

The Present Condition and Problems for Elderly People Participating in Communities

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1 Introduction

The proportion of aged citizens in Japan has been growing and has reached the highest proportion in the world (23.1% in October, 2010 [1]). The time when we need to tackle the social welfare problem of an aging society has arrived. It has been reported that social welfare services are insufficient to reach all people who need help, resulting in 32000 lonely deaths in a single year [2]. It is difficult to solve the problem only by reforming formal care systems under conditions where the number of senior citizens is increasing and the number of younger citizens is decreasing. Community activity that supports elderly citizens is important when the proportion of aged citizens is increasing to prevent overreliance on formal care. The idea named PPK(pin-pin-korori [3]) thus emerged. This is the idea that the number of people requiring long-term care can be decreased by increasing the number of active senior citizens.

The following problems were reported in the annual report of the Cabinet Office of Japan for community activities for supporting elderly citizens [4].

- Difficulty for continuing community activities due decreasing numbers of participants in senior citizen clubs and increase of their age.
- Increase in elderly citizens who are isolated due to weak human connections with their regional community.

One of the approaches for solving these problems is promoting community activities that support senior citizens. ICT support is also expected to support such community activities. These mechanisms have been studied from the aspect of administration, however, there has been little research focusing on the view point of the senior citizen who actually participates in the community activities.

In this paper, we report an ethnographic study for finding out important design implications for ICT support for the community activities. The participants of the study had various problems and stories regarding senior citizens participating in community activities. We then discuss the implications of design for ICT support.

2 Method

We conducted ethnographic interviews of fourteen senior citizens to find out about problem situations in their daily activities. Fourteen active seniors were selected as interviewees, since we could expect many tips from “lead users” [5].

In the ethnographic interviews, we asked interviewees to speak freely about their story of daily activities and community activities instead of answering predefined questions. Based on analysis of the transcriptions of the conversations, we collected various notes, such as episodes of participation, problems of participating in the community, surrounding situations, etc., from the story of the varieties of their activities. The collected notes were classified, and arranged into different types of problems and situations.

It is difficult to find out about episodes if you ask about the community activity directly. Therefore, we used the following interview sheets (Fig.1,2,3,4). Using the map sheets in Fig.1, we asked about the places where the interviewees visited daily. We then asked about the people who met at the places and their activities. Using the clock sheets in Fig.3, we asked about their daily activities from morning to night, and then clarified the daily activities that engaged in unconsciously. It is difficult to find out about daily activities because unconscious behavior does not leave an impression. However, it becomes possible to clarify these by looking back on the activities one at a time by using the interview sheets.

