

Health Psychology in Japan

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Health psychology in Japan remains relatively unknown on the world map of psychology. This paper aims to provide an overview of the current status of health psychology in Japan and discuss its future directions. First, a brief overview of demographics and public health issues is presented, as these issues are strongly related to health psychology's empirical studies and practices. Second, a description of the activities of the Japanese Association of Health Psychology as a key actor in health psychology is provided. Third, the current training system of psychologists is explained, and the future development of the field is discussed.

Health-at-a-Glance in Japan

Longevity is a word that describes the overall health status of Japan. Japan has been ranked as the most long-lived country among the G-7 countries (Tsugane, 2021). According to Tsugane, life and healthy life expectancy are the longest in Japan, among the G-7 countries. While Japan enjoys longevity, it has a low birth rate of 1.3 births per woman (The World Bank, 2023). Consequently, Japanese society has been rapidly aging, with those over 65 years now accounting for 27.4% of the entire population.

Such demographic changes have a great impact on the health care system including medical service systems and expenditure (the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2021). Yamada (2017) described two pathways

through which the aging population affect the health care system. First, the increase in the proportion of the population over 65 results in the decrease in that of the working age that supports the health care system. Under the current system, 48.8% are paid by a payroll tax levied by employers and employees. Second, the elderly are more likely to experience health-related issues than younger counterparts.

Thus, there are strong demands for the Japanese government to reorganize its social security system (OECD, 2021). The government is concerned about the rapid increase in medical expenses and has enacted policies such as the Health Promotion Act announced by the Minister of Health, Labour, and Welfare in accordance with Article 7 (2012). Under the Health Promotion Act, "Healthy Japan 21" was proposed. The targets of Healthy Japan 21 include:

- the importance of primary prevention
- the creation of a healthy environment
- goal setting and assessment
- the promotion of effective, well-coordinated activities by various implementing bodies.

The nine areas of focus are as follows:

- diet and nutrition
- physical activity and exercise
- leisure and mental health
- smoking
- alcohol
- dental health
- diabetes
- cardiovascular disease
- cancer.

Hence, the targets of Healthy Japan 21 are closely related to the themes of health psychology.

As described earlier, the major health issues in

Japan are related to the aging population. For instance, glaucoma, a leading cause of vision loss is more prevalent in Japan than other countries (Fujiwara et al., 2022). Whereas treatment adherence is essential to prevent the progression of the disease, it is reported that the proportion of patients showing good adherence varied between 48.6% and 69.6% (Shirai et al., 2021). In order for healthcare providers to support good adherence for the glaucoma treatment, it is critical to explore factors contributing to good adherence. In this sense health psychology in Japan is expected to implement empirical studies and to develop programs and systems to support behaviors changes related to the disease prevention.

The Japanese Association of Health Psychology

Academic activities in health psychology have been rigorously implemented within the above context. Health psychology is a field of psychology that aims to understand how psychological factors and treatments contribute to the maintenance of health and the prevention of illness, and how they inform health education, healthcare, and healthcare policies. The Japanese Association of Health Psychology (JAHP, <https://kenkoshinri.jp/index.html>), founded in 1987, aims to promote research, disseminate empirical findings, and facilitate scholarly exchange among members. To achieve these goals, the JAHP conducts the following activities:

- hosting annual conferences to encourage research activities among members,
- publishing an academic journal and other types of research materials, such as the encyclopedia of health psychology and college textbooks,
- collaborating with both domestic and international academic organizations.

Approximately 1,500 members have joined the

association, to date. The JAHP encourages its members to pursue empirical research and clinical practice in health psychology. The major outlet of the members' research is Health Psychological Research (<https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/browse/jhpr/-char/en>), which publishes a variety of research findings in health psychology. Manuscripts are published in either Japanese or English. Since the first conference was held in 1988, the annual JAHP conference has been held 35 times, up to 2023.

Similar to health psychology in other countries, a wide range of research topics has been studied in Japanese health psychology. There are a number of studies related to an aging society in response to the health-related issues and characteristics of Japan's aging population. Examples from recent publications include psychological well-being of older adults and caregivers, meaning in life, and problem drinking in middle-aged people. One interesting study reflecting social issues in Japan may be a qualitative study conducted by Hatanaka et al. (2021). The number of foreign nurses and carers has been increasing and many are working at elderly care facilities. Through semi-structured interviews with old adults at a care facility, Hatanaka et al. (2021) found positive attitudes towards foreign care workers.

