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Action Research on Drafting Municipal Policies for People With Disabilities in Japan

Masakuni Tagaki[1]

Abstract

This study describes a series of regularly scheduled residents' meetings (RMs) on local disability policy during a 15-year period. The study employed an action research analytical method using data gathered in Yao city in western Japan. From 2002 to 2007, I participated in the meetings as an advisor—overseeing two focus groups, each with six key informants who actively managed the meetings. According to the results, the meetings occurred in three phases: the officials' initiatives (2002-2003), collaborations between city officials and leading residents (2004-2006), and the final fiscal year (2007). Initially, city officials or I led the meetings; later, however, certain residents accepted leadership roles to manage the meetings. Subsequently, the focus group interviewees successfully managed projects. Although these projects were not the ultimate goals of the RMs, they enabled residents to redefine disability issues in the community.

Keywords

disability, action research, narrative, Japan, community

I implemented an action research design to examine the collaborative process among people with disabilities (PWDs), municipal officials, and residents engaged in welfare activities that transpired during a series of residents' meetings (hereafter referred to as "RMs") in Japan. In addition, I employed the sense-making theory, which is based on the narratives of organization members, and Ross's (1955) three community organizational aspects—tasks, processes, and relationships—to develop an in-depth understanding of group dynamics with respect to members' experiences and organizational development.

In Japan, RMs are established by local governments as a venue for residents without professional knowledge to exchange opinions on welfare issues such as community work, disabilities, child rearing, and the care of senior citizens. Local governments often use RMs to collect residents' opinions to launch municipal government action plans for welfare policy. The explicit purpose of RM dialogue is to incorporate important aspects of the discussion into policy; however, only some of these important elements are successfully integrated in relevant policies. Local officials are responsible for determining which matters discussed in the RMs should be incorporated into policy. Beyond the explicit purpose of RMs, there is also an implicit purpose—providing RM members an opportunity to share their experiences with each other and develop a sense of solidarity by regularly attending these meetings. Therefore, even though not all discussions result in policy development, these RMs allow residents opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions.

According to the Cabinet Office of the Government of Japan (COGJ; 2014b), approximately 7.88 million Japanese people (nearly 6% of the total population) had physical or intellectual disabilities or mental disorders in 2012. This study applies the "disability" terminology used by the Japanese government. Over the past 20 years, the administrative role of Japan's municipal governments in disability policy has been expanding (Ozawa & Ohshima, 2012). The Japanese central government has attempted to decrease the number of institutionalized PWDs and increase in-home support services, respite care, and day care facilities to promote the active participation of PWDs in the community (Ozawa & Ohshima, 2012).

Grassroots disability movements, such as the independent living movement, philosophies of normalization, and designation of 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons (United Nations, 1981), strongly influenced this policy. An important negotiation between PWDs and local governments began in the 1980s, when independent living became a goal of the Japanese government as an alternative to institutional living for people with physical disabilities. At the time,

[1]Osaka Prefecture University, Sakai, Japan

Corresponding Author:
Masakuni Tagaki, Graduate School of Humanities and Sustainable System Science, Osaka Prefecture University, Gakuen-machi, 1-1, Naka-ward, Sakai, Osaka 599-8531, Japan.
Email: tagaki@sw.osakafu-u.ac.jp

human rights organizations began negotiating with municipal governments to implement in-home care services because PWDs were increasingly leaving institutions and rejoining their communities.

In Japan, PWDs value employment as a means to participate in society and enjoy economic independence (Tagaki, 2016). A 2014 survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW; 2014) estimated the number of employed PWDs to be approximately 500,000. Employment for PWDs is available in both public (i.e., central or municipal governments) and private sectors. In 1960, Japan enacted an employment quota system for PWDs under the People With Disabilities Employment Promotion Law (Japanese Law No. 123).[1] In 2015, the employment quota was 2.0% for private companies and 2.3% for statutory corporations, the central government, and local governments. In 2013, the COGJ (2014b) reported that the employment rate of PWDs in private companies was approximately 1.76% of the total workforce, which currently remains below the legal requirement despite having steadily increased.

Over time, public interest in the needs of PWDs has increased. In a recent public survey on people's attitudes toward PWDs, approximately 70% of the respondents reported that they have helped or talked to PWDs (COGJ, 2012). This is a significant increase from 1987, when only 46.6% of respondents reported interacting with PWDs (Prime Minister's Office, 1987). Nevertheless, 89% of the respondents to the 2012 survey stated that prejudice or discrimination exists against PWDs, which is slightly higher than that reported by a 2007 survey (83%) (COGJ, 2007, 2012)

An Action Plan for a Municipality-Level Disability Policy

The RMs investigated in this study were initially concerned with an action plan for a municipal disability policy that the local government was legally obligated to develop. The Disabled Persons' Fundamental Law (Japanese Law No. 84), amended in 2007, states that every municipal government in Japan must devise an action plan for disability policy. The Services and Support for Persons With Disabilities Act of 2006 states that every municipal government must provide an action plan to develop systems that provide disability services to PWDs. The former deals broadly with disability policy in a variety of fields, such as medical care and education, and it discusses a barrier-free urban development plan and improvements in public attitudes toward PWDs. The latter focuses on the timing for providing disability services, such as in-home support, day care, and respite care.

When the Democratic Party of Japan came to power in 2009, the Japanese government launched the Council for National Disability Policy Reform (hereafter referred to as "the Council"; COGJ, 2009). The Council's main agenda was to reform the 2006 Services and Support for Persons With Disabilities Act to formulate an antidiscrimination act. The Council was comprised of people with diverse disabilities, academic professionals, disability service representatives, policy makers, and high-ranking officials. This Council represented a significant shift in governance because of its diverse membership, and it met more than 20 times in 3 years. The Council proposed amendments to the Disabled Persons' Fundamental Law and Services and Support for Persons With Disabilities Act, and proposed legislation for the antidiscrimination act (COGJ, 2009). However, proof of the Council's influence at municipal-level meetings was lacking. In July 2012, after issuing the proposals, the Council was disbanded, just months before the Liberal Democratic Party once again came to power.

