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## A Study on Priority Seats in Japanese Public Transportation



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### ABSTRACT

Priority seats are designated to give priority to people with physical disabilities in public transportation, such as railway cars and buses, or in public facilities, such as movie theaters. Persons with physical disabilities refer to elderly persons, persons with disabilities, persons facing physical challenges, pregnant women, or persons accompanied by infants. These are marked as a concession toward such users encouraging them to use public transport with ease. In recent years, however, social problems regarding priority seats have developed, especially in public transportation in Japan. This was attributed to the different levels of awareness of each user regarding the priority seat. In this paper, we outline related content currently in the news and state our opinion on what is different.

## INTRODUCTION

A priority seat is a chair that gives priority to or encourages seating for elderly people, people with disabilities, people in poor physical condition, pregnant women, and those with infants (including those bringing a stroller). These are installed in public transportation, such as railway vehicles and buses, and in public facilities, such as movie theaters. Priority seating was introduced in Japan in September 1973 by the Japanese National Railways (now Japan Railways) calling it “a silver seat,” and it soon became fully introduced in all railroad seats.<sup>1)</sup> The term “silver” is related to gray hair and a seat for the elderly. However, it was also related to the color of the seat first introduced as silver. Currently, these seats are widely used in railways and buses of private companies, as well as in public facilities. It is now known as priority seats in view of giving priority to people with poor health. Such initiatives prevail not only in Japan but also in countries across the world.<sup>2)</sup> As the name suggests, priority seats should be occupied only by those for whom it is meant. It encourages people to mutually give up their seats to those who are physically vulnerable (or those who find it difficult to keep standing).

In recent years, there have been many problems relating to priority seats in Japan, particularly in public transportation<sup>3-9)</sup>, some of which have become criminal cases<sup>6)</sup>. Therefore, in this study, we list these problems and express our opinions about them.

### **Related reports on problems in priority seating in Japan**

(i) An actor on SNS said, “Why are office workers sitting in priority seats when old men have given up their seat to children?” This echoed the public sentiment.<sup>3)</sup> This content was received with both positive and negative comments by the public. The first point is to consider whether office workers sitting in the priority seat must give up their seats to the elderly or to the children. This is what the actor says. Second, the question is whether children should be given priority seats rather than the elderly. In general, it is decided that whoever is physically weaker of the two must be considered, or both. Third, office workers were physically able and hence should not occupy priority seats.

(ii) A situation wherein a priority seat was vacant and nobody sat in it during busy hours of commute became a topic of debate on the Internet.<sup>4)</sup> One person remarked that someone should sit in that seat because the ride is crowded and it would leave more room for standing

commuters. There were divided opinions about this from people who said A) “do not sit,” B) “sit sometimes,” and C) “sit comfortably.”<sup>4)</sup> Those who said “do not sit” (a-1) want the seat to be free so that when the elderly come, they can sit right away; (a-2) believe that others should not sit on these seats; (a-3) urged those sitting in priority seats to retire silently; and (a-4) found it embarrassing to give up their seats when the seats were needed by the elderly later. People said “sit sometimes” if (b-1) no one needed those seats and if they are tired; (b-2) more standing room can be created by sitting down in the seat; and (b-3) the commute was for long distances and it is difficult to stand all the time. Those who say “sit well” believe (c-1) that one can sit anywhere; (c-2) that priority seats can be preferentially given to those when there is a need; (c-3) that if a seat is empty, anyone can sit on it; and (c-4) that if a person who should be given priority gets on the board afterwards, one can always give up the seat. These reveal the differences in the way people think about priority seats, the environment that makes it difficult for them to sit despite being weak, and the gentle personality of the Japanese.

