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# The Development of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness Among People with Mental Disabilities in Japan

**Yumi Yuzawa**
yumiyuzawa3@gmail.com

The University of Tokyo

**Takeo Kondo**
The University of Tokyo

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## Abstract

## Introduction:

While employment is crucial for self-actualization, people with mental disabilities often experience hesitation and conflict regarding work because of symptoms, stigma, and reduced self-efficacy. This study focused on the gap between self-concept and work image to clarify the process of establishing Self-Determined Vocational Readiness, conceptualized as subjective belief in one's ability to "give work a try" and take action accordingly.

## Methods

We conducted a qualitative text analysis of semi-structured interview data to generate the concepts of three themes: meaning of work, self-concept, and work image. Participants were categorized into three groups—Hesitation, Conflict, and Action—and compared using statistical methods to examine the structure of their Self-Determined Vocational Readiness.

## Results & Discussion

Participants felt a sense of helplessness regarding fixed work images influenced by social security systems and employment culture. They possessed two motivations—maintaining social relationships and a desire for autonomy—and their self-concept, meaning of work, and work image differed according to their stage (Hesitation, Conflict, or Action). The findings illustrate Self-Determined Vocational Readiness as a cyclical process in which a sense of incompetence is transformed into perceived competence through support from recovery partners and the reframing of real-life experiences, leading ultimately to action through an understanding of diverse work styles, workplaces, and individuals. We believe this study's proposed model can bridge the gap between psychiatric and vocational rehabilitation.

## Introduction

Meaningfulness and self-actualization are key life goals [1], both significantly influenced by one's professional career, along with family, leisure, and learning [2]. Therefore, it is important for people with mental disabilities to build professional careers that reflect their true selves. Mandatory employment quotas for people with mental disabilities are relatively new in Japan, and though their employment opportunities are expanding [3], specific challenges have not yet been adequately addressed by vocational rehabilitation services. Barriers include a lack of perceived control over symptoms and daily living difficulties [4], fluctuations in motivation due to stigma and symptom variability [5, 6], and reduced autonomy and self-efficacy resulting from hospitalization [7].

Yuzawa and Yaeda (2024) report that many people with mental disabilities experience conflict and hesitation regarding work before they achieve a subjective state of mind in which they make a self-determined decision to try working and take action toward that goal [8]. For example, some individuals hesitate owing to a premonition of failure stemming from past traumas, unstable symptoms, or awareness of stigma; meanwhile others continue a "Silent Struggle to Escape the Status Quo," gathering information and practicing communication with others in private, without actually applying for jobs [8]. Thus, gaps exist between desire to work and taking action.

Work image, as influenced by Japanese employment culture, has three main characteristics: membership-based, long-term, full-time employment without job descriptions [9, 10]; misalignment between workers' perception of role expectations misaligned with the reality of diversifying work styles (Gender Equality Bureau, & Cabinet Office, 2023); and a focus on workplace relationships and atmosphere [11–15]. Relatedly, self-concept (one's sense of in/competence) is influenced by mental illness symptoms and medication side effects [16–17], and by social attitudes and stigma-based identity [18, 19]. The gap between one's work image and self-concept may inhibit professional career development [20]. Yet how these factors shape the subjective structure of vocational readiness remains unclear.

Four vocational readiness scales developed in the US, UK, and Norway all focus on the individual's own subjective stage of preparation for work [21–24]. By contrast, the Japanese "Assessment Sheet for Employment Support" uses objective indicators of readiness for work, such as skills, behaviors, and attitudes [25]. Guided by this sheet, support staff assessing the vocational readiness of people with disabilities apply an external perspective with little emphasis on subjective factors such as the motivations and needs of individuals who wish to work. In other words, the situation has been such that the self-determination of people with disabilities regarding their employment has not been a primary focus.

In a recent study of Japanese psychiatric patients based on self-determination theory [26], subject-specific factors such as "independence" and "self-esteem" were identified in the Japanese version scale of the Comprehensive Relative Autonomy Index [27, 28]. In this context, self-esteem is the motivation to be unashamedly oneself within a group, while "independence" is the motivation to restore one's dignity as a member of society through work. These insights suggest that the meaning of work may be influenced by classical values of social utility, as well as Japan's mutually cooperative culture [29] and institutional context, where the right to life entails an obligation to work [30]. More broadly, the meaning of work likely reflects the cultural context of the individual's local community.

Based on the above, there is a need to develop a theory that integrates the meaning of work and work image within the Japanese context with the self-concept of people with mental disabilities, aiming to bridge psychiatric and vocational rehabilitation. For this purpose, we propose the concept of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness, defined as subjective belief in one's ability to "give work a try" and take action accordingly—moving from a state of hesitation or conflict regarding work. Based on the subjective perspectives of people with mental disabilities, this study aims to clarify how Self-Determined

Vocational Readiness is established among individuals who wish to work but experience hesitation or conflict, and to illustrate its subjective structure based on the three themes: meaning of work, work image and self-concept.

## Methods

# Study design

Through semi-structured interviewing of people with mental disabilities, we generated textual data for qualitative analysis [31]. This approach combines two methods: inductive concept construction based on empirical data, and deductive classification based on existing theories and research questions. Concepts were generated inductively for each "theme": "Meaning of Work","Self-concept", and "Work Image". Participants were divided into three groups—Hesitation, Conflict, and Action—and the extent to which relevant concepts were commonly mentioned by participants within each group was compared. Candidate concepts were identified using operationally defined criteria and statistical methods; final selection was based on contextual validity, focused on the research objectives. All procedures were overseen by the supervising professor. To ensure the validity of interpretations, they were reviewed through discussions among the lead author and the two experts. This study was conducted after review by the University of Tokyo's Research Ethics Committee and approval by its Head of the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology (23–566). There are no fundings of interest to report.