A municipal council (MC) for disability policy is an organization tasked with developing an action plan for disability policy and service provision at the municipal level. In general, MCs include academic professionals, welfare/health professionals, representatives of public organizations, high-ranking municipal officials, and PWDs. In addition, opinions of local PWDs are collected through surveys and short public hearings held for local disability organizations. According to the COGJ (2014c), 80.4% and 62.0% of municipal governments conducted surveys and provided hearings, respectively.

However, regarding action plans, there are no major or frequent discussions among MC members or hearings provided for local disability organizations (Tagaki, 2006). One reason for this may be that service providers and MC members belonging to disability organizations are often unaware of the practical problems within their organizations because they occupy managerial positions, away from the service provision sites. According to the COGJ (2014c), only 11% of local disability organization members are PWDs, of which 95% have physical disabilities. Ergo, another reason for the lack of discussions might be that people with intellectual disabilities or mental disorders comprise a very small proportion of the local organization membership.

Tagaki (2006) found that MC members with disabilities are often reluctant to discuss their personal interests regarding disability or share their opinions about other types of disability with other members. Furthermore, insufficient discussions across the types of disability might occur because the disability welfare system addresses three disability categories: physical, intellectual, and mental. Physical disabilities encompass four categories: mobility, visual, hearing and speech, and internal (e.g., heart disease, kidney disease, or other chronic debilitations). MC members have difficulty finding common ground across the different types of disability within this system. When they try to find common needs, they tend to be compelled to discuss their personal experiences in detail. However, Japanese society considers disabilities as private matters that should not be discussed with people whose disabilities differ (Iwakuma, 2003). Therefore, MC members with disabilities might be reluctant to share their experiences with each other. In addition, these behaviors of MC members may

reflect the Japanese tradition of respecting harmony (Iwakuma, 2014) as valuing harmony encourages conflict avoidance and agreement among members.

RMs With Local Government Representatives

Some municipal governments started holding regular RMs on disability policy to hear opinions of and encourage participation by PWDs in policy making. An RM consists of local officials, researchers, and nonprofessionals, such as PWDs, their families, and volunteer activists, selected by local governments. Unlike focus groups, which are implemented to collect opinions as data, RMs aim to listen to resident opinions to prioritize those opinions and use them to develop agreements.

Tagaki (2007) studied a series of RMs held by a local government in a rural city in western Japan that spanned nearly 2 years. While participating in the meetings, he employed an action research methodology (see Sugiman, 2006) and the sense-making theory (see Weick, 1995) to evaluate them—focusing, in particular, on the problems discussed. Although local officials attended such meetings, they were reluctant to conduct them; therefore, medical doctors and academic professionals typically led the meetings. Many of the attendees had disabilities. The main topics discussed were establishing a newsletter, developing a website, creating a forum on disability issues in the city, and supporting employment opportunities for PWDs.

Tagaki (2007) believed that using group dynamics and community organization theories (Ross, 1955) improved the RMs and enhanced the process by which members participated in the RMs. Ross (1955) argued that three organizational aspects are important to consider when researching a community organization: task, process, and relationship. After analyzing the RMs based on those three aspects, Tagaki (2007) discovered that the goals of the meetings (e.g., establishing a newsletter) were not accomplished because participation was lacking, meeting preparation was inadequate, and supporting documentation was insufficient. Tagaki (2007) pointed out that his role, as a researcher, was to understand the members' discussions, whereas that of the members was to describe accurately their experiences. He further suggested that researchers in this field should focus on members' narratives regarding matters they believed should be discussed to provide local governmental officials with suggestions for disability policy.

Despite Tagaki's (2007) contribution, additional RMs should be analyzed to learn which issues are discussed and how members address them. Such an analysis could help resolve problems that interfere with successful meetings, such as a reluctance to share personal experiences. Moreover, it is important to study meetings that convene regularly for 5 or more years because the effective terms of basic action plans for disability policy are 5 and 10 years (Tagaki, 2006).

Action Research and Narrative

In addition to Ross's (1955) theory, the current study employs the action research (Lewin, 1948) and sense-making theories (Weick, 1995), which were based on narrative theory to group dynamics in organizational development. Each theory is suitable for analyzing the results of fieldwork that includes intensive interaction between members and a researcher. Sense-making theory is appropriate to examine member involvement in the RMs at behavioral or linguistic levels.

Nagata (2013) observed that Lewin (1948) focused on group dynamics in organizational development, such as the dynamic relationship between leadership and prevention of human errors. Lewin influenced research on children's development and learning through expansion based on activity theory (e.g., Engestrom, 1987). This approach has been applied in studies on residents' participation in community organizations (Hanny & O'Connor, 2013) and health professionals in local governments (Noro, 2012). These studies examined the development of members' perceptions of their activities as well as the outcome of their activities. Accordingly, I might argue that Ross's (1955) three organizational aspects are closely tied to Lewin's action research.

This type of action research has been used in Japan to learn about individuals in communities using the sense-making theory (Weick, 1995). Sense-making is a process by which people retrospectively give meaning to their experiences through narratives. Weick (1995) developed the theory to analyze narratives in decision-making processes, such as the problem-solving, judgment, or determination processes in organizations. Decision making is a product of the sense-making process because decisions are based on meanings. For example, if an organizational member narrates that his decision making led to a positive result, that narrative is the process of retrospectively giving meaning to the decision-making process. Weick was greatly influenced by Bruner's (1986) narrative theory—pointing out that organizational sense-making is a process that creates policy for future behavior, rather than merely recalling past events or interpreting experiences. Furthermore, sense-making is not an individual's inner monologue, but rather a social dialogue that develops in response to other's agreements or objections (Miyamoto & Atsumi, 2009; Yamori, 2008). Some examples of action research using Weick's theory include investigations of conflict among residents during the merger of two municipal governments (Higashimura, 2006) and the reconstruction of disaster areas (Miyamoto, 2015). The sense-making theory is suitable for analyzing RMs in this study.

