Exploring the Experiences and Needs of Middle-Aged Japanese Immigrant Women in Canada
Research Report Executive Summary

Tonari Gumi - Japanese Community Volunteers Association

Izumi Niki[1], MA, MSW & Izumi Sakamoto[2], Ph.D.

Funded by Vancouver Foundation, 2022 Systems Change Momentum Grant

February 2024

Tonari Gumi - Japanese Community Volunteers Association has been serving the Japanese Canadian community with a wide array of programs, extending a helping hand to seniors and others. From 2020-2021, *Tonari Gumi* and the *University of Toronto* research team worked on the research project "Exploring the Experiences of Community-Dwelling Japanese-Speaking Seniors in Metro Vancouver" to examine the experiences of Japanese-speaking seniors. This research suggested that Japanese immigrant seniors have language, service and financial needs that are often unmet, and some wished that they had prepared for their senior years much earlier. Thus, in the second phase of this community-university collaboration, a bilingual research team conducted a series of focus groups with middle-aged Japanese-speaking immigrant women in their 50s and 60s, exploring their settlement experiences, family care, community connections, service needs, and preparedness for senior years.

The focus group interviews highlighted research participants' diverse life experiences in Canada, which were affected by such factors as their reasons for immigration, location of residence, length of stay in Canada, marital status, presence of children, English language proficiency, employment, engagement in (transnational) family care, and the presence of Japanese-speaking friend networks, which seem to have affected the degree of integration to and the identification with Canadian society. Research participants' narratives revealed five key findings (see full report for more details):

Theme 1: No concrete plans for their senior life (e.g., returning to Japan or staying in Canada)

Most participants shared some level of anxiety toward their senior years, with concerns partly arising from a lack of clear plans for the future. While some were entertaining the thought of returning to Japan for better medical and cultural resources, most were inclined to stay in Canada. The inability to make a clear plan was affected by the mono-citizenship policy in Japan; that is, Japan does not allow dual citizenship and obtaining Canadian citizenship would mean giving up their Japanese nationality. Even still, reasons for staying in Canada included the strong likelihood of children remaining in Canada and worries about the financial sustainability of returning to Japan, amongst others.

Theme 2: Complex family dynamics and identities

Japanese-speaking immigrant women were often sandwiched between the policies and values of two countries, Canada and Japan. Although they appreciate "Canadian multiculturalism," they faced challenges when it comes to passing down language and culture to their children due to their high percentage of mixed unions. Not only did they perceive racism, but also superficial and stereotypical views toward Japanese-speaking people in Canada.

Theme 3: Vague anxiety about the future life

Japanese-speaking immigrant women expressed anxiety and concerns for their future in Canada, especially in timely access to medical care, language barriers, housing, finances, and the lack of sufficient cultural resources.

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Theme 4: Continuum of "work" -- paid and unpaid, and more

Most had some kind of care needs, including transnational caretaking of their aging parents in Japan, caretaking of their children, husbands/partners, or even friends. Some had no, or only a few, Japanese immigrant friends who shared similar experiences as them, while others relied on their Japanese-speaking friend networks for obtaining information and support.

Theme 5: Importance of informal networks of Japanese friends

Those Japanese-speaking immigrant women who had informal networks of Japanese friends discussed how valuable these networks were in obtaining information and goods, help in emergencies, and emotional support. It should be noted, however, that not all participants were connected to such networks.

While many middle-aged Japanese immigrant women were entertaining the idea of staying in Canada in their senior years, all (or they) were mostly undecided and unprepared for their senior lives, whether in Canada or Japan. The plans for future years for our research participants were affected by national policies, cultural values, and respective family dynamics in both Canada and Japan. The uncertainty about the future years was heavily impacted by Japan's mono-citizenship policy. Our research participants wished that there were more tailored information and services for Japanese immigrants available in Japanese language. Many participants also valued the mutual support provided through informal networks among Japanese immigrant friends and acquaintances, which partially filled the gap of publicly available services.

Even though most of these middle-aged Japanese women were undecided on the country of residence in coming years, our research suggests that it is important that they start thinking about and preparing for their senior years now, rather than waiting until after retirement. Senior years can be thought of as a continuation of their current life-roles, such as paid and unpaid worker, caregiver, and community member. Given that individual experiences of settlement and current life situations were diverse and complex among these middle-aged Japanese immigrant women, their plans for senior life may be equally idiosyncratic and require individualized support. Thus, we conclude that there is a strong need for public education and information sharing specifically tailored for “pre-senior”/middle-aged Japanese-speaking immigrant women to help them actively prepare for their senior years.

While government funding tends to push for amalgamated services for immigrant communities, our findings point to the need for cultural and language-specific services. This may be a common theme not just for the Japanese-speaking immigrant community, but also for other relatively small immigrant communities. In the next phase of the research, it may be beneficial to contrast our findings with existing literature on the experiences of other similar immigrant communities (such as those with a high proportion of mixed unions, for example). By exchanging ideas and learning from each other’s community experiences, we can better support middle-aged members in their efforts to prepare for successful aging in place. While this research is specific to the Japanese Canadian community, it may have potential applications for other ethnocultural and immigrant communities and organizations, where there are issues in language, cultural, and legal considerations for seniors.

