



For the November issue, I interviewed Dr. Masami Takahashi from Northeastern Illinois University, a professor who specializes in developmental psychology and gerontology. He is also a chair of the Chicago Sister Cities International Social Services Exchange Program between Chicago and Osaka, Japan. From November 7 to 13, 2015 a delegation of six experts in social services professions will travel to Japan to learn more about the country, their social service systems, and service sustainability.

**AK: Tell us about yourself, how did you become interested in psychology and what research topics are you most interested in?**

MT: I was born in Japan and went to a very competitive high school. I hated every minute of it. I was able to barely graduate because I just had the grades to get by. We had about 400 students, and I was always at the bottom 10 in the class. After that, I was not really doing much so my father sent me to the United States. I was in a cultural exchange program. Back then, the US dollar was much more expensive. Most of us in the program were brats from privileged families. Half of them were kind of serious, but the other half were kind of like me, delinquent kids sent over here by their parents. We had no interest in the United States or learning English. It was alright, though. I was a teenager, and it turned out to be pretty fun, and that's how I started. So, in the program I was first sent to the South, Shreveport, Louisiana, for ESL (English as a Second Language). And then I went to San Antonio, Texas. I attended community college there because that was more affordable. My father was paying for this. He never complained, even though I was using like \$1000 a month which was quite a bit back then. I went to community college for two and a half years, and then my father passed away. I did not really know what to do next, so I stayed with my mom in Japan for about a year, and I decided to pursue education further. My dad was an entrepreneur, and I did not want to follow his path. I wanted to do something else. I did some odd jobs and borrowed some money from my mom, and came back to Texas. My life was pretty low key for a couple of years, eating only pork and beans day after day. Then, I received a scholarship. It was only about \$500 a semester, but it also came with in-state tuition. It was really helpful. About the same time, Japan was also in the economic bubble years so lots of people came to Texas from Japan, and I started working a part-time job as well. I finished the Bachelor's and Master's programs at the University of Houston. It took me

a little longer than usual because I had to take breaks to raise money for my tuition. I then applied for a Ph.D. program, and I was accepted into Temple University in Philadelphia. By then, I was really interested in psychology and especially aging issues, and I aced every class. Temple had a very good developmental psychology program, and it was generous enough to pay my tuition along with giving me a teaching assistant position and living stipend. It was only about \$800 a month for six or seven years, but you know I survived. I graduated then in 1999 and started working here. I had a few other offers but chose Northeastern Illinois University because the Psychology Department is very vibrant and has an emphasis on research.

**AK: Ok, great. So, as you mentioned, you are most interested in aging issues. Are there any other topics you are currently researching or topics related to that?**

MT: In terms of aging, well I don't know, have you taken any psychology classes?

**AK: Well, yes, just Psychology 101 in undergrad.**

MT: OK, so, I was trained as a (Jean) Piagetian developmental psychologist. Usually when we say Developmental Psychology, it means we study infants and young children. But some of the more recent Piagetian researchers take an approach that looks at the whole lifespan of a person. So I am taking his theory of development to a human lifespan. What I am interested in is the transformation of psychological structures in old age. So, what does that mean, right?

**AK: Yes, please explain.**

MT: Psychological structures are not something tangible or observable but something that you assume, and we explain our behavior with that assumption. Just like muscle structures are invisible with the naked eye, but it can explain our range of visible, physical movement. I am more interested in ordinary aging rather than the pathological aging experiences. For example, I am interested in the concept of wisdom, religion and spirituality, and other psychological strengths. I am also interested in the *kamikaze* pilots and did some research while producing and directing a film which is now distributed worldwide (*The Last Kamikaze: Testimonials from WWII Suicide Pilots*). Another research interest of mine is longevity because Japan has the highest life expectancy in the world. As a matter of fact, I am leading a study tour this coming summer to Okinawa, which has the highest life expectancy in the whole world for the last couple of decades.

**A: Oh, wow, great! That will be really interesting.**

MT: Yes, we will be visiting various parts of Okinawa, meeting many older people enjoying their lives. One particular region that I am excited to take my students to is called Oku village. It literally means “Deep.” It’s a small village that still maintains very traditional communal living. We will also have a chance to talk to Dr. Craig Willcox, one of the authors of the New York Times best-seller, *Okinawa Program*.

**AK: I'm just curious when you talk about religion and spirituality with aging, what do you mean precisely with that? Do you mean, for example, how over time concepts of spirituality develop in people and what that means?**

MT: Well, that too. Umm, so, because my education is in the United States, most of my papers and presentations were limited to what was discussed in the English language. So my sources were from English-speaking countries, which is like 80-90% of the scholarship that has been done anyway in the field. But around 10 years ago, I was invited to a Japanese conference, and I had to give my lecture in Japanese. I had to use a dictionary and other sources to translate these English concepts because I either did not know the word or it does not exist in Japanese. Since then, I have been going back and forth studying Japanese and Americans who are aging. With regard to spirituality, everyone in the U.S. kind of knows what that term means although there are variations. For instance, if you ask African American people who emigrated from the southern United States back in the 1920s, their definition of spirituality would be very different from yours. So I decided to do some cross-cultural studies with Japanese and American people back in the beginning of the 1990s, and we asked several Japanese people to define what spirituality was, but no one knew that word. So we had to use a translation for a kanji version of spirituality to express the idea. Spirituality became a buzzword in a different context a few years later in Japan when a kind of cult-ish person on TV began using the word. Since then we have done several studies looking at different aspects of the concept including its definition, assessment methods, its relationship to religiosity, and so forth. A team of us also received a huge Japanese government research grant a few years ago to conduct a nation-wide study regarding religiosity and spirituality in the country, and as we speak we are preparing to publish several books and articles.