## Data collection

Participants were recruited through employment support agencies, including psychiatric daycare and sheltered employment centers). The target population included individuals with a mental disability certification or currently receiving outpatient psychiatric care, ranging from those interested in employment to individuals employed for less than one month (the inclusion criteria). We explained the study in person or online to support agencies, which then referred potential participants. Immediately before the interview, the researcher explained the following to each participant in writing and verbally: the study purpose, their right to freely give and withdraw participation consent, details of the research methods and what participants would be asked to do, the potential benefits and drawbacks of participating, privacy protection, how to contact researchers regarding the study, the academic publication of research findings, and the assurance that responses would not affect the support they received. The researcher obtained signed consent from each participant. No participant had met the researcher before the interview.

All interviews were conducted in person in a private space within the participant's or researcher's affiliated institution, either one-on-one or with a support person present at the participant's request or with their consent. Participants were asked to complete a written questionnaire collecting data on age, sex, possession and level of a mental disability certification, self-reported diagnosis, date of initial diagnosis, highest level of education, work experience, types of employment experienced, enrollment in employment programs, and current job-search status. Furthermore, to understand participants' "Self-concept", "Work Image", and "Meaning of Work", and the processes of change in these areas, we asked questions based on an interview guide (Supplemental Materials 1) about their feelings toward work and working life, and how those feelings have changed over time. Using open questions encouraged free and candid responses.

Each of the 50 participants was interviewed once. Interview duration ranged from 25 to 63 minutes and averaged (mean and median) 45 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria or would not consent to recording (allowing only written notes) were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 46 participants. Participants' basic characteristics are shown in Table 1, and their self-reported diagnoses are presented in Table 2.

Table 1
Participants' basic characteristics (*N* = 46)

| **Characteristic** | ***n* (except for Age)** |
|---|---|
| Gender | |
| Male | 28 |
| Female | 18 |
| Age (years) | |
| Mean | 22–62 |
| Median | 38.9 |
| Range | 37.0 |
| Mental disability certification (n) | |
| Grade 2 | 25 |
| Grade 3 | 12 |
| None | 9 |
| Work experience | |
| Yes | 43 |
| No | 3 |
| Highest level of education | |
| Junior high school graduate | 1 |
| High school dropout | 2 |
| High school graduate | 13 |
| Vocational college dropout | 2 |
| Vocational college graduate | 6 |
| Two-year college graduate | 4 |
| University dropout | 5 |
| University graduate | 13 |
| Note. There is one missing value for Age. | |

Table 2
Participants' self-reported diagnoses (*N* = 46)

| **Diagnosis** | ***n*** |
|---|---|
| Schizophrenia | 19 |
| Autism spectrum disorder | 11 |
| Depressive disorder | 8 |
| Bipolar disorder | 8 |
| Adjustment disorders | 4 |
| Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder | 4 |
| Anxiety disorders | 3 |
| Obsessive-compulsive disorder | 3 |
| Intellectual disability | 3 |
| Addictive disorders | 2 |
| Learning disorders | 1 |
| Other neurodevelopmental disorders | 1 |
| Other | 3 |
| Note. multiple responses allowed. | |

## Analysis and reporting

Analyses were performed in MAXQDA, Microsoft Excel, and SPSS. First, all interview transcripts were carefully read to note key points, identify the general framework of each participant's narrative, and utilize this to generate concepts based on the overall narrative. Next, the analytical framework focused on the themes of 'Meaning of Work', 'Work Image', and 'Self-concept', and related segments were classified through inductive coding. Coding units (segments) were determined based on semantic scope to ensure they retained their meaning even when decontextualized. Subsequently, the codes within each theme were organized to generate concepts. Any segment containing overlapping content was assigned multiple codes and classified under multiple themes. Following Kuckartz (2014/2018), the categories were refined iteratively by prioritizing relevance to the research aims and meaning for the reader [31].

Next, based on their registration in employment programs and job-seeking status, participants were classified into the Hesitation Group ($n$ = 11; those with aspirations but not yet active), the Conflict Group ($n$ = 17; those engaged in tentative activities or registered but not yet active), and the Action Group ($n$ = 18; those applying for jobs or attending interviews). The specific classifications for each group are as shown in Fig. 1.

For each group, we calculated the proportion of members mentioning each concept. To compare the three groups, we also selected concepts based on the following operational criteria. First, concepts mentioned by at least 25% of participants in all three groups were included. Second, we selected concepts that showed gradual differences across the three groups from the Hesitation Group through the Conflict Group and on to the Action Group (a gradual change, with an increase of more than threefold from the Hesitant group to the Action group and the Action Group is at least 25%, or a decrease of less than one-third from the Hesitant group to the Action group and Hesitant group is at least 25%, furthermore, the Conflict Group indicates an intermediate percentage). Third, we included concepts characteristic of specific groups based on three operational criteria: 1) number of mentions is 0% in one group and ≥ 20% in an adjacent group; 2) number of mentions is ≥ 33% in one group and at least three times higher than in an adjacent group; or 3) number of mentions in one group is ≥ 33% and at least twice the overall average.

We specifically explored the strength of the evidence for differences among the three groups. Qualitative text analysis method with MAXQDA allows concepts to be used as categorical variables in statistical analysis using SPSS [32]. Aiming to comprehensively evaluate indicators, rather than relying solely on $p$-value thresholds [33.34], and based on the objective of translating suggested $p$-value ranges into "the language of evidence" [35], this study employed a hierarchical approach for two-group comparisons using the Fisher Exact Test [36–38], the Fisher–Freeman–Halton Exact Test [39], and Bonferroni's method [40]. In the concept-selection process, we reconsidered concepts where $p \leq 0.1$ based on contextual validity. As a result of these tests, two key concepts were added to the concept list based on the original operational criteria, and seven concepts were removed from that list.