Furthermore, Japan is characterized by natural disasters such as large earthquakes and typhoons. After the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, both scholars and practitioners engaged in studies on the mental health of victims and individuals involved as well as preparatory measures for disasters. For instance, at the 2019 annual conference, the International Committee organized a symposium entitled "Disaster Relief and Health Psychology: Malaysia, USA, and Japan," in which disaster relief operations and psychological health in the three countries were discussed.

The JAHP recognizes the need to translate empirical findings to practice, including behavioral changes, psychological interventions, and disease

prevention. To qualify experts in health psychology, JAHP accredits "Certified Health Psychologists" and provides continuing education programs for health psychologists by organizing the "Association of Certified Health Psychologists."

The JAHP has endeavored to work with both domestic and international organizations in adjacent fields. As for domestic organizations, JAHP has joined the "National Liaison Council for Promotion of Health Japan 21" and the "Tobacco Control Medical-Dental Research Network."

As part of international collaboration, the JAHP has been rigorously involved in organizing the Asian Congress of Health Psychology (ACHP), a leading federation of national health psychology associations of health psychology in Asian countries. As a forum for scholars from a wide range of scientific and clinical practices, the ACHP has assembled seven times since 2001, bringing together promising scholars and practitioners for the exchange of new ideas, findings, or research, and their applications for healthcare practice in the real world.

Beyond Asia, the JAHP has a close relationship with the European Health Psychology Society (EHPS) and sends national delegates to the society. Resonating with the idea of translating research findings into practice, the JAHP has translated the contents of the Practical Health Psychology Blog provided by EHPS (<https://practicalhealthpsychology.com>) into Japanese and disseminated them to members and non-members. Two National Editors from the JAHP are voluntarily working on this project.

Details of earlier JAHP activities have been described in an earlier issue in an article published in the *European Health Psychologist* (Igarashi, 2011).

Training System of Practitioners

Members of the JAHP include practitioners and academic scholars. Many are active in medicine and healthcare, mainly as mental health service providers and experts in welfare, education, and industry. Unfortunately, few health psychologists work in hospital departments other than psychiatry or in fields where knowledge of health psychology is applied, such as public healthcare and policymaking. Since health psychologists significantly overlapped with clinical psychologists in Japan, this section briefly introduces the training system for clinical psychologists, officially named certified public psychologists.

"The Certified Public Psychologists Act" was launched through the efforts of numerous individuals from various sectors. The Act became effective in September 2017. Article 2 of the Certified Psychologist Law defines a certified psychologist as: "In healthcare, welfare, education, and other fields, a person who engages in the following acts with specialized knowledge and skills related to psychology: 1) to assess psychological states of individuals requiring psychological support and to analyze the results of the assessment, 2) to provide psychological help and various types of interventions to those who are in need, 3) to provide psychological help and various types of interventions to informal caregivers, and 4) to provide education practices and disseminate information and knowledge about mental health."

To be a Certified Public Psychologist, individuals need to earn credits for courses in an undergraduate program in psychology and at a master's level at a graduate school. Twenty-five courses are required at the undergraduate level and ten courses at master's level. Examples of undergraduate course work include introductory courses in psychology (e.g., Introduction to Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Experimental Psychology), research methods including Statistics

and Psychological Experiments, advanced psychology (e.g., Health/Medical Psychology, Emotion/Personality Psychology, Educational/School Psychology), seminars in psychology, and practicums. The ten courses at the graduate level involve theories and interventions in healthcare, welfare, education, and other fields; theories and practices of psychological assessment; psychological interventions; and practicum. To be certified, individuals need to pass an exam after completing their coursework.

Psychologists certified as public psychologists are awaited to work in the educational, medical, forensic/criminal, and industrial/occupational areas. It is unfortunate that there are not many full-time positions psychologists in Japan. As a result, most certified psychologists work part-time at hospitals and schools. It is hoped that full-time positions of psychologists will increase in various settings in the near future, and the need for health psychologists will be more recognized in Japanese society.

Future Directions

Academic disciplines have become increasingly interdependent and “inter-disciplined.” Health psychology in Japan is expected to collaborate with other fields such as medicine and Internet of Things (IoT) technologies to resolve current health issues. Therefore, it is critical to train scholars and practitioners to be proficient in such collaborations.

The COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly raised the awareness for the importance of behavior changes in Japan. Collective efforts of psychological scientists and practitioners are now called on to respond research questions, to translate psychological science into practice, and to inform stakeholders to enact health-related policies.

The importance of international collaborations has been recognized among Japanese health

psychologist. For those who are interested in, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, a national funding agency, provides various grants to facilitate international collaboration with scholars of health psychology (<https://www.jsps.go.jp/english/>).

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