**AK: Ok, so based on research I've done, there are a lot of articles about how concepts like post-traumatic stress were not a part of the Japanese lexicon after the Kobe earthquake of 1995. Psychology is a field that was not really acknowledged at the time as well. Has that changed?**

MT: Well, maybe I shouldn't say this, but psychology is a few decades old in Japan for a variety of reasons, but the main reason is the language. As I said before, because most studies and research in the field are published in English, by the time English literature is translated, the studies are several, if not more, years old. So professionals have a tendency to be behind and write their works founded on theories and research findings

that are now a little outdated in the English-speaking world. Case in point, I just wrote an invited article on wisdom in a Japanese journal. Wisdom is a relatively new idea as a psychological concept, but it has been around since 1980, for about three or four decades, right? But in Japan, virtually no study has been done on wisdom. Here, the study of wisdom is huge. For example, the University of Chicago had a multi-million grant a few years ago, and they dedicated a lot of research to this topic. This is not the case in Japan still.

**AK: What is your favorite course or courses to teach at Northeastern Illinois University?**



MT: I usually teach graduate courses on gerontology. Recently, I am teaching developmental psychology and the history of psychology. Those are the two that I enjoy most. Both are kind of rooted in the philosophy behind it so, I guess I like the theoretical side of psychology.

**AK: So, how about the Social Services Exchange between Chicago and Osaka? Can you just talk about the program a little bit?**

MT: Sure. So, Chicago and Osaka have a Sister City Relationship that Ms. Yoko Noge oversees. I chair one of the programs dealing with social services. The program we have here is the second oldest of its sort. We interview and select a group of people from Chicago who are involved in social services related work, and we send them on alternate years to Chicago and Osaka. So last year, ten people came here from Osaka and this year, we are sending six to Osaka. They visit different sites in each city.

**AK: What is a goal of the program? Is it for each culture to go learn how social services are handled in the other country?**

MT: Yeah, that too. But I think the overarching purpose is to broaden the horizon of people who are involved in social services. You can't transport what is being done in Osaka to Chicago, but at least you see it from a different perspective. The particular application may be different to address an issue. For example, when the ten people came from Osaka last year with about three or four in the aging field, I created an agenda. One thing that struck me was when we went to a housing facility for the elderly in the Boystown area of Chicago, a neighborhood that caters mostly to gay populations. This was a total shock for the Japanese visitors. They had never heard of gay elderly housing. But it's an issue in America. This year, we are sending the American delegation to Osaka, and they will meet with and interview two famous gay lawyers in Osaka who are advocating for equality for really the first time in Japan to facilitate discussion.

**AK: In line with elderly people, do you see a major difference in elderly care facilities here and in Japan? As in, treatment towards aging and services offered?**

MT: It is an intertwined issue with pros and cons. I think Japan has a basic system in place. In the U.S. if you have money, you can receive the best care, but if you don't, there are some basic options available as well. The sheer proportion of people in need of elderly care in Japan is astronomical compared to the United States. Roughly 25% of Japan is older people, and the fastest segment of population that is increasing is 85+. So it's just the number of people who need the care versus the number who are able to provide. That is an issue, and Japan is struggling. In the meantime, pay and social security income is dropping. I understand that the Japanese economy is not doing well, but this is difficult for elderly populations to live with.

**AK: I read in the news, there are a lot of cuts in social services where a lot are nonprofit based social services are being hit hard. What do you think could be done to help the situation?**

MT: So, one of the themes of this year's exchange is service sustainability. In the US, at least nonprofit organizations can raise their money, and citizens are accustomed to donating partly because of the tax benefits. In Japan, giving donations is not something that people do, whether culturally, religiously, or taxation system wise. So fundraising is not really an option in Japan while here, it is a huge part of an organization's work. Its pros and cons...Americans are willing to donate because they are accustomed to this here, but because the economy is not doing so well, they have less money to do so.

**AK: Hmm...that is very interesting, I see your point. This is going in a slightly new direction, but I was wondering, do you have any quote or motto you'd like to share that you kind of live by?**

MT: I have this quote by Aristotle from the Nicomachean Ethics that I really liked when I first read it in school in Texas: *Most noble is that which is justest, and best is health; but pleasantest is it to win what we love.* This does not necessarily mean a person you love, but you pursue what interests you most, the meaning of life, if you will.

**AK: This is always an interesting question, but what's a challenge you have had to overcome?**

MT: Some people can come up with lots of obstacles they've faced, but I tend to not see problems. If I really had to think of something, the language has to be it. When I first came when I was 18, I didn't speak much English at all. But if you are doing what you like, like reading Shakespeare or articles in psychology, it becomes less of an obstacle but an inconvenience. It's just a little bump along the way *to win what you love.*

**AK: Yeah, you have to take small steps to reach your goals and keep learning.**

MT: Yes, exactly.

**AK: Finally, what are your impressions of Chicago?**

MT: My general impression of Chicago is that it is a beautiful and nice city, very different from both areas of the country where I went to school (South and East Coast). I enjoy jogging along the lake in the summer. I frequently participate in the Chicago Marathon and the Chicago Triathlon. I even enjoy the cold weather because snow is still novelty to me. I want to stay here and have no desire to go elsewhere really.