Ultimately, we selected six concepts for'Meaning of Work', four for'Work Image', and one for'Self-concept' as common to all three groups, along with four concepts for'Meaning of Work', seven for'Work Image', and ten for'Self-concept' as those varying across groups. These were organized as key concepts explaining the structure of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness (Tables 3–7.). These concepts illustrate the differences in dominant narratives across the three groups. Although this paper reports only the major concepts, minor concepts potentially important to certain participants were also observed.

Finally, regarding basic attributes across the three groups, we conducted Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact probability tests and Bonferroni tests to identify group differences that could influence conceptual comparisons.

## Results

# Attribute differences among the three groups

Comparing differences in the attributes of the study participants across the three groups, the highest level of education showed a $p$-value of 0.040 in the Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact probability test. Bonferroni correction suggested a difference in university graduates between the Action Group (8 of 18) and Hesitation Group (0 of 11). No participants had a graduate degree, and no evidence of a difference was found for university dropouts. No evidence of a significant difference in age was found among the three groups; however, in analysis by decade, the Fisher–Freeman–Halton exact probability test showed a $p$-value of 0.014 and Bonferroni correction indicated a difference in participants aged 50–59 between the Action Group (0 of 18) and Hesitation Group (6 of 11). However, no evidence was found of a difference in participants aged 60–69.

# Concepts common to all three groups

Table 3 presents the results for shared [concepts]. The main narrative storylines are as follows. Many participants possessed [Beliefs regarding standards for job hunting and job preparation] and believed they were expected to pursue [Full-time / Long-term employment] at a single company and demonstrate [Being able to fit in] with the workplace atmosphere. At the same time, they concurrently believed it was acceptable to work at [My own pace]. The image of [Full-time / Long-term employment] reflected the influence of their fathers' work styles, the belief this was the norm, and generational views on work. Furthermore, [Being able to fit in] encompassed expectations regarding interpersonal relationships, including not only work-related communication but also casual conversation. In contrast to this 'Work Image', participants held a negative 'Self-concept' characterized by a [Vague sense of inadequacy about work]. This 'Self-concept'was described in connection with past work experiences, academic struggles, failures in part-time student work, and repeated difficulties in vocational training. Regarding 'Meaning of Work', in addition to [Livelihood Security] and [Right way to live (Sense of norms)], participants cited [Being normal for my age]—the desire to be like their same-age contemporaries—and [Being a useful person], rather than merely being supported by others. Also prominent were the aspiration to live as an [Independent individual] and [Freedom of self-determination]—the desire to earn an income and realize the life one desires.

Table 3
Concepts mentioned frequently across all three groups

| Themes | Concepts | All | Act | Con | Hes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | ***N*** **= 46** | ***n*** **= 18** | ***n*** **= 17** | ***n*** **= 11** |
| Self-concept | Vague sense of inadequacy about work | 28.3% | 27.8% | 29.4% | 27.3% |
| Work Image | Beliefs regarding standards for job hunting and job preparation | 41.3% | 50.0% | 41.2% | 27.3% |
| | Full-time / Long-term employment | 58.7% | 55.6% | 58.8% | 63.6% |
| | Being able to fit in | 39.1% | 33.3% | 47.1% | 36.4% |
| | My own pace | 39.1% | 38.9% | 35.3% | 45.5% |
| Meaning of Work | Independent individual | 43.5% | 38.9% | 47.1% | 45.5% |
| | Freedom of self-determination | 52.2% | 61.1% | 41.2% | 54.5% |
| | Being a useful person | 43.5% | 38.9% | 47.1% | 45.5% |
| | Being normal for my age | 50.0% | 66.7% | 47.1% | 27.3% |
| | Right way to live (Sense of norms) | 60.9% | 55.6% | 64.7% | 63.6% |
| | Livelihood security | 63.0% | 61.1% | 58.8% | 72.7% |

Hes=Hesitation Group, Con=Conflict Group, Act=Action Group. For sample narratives, see Supplemental Materials 2.

## Concepts that explain the Hesitation–Conflict–Action differences

Table 4 shows comparisons of concepts that differed between the Hesitation and Conflict Groups. While some Hesitation members reported a sense of recovery—specifically, [Physical improvements]—through program participation, many perceived a capability deficit, such as [Stamina/fatigue/lack of concentration] or [Inability to perform duties/tasks]. In addition, many participants exhibited a Work Image of perceived [Disconnect between past work experiences and the present]. They sought to find Meaning of Work in [Self-utilization]—making the most of themselves through work—and in [Having others recognize my presence]. All of these concepts were significantly less common in the Conflict Group.

Table 4
Concept differences between the Hesitation and Conflict Groups

| | | | Ratio of mentioners to participants | | | | Bonferroni | Fisher–Freeman–Halton | Hierarchical method Fisher (two-sided test) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | All | Act | Con | Hes | Differences | *p* | *p* | *p* | *p* |
| +/− | Themes | Concepts | *N* = 46 | *n* = 18 | *n* = 17 | *n* = 11 | 3 Groups | 3 Groups | Act–Con | Con–Hes | Act–Hes |
| − | Self-concept | Stamina/fatigue/lack of concentration | 19.6% | 11.1% | 5.9% | 54.5% | 2–3, 1–3 | **0.007** | 1.000 | **0.007** | **0.028** |
| − | Self-concept | Inability to perform duties/tasks | 21.7% | 16.7% | 11.8% | 45.5% | | 0.146 | 1.000 | 0.076 | 0.197 |
| − | Self-concept | Physical improvements | 4.3% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 18.2% | | 0.053 | | 0.146 | 0.135 |
| − | Work Image | Disconnect between past work experiences and the present | 19.6% | 16.7% | 5.9% | 45.5% | 2–3 | **0.045** | 0.603 | **0.022** | 0.197 |
| − | Meaning of Work | Having others recognize my presence | 15.2% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 36.4% | 2–3 | **0.026** | 0.229 | **0.016** | 0.375 |
| − | Meaning of Work | Self-utilization | 26.1% | 27.8% | 11.8% | 45.5% | | 0.135 | 0.402 | 0.076 | 0.432 |

The table includes concepts for which any test yielded a *p*-value ≤ 0.1; $p \leq 0.05$ indicated in bold; $p > 0.1$ displayed in gray, Hesitation Group = Hes, Conflict Group = Con, Action Group = Act, +: Increases from hesitation to conflict to action; −: Decrease from hesitation to conflict to action. For sample narratives, see Supplemental Materials 2.