In the process of sense-making, people begin to notice self-evident norms or use explicit stories to explain what they have implicitly understood (Sugiman, 2006). Instead of teaching PWDs the professional, academic knowledge, action research with sense-making teaches them how to make sense of their, as well as other members', actions and opinions (Tagaki, 2007). Therefore, the sense-making theory

is consistent with the current trend of using narrative analyses in disability studies (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Bruner (1986) proposed that people think paradigmatically to understand the so-called scientific truth and, through narratives, to develop meanings from their experiences. Although Bruner stated that these two ways of thinking are reciprocal, narratives focus on sense-making. In addition, disability narratives correspond to illness narratives (Kleinman, 1988), which relates to how the meanings of PWD differ from those of experts.

Moreover, sense-making theory is useful for researcher reflections on his or her own position in a project. As mentioned above, significant interactions occur between investigators and research participants in action research studies. Oliver (1997) argued that, regardless of research design, researchers are incapable of adopting a neutral stance—opposing the positivist paradigm that researchers can maintain objectivity. In action research, the descriptions of fieldwork and the data analyses are influenced by (if not based on) researchers' perspectives (Sugiman, 2006). This suggests that researchers who use action research designs should reflect on their personal values, as well as the roles expected of them by their research participants. Researchers who have used action research point out that some extent of member involvement depends on the nature of the particular research project (Seekins & White, 2013; Yamori, 2010).

This study's main objective was to understand the developmental process of a particular series of RMs. These meetings resolved some of the problems revealed by previous research, accomplished the three goals explained by Ross (1955), and spanned more than 5 years. The second objective was to examine the extent to which participation in the meetings changed the meeting members' perspectives or attitudes toward themselves and other people regarding disabilities. Finally, the study examined the role and function of an action researcher in the RMs.

Method

Context

Yao City, Osaka, Japan. The RMs were held in Yao city in the suburban area of Osaka in western Japan. I was a member of the advisory staff. Currently, Yao's population is approximately 270,000, of which nearly 15,000 (about 5.5% of the population) have disabilities (Yao City, 2016). Human rights movements, including those concerning disability issues, are active in the city.

First-term and second-term Yao action plans for disability policy. The first-term Yao action plan was effective from 1998 to 2002 (Yao City, 1998), and the second-term plan, effective from 2003 to 2007, was discussed at the Yao council for disability policy (hereafter referred to as "the Yao Council") during the 2002 fiscal year (FY; Yao City, 2003). The Yao Council, a high-ranking disability policy entity that works with organizations, promotes, manages, and evaluates the progress of the action plans. The first-term action plan was implemented based on the results of surveys of residents with disabilities or their parents and a hearing for PWDs who were members of Yao disability organizations. However, the disability section of the Yao government was concerned that discussions at the Yao Council would privilege professional or organizational knowledge because of the composition of its membership and its results would not reflect the opinions of residents with disabilities.

Establishment of RMs on disability issues. The second-term Yao action plan was discussed at the Yao Council (Yao City, 2003; during FY 2002). The disability section suggested to the Yao Council that RMs be held to solve the disability issues and collect opinions from PWDs, welfare practitioners, and volunteer activists (Yao City, 2003). The section explained that the meetings would also help members and local officials avoid mutual criticism, arrive at compromises, and avoid PWD overdependence on the public sector. The Yao Council agreed and suggested launching a series of meetings, the first of which was held on July 27, 2002. In addition, the members annually held a citizen's forum on disability issues with the Yao government and welfare organizations that did not attend RMs.

Although the stated purpose of the RM was initially limited to drafting a disability policy to be inserted into the second-term action plan (which began in 2003), the meeting members wanted the meetings to continue from FY 2003 onward to promote opinion-changing dialogue. Hence, the RM became a subordinate organization to the Yao Council.

As of October 14, 2016, the Yao Council had conducted RMs for 15 years. During this time, the RM has dealt with various disability issues such as employment, public awareness of PWDs, and accessibility on public roads. I have been involved since the first meeting in 2002. The total number of members is currently 25, with a membership term of 1 year, although members can be reappointed. Members include individuals with physical disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, or mental disorders in remission; the families of PWDs; and the members of a sign language club. With my exception, none of the members has concurrently held a post on the Yao Council (I became a member of the council in April 2002). In this study, I analyzed the development of the RM from FYs 2002 to 2007—the effective period of the second-term action plan for the disability policy.

Data Collection: Participant Observation and Focus Group Interviews

My continuing participation in the meetings made me realize their importance and, in 2003, I determined that they were suitable subjects for an action research project. Because my interest in the meetings grew gradually, I cannot specify the

exact start date of this study. Yamori (2010) stated that it is not always possible to identify the beginning and end dates of action research projects.

The data used in this study include field notes, handouts, emails, transcripts of RM proceedings, and focus group interview data. In my field notes, I wrote down progress of RMs, key members' statements, member discussions, my own reflections, and member reactions. I lived in a city that is approximately 30 km by train from Yao city. Yao city officials requested my active involvement in the Yao Council and the RMs as an advisor. Perhaps they thought I should fill two roles: first, as an academic professional, I would chair meetings and not interact with disability organizations; and, second, as a person with a physical disability, the officials thought I would be welcomed by RM members. My physical disability enabled me to express solidarity with RM members and avoid common criticisms—directed at academic professionals in similar contexts (Tagaki, 2006) Yao city officials might expect me to give advice that was based on my personal experience as well as academic knowledge.

My age was another factor. In 2002, I was 27 years old, which made me younger than most researchers in senior positions at Japanese universities (Lebra, 2004). The Yao city officials probably thought that my youthfulness would promote a friendly atmosphere that might encourage open discussions among the members.

In addition to attending the meetings, I conducted two focus groups in the fall of 2007 with six key members of the RM who had actively managed the meetings. Three of them had mobility or visual disabilities, two were supporters of Yao city residents with hearing loss, and one person was a psychiatric social worker. I conducted the focus group interviews in a conference room in Yao city; however, no Yao official attended them. Before each interview, I thoroughly explained the study's research objectives and privacy policy, which was to preserve carefully the data and use pseudonyms for all participants in all publications. In addition, I provided members with written explanations, although they all seemed to understand my oral explanation. I emphasized that they could refuse to participate whenever they wanted for any reason, and they could leave the interview at any time. Each focus group spanned about 2 hr, and the interviews were audio recorded with the members' permission. The ethics committee of the relevant university approved the study protocol.

