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Special Feature Article

Promotion of an Inclusive Community for Client Empowerment based on the Life Model Approach

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Abstract

The basic value of well-being in the late modernity is placed on the realization of inherent human dignity, the fostering of relationships that accept suffering together, and taking responsibility for marginalized persons as common human beings. Herein, we envisage the development of a community where vulnerable people, such as those with mental illness, can live with self-respect and with empowerment. Such an inclusive community would be a life-model-based community that has high resilience and active polyphonic dialogue. Furthermore, it would be a community that aims to realize a social and ecological "resilient world".

Keywords: Life-Model, inclusion, resilience, communication, cozy place

Introduction

This paper first confirms the fundamental values of welfare and then presents a vision for a community where vulnerable people, including those with

mental disabilities, can live as they are, based on the Life-Model. This vision is realized through a process in which citizens and individuals with mental disabilities are empowered together.

The definitions of the Life-Model and empowerment used in this paper, along with their relationship, are summarized as follows. The Life-Model in social work was proposed by C.B. Germain and defines problems not as reflections of pathological states, but as the result of interactions between elements within an ecosystem. This ecosystem includes people, things, places, institutions, ideas, information, and values.⁵⁾ Furthermore, "Germain's Life-Model is highly compatible with the empowerment approach."¹⁴⁾

Empowerment is defined as "the utilization of mediating functions to influence the various forces operating within an individual's living environment, through the exercise of personal capacity, in order to be of benefit to the individual themselves." Furthermore, "critical awareness and knowledge of oppression" is power, and this power is based on "self-respect through identity, direction in life, competence (author's note: the ability to exert power that interacts with the environment), and relationship building."¹⁴⁾ Moreover, the ultimate goal of empowerment is community empowerment.¹⁵⁾

In this paper, we conceptualize the ideal form of a local community as an "inclusive community," a society in which diversity is respected, individuality is expressed, and

differences are valued. Furthermore, we position the notion of a "resilient world (RW)" as a central framework in our discussion.

I. Basic values of welfare

Today, there are two main pillars of basic values of welfare:

The first pillar consists of: (i) the inherent dignity of each individual, (ii) inalienable rights (rights to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness), and (iii) equality with respect to dignity and rights. It is essential to recognize the unique and inherent dignity of every human being, regardless of severe intellectual disabilities, dementia, or other weaknesses or shortcomings. This is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Respecting "inherent dignity" is inherently linked to respecting "diversity."

The second fundamental value is to empathize with the pain of others and share their suffering (co-suffering). It also involves feeling a sense of responsibility toward people who are marginalized due to deprivation, isolation, or violence, as fellow members of the same society and era. The modern significance of welfare lies in the formation of relationships based on "encountering people as people."

II. What kind of community do we aim for?

1. A resilient community with diverse communication and the Life-Model

Zubin, J. (1900–1990), et al. proposed the "Vulnerability-Stress Coping Model."³⁰⁾ In this model, the vertical axis represents the magnitude of stress, and horizontal axis represents the degree of vulnerability. It considers that individuals with high-level vulnerability are at risk of developing schizophrenia when exposed to marked stress. Zubin proposed that reducing vulnerability through medication and enhancing stress-coping abilities could prevent the onset of the disorder. However, this model lacks a social perspective based on the Life-Model.

The author suggests that instead of using stress levels as the vertical axis, the cultural context within society should be used as the axis. At the top of the vertical axis is a society marked by division and control, characterized as a highly expressed emotional society, where excessive emotional expression coexists with both involvement and manipulation. At the bottom of the axis lies a society that is tolerant, free, and resilient, in which open, polyvocal communication thrives. As the cultural inclusiveness of a society increases in this way, the conditions expand under which individuals with marked

vulnerability can activate and express their sensitive individuality. A "stress-free society" is an illusion; rather, by making use of stress, life becomes richer. Even when faced with marked stress or trauma, if there is an environment that accepts it, it is possible to face stress positively, sublimate suffering, and acquire a deep and expansive "scheme of cognition and sensibility."

