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Creating a common world through action: what participation in community activities means to older people

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Abstract

As a response to demographic ageing, various governments have been promoting social policies that promote older people's participation in productive activities, including those outside the formal labour market. Nevertheless, older people's behaviours do not simply reflect government policies and intentions. This paper explores how older people themselves interpret their social roles within a policy context that seeks to position them as providers of welfare through their participation in community activities. For this purpose, this paper draws on a qualitative case study of older people in Japan engaging in health promotion and mutual aid among local residents. By employing Hannah Arendt's distinction between the human activities of labour, work and action as a conceptual framework, it finds that although the purported purpose of community activities was to substitute decreasing pensions and family care or to create a better community, participants in this study valued their activities as a process of creating new relations and new realities through action. The paper argues that while labour has occupied a predominant position in the post-war welfare paradigm, community activities by an expanding population of older people may offer opportunities for action, which were not always available through paid work or care-giving in the household.

Introduction

Population ageing presents new challenges for social policy, such as how to achieve intergenerational justice and provide for extended care in late old age (Walker, 2018). At the same time, lengthening healthy life expectancy and rising human capital among post-war baby-boomers have led to a positive conception of ageing that associates productive contribution and social engagement as normal features of the ageing process (Johnson and Mutchler, 2014). Moreover, existing research indicates the significance of meaningful social engagement for older people's personal wellbeing (Katagiri, 2012; Walker and Maltby, 2012; Johnson and Mutchler, 2014). Within this context, community participation and voluntary work by the expanding

population of healthier and more educated seniors have become the target of policies aimed at fulfilling the increasing need for care services (Lie *et al.*, 2009; Katagiri, 2012; Jensen *et al.*, 2014; Blix and Hamran, 2018).

While demographic ageing is a common trend across post-industrial societies, Japan leads the world in terms of facing the need to make institutional and normative adjustments in relation to this social change. With the population ageing rate in 2016 at 27.5 per cent, and projected to rise to 38.4 per cent by 2065, Japan is the world's most aged society (Cabinet Office, 2017). The year 2025, when the post-war cohort will reach 75 years old and the old-age population will reach 36.8 million, has come to be described as the '2025 problem' in the media and in various policy documents. Although much policy discourse has focused on extending older people's employment opportunities, recent discourses also emphasise their participation in community activities as a preventive measure for healthy later life and a source of mutual support in old age (Iwata, 2016; Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), 2016; Cabinet Office, 2017).

Numerous past studies on older people's social participation examine the demographic determinants – such as health, income and education level or gender – of older people's volunteering (*cf.* Erlinghagen and Hank, 2006; Principi *et al.*, 2016), or focus on its effect on participants' health and wellbeing (Morrow-Howell, 2010). Other studies on Japan approach this topic by analysing the evolution of long-term care policies (Morikawa, 2014; Mori, 2016). While these latter studies shed light on the institutional contexts that affect older people, examining how older people interpret their roles and structure their behaviour within existing ageing policy frameworks is necessary for understanding how such policies are actually played out in real-life contexts (Yanow, 1995, 2000). Moreover, what social role older people will occupy as an expanding 'second majority' behind a shrinking 'working-age' population is likely to have a major impact on society as a whole (Oda, 2017).

This paper aims to examine how older people interpret the meaning of their participation in mutual aid activities within the current policy context in Japan, which promotes older people's role as informal welfare providers in the community. For this purpose, the paper draws on a qualitative case study of older members of a health-care co-operative in Japan that engages in activities such as health promotion and mutual aid among residents. Community activities in this study refer to activities undertaken primarily for the purpose of benefiting the local community and its residents as opposed to gaining financial rewards. As a conceptual framework with which to analyse the meanings that older people attach to their community participation, this paper employs Hannah Arendt's ([1958] 1998) distinction between the human activities of labour, work and action, linking them to different modes of citizenship. While existing categorisations of older people's social engagement differentiate the outward manifestations of their activities (Avramov and Maskova, 2003; Levasseur *et al.*, 2010; Katagiri, 2012), Arendt's typology proves conceptually useful for unravelling the multiple meanings inherent in people's different pursuits.

Arendt's typology of human activity: labour, work and action

Advocates of active ageing have argued against the economic, social, political and cultural exclusion of older people, together with existing stereotypes of older people

as passive and inactive citizens (Walker and Maltby, 2012; Johnson and Mutchler, 2014). For this purpose, they advocate a lifecourse approach to active ageing, which aims to break down the traditional barriers surrounding old age as a distinctive category and to create a society where all age groups can participate, free from discrimination, in various spheres of society. However, dispensing with the category of old age can be a double-edged sword, which has often been deployed for the neoliberal agenda of attacking post-war welfare rights (Moulaert and Biggs, 2012; Macnicol, 2015). Especially since the 1990s, promoting an 'age-neutral' or 'ageless' society has been employed to justify raising the eligibility age for state pensions and increasing older people's employment, while a parallel priority has been to contain expenditures for health and social care by promoting the image of older people as independent, healthy and active citizens (Macnicol, 2015). Policy initiatives increasingly position older people as an important community resource which should be harnessed for sustainable long-term care in an aged society (Katagiri, 2012; Jensen *et al.*, 2014; Morikawa, 2014).