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Exploring the Experiences and Needs of Middle-Aged Japanese Immigrant Women in Canada

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Executive Summary

Tonari Gumi - Japanese Community Volunteers Association has been serving the Japanese Canadian community with a wide array of programs, extending a helping hand to seniors and others. From 2020-2021, *Tonari Gumi* and the *University of Toronto* research team worked on the research project "Exploring the Experiences of Community-Dwelling Japanese-Speaking Seniors in Metro Vancouver" to examine the experiences of Japanese-speaking seniors. This research suggested that Japanese immigrant seniors have language, service and financial needs that are often unmet, and some wished that they had prepared for their senior years much earlier. Thus, in the second phase of this community-university collaboration, a bilingual research team conducted a series of focus groups with middle-aged Japanese-speaking immigrant women in their 50s and 60s exploring their settlement experiences, family care, community connections, service needs, and preparedness for senior years.

The focus group interviews highlighted research participants' diverse life experiences in Canada, which were affected by such factors as their reasons for immigration, location of residence, length of stay in Canada, marital status, presence of children, English language proficiency, employment, engagement in (transnational) family care, and the presence of Japanese-speaking friend networks, which seem to have affected the degree of integration to and the identification with Canadian society. Research participants' narratives revealed five key findings (see full report for more details):

Theme 1: No concrete plans for their senior life (e.g., returning to Japan or staying in Canada)

Most participants shared some level of anxiety toward their senior years, with concerns partly arising from a lack of clear plans for the future. While some were entertaining the thought of returning to Japan for better medical and cultural resources, most were inclined to stay in Canada. The inability to make a clear plan was affected by the mono-citizenship policy in Japan; that is, Japan does not allow dual citizenship and obtaining Canadian citizenship would mean giving up their Japanese nationality. Even still, reasons for staying in Canada included the strong likelihood of children remaining in Canada and worries about the financial sustainability of returning to Japan, amongst others.

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Japanese-speaking immigrant women were often sandwiched between the policies and values of two countries, Canada and Japan. Although they appreciate "Canadian multiculturalism," they faced challenges when it comes to passing down language and culture to their children due to their high percentage of mixed unions. Not only did they perceive racism, but also superficial and stereotypical views toward Japanese-speaking people in Canada.

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Japanese-speaking immigrant women expressed anxiety and concerns for their future in Canada, especially in timely access to medical care, language barriers, housing, finances, and the lack of sufficient cultural resources.

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Those Japanese-speaking immigrant women who had informal networks of Japanese friends discussed how valuable these networks were in obtaining information and goods, help in emergencies, and emotional support. It should be noted, however, that not all participants were connected to such networks.

While many middle-aged Japanese immigrant women were entertaining the idea of staying in Canada in their senior years, all (or they) were mostly undecided and unprepared for their senior lives, whether in Canada or Japan. The plans for future years for our research participants were affected by national policies, cultural values, and respective family dynamics in both Canada and Japan. The uncertainty about the future years was heavily impacted by Japan's mono-citizenship policy. Our research participants wished that there were more tailored information and services for Japanese immigrants available in Japanese language. Many participants also valued the mutual support provided through informal networks among Japanese immigrant friends and acquaintances, which partially filled the gap of publicly available services.

Even though most of these middle-aged Japanese women were undecided on the country of residence in coming years, our research suggests that it is important that they start thinking about and preparing for their senior years now, rather than waiting until after retirement. Senior years can be thought of as a continuation of their current life-roles, such as paid and unpaid worker, caregiver, and community member. Given that individual experiences of settlement and current life situations were diverse and complex among these middle-aged Japanese immigrant women, their plans for senior life may be equally idiosyncratic and require individualized support. Thus, we conclude that there is a strong need for public education and information sharing specifically tailored for “pre-senior”/middle-aged Japanese-speaking immigrant women to help them actively prepare for their senior years.

While government funding tends to push for amalgamated services for immigrant communities, our findings point to the need for cultural and language-specific services. This may be a common theme not just for the Japanese-speaking immigrant community, but also for other relatively small immigrant communities. In the next phase of the research, it may be beneficial to contrast our findings with existing literature on the experiences of other similar immigrant communities (such as those with a high proportion of mixed unions, for example). By exchanging ideas and learning from each other’s community experiences, we can better support middle-aged members in their efforts to prepare for successful aging in place. While this research is specific to the Japanese Canadian community, it may have potential applications for other ethnocultural and immigrant communities and organizations, where there are issues in language, cultural, and legal considerations for seniors.