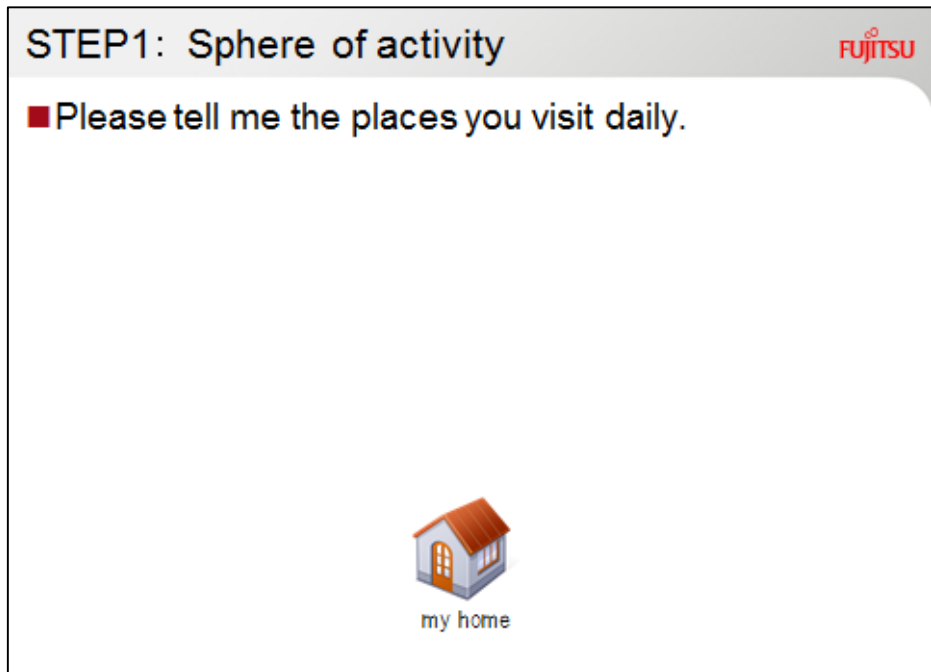


Fig. 1. Map sheet

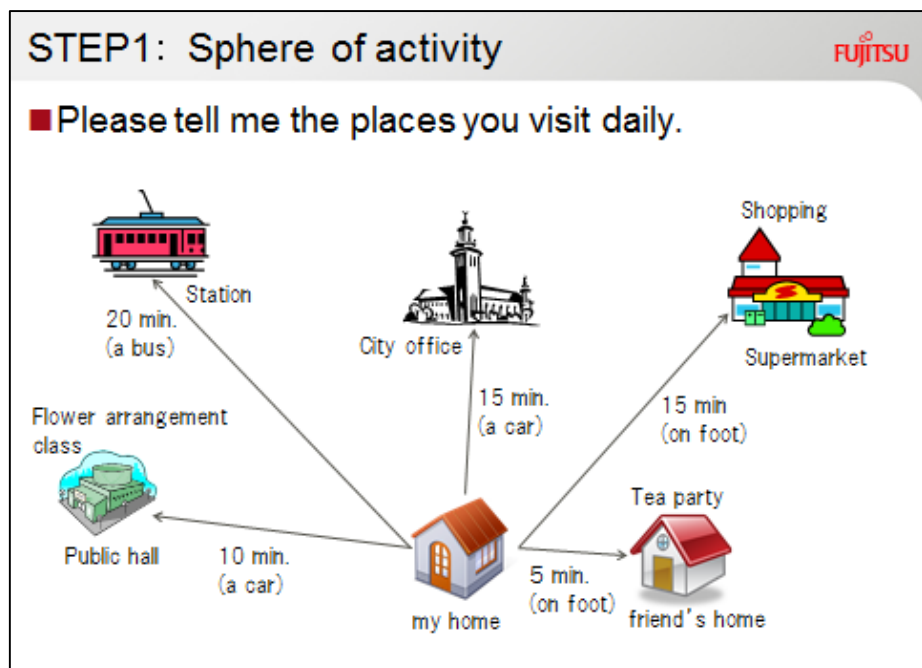


Fig. 2. Example of the entry in a map sheet

STEP2: Your usual daily activities FUJITSU

■ Please tell me your typical daily activities.

Weekday

Holiday

Fig. 3. Clock sheet

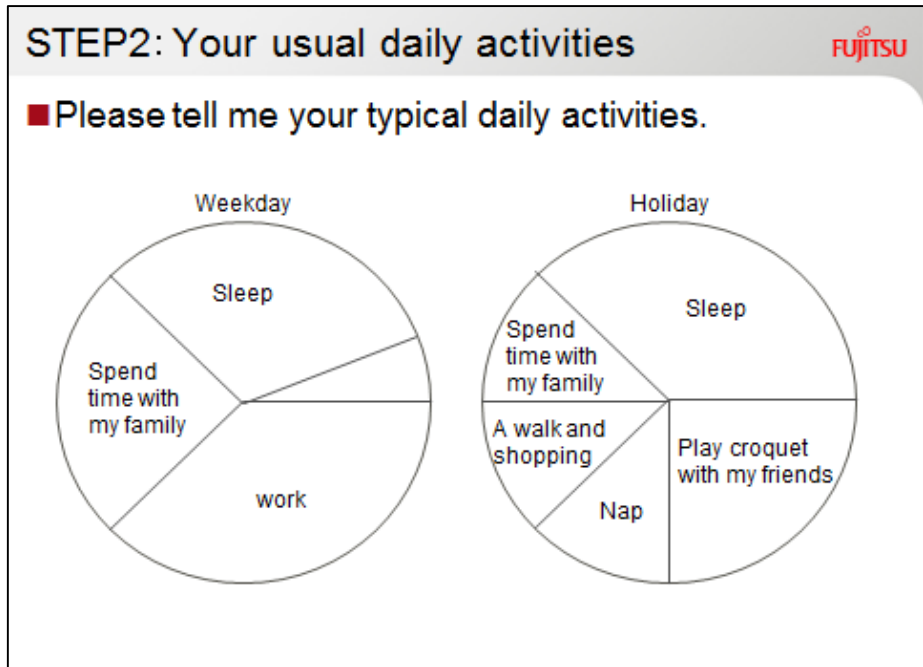


Fig. 4. Example of the entry in a clock sheet

3 Results

We got more than 100 episodes of problem situations for facilitating community activities from the fourteen interview transcriptions. The followings are example of episodes.

(1) A new community activity derives from an existing community activity.

We found that new communities were created triggered by community activities that already existed.

At the interview, we observed the following discussion.

"I joined the softball club because I was invited by a friend of the neighborhood association. The softball club is a very important community for me."

"I joined the sign language club because I have handicapped friends in another community". These episodes might suggest that community activity itself acts as a trigger for a new community activity.

(2) Importance of participation by obligation

We found that social pressure was a one of the important factors for the participation of elderly people in communities.