Deeken, A. (1932–2020) outlined a 12-stage process through which individuals diagnosed with terminal cancer or those who have lost family members cope with stress. These stages are: (i) shock, (ii) denial, (iii) confusion, (iv) anger, (v) fate hatred, (vi) self-blame, (vii) fantasy, (viii) depression, (ix) apathy, (x) resignation, (xi) gratitude for fate, and (xii) creation of fate (※ (v), (xi), and (xii) are neologisms coined by the author).²⁾ The problem does not lie in the amount or intensity of stress, nor in its very occurrence; rather, the issue is that the process of stress acceptance becomes fixed or stagnates at stages such as denial, fate hatred, or self-blame. To move forward in the process of acceptance, it is essential to have people present who share in one's struggles, as well as a culture that fosters a constructive, co-evolutional approach to accepting suffering. The construction of such a society, based on these relationships and culture, should also

be aimed for within the integrated care system that addresses mental disorders.

As part of the fundamental values of welfare mentioned above: (ii) "basic human rights," it is the responsibility of the state to ensure a "healthy and cultural foundation for life" through the cooperation of various institutions, and this is a legitimate "right" guaranteed by the constitution. However, this right has not been sufficiently guaranteed for people with mental disorders. Therefore, the guarantee of a foundation for life must be actively promoted as a measure to ensure rights. Equally important is the revitalization of culture. It is necessary to revitalize the "life environment," which encompasses artificial, consumer, and information environments, and to reconstruct a lifestyle that allows people to live as part of the ecosystem. Since the human mind and body are themselves nature and microcosms, separation from the ecosystem is a factor that causes mental and physical disorders.

Furthermore, reconstruction of the world through communication is indispensable. To this end, multi-voice dialogical meetings in social networks²⁴⁾ are necessary. The self is formed through communication with oneself. The richness of dialogue with oneself is linked to the richness of communication with others and ecosystem. In that

sense, connecting with diverse people and engaging in dialogue are also acts of uncovering the diversity that lies dormant within oneself.

Inclusion, as mentioned earlier, is the principle of "mutually embracing differences." Thus, it calls for the creation of diverse situations, rather than the imposition of homogeneity.

To create a society where people can comfortably experience mental suffering: "suffer mentally," "social withdrawal," and "emotional pain," it is necessary to recognize the unique social value of mental illness, provide opportunities for interaction with diverse people, and utilize the values that express inherent dignity in the individualization of each person.

2. A regional vision that values weak, thread-like connections and the "useless usefulness"

Nakai points out the significance of a community where one can cherish the delicate "new growth of the heart" when suffering from mental illness, and experience a gentle recovery. In connection with this, Nakai states that "strong human relationships are closed off and lack opportunities for information exchange with the outside world, so 'fragile human relationships' are important to compensate for this,"¹⁹⁾ thereby introducing the concept of "fragile human relationships." He

further states that "it is better for marital and close friendships to have some margin or slack," and that "conversations without a specific focus are not meaningless, but rather necessary."²¹⁾ He also points out that "the richness of fragile ties is essential for extending thread-like roots into society," and that "there is a missing middle between strong relationships and virtual connections with online friends."²¹⁾ These "fragile human relationships" include elements such as "slack," "ambiguity," and a kind of "balanced looseness," serving a role similar to delicate, thread-like roots that support and nurture stronger relationships.

To sustain such relationships, it is essential to have "*Yutori* (emotional and temporal space)" embedded throughout daily life. The "*Yutori*" (emotional and temporal space) referred to here is not limited to the basic guarantees of income, housing, medical care, employment, and education; it also includes the presence of meaningful work and trusted companions. Furthermore, it may only truly emerge when society as a whole is grounded in the rhythms of the ecosystem, such as the slow, natural flow of time in which plants grow and fruits ripen, or the unhurried temporal sense experienced by farmers and fishermen. Modern society, in contrast, is overly dominated

by the mechanical and institutional rhythms of modern life.

Let us reconsider the essence of "*Yutori*." There is a concept known as "redundancy". It refers to a state where excess or duplication exists beyond the bare minimum, and is associated with ideas such as flexibility, emotional richness, and a sense of reserve. In recent years, the term has gained attention in the field of information systems, where it describes backup mechanisms designed to prevent failure.

In "Tao Te Ching," the "empty parts" such as the center of a wheel or the inner space of a vessel are said to be the essence of their function (Chapter 11). Similarly, in Zhuangzi, it is stated that if you dig deeply around your feet while leaving the ground beneath you, you will be unable to walk due to fear, and that "it is precisely because the void serves a purpose that the existent also serves a purpose" and "only by knowing the useless can one speak of the useful" (Chapter 26). In this sense, "redundancy" can be seen as a modern reinterpretation of the concept of "the usefulness of the useless."