Table 5. presents the prominent concepts in the Conflict Group. Unlike in the other two groups, some of these participants described [Memories of struggling helplessly], recalling repeat experiences of searching for jobs, getting hired, and quitting, a cycle they coped with alone, with no one to support them. Also within the Self-concept theme, many Conflict members specifically mentioned a [Lack of confidence in interpersonal relationships and communication], particularly in casual workplace conversations outside work duties.

Table 5
Concepts mentioned frequently in the Conflict Group

| | | | Ratio of mentioners to participants | | | | Bonferroni | Fisher–Freeman–Halton | Hierarchical Method Fisher (two-sided test) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | All | Act | Con | Hes | Differences | *p* | *p* | *p* | *p* |
| +/− | Themes | Concepts | *N* = 46 | *n* = 18 | *n* = 17 | *n* = 11 | 3 Groups | 3 Groups | Act–Con | Con–Hes | Act–Hes |
| − | Self-concept | Memories of struggling helplessly | 13.0% | 0.0% | 35.3% | 0.0% | 1–2 | **0.003** | **0.008** | 0.055 | |
| − | Self-concept | Lack of confidence in interpersonal relationships and communication | 32.6% | 16.7% | 52.9% | 27.3% | | 0.073 | **0.035** | 0.253 | 0.646 |

Concepts for which any test yielded a *p*-value ≤ 0.1; $p \leq 0.05$ indicated in bold; $p > 0.1$ displayed in gray, Hesitation Group = Hes, Conflict Group = Con, Action Group = Act, +: Increases from hesitation to conflict to action; −: Decrease from hesitation to conflict to action. For sample narratives, see Supplemental Material-2.

Table 6. presents comparisons of concepts that differed between the Hesitation and Action Groups Through encounters with diverse individuals during hospitalization and current activities, many participants in the Action Group became aware of people working despite impairments that limited their duties, as well as the possibility of choosing working hours and styles—encapsulated by the concept [Diverse work styles, workplaces, and individuals]. Consistently, many Action members had begun to form a clear work image and, consequently, began to perceive the feeling of lacking a work image as a narrative about their past—[Lack of clear work image (in the past)]. [Stories about working in specific jobs in the past], which represents a past Self-concept, and narratives regarding [Being myself], which represents the Meaning of Work concept of wanting to be true to oneself through an ideal job, were both mentioned less in the Action Group.

Table 6
Concept differences between the Hesitation and Action Groups

| | | | Ratio of mentioners to participants | | | | Bonferroni | Fisher–Freeman–Halton | Hierarchical Method Fisher (two-sided test) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | All | Act | Con | Hes | Differences | *p* | *p* | *p* | *p* |
| +/− | Themes | Concepts | *N* = 46 | *n* = 18 | *n* = 17 | *n* = 11 | 3 Groups | 3 Groups | Act–Con | Con–Hes | Act–Hes |
| + | Work Image | Diverse work styles, workplaces, and individuals | 34.8% | 55.6% | 29.4% | 9.1% | 1–3 | **0.034** | 0.176 | 0.355 | **0.019** |
| + | Work Image | Diligence and initiative | 19.6% | 33.3% | 23.5% | 0.0% | | 0.098 | 0.711 | 0.132 | 0.058 |
| + | Work Image | Commitment to reliable work and results | 39.1% | 61.1% | 29.4% | 18.2% | | 0.053 | 0.092 | 0.668 | 0.052 |
| + | Work Image | Lack of clear work image (in the past) | 19.6% | 33.3% | 17.6% | 0.0% | | 0.086 | 0.443 | 0.258 | 0.058 |
| − | Self-concept | Stories about working in specific jobs in the past | 8.7% | 0.0% | 5.9% | 27.3% | | 0.034 | 0.486 | 0.269 | **0.045** |
| − | Meaning of Work | Being myself | 30.4% | 16.7% | 23.5% | 63.6% | 1–3 | **0.031** | 0.691 | 0.053 | **0.017** |

Concepts for which any test yielded a *p*-value ≤ 0.1; $p \leq 0.05$ indicated in bold; $p > 0.1$ displayed in gray, Hesitation Group = Hes, Conflict Group = Con, Action Group = Act, +: Increases from hesitation to conflict to action; −: Decrease from hesitation to conflict to action. For sample narratives, see Supplemental Materials 2.

Finally, Table 7 presents comparisons between the Conflict and Action Groups. Some Action members mentioned achieving a [Sense of competence in interpersonal relationships], an area in which they had previously struggled. Furthermore, through real task experience, they gained a [Bodily sensory understanding of work] and reported [Breaking free from stereotypes/ideals]. Additionally, many Action members mentioned a [Sense of experimentation]—the willingness to try things out—and [Envisioning personal steps] toward what they could do. These insights emerged as participants experienced practical interactions with the outside world, even in simulated workplace activities; tried multiple job roles; and broke down tasks to identify their strengths and weaknesses. They also developed awareness of the need to share disability information and adhere to established procedures, conceptualized as [Perception of standards for the employment of people with disabilities]. Notably, mentions of the Meaning of Work concept of [Meaningful Time]—referring to the hope that working will bring the fulfillment currently missing from daily life —were much less common in the Action Group than in the other two groups.

