EFFECTS OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES ON THE FAMILY ROLES IN ELDERLY SUPPORT: A CASE STUDY OF UNAZUKI TOWN, JAPAN

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This study was intended to explore how technological changes affect family roles in elderly support. This research used a historical and sociological scope to understand the current situation of the elderly. In light of the cultural, social, and technological changes of rural Japan, elderly issues associated with the tendency towards smaller households, institutionalization, and reduction of filial piety are reexamined.

Three methods of qualitative study, in-depth interview for twenty elderly, participant observations, and review of town records, were conducted in Unazuki town. Informants reported various living arrangements, and the informants were divided into three generational groups, young-old, middle-old, and old-old. Data was manually coded and analyzed according to the research objectives and themes.

The study revealed the function of technological advancement for elderly who live in small households in terms of independent living as well as preserving intimacy in family relationships at a distance. Elderly care equipment, rather than family members, provided instrumental support for vulnerable elderly. Furthermore, technological interventions into the lives of the elderly promoted the acceptance of institutionalization by the elderly. In terms of generational differences, it was observed that the young-old demonstrated a preference for technological tools in order to receive the benefits of the tools, such as convenience and greater life opportunities. The old-old elderly had a tendency to be reluctant toward instrumental changes.

Along with technological advancement, however, family roles have not become less important than in previous times. Instead of instrumental support, the elderly expect and receive emotional fulfillment. Furthermore, the coordination of support from family members is necessary for elderly receiving social support, including appropriate housing and living conditions.

In conclusion, this study found that technological changes affect family roles in terms of shifting the roles from instrumental care to coordination of services for the elderly family member. It is suggested that families be equipped to effectively use the technological advances, which are appropriate to assist the elderly.