Why This Study was Conducted

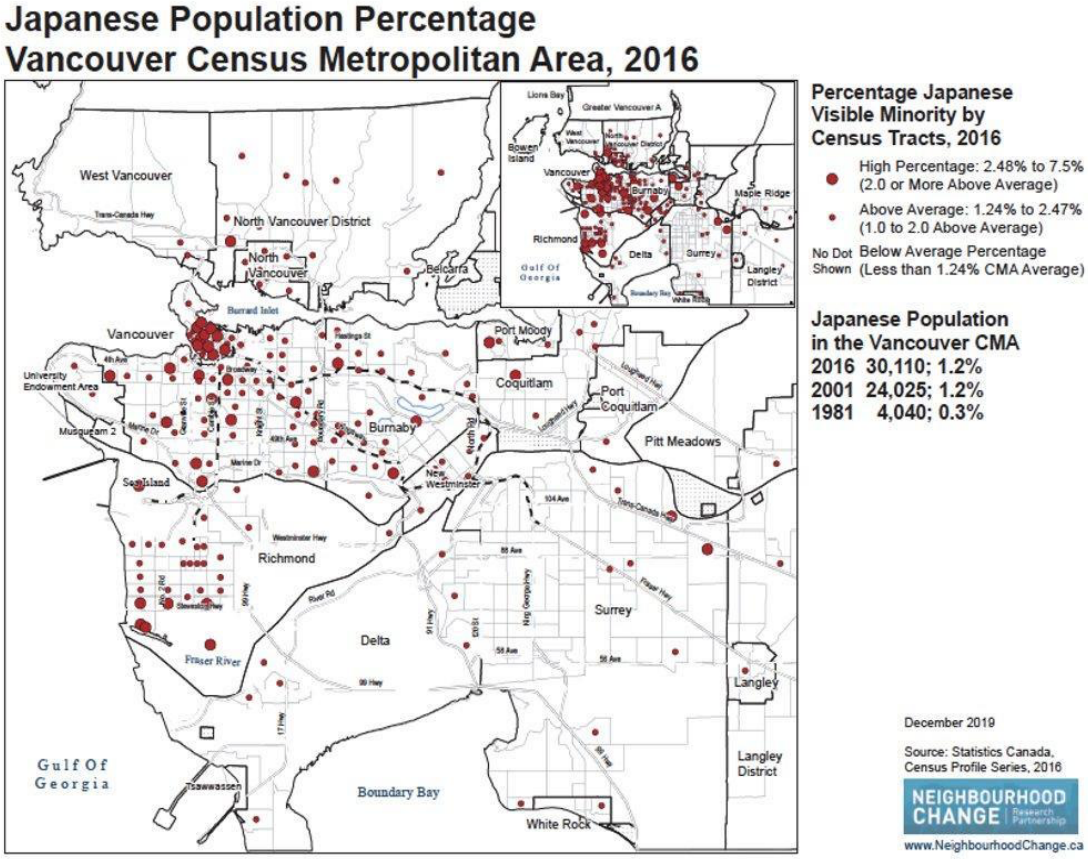
Tonari Gumi - Japanese Community Volunteers Association has been serving the Japanese Canadian community with a wide array of programs and extending a helping hand to seniors and others since 1974. During the COVID-19 pandemic and especially during lockdowns, Tonari Gumi was alarmed by the isolation and disconnect experienced by Japanese-speaking seniors living alone in Metro Vancouver. To explore the experiences of these Japanese-speaking, community-dwelling immigrant seniors, *Tonari Gumi* and the *University of Toronto* research team conducted a research project, "*Exploring the Experiences of Community-Dwelling Japanese-Speaking Seniors in Metro Vancouver*," in 2021. We specifically aimed to highlight some common challenges and needs, and to envision recommendations for improving the lives of Japanese-speaking seniors. This 2021 research study suggested that Japanese immigrant seniors had language, service, and financial needs that were often unmet, with some wishing that they had prepared for their senior years much earlier. Despite the needs suggested by this study, however, the Japanese Canadian community's service resources are limited due to its relatively small size, with only a few Japanese-language service agencies existing nationally. Thus, in the second phase of this community-university collaboration, a bilingual research team conducted a series of focus groups with so-called "pre-seniors," or middle-aged Japanese-speaking immigrant women in their 50s and 60s, exploring their settlement experiences, family care responsibilities, community connections, service needs, and preparedness for senior years. We focused on Japanese-speaking immigrant women specifically, as about three-quarters of Japanese immigrants since 1991 have been women (Statistics Canada, 2022a & 2022b), many of whom married non-Japanese partners (cf. Ohki, 2023; Szeto, 2023). While this research is specific to the Japanese Canadian community, it may also have potential applications for other ethnocultural and immigrant communities and organizations.

Background Information on the Japanese Canadian Community in Canada

While the first Japanese immigrants settled in Canada over 150 years ago, today, people with Japanese ancestry make up a relatively small community. According to the 2021 Census, there were about 129,430 people in Canada who self-identify as having Japanese heritage, comprising 0.36% of the total Canadian population (Ohki, 2023). Japanese Canadians tend to concentrate in the provinces of British Columbia (BC) (42.2%, 54,640 people), Ontario (32.6%, 42,250 people), and Alberta (14.4%, 18,605 people) (Ohki, 2023). Compared to other major ethnic groups (e.g., Chinese Canadians – 1.7 million people), the Japanese Canadian community is relatively small (Statistics Canada, 2022c). The data also indicates that from 1967 to 2021, about 48,000 Japanese immigrated to Canada. In contrast with the Japanese Canadians whose ancestors migrated to Canada in the late 1800s to the early 1900s, those who immigrated to Canada after WWII are often called "new immigrants" (新移住者 shin-ijusha) in the Japanese Canadian community (Sakamoto et al., 2016). One of the key differences between these two groups is the main language spoken at home and with others; while Japanese Canadians whose ancestors came to Canada pre-WWII primarily speak English, new immigrants mostly use Japanese. As a result, the latter may not feel comfortable accessing health and social services offered in English and may have a greater need for ethnolinguistic-specific services. This research focuses on Japanese "new immigrants"

who migrated to Canada post-war. Figure 1 shows the distribution of people in Metro Vancouver who identified as having Japanese heritage in the 2016 census. Unlike some other ethnocultural communities, there are no particular neighbourhoods or geographic areas with dense Japanese Canadian populations. Rather, the Japanese Canadian population is scattered around Metro Vancouver (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



About the Research

Research Method: Community-Based Research using Focus Group Interviews

Our overall research methodology is community-based research using focus group interviews, in that a community-based agency requested a university-based research team to conduct a research study to meet their needs (e.g., Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services, 2012; Hacker, 2013). The need for this research was identified by Tonari Gumi, who then secured research funding. Based on the prior research experience with the research team (Tonari Gumi 2021), the Executive Director of Tonari Gumi reached out to the second author, who, in turn, asked the first author to coordinate the research effort, as an adjacent project to the ongoing research project about Japanese Canadian identities (BRAID JC project; PI: Sakamoto). Throughout the research process the researchers kept in close contact with Tonari Gumi to ensure the goal and direction of the project stayed within the original intent.