In the focus group interviews, I asked members to describe their expectations of the RMs between 2002 and 2007, how they led the meetings, and their understanding of Yao city officials' roles. Furthermore, I asked them to elaborate on the opinion that PWDs should do as much as they can by themselves without depending on the public sector. In the second focus group, I asked the members to elaborate on the main topics discussed in the first focus group and the RM's limitations. Before submission, I asked Yao officials and some key members of the RM to review the draft and requested that all focus group members check the descriptions and quotations of the focus group results via email or telephone.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the meeting process was based on written resources, such as handouts delivered by Yao city officials, my emails with the officials, and my field notes. Records of my interventions in all the processes were extracted from the sources, following which the meeting process clarified my involvement. Regarding focus group interviews, I employed "the KJ method," a kind of bottom-up qualitative method that was developed by a Japanese ethnologist, Jiro Kawakita (1967). He adapted this method from Charles S. Peirce's notion of abduction, which relies on intuitive thinking processes to identify explanatory hypotheses (Scupin, 1997). The KJ method contains some general steps: reading transcripts carefully, extracting quotations from the transcripts, assigning a code (a summary label or index) to each quotation, developing categories by grouping codes, and summarizing categories and relationships among them.

I applied this standard procedure of the KJ method. First, I carefully reviewed the transcripts to gain an overall sense of the focus groups. Second, I linked 138 codes to 147 quotations extracted from the transcripts, as some quotations were assigned the same code. The quotations were each three or four sentences long. Third, I provisionally grouped and organized the coded quotations and summarized them into about 20 groups, which described, for example, mutual respect among the members, dialogue with the officials, or the meetings' proceedings. Finally, from these groups, I developed main categories, which are described in the section of "Results of the Focus Group Interviews".

Nochi (2013) suggested that there are similarities between the KJ method and grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Both develop connections among categories using codes generated from segmented text data. However, there are some differences between them. The goal of the grounded theory methodology is to logically develop and integrate categories into a theory, whereas that of the KJ method is to create new connections between ideas or concepts that could create contradictory or illogical categories. Nochi suggested that the KJ method is suitable for analyzing self-narratives because narratives tend to include many contradictions or inconsistencies. Unique to Japan, this is a popular qualitative analytical method in many fields, including developmental psychology (Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009; Tagaki, 2015) and gerontology (Fukui, Okada, Nishimoto, & Nelson-Becker, 2011).

Results of the Meeting Processes

First, I provide a brief description of my remarks to the meeting members. Second, I present the RM process as three phases across time (Table 1): the initiatives of Yao city officials and leading residents, collaborations among the officials and other members of the RM, and results and conclusions (comprising the last year of the effective period of the

Table 1. Development of RMs from FYs 2002 to 2007 With the Number of Meetings per FY in Parentheses.

Initiatives of Yao city officials and leading residents	
2002 (5)	Proposal regarding Yao action plan for disability policy
2003 (5)	Management of a city center for PWDs
Collaborations among officials and other members of the RMs	
2004 (6)	Issues of PWDs in securing engagement in the community
2005 (10)	Support PWD employment and prevention of illegally parked bicycles
2006 (11)	Activities at sheltered workshops for PWDs, regular employment, and community disability awareness programs
Results and conclusions	
2007 (8)	Summaries, reflections, and conclusions on meeting development

Note. RMs = residents' meetings; FYs = fiscal years; PWDs = people with disabilities.

second-term action plan for the disability policy), which are based on the agenda and key meeting leaders. The Yao city government structured the meetings by FY. In the first phase, the officials chairing the meetings developed an agenda and provided it to me in advance. In the second phase, they created individual meeting scenarios and asked key RM members to initiate discussions. The third phase encompassed reflections and conclusions about the effects of these meetings on disability issues. Following the description of these phases, I present the main categories of the focus group interview data.

Over this 6-year period, the RM has accomplished the following tasks and goals: managing the annual citizen forum, selecting equipment and events for the city center for PWDs, improving pedestrian accessibility on sidewalks by addressing the issue of illegally parked bicycles, using products made in sheltered workshops to promote employment of PWDs, and increasing a community's awareness of PWDs. In addition to these concrete issues, the RM members deepened their mutual understanding of disability-related issues, took on leadership roles in the meetings, and participated in disability-related activities.

My Role as a Researcher

At the request of Yao city officials, I acted as an RM advisor and coordinator. I believed that RMs carried potential for developing collaborative solutions for disability issues between municipal governments and the residents. I considered my interactions with PWDs to be important to my previous research, which focused on the psychosocial issues related to disabilities.

The Yao city officials did not provide clear guidance regarding what I should do or what types of policies they wanted to implement. In the beginning, my role seemed to include promoting opinion exchanges among members, organizing the expressed opinions, and emphasizing the members' power as laypersons. First, I asked all the members to respect the disabilities and opinions of others because there were numerous types of disabilities among them. Due to this diversity, I expected it to be difficult to reach simple agreements. I suggested that, when the members wanted to give more than one statement, they should first listen carefully at least once to another opinion. I reiterated that their opinions as laypersons with disabilities were more important than the ideas presented by the experts and officials. This was intended to help the members feel free to share their opinions. These suggestions seemed to be accepted by the members during discussions. Through my emphasis on the value of their opinions, I tried to communicate to them that self-reliance was better than excessive dependency on the municipal government, which was an explicit goal of the RM. While some of them supported this idea, others might have thought that it reflected the intentions of the Yao city government, which could have been interested in decreasing their disability benefits.

Overall, I believe that I was regarded as a key member of the RM. The meetings were often conveniently held with my schedule in mind. Sometimes, members showed solidarity with me as a person with a disability, and they often respected my suggestions. However, some members regarded me as an associate of the Yao city government, while others regarded me as someone unfamiliar with the city's local affairs.