(iii) Another news that was circulated was that a woman who had a priority seat was cautioned by another person saying, “If you use a mobile phone, you should give up your seat,” and then the woman started crying<sup>5)</sup>. This woman happened to be pregnant. Usually, a pregnant woman in Japan wears a maternity mark keychain attached to the handbag. However, she replied, “If I wear a maternity mark, I may get hit on my stomach” (there have been cases when women who were infertile have pushed pregnant women by elbowing or hitting them with their bags).<sup>5)</sup> The woman was on her way home from work despite her poor physical condition. The other woman who noticed her said, “I wish you were not doing so bad,” and gave up her seat. In addition to this woman, office workers were also seated in the priority seat, but only the woman cautioned the pregnant woman to be careful. It is unclear why the woman was using her mobile phone.

(iv) In another incident, a man was arrested for his rude manners and causing trouble when seated in the priority seat.<sup>6)</sup> He tried to prevent the train doors from closing and was arrested. Healthy young people sat in priority seats on trains (where they have to refrain from using mobile phones) and used their smartphones, which led to arguments with other passengers. These led to train operations being hindered and several times to the use of the emergency stop device.

(v) Another instance is of some elderly people who naturally occupy priority seats<sup>7)</sup>.

However, they may not look their age and as elderly to the public. Some passengers think that people should automatically give up their seats to them because they are elderly, or they may urge them to do so (Partial description is also in 1 and 2). Some experts believe that priority seats must be given to vulnerable people, such as pregnant women, people with physical disabilities, and sick people, but not necessarily to people just because they are elderly.

(vi) A complaint on SNS was about using a stroller (used without folding it) in a crowded train.<sup>8)</sup> People asked why was it placed near a normal seat and not near the priority seat, or why it was not placed in the space near the priority seat. Multiple problems could arise thus from bringing a child on a crowded train, bringing a stroller, or leaving the stroller unfolded outside the designated location.

(vii) Although the viewpoint is slightly different, young people usually do not sit in priority seats on Korean trains.<sup>9)</sup> This is seen as good manners by foreigners, but it is a new social problem in Korea. In Korea, the priority seat symbolizes “respect for the elderly,” and even if a pregnant woman or a young person with a physical disability sits on this seat, it makes themselves uncomfortable. Therefore, even if there are physical challenges, one tries to avoid sitting in the priority seat as far as possible. However, the existence of these “priority seats” makes it natural for the elderly to go toward priority seats without looking at the regular seats. Elderly people do not stand in front of regular seats but stand only near priority seats. When the elderly gather around the priority seats, the younger ones among them will give up their seat for the older person.

## **SUMMARY**

First, regarding points (i)-(vii) above, in point (i), priority seats were allocated in Japan so that the elderly can be seated comfortably. However, as shown in (v), the elderly are not necessarily physically vulnerable. Another general misconception about children is that they may not be considered weak. Therefore, it becomes necessary to determine who should be given the seat based on the situation (or age in some cases). It is unfair to speak about the pros and cons easily on SNS, because the exact age and individual physical condition of people are not known. Table 1 shows the status of priority seating in several cities, including Seoul. Some countries have age rules, and the priority conditions differ. Regarding (ii), priority seats are used depending on whether there are physically weak people in the crowded

train and if they want to be seated. Considering that many people stand in a narrow space during the commute, it is better if somebody occupies the priority seats if there are no takers. However, there is mental annoyance when one has to give up their seat to an elderly person later. Point (iii) is a difficult problem. It concerns a pregnant woman and in poor physical condition. However, this situation could not be judged by other people and the person who noticed it could not be blamed. As many Japanese feel, the mobile phone should not be used near priority seats, and those who use mobile phones should have proper knowledge about priority seats. Considering this, it is valid for people around to think that the woman should not have used the priority seat (since she used a mobile phone, she was thought to have no understanding of priority requirements). It is unclear whether the lady used her mobile phone because of urgent requirements. Although point (iv) is also difficult, there is nothing wrong in arresting a person for not complying with the rules of usage of priority seats.