Focus Groups

Online focus groups for Japanese-speaking women in their 50s and 60s were conducted 6 times using Zoom from November to December 2023. It was assumed that most people in their 50s and 60s would feel comfortable using Zoom (online video call software), which allows for people in different areas of residence to participate. In this post-pandemic time. Focus groups were chosen to allow for exploring the experiences of a wide range of participants in a relatively short period of time. As an added benefit, many participants expressed a sense of appreciation for us, saying that they did not have many opportunities to meet others in their age groups beyond their friends' circles and liked meeting others in similar situations.

The inclusion criteria for research participants were:

- Japanese-speaking immigrant women (self-identified) who have lived in Canada for 5+ years and have citizenship or Permanent Residency (PR) status
- Aged 50-69

Participants were recruited through existing email lists for Japanese people in Ontario and British Columbia, Facebook groups for Japanese immigrants, and word of mouth. All six focus groups filled up within a few days of circulating the initial recruitment advertisement. Each focus group (120 minutes/group) consisted of 6-7 participants and was conducted using Zoom. All focus groups were facilitated in Japanese by Japanese-speaking researchers and research assistants at the University of Toronto, since the native language of the research participants was Japanese. The data was summarized first for debriefing and discussion among the research team, and further analyzed using an Interpretive Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2008) in Japanese and then translated into English.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics protocols for this research were reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board. Considering a pre-existing relationship between some prospective research participants and Tonari Gumi, utmost care was taken to avoid conflicts of interest. To that end, while Tonari Gumi aided researchers in the recruitment of research participants by disseminating our advertisements through their email list, any and all identifying information of the participants was not shared with Tonari Gumi to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. All interviews were recorded using a Zoom recorder and saved in a password-protected computer drive.

Focus Group Questions and Analysis

During each of the focus group interviews, we asked about their current lifestyle, family dynamics, work, and future plans after retirement. We focused on how personal factors such as family dynamics, experiences, well-being, needs, and attributes (e.g., gender, marital status, social group) impacted individuals' decision-making for future planning. An interpretive thematic analysis was conducted during our data analysis processes. The core research team members are all Japanese immigrant women themselves and discussed their positionality and relationship to the topics throughout the research process to raise critical consciousness.

Demographic Information of the Research Participants

A total of 38 Japanese-speaking women participated in our study (See Figure 2).

Figure 2 Demographic Information of the Research Participants (total =38)

Residence	British Columbia: 27 (71%) Ontario: 9 (24%) Alberta:1 Manitoba:1
Age	Range: 50 – 66 years old Average: 54 years old 50s: 31 (82%), 60s: 7 (18%)
Years in Canada	Range: 6 – 40 years Average: 24 years
Permanent Residency (PR)/ Citizenship	PR: 26 (68%) Citizenship: 12 (32%)
Marital/Partnership Status	Married: 30 (79%) Divorced: 6 (15.8 %) Other: 2
Mixed Unions (Among those who were married)	Mixed Union:18/30 (60%) Married with Japanese or Japanese Canadian: 11/30 (36%)
Have Child(ren)	Have children: 30 (79%) Age of child(ren): Range 8-36 Have child under 18: (16/30) 53%
Residential Condition	Home ownership: 24 (63%) Rent: 13 (34%) Other: 1
Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identities	No one identified as 2SLGBTQIA+

Age

The mean age was 54.1 years old (range: 50 years old – 66 years old). 72% of the participants (31/38 people) were in their 50s, and 18% (7/38 people) were in their 60s.

Years in Canada

Among participants, the mean habitation length in Canada was 24 years (range: 6 - 42 years). 66% (25/38 people) of participants had lived for more than 20 years in Canada, whereas 27% (10/38 people) had lived in the country for 10 to 19 years.

Status in Canada

68% (26/38 people) had permanent residency (PR), and 32% (12/38 people) had citizen status in Canada. This number aligns with the 2021 national census, in which 34.4% of Japanese immigrants had obtained Canadian citizenship by naturalization (Ohki, 2023)[2]. Since Japan is a country with a mono-citizenship

[2] The percentage of naturalized Japanese immigrants increased as they spent more time in Canada. For example, only 19.4 percent of those who immigrated to Canada from 2001 to 2010 had been naturalized by 2021. But 83.0 percent of those who immigrated to Canada before 1980 had been naturalized by 2021 (Ohki, 2023).

policy, becoming a Canadian citizen means renouncing Japanese citizenship. The corresponding loss of a Japanese passport makes extended visits to Japan difficult. As a result, immigrants who obtain Canadian citizenship will most likely remain in Canada for the foreseeable future. In Canada, permanent resident status must be renewed every five years, and to renew it, one must stay in Canada for at least two years.