3. Community vision aimed at building the Resilient World

Along with the re-examination of "*Yutori*," there is another concept that deserves renewed attention. This is "resilience," which has been gaining

popularity in the field of mental health and welfare in recent years. This concept, which is translated in dictionaries as "recovery power" or "natural healing power," refers to the ability of a person to recover flexibly from severe stress, just as a large ship recovers from being tilted by huge waves. Thus, it may be described as a "repository of learned approaches to transcending conflict," formed through the accumulated experience of enduring and overcoming suffering and inner struggle. This resilience deepens and enriches through the accumulation of experiences that have gone through the 12 stages of acceptance described by Deeken. When this accumulated learning extends beyond the individual and forms layered, intimate relationships where people can share sorrow and suffering with others, this situation can be understood as social resilience.

Kato, a leading researcher in resilience studies, contrasts this concept with the "vulnerability model" and interprets it as "the power to bounce back from vulnerability."¹²⁾ Tanabe describes this as "disease resistance,"²⁵⁾ Tsujino et al. as "resistance to illness,"²⁶⁾ and Yagi et al. as "the higher the plasticity of dopamine neurons, the greater the resilience."²⁷⁾ Previous discussions tended to focus on biological and psychological perspectives and

place emphasis on individual attributes, and approaches from social and ecological perspectives have not been sufficiently developed. Furthermore, vulnerability is recognized as a negative factor that must be overcome.

Kato notes: "Given that many mental illnesses are capable of favorable recovery, it is regrettable that, following the revision of the Mental Health and Welfare Act, the concept of 'mental disability'—which places emphasis on fixed impairments in social functioning and aligns with eligibility for welfare services—has come to dominate public and institutional understanding of mental disorders."¹²⁾ He also notes: "There are many cases where individuals lead fulfilling social lives without receiving welfare services,"¹³⁾ suggesting that there are biases in the understanding of welfare services. In reality, not all users of welfare services have fixed impairments, and many people are "actively engaged in social life" while utilizing welfare support.

Resilience is generally conceptualized as either personal or inter-personal resilience; however, from a macroscopic and structural perspective, it should be understood in relation to broader societal and cultural contexts. As an attempt to re-examine resilience from an ecological perspective, Walker, B. and Salt, D. proposed the concept of "Resilient World (RW)." Walker is a

social ecologist born in Zimbabwe, former Chief of the Sustainable Ecology Division at CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization), and former President of the International Institute for Ecological Economics at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences. Salt is an ecologist and emeritus professor at the Australian National University. In their 2006 publication, "Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World,"²⁸⁾ the authors examine the interrelated concepts of resilience and sustainability. Building on prior theories, they propose nine visions for a resilient world (RW):²⁸⁾

1. Diversity: In RW, diversity in all forms—biological, landscape, social, and economic—is both promoted and preserved.
2. Ecological variability: Rather than seeking to control or reduce ecological variability, RW embraces it, working with variability rather than against it.
3. Modularity: RW is structured around modular components. Here, "modular" refers to a design in which parts are segmented, autonomous, and independent of the whole, each performing distinct functions, as opposed to a system where the failure of one component leads to the collapse of the entire system.
4. Acceptance of varying degrees of "slowness": In RW, policy focus is

directed toward managing "slowness" within a controlled range, with established tolerance thresholds.

5. Tight feedback: In RW, tight feedback mechanisms function between systems. However, these should not be excessively tight.
6. Social capital: RW fosters trust, well-developed social networks, and leadership that is responsive and accountable.
7. Innovation: RW encourages learning, experimentation, and the local development of new rules, with a particular emphasis on adapting to change.
8. Redundant governance: RW incorporates institutional mechanisms that allow for "redundancy" in governance structures, with overlapping rights to access both public and private assets.
9. Ecosystem services: RW integrates all non-monetizable ecosystem services—such as clean water and air—into proposals and assessments for social development.

In RW, greed is suppressed, and excessive desires are restricted and sanctioned at various levels. RW presents a vision of a world that provides the conditions needed for individuals to live autonomously, with free and a sense of security, while remaining vulnerability.

