

Philosophy and Ethics

My research is chiefly in the areas of Western philosophy and ethics, including bioethics and medical ethics.

Assistant Professor

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Interests:

Kant's philosophy, the elderly living in solitude, the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness, emotional support



1. Kant's philosophy: The development of Kantian thought

All his life, German philosopher Immanuel Kant dealt with the term "character", gradually arriving at a clear concept. Analysis of the lectures on anthropology is essential to understand Kant's thought process on the concept of human character. When reading the lectures on anthropology, the following points become clear. Around the mid-1770s, Kant developed a concept for distinguishing between an inferior and a bad character, considering the latter to be better. Around the beginning of the 1780s, Kant placed great value on those who promised themselves something and held flatterers in low regard. The development of Kantian thought in particular reflects the insight that people spoil their moral character when they pay too much attention to the influence of others (1).

2. Elderly people living in solitude and loneliness

This study focuses on the question of how the elderly living in solitude can better accept their present situation and build relationships with others. To examine these issues, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 elderly persons (ages 65-89). The transcripts from these interviews were analyzed through a qualitative-inductive approach. We were able to classify the obtained information into ten categories. Four of these concerned their self-relations: (i) Changes after one's bereavement; (ii) changes with time; (iii) past events that changed their life style; and (iv) creative ability, absorbing oneself in a hobby and performing various tasks. Concerning relations with others, six categories could be noted: (v) Relations that provide encouragement to the elderly; (vi) joyful interactions with other people; (vii) becoming more distant from others; (viii) finding connections with others; (ix) ways of improving relationships with others; and (x) the presence of significant others. The analysis provided suggests that the elderly imagine others while they grapple with their own problems, and at the same time express spontaneous intentions concerning their relations with others. While the issues facing independent individuals and various

communities cannot be easily differentiated, their mutual influence should be considered (2).

According to estimates by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2018), the rate of living alone in 2040 will increase from 14.0% in 2015 to 20.8% for men aged 65 and over, and from 21.8% to 24.5% for women aged 65 and over. It is necessary to know the actual situation of the lives of elderly people living alone, which is expected to increase in number. Based on an interview survey of elderly people living alone in Sapporo City, Rumoi City, Kushiro City, and Kuromatsunai Town, the study reports on how elderly people living alone have adapted to life as individuals (3).

As Japan approaches a super-aging society, supporting isolated elderly people living alone is an urgent issue. 'Isolation', which is a form of being alone, does not necessarily lead to 'loneliness', which is the painful feeling of being all alone. The question is what causes the difference between those who suffer from loneliness and those who do not among the elderly. As clues to answer this question, we can look at Japanese traditions, nature, regional connections, and connections with the dead and greater beings (4).

3. The COVID-19 pandemic and elderly people living alone

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the sense of loneliness underlying the lives of elderly people. The lack of activities relating to hobbies or exercises and separation from their social networks has led to the absence of intimate human relationships. This in turn has revealed the issue of emotional loneliness, which had been hidden beneath various social activities. First, to discuss the abovementioned theme, an outline of impactful studies conducted before and after the COVID-19 pandemic on the theme of isolation and loneliness of elderly citizens is presented, along with the proposals made in them for ways to ease emotional loneliness. Next, an investigation by Sigrun-Heide Filipp, one of the representative psychologists of elderly mentality in Germany, and her colleagues is reviewed to

understand their suggestions toward providing proper emotional support for elderly citizens facing emotional crisis events. Finally, the idea of the “Little Way” proposed by Thérèse of Lisieux, a nun belonging to the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in France, and a discussion by a Catholic priest, Ichiro Okumura, to find connections between the Japanese people and Christianity encompassed in the idea of the “Little Way”, are reviewed, to clarify whether this would lead to a suggestive notion to form a foundation of emotional support practice in Japan (5).

Until now, various measures have been taken to prevent the social isolation of elderly people living alone. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, society has been urged to avoid contact with these people. Due to the lack of social connections during this pandemic, some elderly people may be experiencing anxiety not only physically but also through loneliness and isolation. This investigation presents an interim report on some of the results, focusing on the feeling of loneliness caused by subjective discomfort, based on a survey of elderly people living alone in four cities and towns in central, northern, and eastern Hokkaido (6).

How has the mental status of elderly people living alone been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has restricted travel with family members, caused individuals to refrain from socializing, and restricted visitation at facilities? Based on this question and a survey of the actual situation of elderly people living alone in four cities and towns in central Hokkaido, northern Hokkaido, and eastern Hokkaido, the study addresses the isolation and loneliness of elderly people living alone due to a lack of connections during the COVID-19 pandemic. An interim report focuses on both positive and negative impacts (7).

4. Gerontology and philosophy/religion

Age 55 is the turning point in human life where a person looks at their entire life and reconsiders the way they live. We have collected ideas from religious thinkers and philosophers that will form the basis of our future lives, while considering changes in work, family life, and social life, as well as aging and death. When I hear the words of Kant, German philosopher Max Scheler, German philosopher and monk Edith Stein, Carl Hilty, a Swiss jurist and thinker, and Teresia Abulensis, a Spanish mystic, my heart is moved. I have tried to express them as easily as possible, even for non-experts (8).

References

- (1)Funaki S. On the development of Kant's ideas about human character in the lectures on anthropology. *Japanese Kant Studies* (2023) 24:13-24 (in Japanese).
- (2) Funaki S, Miyajima S., Yamamoto T., Awaya T. Mixed forms of individuals and communities: Lives of elderly people living alone. *Hokkaido Journal of Bioethics* (2019) 7:19-35 (in Japanese).

(3) Funaki S. Life as an individual for elderly people living alone. *Community Caring* (2018) 20(14):62-64 (in Japanese).

(4) Funaki S. Elderly people living alone and loneliness: A perspective that goes beyond the binary opposition between autonomy and community. *Community Caring* (2019) 21(14):72-73 (in Japanese).

(5) Funaki S. Reducing loneliness for elderly people living alone: A view of emotional support. *Journal of Mind-Body Science* (2022) 31(1): 13-22 (in Japanese).

(6) Funaki S. Loneliness of elderly people living alone under the COVID-19 pandemic. *Community Caring* (2022) 24(12):71-74 (in Japanese).

(7) Funaki S. Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on isolation and loneliness in elderly people living alone. *Community Caring* (2023) 25(5):40-44 (in Japanese).

(8) Funaki S. Words of philosophy and religion from 55 years old: Immanuel Kant, Max Scheler, Edith Stein, Carl Hilty, Teresia Abulensis. Sapporo: Nakanishi Press (2021).

List of Main Publications (September 2018 to August 2023)

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