Initiatives of the Yao City Officials and Leading Residents

FY 2002. In FY 2002, the members discussed a proposal for an action plan on disability policy that focused on the residents' initiatives. They attempted to identify problems and solutions and determine the roles of the municipal government and PWDs. In this phase, organizing the members was the first challenge. In 2002 and 2003, Yao city officials classified the members based on their type of disability (physical, hearing loss, intellectual, or mental) and volunteer activist status. This classification encouraged discussions and conversations because the members were asked to introduce themselves, write about their disability issues, and share their personal experiences and solutions with each other.

During this process, the members began to understand their problems or needs and, consequently, increased their respect for others' opinions. For example, people with mobility or visual disabilities listened carefully to the remarks of persons with hearing loss, mental disorders, or intellectual disabilities, and sometimes spoke particularly slowly to them. Similarly, members paid more attention to sign language translators. Moreover, some members recognized the variation in disabilities within the groups. For example, people with physical disabilities (the group in which I participated) included a woman with a visual

disability, man with a spinal cord injury, man with a paralyzed limb, and woman with kidney disease. These individuals shared their personal struggles, such as those in terms of overcoming structural barriers, learning Braille, and experiencing dialysis treatments. Because of the variety of disabilities in the group, it was difficult to reach consensus on any policy change.

The members concluded the last meeting of 2002, by discussing the year's results. Many members mentioned the importance of having people with diverse disabilities come together, and they wanted to continue the meetings despite the challenges faced in exchanging opinions. Although many of their ideas were added to the action plan, some were not. For example, although the idea of having a 24-hr emergency support system for people with mental disorders was supported by some members, it was not included. The members reported their opinions at the citizens' forum.

FY 2003. Along with Yao city officials and some of the leading members, I decided to participate in the RM for the second-term action plan. In the first meeting, some members expressed concern that it was difficult for them to develop an agenda suitable to the RM. One member pointed out that intense discussion would be meaningless if the officials did not formulate them into a policy, suggesting the limitations of the RM. Subsequently, the officials and members chose to discuss a new city center for PWDs, the types of equipment that would be needed in such a center, and the types of events that could be held there.

In the last meeting of 2003, the members discussed the results of the year's meetings. Some members suggested that we should create an enterprise, rather than merely talking about things. Furthermore, the members suggested that the meetings should be structured by establishing an agenda, assigning leaders, and keeping a written record.

Collaborations Between the Officials and Leading Residents: 2004 to 2006

FY 2004. In the first meeting of 2004, some key members organized a task force comprised of residents, officials, and myself. The goal of the task force was to set up agendas in advance of the coming year's meetings and assign a person to lead the meetings. The key members of the task force were a man with a spinal cord injury (Mr. A), a woman with a visual disability (Ms. B), a person with a mental disorder, and some able-bodied volunteers and activists.

Ms. B explained the purpose of the RM to the other task force members and the meeting at large, stating, "I strongly ask you to realize that this meeting is an opportunity not for you to make demands of the Yao government but to express ideas that the members can carry out on their own." She seemed to want to prevent the meetings from developing into negotiations between officials and disability activists. After careful deliberations, the task force decided to classify the RM members without considering their disabilities.

After the first RM, the task force members, officials, and I decided to add to the agenda the problems faced by PWDs in integrating themselves into the community. In addition, at the fifth meeting of 2004, the members decided to start a campaign to prevent the illegal parking of bicycles on sidewalk and implement security sweeps of public buildings (scheduled to begin after 2004), such as railway stations, because illegally parked bicycles were creating dangerous obstacles for the PWDs, particularly sight-impaired or wheelchair-bound individuals. As described in the following section, the proposal regarding bicycle parking was accepted by the Yao government.

FY 2005. The task force members suggested that the employment problems, illegally parked bicycles, and a disability awareness campaign should be covered in the 2005 meeting agenda. At the first RM, members agreed that the first two concerns would be included in the agenda. We learned at the meeting that the members were unaware of any employment programs within the Yao city government, the quota system, or the equal opportunity policy within Japan; these programs and policies encompassed the informational categories that PWDs need to improve their employment opportunities.

In spring 2005, some members submitted a draft on the bicycle problem to Yao city to apply for an official grant promoting a community-based welfare program for PWDs in the city. The city accepted the proposal. Even though the RM did not officially approve the draft and its associated campaign, these members produced a result that originated from RM discussions.

At the last meeting of 2005, the members discussed possible reasons for not finding an effective solution to the employment problem. One opinion was that only a few RM members had employment experience. The officials and I noticed some positive changes in the members that accompanied the RM developmental changes. For example, one member with a mental disorder who always came accompanied by a social worker participated in some discussions when he was not accompanied. Another member, with a physical disability, who had emphasized during the first phase that the government should take responsibility even for personal disabilities, stated that PWDs should attempt to resolve their issues without government support.

FY 2006. In 2006, the task force set the agenda for the first and second meetings to address an activity at a sheltered workshop for PWDs as well as an employment and disability awareness program in the community. At the first RM, the members learned about a sheltered workshop from guest speakers, who had been trained to bake goods at the workshop. The members suggested that they could deliver baked goods made at the workshop to elders living in a welfare facility. They thought that this service was an example of the improvements in the sales of goods produced in workshops.[2] After the first meeting, some of the RM members served as

intermediaries between a sheltered workshop and a welfare facility for elders to promote the delivery of goods.

At the second meeting, the members discussed the fact that the job skills required by PWDs were not clearly defined, and, in addition, they considered the types of jobs that PWDs could perform. Some members stated that having a coordinator to mediate between a person with disabilities and his or her employer would be beneficial. Many members emphasized that PWDs should stress their strengths instead of their limitations. One member suggested that PWDs could consult enterprises regarding the construction of barrier-free buildings and disability awareness educational programs, or they could be customer service representatives specifically for PWDs.

Mr. C, who had previously worked for a large company and sustained a physical disability, told the members that the unique strengths of PWDs are not broadly suitable to the labor market and private enterprises do not want to employ PWDs. As I listened, I felt concerned that his emphasis on employers' perspectives might discourage other members. Our conversation[3] is as follows:

> Mr. C: Truly, a private company is legally required to employ PWD as a certain percentage of all employees. But, the real situation is that it does not want to employ even one person with a disability. . . . PWD have to know what an employer needs; otherwise, any support plans for employment would turn out to be nothing but pie in the sky.
> Me: I asked you to share your opinion after all the members had each expressed their opinions. It sounds reasonable that the situation of a company is different from that of a person with disabilities. Would you share your long-term work experience later?
> Mr. C: I understand.