4. Community vision rich in culture that nurtures grief work

To create an inclusive community, it is necessary to foster a culture that encourages grief work (trauer arbeit).³⁾ Japanese culture has traditionally provided the time, space, and relationships necessary to fully grieve when faced with intense suffering or deep sorrow. For example, in the Noh play "Sumida River," a mother grieving the loss of her child hears the phrase: "Enter madness with beauty," upon which she begins to dance in mourning. Her performance becomes a shared experience of sorrow for those around her, including the audience. As seen in Bashō's haiku: 憂きわれを寂しがらせよ閑古鳥 (Let the cuckoo's cry draw out the loneliness in my sorrowful heart), it is the time spent communicating with the beauties of nature and deeply experiencing solitude that becomes a force capable of healing one's sorrow. By sharing the sense of time embodied in "wabi" and "sabi" with others, a relationship is formed in which both transcend sadness together. The concepts of "和敬清寂 (wa-kei-sei-jaku)" in the tea ceremony and "涅槃寂静 (nehan-jaku-jou)" in Buddhism are cultural symbols that simultaneously evoke a sense of eternal time and fleeting, impermanent time, and serve as a means of sharing these perceptions.

The work of grief involves confronting the innermost core of the self and hitting bottom,¹⁾ and it also entails fully undergoing a "small death."⁶⁾ This corresponds to the stage of "(x) resignation" among the twelve phases identified by Deeken. In the traditional Japanese way of life, there were stable relationships in which people would closely listen to each other in times of crisis and gently watch over one another. It was precisely these relationships that enabled individuals to confront their suffering with determination and engage meaningfully in the process of grieving. The capacity to accept suffering (art of suffering, Illich, I.) cultivated under such circumstances becomes resilience and ultimately leads to empowerment.

5. Learning to embrace "the tolerance of ambiguity" of life's meanings through aging and disability: A community vision

Nakai emphasizes the importance of patients cultivating the abilities to "take detours," "begging for forgiveness," "leave things unfinished," "put things on hold," and "shift course" (not a "desperate last stand," but a "quiet resolve to go against the current").¹⁶⁾ This, in essence, refers to the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and accept the multiplicity of meanings—what is often termed tolerance of

ambiguity.⁴⁾ This capacity nurtures relationships grounded in tolerance toward both oneself and others. The maturation of intimate relationships such as those between spouses, friends, and parents and children means acquiring the ability to tolerate ambiguity while transcending conflict. This reveals the essence of resilience as a relational quality.

Furthermore, Genpei Akasegawa's concept of "the elderly's ability to be easygoing" and Winnicott's concept of the "good-enough mother"²⁹⁾ are also forms of resilience and abilities nurtured within regional cultures.

"*Yutori*" expands through communality and shrinks through isolation. Religious events can also be considered activities rooted in social communality. Seemingly unproductive communal times and spaces—such as playing mock sword fights in vacant lots, casually browsing festival stalls, or chatting and venting in izakayas—may, in fact, reveal the true nature of "*Yutori*."

People who live with old age and disabilities are beings who richly question the multiple meanings of life. It is through encounters with such people that we can learn "true *Yutori*" and become empowered. Device to facilitate such learning and encounters are necessary in community welfare policy.

III. Community vision communicated through a shared sense of commonality

Many people lose *Yutori* in their relationships and fall into dependence on violence. Kandabashi states: "What really characterizes the atmosphere of domestic violence is, more often than not, sadness."⁷⁾ Although he does not explicitly state what this "sadness" is, it can be inferred from the context that it refers to the feeling of being alone, with no one who understands one's true feelings.

Kandabashi proposes a method to help individuals understand the meaning of their actions by encouraging them to engage in back-and-forth introspection between the act of violence and emotions (images) that led to it. One concrete method involves instructing the individual as follows: "Try striking this pillow with the anger you're feeling. Doing so can make your current sense of anger feel more real to you," and encouraging them to physically hit the pillow.⁸⁾ By becoming aware of the image underlying violence, one is no longer controlled by the violence itself. The experience of communicating not only through words but also through one's entire body in a realistic way has become increasingly difficult to experience in everyday life, and the growing dependence on violence can be seen as closely related to this.

Furthermore, Kandabashi defines empathy as "something that can be conveyed through expressions, timing, and tone of voice other than words," and defines its essence as "the feeling that 'I am not alone' that arises within the partner."⁹⁾ Empathy is an experience that is formed through the holistic and existential communication, bringing about a sense of "being together." Kandabashi also states that "the mere presence of someone who offers to stay by your side and watch over you until you fall asleep" is enough to allow one to sleep, highlighting the importance of recognizing the need for someone who cares about one's well-being.¹⁰⁾ Becoming aware of the need for empathy also involves opening one's sensory receptors, thereby creating an opportunity to recognize that one is loved and valued by the people and events in one's life.