Table 7
Concepts showing differences between the Conflict and the Action Groups

| | | | Ratio of mentioners to participants | | | | Bonferroni | Fisher–Freeman–Halton | Hierarchical Method Fisher (two-sided test) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | All | Act | Con | Hes | Differences | *p* | *p* | *p* | *p* |
| +/− | Themes | Concepts | n = 46 | n = 18 | n = 17 | n = 11 | 3 Groups | 3 Groups | Act–Con | Con–Hes | Act–Hes |
| + | Self-concept | Sense of competence in interpersonal relationships | 13.0% | 27.8% | 0.0% | 9.1% | | **0.033** | **0.045** | 0.393 | 0.362 |
| + | Self-concept | Sense of experimentation | 17.4% | 38.9% | 0.0% | 9.1% | 1–2 | **0.006** | **0.008** | 0.393 | 0.110 |
| + | Self-concept | Breaking free from stereotypes/ideals | 10.9% | 27.8% | 0.0% | 0.0% | | **0.020** | **0.045** | □ | 0.126 |
| + | Self-concept | Bodily sensory understanding of work | 8.7% | 22.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% | | 0.071 | 0.104 | □ | 0.268 |
| + | Work Image | Envisioning personal steps | 10.9% | 27.8% | 0.0% | 0.0% | | **0.020** | **0.045** | □ | 0.126 |
| + | Work Image | Perception of standards for the employment of people with disabilities | 8.7% | 22.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% | | 0.071 | 0.104 | □ | 0.268 |
| − | Meaning of Work | Meaningful time | 30.4% | 11.1% | 41.2% | 45.5% | | 0.071 | 0.060 | 1.000 | 0.071 |

Concepts for which any test yielded a *p*-value ≤ 0.1; $p \leq 0.05$ indicated in bold; $p > 0.1$ displayed in gray, Hesitation Group = Hes, Conflict Group = Con, Action Group = Act, +: Increases from hesitation to conflict to action; −: Decrease from hesitation to conflict to action. For sample narratives, see Supplemental Materials 2.

## Discussion

# The impact of inter-group differences in attributes

There appeared to be a difference in the highest level of education (university graduation) between the three groups. However, no difference was observed in the age of first diagnosis, suggesting that diagnosis did not influence educational progression. A more plausible interpretation is that the Hesitation Group began working at a slightly younger age compared with the other groups, and thus possibly received their first diagnosis after they had started working. Furthermore, notwithstanding the apparent inter-group difference in participants aged 50–59, the impact of age (if any) appears limited.

# The influence of social context on the meaning of work

Japan's Public Assistance Act guarantees a minimum standard of living. Furthermore, people with disabilities can receive disability pensions if they meet certain criteria. However, the pension amount is deducted from their public assistance benefits, and they may be excluded from eligibility if deemed capable of working. Requalifying for benefits requires a protracted review process. Thus, provided one's income does not exceed a certain threshold, there is a tradeoff between earned income and social security benefits; fear of losing this safety net can contribute to work hesitancy in people with disabilities. However, many participants found meaning in covering their [Basic living expenses] through wages earned from work, rather than relying on social security.

Furthermore, the meaning of work theme encompassed motivations rooted in social relationships, such as the [Right way to live (Sense of norms)], the desire to be like similarly aged peers ([Being normal for my age]), and the aspiration to be not entirely supported by others but also a [Useful person] in one's own right. The concept [Being normal for my age] is likely rooted in uniform evaluations within Japanese school education [41] and employment practices such as the mass hiring of new university graduates and long-term employment. Furthermore, as Yuzawa et al. (2024) point out, a characteristic motivation for people with mental disabilities to work may be the value system that views workers as useful and an institutional context tying the right to life with the obligation to work [28, 30]. Moreover, in the Japanese view of the self, conforming to others' expectations as a group member is considered a key element of self-actualization [29].

Other commonly mentioned meaning of work concepts included [Independent individual] and [Freedom of self-determination]. In particular, [Independent individual] was discussed in terms of leaving one's parents' home and making a living on one's own. This orientation aligns with the aim of [Being normal for my age]. These insights suggest that when supporting people with mental disabilities to develop their professional lives, it may be important to prioritize personal recovery, promoting individual growth over comparison with others. In addition, their recovery must be viewed within the context of social relationships.

# The main contexts in which hesitation and conflict arise

The gap arising between self-concept and work image when participants attempted to act on their desire to work can be explained as follows. They recognized that the working world has standards for abilities and behavior that every professional must meet—[Beliefs regarding standards for job hunting

and job preparation]—and they cited [Full-time / Long-term employment] and [Being able to fit in] (alluding to the workplace atmosphere and interpersonal relationships) as central to these standards. Conversely, while they believed they could work at [My own pace], they appeared to harbor a [Vague sense of inadequacy about work]. Figure 2 presents the basic mindset of this study's participants.

The norm of [Full-time / Long-term employment] in Japan (Hamaguchi 2011, 2021) inevitably informs a mindset among people with mental disabilities that this is the standard way of working, especially where job descriptions are lacking and tasks are flexibly assigned. The expectation of long-term employment may heighten anxiety regarding [Being able to fit in] with respect to interpersonal relationships and the workplace atmosphere [12–15]. In response to this work image, participants described a self-concept characterized by a [Vague sense of inadequacy regarding work], likely rooted in internalized experiences of failure, such as falling behind others in academics or part-time student work, painful early career experiences, and training focused on weaknesses (i.e., what one could not do).

In practice, work styles in Japan have been changing in response to shifts in gender role perceptions, household and industrial structures, and a declining labor force. Furthermore, regulations on long working hours have been strengthened by the 2019 enforcement of the Act on the Arrangement of Related Acts to Promote Work Style Reform [42]. However, participants' mindsets regarding their work image appeared somewhat fixed, suggesting the influence of parental upbringing and prolonged periods of social isolation. Encouragingly, though, many participants had identified a way forward by addressing this gap at [My own pace]. Carefully understanding these individual efforts and supporting their trial and error can contribute to promoting Self-Determined Vocational Readiness.