Marital Status and Partnership Status

Close to 80% of the participants (78.9%) were married or had partners (30/38 people). As the previous data shows, Japanese women are more likely to marry non-Japanese partners (Ohki, 2023, see Figure 3). Among our research participants, 60% (18/38 people) were in mixed unions, 36.7% (11/38 people) were with Japanese or Japanese Canadian persons, while 15.8% indicated that they had been divorced (6/38; and 1 unanswered). Most (78.9%; 30/38 people) had children (ages 8-36), and 53.3% of parents (16/30) had children under 18 years of age.

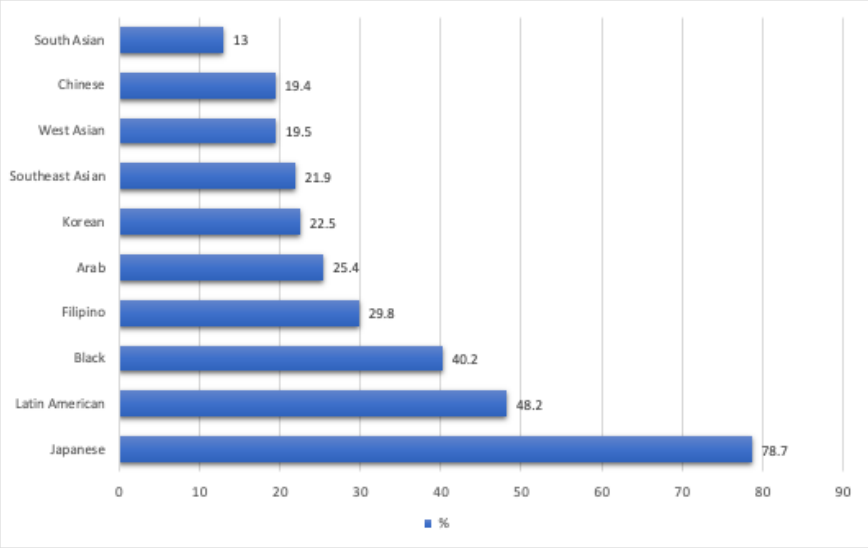


Figure 3 Percentage of Mixed Unions by Visible Minority Group in 2011
(Created by authors using Statistics Canada, 2015)

Residential Condition

63% (24/38 people) owned their homes, 34% (13/38 people) lived in rental properties, and one person was living in her family's house.

Research findings

Summary

Japanese-speaking immigrant women who participated in this research had diverse life experiences in Canada, which were affected by such factors as their reasons for immigration, location of residence, length of stay in Canada, marital status, presence of children, English language proficiency, employment, engagement in (transnational) family care, and the presence of Japanese-speaking friend networks, which, together, seem to have affected the degree of integration to and the identification with the Canadian society.

Most participants shared some level of anxiety toward their senior years, with concerns arising from a lack of clear plans for the future. While some were entertaining the thought of returning to Japan for better medical and cultural resources, most were inclined to stay in Canada. Reasons for staying in Canada included the strong likelihood of children remaining in Canada and worries about the financial sustainability of returning to Japan, among others (Theme 1: No concrete plans for their senior life). Japanese-speaking immigrant women were often sandwiched between the policies and values of two countries, Canada and Japan. Although they appreciated "Canadian multiculturalism," they faced challenges when it came to passing down language and culture to their children due to the high percentage of mixed unions. Not only did they experienced an overt form of racism, but also eperceived more subtle forms of racism (or racial microaggression) as well, such as superficial and stereotypical views toward Japanese-speaking people in Canada (Theme 2: Complex family dynamics and identities). They did have anxiety and concerns for their future in Canada, especially in the areas of timely access to medical care, language barrier, housing, finances, and the lack of sufficient cultural resources (Theme 3: Vague anxiety about the future life). Most had some kind of care responsibilities, including transnational caretaking of their aging parents in Japan, caretaking of their children, husbands/partners, or even friends (Theme 4: Continuum of "work" -- paid and unpaid, and more). Some had no or only a few Japanese immigrant friends who shared similar experiences as them, while others relied on Japanese-speaking friend networks for obtaining information and support. The latter utilized an informal network of Japanese-speaking friends to obtain information and goods, help in emergencies, and emotional support. Having a strong mutual support network is particularly important for immigrant women who do not have family members living in Canada, especially when publicly offered services may not fill all the needs that immigrant women may have (Theme 5: Importance of informal networks of Japanese friends).

Theme 1: No concrete plans for their senior life

Most participants did not have specific plans for life after retirement. Perceptions of retirement differed considerably between those in their 50s and 60s. For example, those in their 50s shared that they could not think about their retirement because their children were still young. Some people mentioned how they were preparing for their future years financially, including contributing to RRSP (Registered Retirement Savings Plan) in Canada and a few people even continuing their contributions to the Japanese national pension plan even after leaving Japan several years (or decades) prior.

The following were listed as a desired retirement lifestyle:

- Stay as healthy as possible.
- Continue working as long as possible.
- Have fun with friends who have similar interests, including hobbies and activities.
- Continue studying by going to college.
- Continue community activities and volunteer work.
- Live in a facility/assisted living where they can eat Japanese food.
- Spend half a year in Japan and half a year in Canada if possible.
- Some participants expressed their desire to contribute to society using the Japanese language after retirement, such as volunteering in Japanese or helping Japanese-speaking persons.