Additionally, Kandabashi states: "The greatest outcome of holding staff treatment meetings in the presence of patients is that everyone begins to feel as if their hearts have gently opened up—cultivating a warm, receptive state of mind."¹¹⁾ This was published in August 1998, well before the Open Dialogue approach began receiving widespread attention.

How is existential communication, mediated by images and involving the whole body, carried out? Nakamura

introduces the concept of "integrated sense (sensus communis)." This is defined as "a fundamental sensory ability that integrates all sensory domains," including sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and visceral sensations.²²⁾ It is also an integrated sensory ability that includes intuition, self-reflection, and ability to consider others. Nakamura points out that, if sensus communis is understood as the capacity to consider all others in reflective judgment and place oneself in the position of another (as defined by Kant), then the issue of illness and suffering—conceived as empathy or shared suffering—is closely intertwined with the issue of sensus communis.²³⁾ Furthermore, illness is described as belonging to "somatosensory perception" along with "tactile sensation, pressure sensation, thermal sensation, cold sensation, and kinesthetic sensation," while also belonging to "visceral sensation" along with "organ sensation."²³⁾

Nakai states as follows: "Perhaps those who cannot feel even the faintest, painfully tender vulnerability in a patient should not be involved in treatment."¹⁸⁾ By engaging one's inner sensus communis, gently opening the heart within multi-voiced communication, and reflecting while sensing the other's tenderness through the fine, downy hairs of one's heart—

this is the kind of relational fabric one hopes will form the foundation of society. Yet, it seems that the Internet society is eroding and dismantling such connections.

IV. Direction of communication and cozy places for realizing the vision

In order to realize RW in local communities, it is necessary to take into account the various perspectives discussed above and undertake multidimensional and integrated efforts in the domains of communication and cozy places.

First, with regard to the domains of communication, the following four levels can be identified: (i) communication with the self, including dialogue with images and the collective unconscious; (ii) communication with others, encompassing sexual love, friendship, caregiving relationships, and even relationships with the deceased; (iii) communication with diverse communities, characterized by multi-voiced and open exchange, autonomy, and collaboration; and (iv) communication with ecosystems, time, cosmic eternity, and transcendent entities. When these four domains of communication interact in holistic and transactive manner, the images and words used to understand the feelings of others become richer. Communication is not only verbalized but also takes place

through bodily sensations, visceral sensations, and pre-verbal thoughts = images.

A cozy place is defined as a space where one can feel a sense of being useful. The following five domains of this concept can be identified: (i) a cozy place for relaxation and care in a private residence, (ii) a cozy place located between the private and public spheres, with a high degree of freedom and semi-openness, (iii) a cozy place within a diverse community where one has a unique role and is valued and multi-voice dialogical meetings in social networks are realized, (iv) a cozy place where stable participation and evaluation are recognized within social institutions, and (v) a cozy place within humanity and ecosystems. Through the interactive transformation and comprehensive development of these cozy places, the formation and expression of multi-identity and inherent dignity (integrity) are promoted. However, today, the domains (ii), (iii), and (v) of cozy places are undergoing disintegration, and the domain (iv) has become overly dominant. Additionally, it cannot be denied that the functions of (i) are significantly declining.

Conclusion

This paper first examined two fundamental values in welfare. It then

confirmed the importance of citizens themselves taking the initiative in creating a tolerant and inclusive community where vulnerable people can live enjoying dignity and freedom, as a vision for community welfare. Furthermore, it examined the essence of “*Yutori*” and re-examined the RW vision from the perspective of Life-Model. An ecosystem is the ultimate open system, a mutually dependent (interdependent) system of "giving and receiving life," and can therefore be conceptualized as RW. At the same time, this is a community where a culture of warmly watching over the grief work is vibrant; where fragile relationship, rhizome-like connections and "usefulness of the useless" are utilized; that learns “the tolerance of ambiguity” on life from the ways of living of the elderly and the disabled. We proposed that, in order to realize this vision, it is essential to establish a framework that enables communication and nurturing environments to function in a multidimensional and integrated manner. This will ensure actualization of the inherent dignity within us. The inclusive community realized through this approach will foster healthier relationships and stimulate innate healing for individuals with mental health challenges.

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