question is very big and broad for Akita to attempt to take on. This displays how they see the city and one’s environment as a major factor in any person’s sense of well-being. Although they did inquire about their citizens' overall opinions on Akita’s Age-Friendliness, putting the concerns of each individual’s “sense of purpose ” on their radar for improvement is a monumental task.

Columbus found strength in their older adults' access to transportation because over 75% of responses mentioned having no problems getting around (3). However, keep in mind that over 80% of these responses drive themselves (3). For those who do drive themselves, parking was also found to not be any major barrier (3). Traffic signs in the neighborhoods of Columbus older adults are easily readable to over 90% of respondents (3). Throughout their neighborhoods, 77% of older adults agree that the streets have been well maintained (3).

Of Akita’s more open-ended responses on transportation, they found that the community's top strengths with public transportation were (greatest to least): convenience with the use of the “coin bus” system (34.5%), there are many stops (16%), the central city loop (100 yen ride) is convenient (15.3%), the non-step/low bus is convenient (11.1%) (8). Akita found that applications for the Coin Bus pass had increased each year since 2014 from 57.96% to

62.03% in 2017 (9). It is expected that the grant rate will continue to rise in the future due to the increase in the number of older adults becoming eligible for the service (9). In 2017, a large increase in universal design taxis led to an increase in the overall introduction rate of both universal taxis and the welfare taxis (9). Accessible taxis for older adults provide more freedom and independence in transportation.

Comparison Results

Housing

Akita in particular had home cultural factors that would not affect Columbus at all. This included, the step-up rooms, which is often used to take off shoes when entering a home. The need for sunlight, although felt not like not a major priority, is actually a culturally important thing to Akita. Professor Teppie Kiyosue led me to the insight that having a south facing window allows for maximum sunlight and is often considered when house hunting in Japan. Another Akita specific concern, would be “Japanese-style” toilets. These require you to squat to the floor and are often inconvenient for older adults.

Akita is a much more rural area and has a very different housing issue with there being too many old and abandoned homes compared to Columbus. Yet, their access to renovations through government grants is a great solution.

Outdoor Spaces and Buildings

For Akita, one of their few mentioned strengths in Outdoor Spaces and Buildings includes the barrier-free rate of public facilities. Although it is slightly below the Akita Prefecture average of 21.1% in 2017, it continues to rise steadily each year (9).

Despite Akita’s reports on their heated roads and snow removal projects (1), there seems to be a lack of measurements in this category of their Index. This displays that this area isn’t as great of a priority as other domains of Age-Friendly life. Please keep in mind, this category may overlap with the Housing category for Akita, and the understanding around what is “home” and what is “public” may vary. Akita chose to focus on their residents’ “sense of security” outside, whereas Columbus wanted to know what physical barriers could be found. Surprisingly, Akita was very uneasy about going out. This is less of a shock when you consider the fears of older adults in particular. The lack of streetlights was a big concern for Akita, for example. Columbus inquired about specific barriers to going out and not as much about how they feel about those barriers being an issue. On the other hand, Akita looked at their fears first and worked toward the obstacles.

Transportation

Although both cities emphasized transportation, note the difference in car usage. In Columbus 82% of respondents mentioned cars as being their main method of transportation and income was the biggest factor into their choice of transportation. Those who did use public transport found to have more trouble getting around Columbus. Compared to about 60% of people who use cars as their main method of transportation in Akita, according to the “2nd Akita City Public Transportation Policy Vision” in 2016 (11). In Akita, regarding the use of buses, trains, and taxis when traveling within the city, most respondents answered that they “only use them a few times a year,” but those aged 75 to 84 use them more than once or

twice a month (9). More than 50% of the respondents answered that their older adults are highly dependent on public transportation as a means of going out (9). Akita did not review the other methods as in depth as Columbus. Columbus individuals use the bus system less but this may be due to lack of awareness of the services provided. Akita on the other hand did an in depth review of the needs of their bus system but touched very little on their walking paths and roads.

Communication and Information

Overall, one major difference in each city's findings is their primary source of information. Akita's main source was public papers (ex. Akita newsletter) and newspapers, as where Columbus' was through the internet (8)(3). Both cities did a good job of digging further into those specified needs. Despite the difference in the direction of their concerns, it was fitting for the city's expectations of information distribution.

