



Development of children's understandings of physical disabilities and stigmatization in a Japanese cultural context: Reflections of children in second through sixth grades



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ABSTRACT

Stigmatization associated with disability is a culturally widespread social justice issue. Elementary school age is an important period for children to develop positive attitudes toward people with disabilities. This study examines Japanese elementary school-aged children's developing perceptions of disability and stigmatization. Following interactions and discussion about disabilities with the author, a guest teacher who uses a wheelchair, 118 typically-developing Japanese children in second through sixth grades provided written reflections on physical disability and stigmatization. Children in all grade levels described both positive and negative aspects of disability. Younger children's responses, however, were relatively positive, focusing on concrete examples of life in a wheelchair. Older children's responses focused more on challenges, and articulated their feelings and thoughts about disability in greater detail. Some older children also used the author's disability narratives to describe how they had overcome their own challenges that were not necessarily related to disability. Such differences in children's responses by grade levels are discussed in the context of Japanese socialization practices that emphasize sensitivity to stigmatization as well as empathy to maintain interpersonal relationships. Implications of Japanese cultural cases to professionals in Western countries also are discussed.

1. Introduction

Stigmatization associated with disability is a culturally widespread social justice issue. Stigma can be defined as “undesired differentness” that leads to labeling, stereotyping, status loss, discrimination, social exclusion and negative emotional responses (Goffman, 1963; Link, Yang, Phelan, & Collins, 2004; Yang et al., 2007). Across cultures, school-aged children with disabilities experience teasing, exclusion, and other negative responses from their typically-developing peers (e.g., Kayama & Haight, 2014; Kelly, 2005; Nugent, 2008; Ochs, Kremer-Sadlik, Solomon, & Sirota, 2010; Shah, 2007). As children develop and peer relationships become more important in middle childhood, many become increasingly aware of differences between them and the negative meanings associated with disabilities (Haight, Kayama, Ku, Cho, & Lee, 2016). Likewise, attitudes of typically-developing children in the U.S. and East Asian countries toward individuals with disabilities change over the elementary school years from curiosity in lower grades to exclusion from social and academic activities in upper grades (Kayama & Haight, 2014, Kayama, Haight, Ku, Cho, & Lee, 2016). Yet such negative developmental outcomes are not inevitable. For instance, Swiss elementary school-aged children with frequent

contact with peers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms were more likely to show sympathy and include their peers with disabilities than were children with less exposure in non-inclusive classrooms. Further, this effect was more pronounced with 9-year-olds than 12-year-olds (Gasser, Malti, & Buholzer, 2013), suggesting that there may be developmental changes in the flexibility of children's perceptions and behaviors toward peers with disabilities. Insights into typically-developing children's perceptions of disabilities will contribute to effective, developmentally-sensitive interventions to reduce stigmatization.

The present study describes changing understandings of physical disability and stigmatization from the perspectives of second through sixth grades typically-developing, Japanese children, and how their understandings are shaped in a Japanese sociocultural context. Japan is an illuminating cultural case in which to explore the development of children's understanding of disability and associated stigmatization. As detailed below, Japanese socialization practices at home and school, for example, cultivate children's empathy and sensitivity to their own and others' differences. While individuals' sensitivity to differences can result in stigmatization (e.g., Kayama & Haight, 2014, Sano & Kuroishi, 2005), it also may result in empathy and compassion toward people who are different (Lebra, 1976; Sato, Araki, Ito, & Ishigaki, 2015).

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1.1. Theoretical framework

This study approaches Japanese children's developing perceptions of disability and associated stigmatization sensitized by concepts from developmental cultural psychology (Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992; Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2003). Children's development is shaped within particular sociocultural-historical contexts that vary in socialization practices, norms, and beliefs, including perceptions of disability and interpersonal relationships (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Children acquire cultural meanings of disability and learn culturally appropriate responses during their everyday interactions with peers and adults (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Typically-developing children, for instance, learn the meanings of disabilities through their direct interactions with individuals with disabilities (e.g., Kalymon, Gettinger, & Hanley-Maxwell, 2010), as well as observation of others' attitudes toward those with disabilities (see Hodkinson, 2007) including in the media (Chen, Hsu, Shu, & Fetzer, 2012). How disability and stigmatization are understood and experienced, however, varies across sociocultural contexts (see Shweder & Sullivan, 1993). For example, Japanese and U.S. children were presented with a case scenario of a group consisting of a child in a wheelchair and typically-developing children (Crystal, Watanabe, & Chen, 1999). In the U.S., where equality and social justice are valued and children are socialized to respect individual differences (Shweder et al., 2006), children expressed a willingness and tolerance to accept the individual differences of a child with a disability (Crystal et al., 1999). Japanese children, who are socialized to sense and understand others' minds and adjust their actions accordingly (Lebra, 1976), expressed concern and empathy for a peer with a disability who required accommodations to participate in everyday activities at school (Crystal et al., 1999).