## The structure of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness

Based on the differences identified between the Hesitation, Conflict, and Action groups and on the corresponding narratives, Fig. 3. illustrates the structure of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness.

## Milestone 1. Affirming one's self-worth

Motivations related to [Self-utilization] and [Having others recognize my presence] were mentioned less frequently in the Conflict Group than in the Hesitation Group. This suggests that participants' sense of self-worth was affirmed—and these motivations likely fulfilled—by finding a place where they could be accepted for who they are and maintain their dignity through daily activities. Similarly, feelings of incompetence regarding [Inability to perform duties/tasks] were mentioned less by Conflict members. Meanwhile, Hesitation Group members frequently mentioned [Stamina/fatigue/lack of concentration] and [Physical improvements], suggesting that alleviating feelings of physical inadequacy may be important in some cases. However, the specific meanings of "stamina," "body," and "concentration" require further examination.

## Milestone 2. Finding a recovery partner to walk alongside

A characteristic feature of the Conflict Group was accounts of past struggles to find work and navigate professional lives alone, as illustrated by [Memories of struggling helplessly]. This is likely related to all participants receiving support from not only case managers but also family members and peers at the time of the interviews. We believe that being accompanied by a recovery partner enabled them to view their experiences as positive contributions to career development, rather than as proof of incompetence. This shifted perspective likely allowed them to make their own choices from a variety of communication and work performance strategies, as well as a diverse range of perspectives on work, at Milestone 3. Therefore, to progress toward establishing Self-Determined Vocational Readiness, an individual should be supported by a recovery partner (mainly professional support workers and counselors) during the process of giving meaning to social experiences and thereby mitigating the [Vague sense of inadequacy about work].

## Milestone 3. Real experiences and sense-making transformation system

The findings point to a cyclical system in which a recovery partner helps the individual to transform their sense of meaning based on real-world work experiences.

## Milestone 3 – 1. Interpersonal relationships and communication strategies and tools

While [Lack of confidence in interpersonal relationships and communication] was a characteristic feature of the Conflict Group, mentions of [Sense of competence in interpersonal relationships] were more frequent in the Action Group. This suggests that Action members had acquired interpersonal relationship strategies and tools, leading to the development of a sense of competence in handling workplace interpersonal relationships.

## Milestone 3 – 2. Gaining a bodily sensory understanding that "I can do the work"

[Commitment to reliable work and results] and [Diligence and initiative] were much more frequent in the Action Group than in the Hesitation Group, reflecting greater recognition that the ability to perform job duties is essential for employment. Furthermore, Action members discussed [Bodily sensory understanding of work]. One interpretation is that through experimental and realistic experiences, with a recovery partner alongside them, participants were able to make sense of what had happened to them, put into words what they could and could not do, identify suitable work (environment, methods, job types, etc.), and strengthen their sense of competence. Moreover, performance of work tasks may have met their perceived need for [Being able to fit in].

## Milestone 3–3. Internalizing diversity in work styles, workplaces, and individuals

[Diverse work styles, workplaces, and individuals] were mentioned much more frequently in the Action Group than in the Hesitation Group; Action members also spoke about [Breaking free from stereotypes/ideals]. This suggests some wavering of the traditional, uniform view of work, encapsulated by [Beliefs regarding standards for job hunting and job preparation], [Full-time / Long-term employment], and [Being able to fit in]. By encountering diverse situations and individuals, and by positively articulating the meaning of these experiences with recovery partners, participants may have become able to truly appreciate the

diversity of work styles, workplaces, and workers. Choosing a work style from among these diverse options to suit one's own abilities can also be interpreted as the realization of working at [My own pace] as a long-held idea.

## Milestone 4. Increase in meaningful time and growth in being true to oneself

The meaning of work narratives [Being myself] and [Meaningful Time] were mentioned less frequently in the Action Group than in the Hesitation and Conflict Groups, respectively. These findings may suggest that the process of moving toward Self-Determined Vocational Readiness is itself considered as [Meaningful Time], leading to the restoration of one's sense of self.

## Milestone 5. Envisioning personal steps and experimentation

[Sense of experimentation] and [Envisioning personal steps] were frequently mentioned only in the Action Group. Therefore, individuals reaching this level of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness may be able to autonomously determine their own future career plans through exploration and by trial and error.

## The positioning of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness

Principles such as self-determination and dignity are considered to form a bridge between psychiatric and vocational rehabilitation and thus the foundations of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness. Protection of self-determination and dignity has long been a central theme of psychiatric rehabilitation [4–7], and recent research on individuals with psychiatric disabilities in Japan also suggests the importance of self-dignity [8]. Researchers have also noted the associations of senses of belonging and competence with recovery [8], the importance of positive body image and the challenges in motivating physical activity [43], and the need to focus on the strengths and resources available to individuals with mental disabilities [44]. Because personal recovery is based on the principles of individuality and person-centeredness, it is important to integrate these psychiatric rehabilitation principles into vocational rehabilitation as the foundation of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness.

Within the structure of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness, real-world experience and the presence of recovery partners are crucial. Supported employment based on the Individual Placement and Support model has been reported to achieve high competitive employment rates not only in the United States, where the model was developed, but also in various other countries. Moreover, the "place-then-train" model enables individuals with mental disabilities to participate in competitive employment and pursue recovery through real-world experience [45]. Participants in this study had experienced working through real-world practice, including sheltered employment. By breaking down and making sense of these experiences, they identified their strengths and developed strategies aligned with their personal goals, thereby transforming their sense of incompetence into perceived competence. Furthermore, comparison with peers seemed to help them recognize diverse work styles and individual differences, and peer relationships likely contributed to improved quality of life [46].