Civic Participation and Employment

In general, Columbus was concerned with the "why" older adults were or were not working. Compared to Akita that emphasized their concerns with older adults' feeling of "purpose" in their work. This may also be due to the concerns around employment options in Akita. The established Silver Human Resources Center from previous years could be utilized to find out the "why" that Columbus is seeking. There is a chance that although an increased opportunity to stay employed is there, there may not be interest. This doesn't seem to be the case based on Akita's evidence in finding "purpose" through work, yet, the questions could still be asked. Another interesting difference is in Akita's Action Plan, they label those aged 15-65 as the 'working age'. This is concerning because if people wait til later to work, or are retiring later, it affects the outlook. The main reason for addressing this, is that there is room for concern that older adults are estimated to be supported by about 1.1 of those in the 'working age' population by 2040 (10). Associating age with 'workability' is not something we see in Columbus. Of course, they have less to worry about considering the percentage older adults take in the population. This is also due to Japan's mandatory retirement seen in some jobs.

Respect and Social Inclusion

Overall, Columbus focused on the 'respect' aspect of this domain more than Akita, and Akita focused on the 'inclusion' more. Columbus asked older adults about their feelings of being perceived as an older adult in the community, and Akita asked about their general opinion around 'aging'. Neither had a positive outlook, but, it shows that despite the cultural difference, aging affects both the feeling of respect and social inclusion. Akita wants to make sure their community is not living in fear of getting older or an aging society in general. Columbus wants their older adults to feel like a part of the community.

Health Services and Community Supports

Columbus's main focus with Health Services and Community Support was their older adults' accessibility to services. Whether that be their understanding of services available, what pays for these services, whether or not they are eligible or if they can afford it, were all important questions to Columbus. Akita took a different approach. Although their more open-ended question led to similar results of financial concerns as a major barrier in health care, the Akita Index indicated they had a focus on dementia in their city. They made sure to define a

“healthy” life expectancy and measure how many older adults are living in their dependent years. Akita could take from Columbus in the way that their members expressed financial concerns, so they should focus on those solutions. Columbus on the other hand could open up a new viewpoint on what Health Services and Community Supports mean, with a focus on dementia.

Social Participation

Once again we see Akita involving other generations in the results of some of their surveys, which differs from Columbus. For example, when looking at conditions needed for social participation by age group in Akita, the younger generation emphasized “cost,” the ‘working generation’ emphasized “time,” and the older generation emphasized, “familiarity” (9). Akita overall was more in-depth with this domain compared to others, showing that this may be a priority of theirs. They even adjusted for regions to see how activity participation may vary based on location and/or access. On the other hand, Columbus combined this category with the Respect and Social Inclusion domain which limited the number of details we saw in Akita. Akita details types of activities such as sports and their ‘organized social gatherings’ by residents. However, this makes sense considering those who mentioned rarely or never participating in any social community events were 60% in Akita and 42% in Columbus.

This domain is unique in the sense that despite Akita’s more ‘group-oriented’ driven culture, they found significantly more concerns with social participation. This is where an individualized approach may be a better fit. They have continued to ask the right questions but, if they adjusted for age or income in more of their results, they may find the missing details to pursue a change.

Conclusion

Culture affected just about every part of implementing the Age-Friendly City Initiative. It also affected the baseline of barriers around aging that need to be overcome. For example, Japanese-style toilets are unique to Japan’s culture and in turn, created a unique barrier. The level of involvement of both the older adults and other generations in the baseline assessment was also affected. Akita’s broader scope of an ‘aging society’ rather than Columbus’ ‘aging individuals’ created more space for younger citizens to have a say in the needs of the community as they age. Columbus saw prioritizing the older adults’ opinions on the city as a way to ‘give them a voice’ and hear directly from the demographic in need. Neither of these approaches is exactly ‘better’ they just reflect how each culture made its way into the process.

Although some of the action items may not be culturally translatable, there are still some methods each city could take from the other’s perspective. With this in mind, the next steps would be to review the action items and assess how they may be perceived in the differing cultures before attempting to adopt new tactics.

Resources

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