At the sixth meeting, we deliberated on disability awareness programs in the community. At the seventh meeting, I proposed that we deliberate on the targets or effects of such programs. Ms. B. argued that it is difficult to focus on the targets or examine the programs' effects:

> Ms. B: Professor [me] pointed out the effectiveness of the disability awareness program, but we cannot start the program if we still have to consider it. We held the program for students at school, and we know that even though we sowed 100 seeds, one or two of them would sprout up.
> Me: I do not mean effectiveness; rather, I mean that we have to clarify what is understood and what is not.
> Ms. B: [It is impossible for us to put a line between them]. Let me refute. I guess that this is something that students learn about in some way [from the program]. This is quite different from a professional lecture at a university.

The main result of the 2006 meetings was our decision to continue the regular delivery of baked goods to the welfare facility for elders. Although the members of the RM did not define elders as PWD, this activity could be interpreted as their effort to bridge the welfare services for PWDs and those for elders.

Results and Conclusions: FY 2007

At the 2007 meetings, we summarized the development of the meetings over the previous 5 years. At the fifth meeting of 2007, members stressed the need to strengthen relationships in the RM across disabilities and continue campaigning to prevent the illegal parking of bicycles. Some of the members voiced the concern that the meetings had not represented or assisted the PWDs who were not in attendance and the task force shouldered too heavy a burden. The members reached a consensus that the RM should continue after 2007, that they should have more control of the meetings, and that the Yao city officials should have less control. I asked them whether they would go ahead with the meetings on their own, stressing my belief that their personal initiative was of greater importance than that of the Yao Council members, who did not fully understand the situations discussed at the RM. The officials and I reported the decision to the 2007 Yao Council meeting and received approval to continue the RM from 2008 onward without any objections.

Results of the Focus Group Interviews

The data from the focus group interviews were developed into four broad categories using the KJ method: (a) interviewees' understanding of disabilities, (b) dialogues with Yao city officials, (c) difficulty in setting up agendas that were interesting and relevant to all the members, and (d) advantages of the RM compared with the Yao Council.

Interviewees' Understanding of Disabilities

The focus group interviewees stated that the RM lasted 6 years because the members mutually respected each other's opinions. Some of them pointed out that they had initially joined the RM only to express their personal needs. Ms. D, a member of a small support group for people with hearing disabilities, stated that she had perceived the RM as an opportunity to highlight the concerns of her group.

However, as the RM progressed, the members became less focused on the interests of particular groups, began to appreciate the people with various disabilities who had gathered, and became eager to take advantage of the valuable opportunity. The project aiming to prevent the illegal parking of bicycles unified the entire membership. The interviewees stated that if they wanted officials to consider their expressed issues as credible, they needed to highlight the commonalities among all PWDs.

Some interviewees pointed out that the members who were responsive to other members were those who were likely to continue participating in the RM. Ms. B mentioned people with visual disabilities becoming involved in issues related to those with intellectual disabilities. The members' narratives in the focus group interviews are illustrated as follows:

> Ms. B: If a person with [a] visual disability thought he had nothing in common with the issues of intellectual disabilities, he could not go to a nursing institution for elders to sell bakery goods made by people with intellectual disabilities. I am sure that the staff at the institution was surprised to see me. It is quite irregular.

Dialogues With Yao City Officials

The interviewees stated that they tried to avoid confrontations with officials and disregarded what they perceived as unrealistic, one-sided demands made by the officials because they believed that a disability policy exclusively developed by officials would either be incomplete or eventually become useless. They were pleased that the officials gave them space to freely express their opinions. One interviewee pointed out that the officials and members attempted to understand each other's importance in the process and they realized that it was necessary for the officials to participate in the meetings. They stated that if the officials were to stop participating, the collaboration they had established would become worthless. Mr. F pointed out as follows:

> Mr. F: The local governments' involvement helps us to persuade public organizations, such as a company or an administrative organization. They cannot help listening to our requests. Because of the presence of the government in the meeting, the persuasion is not a personal activity, but a public one.

Difficulty in Setting Up Agendas That Were Interesting and Relevant to All Members

The interviewees told me that they had carefully developed agendas of interest to all members; to this end, they had actively avoided putting a national disability policy on the agenda. No practical solution to such a concern could be developed at a municipal-level meeting. Instead, they aimed for small and practical issues that the local government had not yet addressed. The Yao city officials stated that they knew little of many salient issues. Mr. F remarked, "Because we discuss realistic methods, the members in the discussion can be enthusiastic about becoming involved in the project and can propose alternative methods."

Advantages of the RM Compared With the Yao Council

The interviewees emphasized their beliefs that they were more valuable than the members of the Yao Council because their discussions were based on experience, rather than abstract ideas. They valued their freedom to share their experiences easily without considering disability organizations' interests because they participated in the meetings as individuals with disabilities, instead of organizational representatives. The interviewees stated that, initially, they did not know the original purpose of the RM or understand the disability action plan; however, they gradually understood the advantages of the RM compared with the Yao Council. For example, Mr. A stated that although he had been invited to attend the meetings by officials, he did not know their purpose. However, the interviewees pointed out that, as the RM progressed, there were several noteworthy changes among the members. Some members began to understand each other better after attending several meetings. Some of the interviewees were unsure about the advantages, stating that it was difficult to evaluate the Yao disability policy. In addition, they pointed out that they could not do what they actually wanted to do, but had to go along with the consensus. For example, they could not educate companies about disabilities, learn about the skills sought by such companies, or help PWDs obtain these skills.