Recovery partners play a key role in supporting the interpretation of these experiences, promoting internalization of the existence of diverse workplaces and work styles, and encouraging individuals to align their personal strengths with their work styles. This study demonstrates that the cycle of internalizing this diversity and forming concrete images of "what one can do" mitigates the gap between perceived uniformity of the working world (work image) and feelings of incompetence, thereby challenging social barriers. Self-Determined Vocational Readiness can thus be understood as a cyclical system that guarantees dignity and facilitates the process of making sense of experiences and articulating capabilities, thereby bridging the gap between work image and self-concept.

Within this structure, individuals can envision and attempt their own individual steps. Gelatt (1962) proposed an iterative framework for career decision-making: through repeating experimentation, an individual gathers information to deepen understanding of both self and environment, which becomes the basis for future decisions [47]. The model proposed by this study could be considered the foundation enabling this cyclical decision-making.

### Conclusion

The Self-Determined Vocational Readiness model presented in this study is expected to enable individuals with mental disabilities to engage in self-directed, experimental exploration of their future careers. However, this study reports only the major concepts; there are many minor narratives in practice. Moving forward, practical research should be conducted within the context of community-based support networks, involving not only stakeholders who engage directly with people with mental disabilities but also those responsible for developing local systems and environments. Their collaboration is needed to allocate responsibilities. It is also necessary to establish a system for continuously evaluating the support initiatives for people with mental disabilities to work across the community-based support network. Finally, as this study was conducted in Japan, its implications for different labor contexts should be evaluated through research in other regions.

### Declarations

## Funding

There are no fundings of interest to report.

Data availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to the personal nature of the interview data but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethics approval and consent to participant

This study was conducted after review by the University of Tokyo's Research Ethics Committee and approval by its Head of the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology (23–566). All human-related procedures were performed in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Participants were provided with written and verbal explanations regarding the research outline, cooperation details, voluntary participation, freedom to withdraw consent, and the publication of research results. All participants provided informed consent and signed consent forms.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Clinical trial number

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Author Contribution

Yumi Yuzawa: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing. Takeo Kondo: Conceptualization, Supervision.