Although some people mentioned a desire to return to Japan, many had not decided whether to live in Japan or Canada in their senior years. Some participants said they would like to stay close to their children, whereas others who were single or had no children said they were free to live anywhere with readiness (覚悟). Findings revealed that their future plans depended on family dynamics, including those arising from mixed unions and children's plans. In addition, residency status was found to be a significant factor shaping participants' plans to leave or stay in Canada. As Japan does not allow dual citizenship, 68% of the participants, similar to most Japanese immigrants in general, held permanent residency in Canada rather than citizenship. This was a point of contention as the participants deliberated whether to stay in Canada for their senior years to be with their husbands/partners and Canadian-born children or return to Japan for retirement. This is a high-stakes decision; some even equated obtaining citizenship to abandoning formal ties to Japan. The uncertainty about which country to live in their senior years is tied to the issue of citizenship and constitutes individualized and specific concerns weighed down by the Japanese mono-citizenship policy. Some have already semi-retired but mentioned they were busy with various activities and care duties. This will be further discussed in theme 3.

Theme 2: Complex family dynamics and identities

The second theme is that our participants were often sandwiched between the policies and values of two countries, Canada and Japan. Since many of the participants have family members in Japan, they mentioned that they had experienced troubles and issues with various procedures, for instance, when they received inheritances in Japan. People who reside outside of Japan often face difficulty when opening bank accounts back home, even if they have Japanese citizenship. Several people mentioned they were unsure and wanted to consult with a professional on how they should process taxes on inherited money outside of Canada. Furthermore, as mentioned above, some people have continued to contribute to pension plans in Japan for years (or decades) after leaving because of the uncertainty of the future of pension benefits in Japan and Canada. These results indicate that each person is required to make decisions individually, oftentimes without enough information.

There were many positive comments about "Canadian multiculturalism." For example, research participants felt that Canadian society respects their Japanese backgrounds and allows them to retain Japanese culture and events. However, when it came to their children's education, they were sometimes

confounded by the Canadian educational system when compared to the education they themselves received in Japan. In the case of mixed unions, more people had issues related to their children's education. Japanese-speaking mothers often send their children to Japanese language schools on Saturdays in order to educate them in the Japanese language and give them a Japanese-style education. Even in this case, however, much of the educational burden falls on Japanese-speaking parents. One participant who had married a non-Japanese man mentioned, "I only use Japanese at home in order to pass down the Japanese language to our children. Our children interpret the conversation between my husband and me." Our participants also discussed that it was important for them to have Japanese friends with whom they could share their concerns during child-rearing. This will be discussed in more detail in theme 5.

Our participants also talked about their experiences and views on racism in the focus groups. A research participant who immigrated more than 30 years ago stated, "I think there is a lot less racial discrimination than there used to be. When I immigrated to Canada in the 80's, discrimination was much worse. I was spoken to as if I were a dog, for example." Some people said that despite the lack of noticeable discrimination in recent years, they still feel they are treated differently. One mentioned, "I've had times when I felt like I was being avoided (「避けられている」) at work, where everyone is white except for me." Among participants who lived in the Greater Vancouver Areas in B.C., many said that they "do not have to be conscious of myself as a racialized person or foreign-born because there are many Asian people where I live." On the other hand, some of those who live in areas with few Japanese people said, "There is no discrimination, but I have a sense that I should not stand out." Thus, we can imagine that experiences vary greatly depending on where one lives.

While actual Japanese people and cultures are diverse, some pointed out that the evaluation of Japanese culture in Canada is superficial and rather stereotypical. When people in Canada think of Japanese culture, they think of things like "sushi, anime, and manga." Participants also pointed out that they were seen through the lens of stereotypes, showing up as expectations on them -- "certain Japaneseness, such as punctual and meticulous personality (時間厳守で几帳面)" by other people in Canada. This is sometimes useful in work or relationships with others, but occasionally, they feel that it is one-sided and not accurate. Research participants also missed the Japanese culture, leisure, and built structure including food, public transportation (punctual, reliable, numerous stops), convenience stores (available everywhere), and hot springs (common travel destinations).

In reality, some research participants felt that they did not fit into Japanese society or felt that they were "fully Japanese," especially when they returned to Japan because they are now more used to Canadian society. In particular, their children who have Japanese heritage but grew up in Canada, seemed to have significantly different values, ideas, and attitudes from people who live in Japan. One participant shared her experience that when these children went to Japan, they were disappointed to see the negative side of Japan and Japanese people. She thought that children who grew up in Canada and have roots in Japan are the "new type" who can incorporate the good parts of both Canada and Japan: "I think it would be best if such children could go out into the world with these good characteristics without adhering to a predetermined Japaneseness." These comments indicate that even in multicultural Canadian society, people are applying rather rigid ideas of what it means to be Canadian, Asian, and Japanese.

Theme 3: Vague anxiety about the future life

Although many research participants had no concrete plans after their retirement, they did have vague anxiety and concerns about their future. Many of them expressed concerns specifically about the Canadian healthcare system, saying that they were unsure if they could see a specialist or receive treatment in a timely manner.

Concerns on Canadian Healthcare System

- "It takes time to see a specialist and even a family doctor."
- "It takes time to get surgeries or special medical procedures."
- "It takes too long to get emergency care."
- "Cannot find a family doctor."
- "Try to avoid prescription drugs, dentists, and optometrists since they are not covered by public health care. I refuse medications if I can skip them. On the other hand, drugs, dentists and optometrists are covered by the Japanese national health care system, even though there is a 10-30 % co-payment."
- "I have no problem with normal conversations, but I am concerned with medical jargons. I am more worried about the future when I get old [and need more medical care]."
- "I hear that there are medical interpreters available, but I have never used those services. I don't know how to access them."