Discussion

Accomplishment of Task Goal

We could conclude that the RM accomplished its task goals because members obtained concrete results from their active involvement in the management of annual citizen forums on disability issues, the selection of equipment and events of a city center for PWDs, the development of the campaign to increase pedestrian accessibility by cracking down on illegally parked bicycles, utilization of products made in a sheltered workshop to promote employment for PWDs, and development of community awareness of PWDs. One could certainly argue that the current RM was more successful than Tagaki's RM in 2007. Although there are similar city center facilities in Japan, it is rare that residents with disabilities take part in selection of center events—Typically local government officials or center staff are responsible for this selection. Illegal parking on sidewalks was a major problem for accessibility in public transit facilities, like railway stations or bus stops, or entrances to stores. Even though some municipal governments regulate bicycle parking around transit facilities, the problem persists (Chosokabe, Takeyoshi, & Sakakibara, 2015). In the current campaign, PWDs appeal to residents as illegally parked bicycles create problems for everyone, not PWDs alone. Through their involvement in the bicycle project, residents without disabilities gained a better understanding of disability issues. To promote public awareness of disability issues, the members edited

contents of a booklet and presented lectures on it by themselves. This educational format may be more appealing for audiences compared with other disability awareness activities managed by disability professionals or academics.

Utilization of products of a sheltered workshop is a pioneering achievement. Marketing these workshop products was one of major issues in disability employment. In fact, many solutions had already been attempted—like consultant participation in workshop management with social welfare professionals or selling the products in a corner of large commercial or public facilities (Toyama, 2017). The Act on Priority Procurement Promotion for Persons With Disabilities of 2012 (Japanese Law No. 50) was purposed to encourage public organizations like the central and municipal governments to promote priority purchase from facilities for PWDs, when procuring goods or services. Nevertheless, this Act did not encourage similar purchases by welfare organizations for the elderly or nursery homes, even though most welfare facilities legally and financially are under jurisdiction of MHLW.

Accomplishment of Process Goal and Interaction Among the Members

Emphasis on member disability diversity. We could conclude that the RM partially accomplished its process goal, as—based on my fieldwork and the analysis of the focus group interviews—all members seemed to be very aware of their diversity. Some scholars have suggested a hierarchy of disability or impairment(Charlton, 1998; Reeve, 2004) in social positions, meaning that other PWDs consider an individual with a particular disability as a person who sustains "real" disability. A hierarchy would likely be an obstacle to achieving collaboration or solidarity among the members of the RM; however, I did not observe this phenomenon. People with physical disabilities seemed to pay equal attention to those who had difficulty speaking due to intellectual or mental disabilities. These members talked slowly, and the others seemed to listen to their opinions. Iwakuma (2014) pointed out that the culture of respecting "harmony" could prevent PWDs from active discussion in a council in Japan. However, RM members might interpret talking about their own experiences and listening to others' as respecting harmony in the meeting. In this sense, one could argue that valuing harmony might prevent the member from remaining silent and, instead, encourage active and respectful discussion among the members. Furthermore, after 2004, RM members were no longer categorized by disability, which may have contributed to changes in their perceptions or attitudes.

In the interviews, members pointed out that as time passed they began to recognize common needs and opinions when listening to others. Perhaps they began to understand the value of presenting their common needs to people without disabilities who are unfamiliar with disability issues, although there was no consensus on the matter. National or municipal disability movements tend to focus on specific disabilities (COGJ, 2014a; Ibaraki, 2013); however, they might be more successful if they were based on common needs. The RM members valued the meetings where different people came together, and they expressed concerns that the RM would not be sustainable if the members spoke from self-interest alone. Therefore, the agendas from 2004 to 2007 were mostly about issues common to all the members.

Development of disability identities. A concrete achievement of the RM was the utilization of sheltered workshop products, which developed an environment where members could establish their disability identities (Gill, 1997). A disability identity can be more empowering than a general social identity. Discussion of disability policy is a tool that encouraged members to find relationships between their personal experiences and the local disability policy as the exchange of these experiences could lead to alternative dialogues on disability issues. A typical example is the employment issue included in the 2005 and 2006 agendas. PWDs are often exposed to social perceptions that they do not have requisite abilities for the labor market. Some believe that the Services and Support for Persons With Disabilities Act of 2006 was proposed exclusively for PWDs for employment or vocational training purposes (Ozawa & Ohshima, 2012). Nevertheless, some members stated that they should view their disability experiences as a strength when seeking employment. PWDs seem to share a perception that refutes the dominant ideas able-bodied people have regarding PWD employment. As such, RM members seemed to embrace a common experience of disability and sense of belonging to the disability community beyond their differences.

Milner and Kelly (2009) suggested that PWDs need places like the RM for community life. In Japan, through some financial support of municipal governments, disability organizations held "peer counseling" practices where PWDs are encouraged to talk actively about their disability-related experiences (Sadato, 1994). However, not only are these groups rare, but they are also typically short-lived and their members lack diversity. Iwakuma (2003) found that people who talk about their personal disability challenges might be perceived as self-involved in places where people without disabilities gather. At the RMs, members had no need to worry about this and were able to talk comfortably about their experiences. Gearty (2015) proposed that action research about organizational members creates new narratives for the members. In this sense, the current action research study helped the RM to engage the disability community despite its initial official and solitary goal of discussing the municipal disability policy.

It is important to point out the differences and disagreements among the members. Mr. C's remarks about employers' perspectives brought to light the differences in perspectives between those with and those without employment experience. The RM atmosphere became tense after his remarks. According to Kobayashi (2004), members in

consensus meetings (regarding environmental and food safety issues) should be aware that disagreements among members are unavoidable. Although Kobayashi's findings might not perfectly fit this study, it is important to recognize the need to "agree to disagree" in the context of disability issues. A member with a disability cannot insist that his or her remarks are more legitimate than those of other members with different disabilities.

Management of the RM by the Members, Yao City Officials, and a Researcher

Role of the members and Yao city officials. Many different people led the RMs—Residents, local officials, and I all served in this capacity, and we all considered our roles and limitations. This current RM seems better managed by all the members than the RM in Tagaki's (2007) study. Although the residents became increasingly active in the RMs, local officials and I filled the primary role of facilitating discussions. Member participation in and contributions to the RMs were noteworthy. For example, one task force member focused on the RM management policy. Another example includes members' responses to Ms. B, stating that she should discuss practical issues rather than theoretical matters, and that her remarks were not useful to policy change. These discussions enabled members to avoid focusing on their personal concerns, respect the needs and opinions of others as individuals, and consider the group in its entirety.