1.2. Japanese socialization practices pertaining to disability: Empathy and sensitivity to differences

Although Japanese cultural beliefs pertaining to disability are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, some familiarity with socialization practices, described below, provides insights into the experience of disability in Japan. Japanese understandings of disability can be characterized as sensitivity to differences that can either lead to accepting, empathetic responses toward individuals who have disabilities or marginalization. These responses reflect Japanese people's understandings of “self” in their relationships with others (Lebra, 1976; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Japanese people's sensitivity to others' well-being allows them to empathetically respond to people who have challenges (Lebra, 1976). Such responses from peers, for instance, encourage inclusion at school (Kayama & Haight, 2014). Yet their sensitivity to difference can result in individuals with disabilities and their families to be (and feel) excluded by others (e.g., Sato et al., 2015).

Japanese people are generally socialized to be particularly sensitive to any differences, including disability, that can stigmatize them and their families (see Haight et al., 2016; Kayama & Haight, 2014; Kayama et al., 2016). Until recently, individuals with disabilities often were regarded as burdens to family and extended family members, and even hidden to avoid stigmatization (e.g., Jegatheesan, 2009; Tachibana & Watanabe, 2004). Even today, parents may decline special education services for their children with disabilities, in part, due to their concern about stigmatization (Kayama & Haight, 2014).

Such sensitivity to difference is closely associated with Japanese people's preference for being “normal.” In English, being “normal” typically has neutral or even negative connotations. In contrast, being normal can lead to social acceptance in Japan. Japanese people's understandings of “normal” affect their perceptions of self and behavior (see Kuroishi & Sano, 2007; Yamada, 2009). Japanese people consider that they are “normal” when they act as others do (Kuroishi & Sano, 2007) and are not substantially different from them (see Ikui, Sano, & Kuroishi, 2013). Their responses to normality can lead to

positive feelings of belonging, security, satisfaction and happiness (see Kuroishi, Ikui, & Sano, 2015; see Yamada, 2009). In contrast, when they perceive that they are not being normal, for example, when their difference from others is apparent, they may develop negative feelings such as anxiety and impatience (Sano & Kuroishi, 2005; also see Kuroishi et al., 2015). To regain a sense of security, they may attempt to become normal (Ikui, 2015). Of course, what is considered normal and how individuals' sense of normality affects their behaviors and perceptions of self-change over time (Yamada, 2009). Yet disability, which can make individuals and their family members obviously different from others, has long been perceived negatively.

On the other hand, Japanese people's sensitivity to others also allows them to empathetically respond to people who are not obviously “normal.” Japanese children are socialized to learn to maintain positive interpersonal relationships through *omoiyari*. *Omoiyari* [*omoi*: one's own thoughts feelings, wishes and concerns; *yari*: doing for others] broadly refers to sensitivity and empathy toward others, and is considered a basis of interpersonal relationships in Japan. Individuals' lack of *omoiyari* can result in hurting others' feelings and threatening their relationships (Lebra, 1976). Such socialization ideals are reflected in educational goals for elementary school-aged children, specifically, “education for *omoiyari no kokoro*,” or a mind and heart sensitive to others' minds and hearts (Ministry of Education, Japan, 2008). At school, educators promote children's sensitivity and ability to work with peers with diverse abilities and interests through activities involving collaboration and mutual help, for example, serving meals during lunchtime, cleaning the school (e.g., Lewis, 1995; Tsuneyoshi, 1994), planning school- and classroom-wide activities and field trips, and completing academic projects (Kayama & Haight, 2014).

The strong emphasis on collaborative work with peers, however, can be challenging for both children with disabilities and their typically developing peers. Children with disabilities may struggle to work in groups when they are not able to contribute to peer groups as expected socially or academically (Kayama & Haight, 2014, see also Hosaka, 2005; Shimizu, 2001). Their typically-developing peers also struggle with accepting and including peers with a disability in class activities (Kayama & Haight, 2014). Japanese educators consider such challenges faced by children with disabilities and their peers as opportunities for all children to learn how they can work together. Educators guide and motivate children by allowing them to take ownership to handle challenges (Kayama & Haight, 2014; Kayama et al., 2016).

These Japanese cultural beliefs and practices, however, are not static. They evolve over time. For example, the implementation of a new Japanese special education policy in 2007 that made special education services available for children with relatively milder disabilities, such as learning disabilities, high-functioning autism spectrum disorders, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (Ministry of Education, Japan, 2007), changed educational practices for children with disabilities and educators' perceptions and attitudes toward disabilities (Kayama & Haight, 2014). The new policy was, in part, the government's response to the increasing attention to school struggles of children with milder disabilities, influenced by the international movements to protect the right of children with disabilities to receive an appropriate public education.¹ After the implementation of the new policy, children who were formerly considered “slow learners” (e.g., Abe, 1998) became children with “disabilities”. This policy change has created more opportunities for typically-developing children to interact with peers with disabilities. In adapting to these changes, educators drew on traditional Japanese socialization practices of *omoiyari* to guide empathetic perspectives and accepting behaviors of typically-developing children toward their peers with disabilities during mundane,

¹ For example, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

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