Some people who were more familiar with or had experience using the system, however, were more comfortable with the healthcare system (e.g., "Don't have to worry about the medical fees." "If it's an emergency, they will see patients right away." "If it's not an emergency, it will take longer, but they will always see the patients.") Some people were aware that they had to actively navigate the system, through telling the physicians and nurses accurate information and family history, advocating, asking questions, and acting proactively. Some also stated that they knew that the Canadian health care and social welfare system were inadequate, so they had to be proactive and take care of their own health. One person said that she and her husband had an MRI at their own expense since a full physical exam in Japan would cost a similar amount as well. The participants were comparing the medical systems in Canada against that in Japan and making decisions about whether to pursue certain services or not.

How to navigate the system

- "We need to learn the customs in Canada to survive. We cannot be shy or modest like people in Japan in this country (「カナダでは日本のように遠慮していたらだめ」). It took me some time to adjust to the practice; I learned from how my [Canadian] husband communicated with other people."
- "Sometimes, we have to exaggerate ourselves to get prompt treatment. If we endure the pain, they will see it as a mild symptom."
- "I always ask my husband or children to come with me when I go to clinics and hospitals."
- "I audio record the physician's explanation."
- "I always ask my physician to write medical terms for me."

Some participants also mentioned anxiety about their senior life, such as financial, residential, and language abilities. Some people were concerned about their residential situation; for instance, those renting a house (34% of the participants) were concerned about their future rent due to recent inflation. While there are Japanese-affiliated assisted living facilities in Vancouver and Toronto that offer Japanese food, services, and programs in Japanese, many people were aware of, and concerned about their long waitlists. In addition, although they did not have scientific evidence, some had heard that they might lose their English language ability when they get old. One participant mentioned that this was one of her motivations to have her children learn Japanese.

- "I don't know if the Canadian pension system will still work like the current system in our old age."
- "I am worried that the amount of future rent will be much higher because of the high recent inflation rate."
- "I know that there is assisted living and housing for older Japanese people, but I heard that the waiting list is very long, so we don't know when we could be admitted."
- "I heard we may lose English when we get older… I am worried that I will not be able to speak English in the future."

Theme 4: Continuum of "work" -- paid and unpaid, and more

The fourth theme is the continuation of work and activities (including care work, study, and volunteer work) even after their retirement. One of the positive aspects of Canada compared to Japan is that people have more opportunities to work and study regardless of their age and gender. One participant in her 50s shared her experience of pursuing higher education ("I would not have gone on to higher education at my age if I had stayed in Japan.") In addition, many people intended to continue their work as long as possible, saying that it is good that Canada does not have a clear retirement age whereas Japan's retirement age is usually between 60 to 65. However, there were negative comments about Canadian employment, many concerning the fact that they couldn't use their Japanese experiences and qualifications. A person in the medical field mentioned, "It costs a lot of money and time to obtain Canadian qualifications," although she already had many years of experience in Japan. Another person's narrative that she "gained confidence when she started working in Canada (カナダで働き始めて自分に自信がついた)," indicatesthat work is one of the core components of a person's self-esteem.

It is important to consider that most research participants were caregivers; they cared for children under 18, older family members, or both. Therefore, although women in their 50s and 60s were retired from paid work, many are still busy providing care labour. The care they provide is diverse, including the following.

- Caring for child(ren) under 18: Among 38 research participants, 16 had child(ren) under 18 years old.
- Caring for child(ren) with disability…"It is difficult to find free time because he (the child with a disability) needs to be dropped off and picked up from school. I am worried about his future after he graduates from school. It is also difficult to return to Japan because he cannot be alone or cannot stay on the plane for long hours".
- Caring for grandchildren
- Caring for a sick spouse
- Caring for a friend
- Providing transnational care… "I am semi-retired, but I travel back and forth between Japan and Canada to care for my parents in Japan. I usually stay in Japan for a few weeks several times a year."
- Caring for Japanese-speaking senior… "I was introduced by my friend and work as a caregiver for a Japanese Canadian in Japanese."

Middle-aged adults are often referred to as the sandwich generation, who provide care for both older parents and their children. In addition to this, the fact that many immigrant women provide care across borders (transnational caregiving) and the difficulties they face as a result should be closely examined.

Theme 5: Importance of informal networks of Japanese-speaking friends

Many research participants mentioned the importance of Japanese-speaking friends and networks. Their networks helped them obtain emotional support, information, and goods and support in emergencies.

Many people indicated that they feel connected with their Japanese friends, and they share much in common.

- "Most of my friends are Japanese. I feel comfortable when I talk to Japanese people."
- "I feel relaxed when I talk with my Japanese friends about different things, even small things. I'm married to a person who is not from Japan, so my husband and I have a different sense of humour."
- "I can only share concerns about Canadian education with Japanese friends."
- "I tried not to talk to Japanese people to improve my English, but I think I was pushing myself too hard at the time and had so much stress."

Connections with Japanese people helped them to obtain information about Canadian society and necessary goods.

- "We formed a Japanese playgroup when our children were young, and we are still connected. Among them, there are people from various professions, so we exchange information and learn from each other, which has been very helpful. When I have a problem or issue, I will consult with the people there first."
- "I am a member of a 'newcomer group' run by Japanese people in the city, and they have been very helpful in providing me with information. I was able to learn how to apply for kindergarten. If I had not learned about it there, I would not have known about it."
- "I know there are Japanese social workers and social service programs in our city, but the first people to consult or ask are family members and my Japanese friends."
- "We used to order rice/organic products together."