“I was reluctant to join the neighborhood association. However, I have to take the role of the neighborhood council because it was my turn. But now, this community is very important for me”

“After I joined the neighborhood association, I created a baseball team with friends in the neighborhood association”

(3) Hesitation getting help from others

We found that a feeling of hesitation getting help from others is one of the reasons why elderly citizens refuse participation in community activities. An elderly person said “I feel uneasy about many people taking care of me free of charge in the community activities.” “In a certain community, they reduce such hesitation by taking 100 yen as a registration fee.”

(4) Barrier between generations

We found that there were few opportunities for meeting other generations in communities. Most regional communities are grouped by generation, such as boys and girls clubs, women’s clubs, elderly citizens clubs, etc. There are few events for meeting different communities. An elderly person said “I have nothing to talk about with young men“. “Our community has no events with other communities”.

It is possible that a community in which most of the members are elderly will decline because younger people will not join. An elderly said, “There are no successors in our community. Who take cares of the community after we get older?” As a result, members who run the community were fixed, and there will be few chances for expanding their community.

On the other hand, we found a regional traditional festival event “O-maturi” in which different generations are participating fostered cross generational relationships. For example, we got episodes such as “I talked with a father of my friends”, “I met a person who lives close to my house”, etc.

4 Implications for ICT Design

As a result of the ethnographic interviews, we found that elderly people tended to not join unknown communities where there were no acquaintances. Therefore, it is necessary for the system to provide functions for encouraging them to join unknown communities. We designed a function that supports community members inviting elderly people. When an elderly person pushes the "NICE" button from the list of communities, members of the community get a message that tells them who showed interest in their community and the profile of that elderly person. The members of community can then decide who they should invite. We designed another function that supports elderly people joining a community with their friends. When an elderly person pushes the “NICE” button, the elderly person receives a message that shows their acquaintances registered as “Associate” who also showed interest in the same community.

As a result of interviews, after they joined a community out of obligation, they became interested in the community activities or they found other interesting communities. They might leave the community if they could not find interesting communities

and activities during the duty. Therefore, we designed a function that supports finding interesting communities. The system registers the elderly as an “Associate” when s/he joins the community. The system then supports finding a friend who has the same interest in the community by using the “NICE” button.

It was interesting for us that the interviewees felt guilty about getting kind help from others without giving back in return. Therefore, we designed a function that reduces the hesitation. The system supports selecting appropriate people for the task. When a community member inputs a task such as taking photos of the community, playing a guitar, etc., the system shows the appropriate persons based on the profiles of elderly people. It becomes easy to join a community by not requesting “please join us” but “please help us”.

It is difficult to resolve the barrier among different generations by only focusing on supporting individual communities. We designed a new function supporting connections among different communities. A regional traditional festival could be a good trigger for fostering communication among different communities. The owner of the festival can call different communities to invite them to the festival using the new function. Members of each community can join a new community with their friends from their community. Invitation by community (not by individual) might reduce their hesitation of participating in a new community, and also might foster relationships among different generations of different communities.

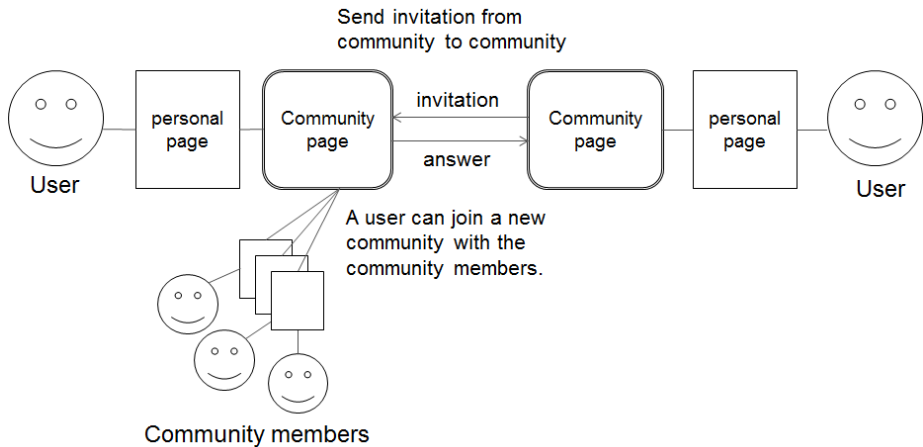


Fig. 5. Image of ICT design

The new function supporting connections with different communities might also help to activate and expand a community. Senior citizen communities tend to be run by fixed members and no new events are created. Owners of communities have to find people who help their events through their own network of acquaintances. The new function might help to find new activities and events of other communities, and easily get help for them using the new function.

5 Conclusion

We obtained design implications for community support based on interviews of community activities of active elderly citizens. However, these implications are still limited. We should investigate not only active elderly people but also non-active elderly people to get further implications. We will continue our ethnographic study on different types of citizens and other stakeholders and then conduct field experiments using an ICT prototype in some regions based on the findings of the field study.

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