Local officials might consider the RM discussions as significant. In the personnel allocation system of Japanese public officials, local government officials transfer from one section to another every 4 to 5 years, except for staff employed as social welfare professionals. For this reason, local government officials often do not have the opportunity to become intimately familiar with disability policy matters (Kurihara, 2007). For the RMs, the local officials played an important role—setting the agenda and supporting the meeting chair—which helped members better understand the relationships between the discussions and policy. The Yao Council members regarded these discussions as useful political recommendations.

The local officials recognize their administrative limitations with regard to incorporating RM suggestions into policy. In Japan, due to the decentralization of power, municipal government's ability to exert their own discretion with regard to social welfare policy has been increasing since the 1990s (Ito, 2012). However, municipal governments have little administrative discretion to decide the content of welfare policy and their own budget; in fact, municipal governments are required to emphasize the intentions of prefectures and central government. Even so, the attendance of the government officials at the RMs is regarded favorably in part because the RM members' discussion is easily transferrable to the Yao government. In addition, their attendance fulfills the "public responsibility" standard emphasized in Japan that pushes central or local governments to take initiative on disability policy (Kim, 2014).

My role as a researcher. I attempted to manage several aspects of the RMs, including membership, clarifying members' roles, prioritizing meeting agendas, developing behavior policies during discussions (such as refraining from criticism), emphasizing that each member's experiences were knowledge based, promoting the value of meetings, and helping to find solutions to the problems identified in the meetings without depending on the government. Based on the sense-making theory, I intended my remarks to shed light on the members' sense-making of their experiences as PWDs. I did not present professional truths or offer solutions for the members to implement.

I asked the RM members to explain their values or norms of which other RM members might not be aware. In particular, I tried to clarify the significance of the members' comments and emphasized that documenting the meetings was important because sense-making is prominently performed in narratives. Documentation is important for arranging narratives through discussion and encouraging the members' interpretations of the RM. By documenting the meetings, residents who were absent catch up on what happened. Accordingly, my role in this action research study can be understood as sense-making, rather than decision making.

I was uniquely aware that I was limited by my lack of Yao city residency and, thus, had no official way of implementing the members' suggestions. Furthermore, social scientists rarely have strong influences on disability policy in Japan's central or municipal governments, particularly compared with governmental officials (Mizumoto, 2009). A revolving door of personnel through which researchers travel and transition among universities, institutions, and policy making are unusual in Japan's central and local governments (Ishii, 2010). Perhaps if more researchers were involved in disability studies, their influence would increase and lead to positive changes to the current disability policy in Japan (Barnes, 2011). In this case, because Ms. B did not completely agree with my suggestion on the target or effects of a disability awareness program in the 2006 meeting, my advice as a researcher was not accepted by the RM members. Nevertheless, the sense-making of the narratives of the RM members might be a small step toward a positive change.

Conclusion

An RM is an effective way for PWDs to participate in local policy-making processes. The following are some suggestions, which municipal governments should apply when managing RMs. First, respect for diversity is required and, once it is established, common interests will emerge. If member categorization is based on disability type, they will likely have strong within-group affinities. Under these conditions, discussions may be too specific to disability type, and cross-group relationships could be undermined. Organizing members without considering the disability type allows them to find new common ground. Respect for

diversity does not mean enforced agreements. Members could agree to disagree and subsequently find a common ground on which to appeal to the local government.

Second, as Yanai and Nakayama (2015) pointed out, a venue for sharing experiences is important, even if there is a specific project in mind for the experience sharing. The RM accomplished three concrete projects, but perhaps more importantly, the members actively shared their experiences with each other. The current RM did not reflect the opinions of all the PWDs in Yao. Nevertheless, it is important to accumulate and generate collective narratives on local disability policy. As McDaid (2009) and Mirza, Gossett, Chan, Burford, and Hammel (2008) insisted, a disability service provision system should respect experience-based knowledge. Initially, policy evaluation can be applied to retrospectively understand its past effects. For example, in the context of restoring a Japanese town damaged by a catastrophe, Miyamoto and Atsumi (2009) emphasized the importance of the narrative way of thinking. Their discussion is reflected in this study, which also deals with residents facing community problems.

The third suggestion is that the meetings should be managed by multiple leaders to encourage the participation of all members. In this study, local officials, key residents, and I collectively coordinated the RM.

It is important to note the limitations of the RM. As one member with an internal disability remarked in 2003, it ran the risk that deep discussions would be useless if the officials did not value them. One goal of the RM has been to help members understand their responsibilities toward themselves and not become overly dependent on the government. If this goal is misunderstood, the legitimate responsibilities of the public sector could be underestimated. I suggest that the RM is a means of enacting the disability policy. Certainly, lobbying high-ranking officials or Congress members is effective for prompt policy making.

Further studies are required on this topic. First, the RM did not fulfill its relationship goal because it did not involve able-bodied people unrelated to policy making or disability issues generally. The Yao RM is continuing in 2016 and some projects are going to be implemented in conjunction with citizen groups in Yao city. Therefore, we should analyze the development of the RM from the process goal. Second, the local government must launch many official meetings, such as the Committee of Service Provision and Council for the Support of Community Life of People With Disabilities. These activities will provide fresh opportunities to conduct comprehensive and effective studies on RM and other types of meetings.

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Notes

1. In 2013, there were approximately 8,000 sheltered workshops in Japan where people with disabilities (PWDs) made baked goods and textiles, among other things (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015). However, such products generally have difficulty selling, and, therefore, many workshops are using these types of markets.
2. The quotations from the members' narratives are based on my field notes.
3. Japanese laws are numbered by calendar year and initiated at the end of each year for the coming year. Therefore, the People With Disabilities Employment Promotion Law and the Services and Support for Persons With Disabilities Act have the same number.

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Author Biography

Masakuni Tagaki is currently a professor whose research interest is in psycho-social issues of PWDs, and their paticipation in municipal disability policy.