Violent actions on the train and disruption of train schedules are also a problem. Regarding (vi), it is better to put the stroller in a predetermined place if possible. However, whether it is possible to move it to the place or to fold it while holding the child seems to depend on the situation. Because of personal circumstances, it is unclear whether it is inappropriate to bring a child on a crowded train. In addition, considering that the elderly may be sitting in regular seats, it is strange that a stroller can be placed only in a specific location. For point (vii), in Korea, if the location of a stroller is fixed, it does not mean that there is no right to place it anywhere else. Even if it is a priority seat, it does not mean that you should not use other places. Priority seats are not private seats.<sup>10)</sup> Since this paper is mainly about Japan, it is unclear whether similar problems occur in other countries as well. However, it is interesting that the target customers to be prioritized vary depending on the city, and that there are age rules.<sup>2)</sup> These are related not only to the presence or content of postings and announcements but also to the national character (Table 2).

Not giving up priority seats is not a violation of the law in Japan. However, if you are considerate, you may give up your seat. This is largely related to the physical condition of the person requiring the priority seat, which is not necessarily known to others. Giving up a seat to those who do not seem physically weak is one trigger that causes the above problems, but it is a difficult issue to resolve. At the very least, people's way of thinking (understanding and recognition) about priority seats and other seats should become unified across the entire Japanese population to ensure that they act in a more appropriate manner. It is wrong to say

that one does not have to give up a seat unless it is a priority seat and that only the physically weak can sit in a priority seat.

Recently, there are have been cases where all seats are priority seats, or all priority seats are abolished in Japan.<sup>11)</sup> This would mean people giving up their seat based on their own considerations and values. Caring for others, the physically vulnerable, and kindness seem to be only necessary value we need to bring about this change.

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**Table No. 1: Comparison of priority seats across nations**

Cities	Tokyo	Seoul	London	Paris	Berlin	Stockholm
Presence of priority seats	○	○	○	○	○	○
Presence of priority seat announcement	○	○	×	×	×	×
A notice about "transfer seats other than priority seats"	×	○	×	○	×	○
Target for priority seats	Elderly people (A), Pregnant women (B), People with physical disabilities (C), People with infants (D)	(A), (B), (C), (D)	(B), (C), Passengers who have difficulty standing	(A) over 75 years old, (B) and (D) under 4 years old, (C), Disabled people due to industrial accidents, Visually handicapped, Wounded soldiers	(C) and other inconvenient circumstances	(A), (C)

Based on data from Reference 2).

**Survey conducted in public transport (subway) from October to November 2013.**

**Table No. 2: Statistical comparison of attitude toward priority seats in Japan and other countries**

Type of action	Details	Analysis result* <sup>1</sup>
Action of giving up one's seat	Action frequency	Japanese < English, French, German, Swedish, Korean
	Imperative norm	English, German < Japanese
Behavior toward children	Action frequency	Japanese < English, French, Korean
	Intention to act	German, Swedish < Japanese < Korea
	Imperative norm	German, Swedish < Japanese
	Descriptive norms	Japanese < English, French, German, Swedish, Korean
	Personal norms	German, Swedish < Japanese < Korean
Public transportation habit strength		French < Japanese
Regional alienation		English, French, German, Korean < Japanese
Views about religion		Japanese < English, French, Korean

Based on data from Reference 2).

\*1: Only listed statistically significant differences. F-value is obtained and analyzed using the Tukey method. The large and small symbols in the results indicate that the survey results have shown that the impact varies from country to country.

Number of samples: Japanese,  $n = 273$ ; English,  $n = 287$ ; French,  $n = 275$ ; German,  $n = 287$ ; Swedish,  $n = 284$ ; Korean,  $n = 288$ .

A norm is an evaluation of others executing a target action.

An imperative norm is one based on the perception that many will appreciate it. For example, to act according to the announcement.

Descriptive norms are those based on the perception that many people are actually taking the required action. For example, you give up your seat when you see others giving up their seat.

Personal norms are those formed by one's own perception as an individual. They are characterized by introspection and reflection.