Some of the research participants mentioned that Japanese-speaking friends and networks helped them in emergencies. Informal networks are especially important for immigrants in emergencies, illness, and child-rearing for those who do not have close family members in Canada.

- "When I was discharged from the hospital, I was allowed to recuperate in someone's home, who was not so close to me at that time."
- "We helped the family members of a person from the network who had to fight with sickness by raising funds. Some people cooked food and cared for the children."

These networks of our Japanese women participants were often established primarily as parenting support groups when their children were young. However, some admitted that they were not connected with Japanese people in the community at all and felt lonely. One person mentioned, "I am too busy with my work and personal life with children that I am unable to do anything else, including making new friends. But I would like to use this focus group as an opportunity to start some activities like volunteer work for Japanese people in the future." Others living in remote areas said there were not many Japanese people in their vicinity. Only a few social services in Canada specifically cater their programs and services to Japanese-speaking people, and they are based in Vancouver and Toronto. This also indicates that their experiences and available supports differ depending on the region or areas in which they reside.

Recommendation of Services and Programs

The services and programs they would like to have in Japanese are related to information and networks:

1. **Easly accessible and accurate information on the Canadian systems in Japanese** (medical, social welfare, pension, etc.)**, such as a database (website) with the up-to-date information in Japanese**;
2. **Information about and access to professionals who are familiar with both Japanese and Canadian social systems who can consult on individual situations** (e.g., tax, pension, health care, and care for older persons);
3. **Free courses and job training to prepare for and adjust to senior life in Canada (both work and personal life) in addition to the workshops and seminars currently provided to prepare for senior life;**
4. **A platform to connect with other Japanese immigrants (e.g., a network to connect semi-retired people to paid volunteer opportunities with people in need; opportunity to communicate with people with similar interests outside of the parenting group).**

Even though research participants wanted more services and programs, they also showed strong desire to use their Japanese language to help other Japanese-speaking people. Many were already involved with Japanese-related organizations as volunteers, but some were looking for paid opportunities. It was mainly informal networks and word of mouth that connected people (e.g., Japanese-speaking people who needed care with those who provided care in Japanese). It would be helpful to have a platform that could provide such opportunities within the community. Some of the services and programs desired in the focus groups already existed through social service agencies and community groups (e.g., translation services, information sessions, and volunteering opportunities). This may indicate that these services are not well known, or that they are not available in some areas.

Limitations of the Study

Limited recruitment methods (i.e., recruitment email messages circulated through several mailing lists and Facebook groups for Japanese immigrants in Canada) were used in the application process, which probably skewed the participants' residency mostly to British Columbia (B.C.) and Ontario. Similarly, we did not hear from those living in remote areas, even within B.C. and Ontario except for one participant; the experiences of this group are likely to be quite different. Due to the nature of the focus groups being group interviews, it is possible that we could not hear in-depth stories from each participant. While people with Japanese ancestry are concentrated in the urban areas of B.C. and Ontario, our future research can address these limitations to reflect the experiences of Japanese immigrant women in other areas, who may have different experiences due to the relatively smaller Japanese Canadian communities and Japanese resources in their areas of residence. While this study used focus groups as a data collection method, in the future, we hope to conduct individual interviews for in-depth exploration of people’s experiences, as well as a survey to gather more people's voices to reflect this population’s experience more fully.

Conclusion

The individual experiences of settlement and current life situations were diverse and complex among the middle-aged Japanese immigrant women in our study. While many were entertaining the idea of staying in Canada in their senior years (over returning to Japan), they were mostly undecided and unprepared for their senior lives, whether in Canada or Japan. Participants' plans for future years were affected by national policies, cultural values, and respective family dynamics in both Canada and Japan. Further, the uncertainty about the future years was heavily impacted by Japan's mono-citizenship policy, in that many participants were hesitant on "abandoning" their Japanese citizenship if they were to obtain Canadian citizenship. They wished that there were more tailored information and services for Japanese immigrants available in Japanese. Our participants valued the mutual support provided among friends, which seemed to help fill the gap of publicly available information and services.

Even though most of these middle-aged Japanese women were undecided on the country of residence in coming years, our research suggests that it is important that they start thinking about and preparing for their senior years now, instead of waiting until after retirement. Many people, especially those in their 50s still raising children, seemed to feel that their senior years were still far in the future. However, we advocate for a view of one's senior years as a continuation of one's current life in which one can have many roles, such as paid and unpaid workers, caregivers, and community members. Thus, as plans for senior life can be diverse and in need of individualized attention, we conclude that there is a strong need for public education and information sharing specifically tailored for middle-aged ("pre-senior") Japanese-speaking immigrant women to help them actively prepare for their senior years.

While government funding tends to push for amalgamated services for immigrant communities, our findings point to the need for cultural and language-specific services. This may be a common theme not just for the Japanese-speaking immigrant community, but also for other relatively small immigrant communities. In the next phase of the research, it may be beneficial to contrast our findings with existing literature on the experiences of other similar immigrant communities (such as those with a high proportion of mixed unions, for example). By exchanging ideas and learning from each other's community experiences, we can better support middle-aged members in their efforts to prepare for successful aging in place. While this research is specific to the Japanese Canadian community, it may have potential implications for other ethnocultural and immigrant communities and organizations, where there are issues in language, cultural, and legal considerations for seniors.

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