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## Figures

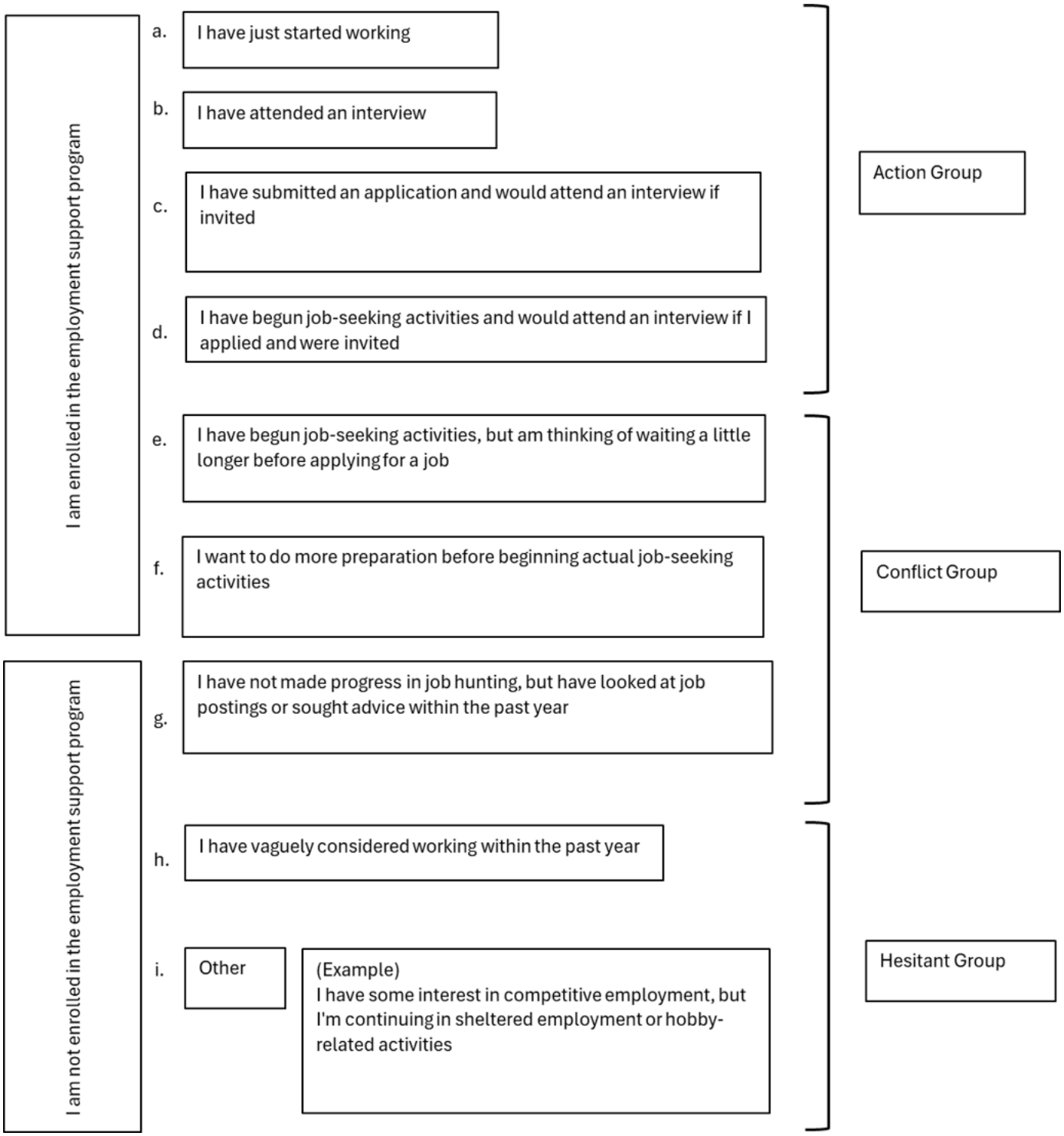



**Figure 1**

Group classification criteria

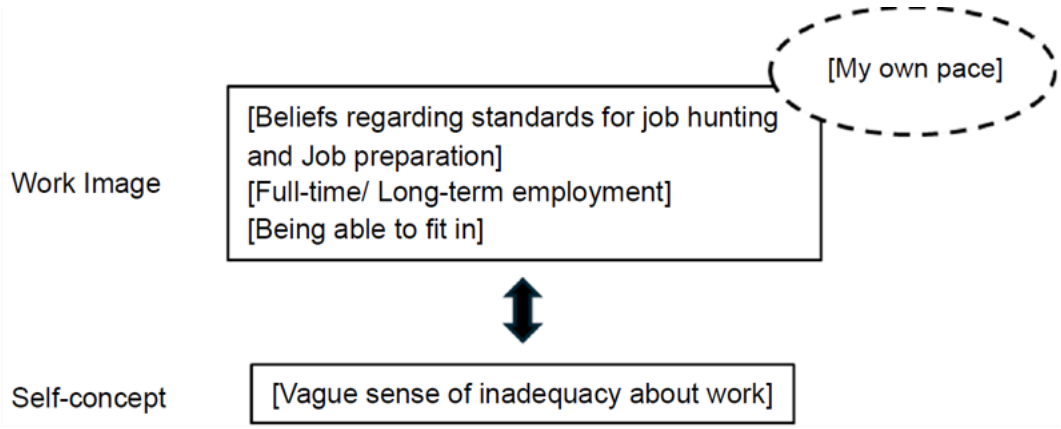



**Figure 2**

The basic mindset of participants

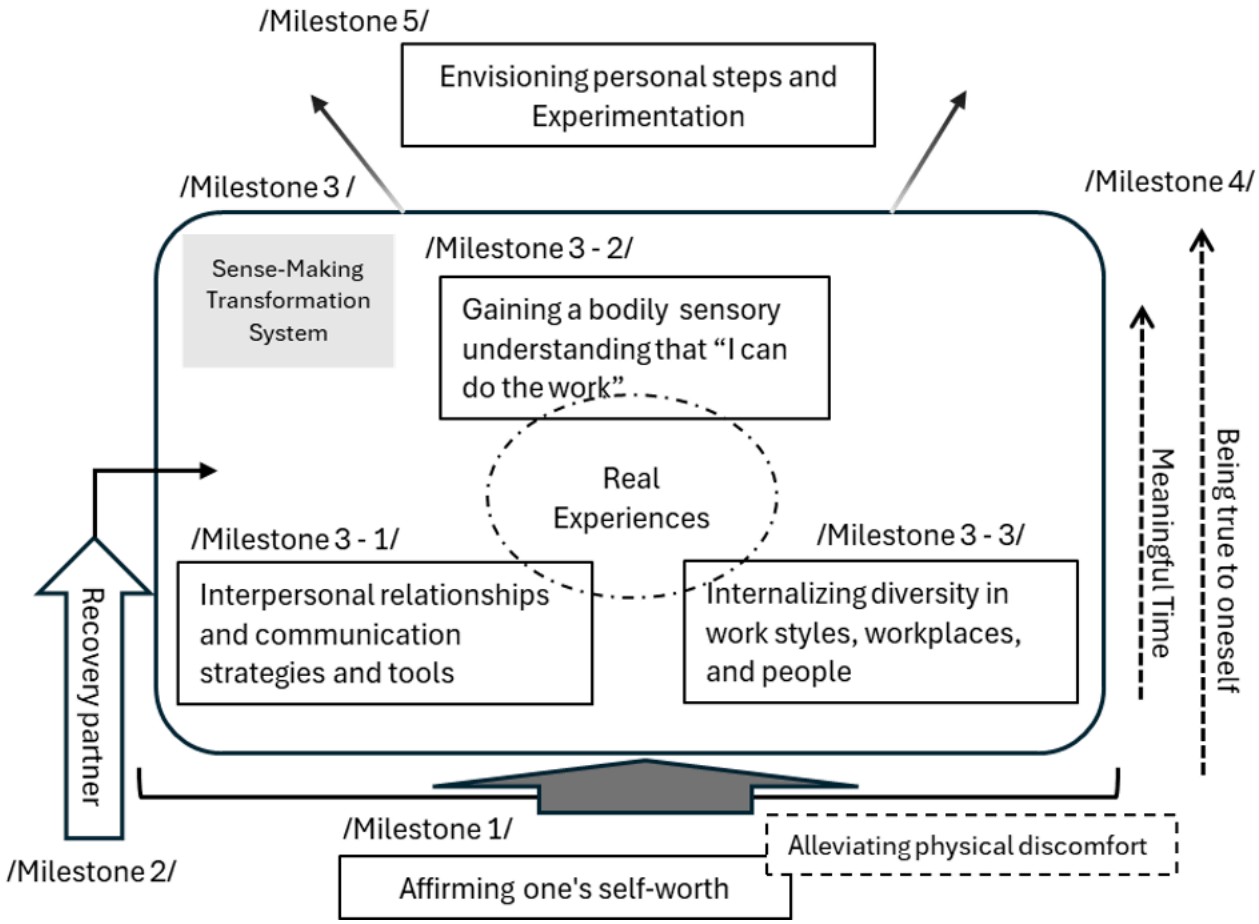



**Figure 3**

Structure of Self-Determined Vocational Readiness

## Supplementary Files

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- SupplementalMaterial2samplenarratives13.docx