Thus, a predicament of the active ageing paradigm is that being 'active' can have many meanings (Katagiri, 2012; Boudiny, 2013; van Dyk *et al.*, 2013). Existing studies that categorise older people's activities link them to manifest and behavioural aspects, such as whether they are undertaken alone or with others, and whether they are self-regarding or other-regarding activities (Levasseur *et al.*, 2010; Katagiri, 2012). Others differentiate between domains of life: paid labour, domestic tasks, community participation and leisure activities (Avramov and Maskova, 2003). However, these categorisations have limited capacity to make conceptual distinctions among the plural dimensions within an apparently single type of activity. Previous research indicates that community participation itself can be interpreted in plural ways. It can mean participating as independent political actors, sometimes resisting government policies (Blix and Hamran, 2018). Alternatively, it may be considered as a way to contribute to the common good, or to care for others (Lie *et al.*, 2009). Being active may be perceived as an inherent feature of being alive, whereas inactivity signals a retreat from life (van Dyk *et al.*, 2013). In order to analyse the changing social roles of older people, it is therefore necessary not only to identify the outward manifestations of what people do, whether it be paid work or community activities, but to understand what type of activity they are engaging in in terms of the values and meanings they attach to those activities.

Hannah Arendt's distinction of labour, work and action is helpful in this context as a typology of different modes of human activity. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt ([1958] 1998) identifies these three activities as those which correspond to the basic conditions of human beings' life on earth. The activity of labour corresponds to the human condition of 'the biological process of the human body' (Arendt [1958] 1998: 7). The purpose of *animal laborans* is to produce goods to be consumed for the reproduction of the life process.

If labour relates to providing for human reproduction, the activity of work corresponds to the human condition of 'worldliness', and involves the creation of artificial objects for human use (Arendt [1958] 1998: 7). The model of *homo faber* is the craftsman whose 'work' consists of reifying ideas, actions and speech into worldly use objects, which make up the objective reality of the world that we

inhabit. The purpose of work lies in the beauty or excellence of the end product and its usefulness for human life. These creations attain a durable, objective reality that outlasts, and is independent of, the activity of producing them.

Finally, action corresponds to the human condition of plurality; that is, the fact that 'nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (Arendt [1958] 1998: 8). Action and speech consist of the process of revealing each individual's uniqueness or distinction beyond their common bodily needs and functions. Action is free from both necessity and usefulness, and involves the human capacity to give rise to 'new beginnings' by inserting one's thoughts, through words and deeds, in the existing 'web of human relationships' (Arendt [1958] 1998: 184). Action is inherently political, since it presupposes human plurality and the presence of others in front of whom individuals can appear, and be seen and heard. Everyone sees and hears from a different perspective, but the process of public appearance gives rise to a common reality that these different people share and that relates them to each other.

Arendt's typology proves useful for interpreting older people's community participation for the following reasons. First, these three activities are independent from the ways in which they are outwardly enacted. By distinguishing the three activities, Arendt urges us to 'think what we are doing' when we engage in various pursuits as human beings ([1958] 1998: 5). This is no less than an invitation for us to contemplate the meaning of our existence as we live out our lives through enacting different activities. For instance, a researcher may write to make a living (labour) or she may write to produce a well-crafted piece of research that helps us to understand the world (work). Although the outward manifestation of the activity is the same – that is, writing – the interpretations of what she is doing can be quite different. Thus, Arendt's typology can help us to draw out and distinguish the multiple meanings attached to older people's community participation from the vantage point of the human condition.

Second, the dynamics between these three activities can be applied to interpret older people's community participation in terms of changing forms of citizenship. The hierarchy among Arendt's three activities is not set in stone, but rather shifts depending on the different stages of human history (Dietz, 1991). Arendt argues that in the ancient Greek polis, action in the public sphere was regarded as the highest form of human activity while labour for the maintenance of life was a despised activity conducted by slaves and women in the household. However, the rise of 'society' in the modern age was marked by the admission of economic affairs into the public realm. Moreover, 'securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance' (Arendt [1958] 1998: 126), that is, the accumulation of wealth for human consumption, has been elevated to the highest human activity, relegating all other activities besides 'making a living' to non-serious 'play' or 'hobbies' ([1958] 1998: 127–128). The hierarchy of different forms of activity can be tied to conceptions of the paradigmatic citizen. Feminist scholars have argued that the post-war welfare state assumed a 'patriarchal social contract' that upheld men's participation in paid employment as the model of citizenship (Pateman, 1988; Lister, 2002). Subsequent neoliberal reforms and women's increasing entry into the labour market have led to the transition from the male breadwinner to the 'universal breadwinner' model where both men and women work[1] to earn a

living (Fraser, 1997). If we apply Arendt's typology, the dominant activity for both the male breadwinner and the universal breadwinner model is labour, in which citizenship is defined primarily in terms of contributing to economic productivity to sustain or multiply wealth for consumption. If demographic ageing is also a contemporary social change that compels the revision of previous social contracts (Komp and Béland, 2012; Oda, 2017), understanding the nature of the activities that older people engage in in terms of Arendt's typology can help us to grasp what model of citizenship might evolve in the future.

The welfare settlement and old-age policy in Japan

As many scholars note, the post-war social contract in Japan until the 1990s was based on men's participation in paid work while women assumed the role of primary care-givers. This system was maintained through a system of 'welfare through work' in which employment protection and occupational welfare functionally substituted income maintenance (Miyamoto *et al.*, 2003; Miura, 2012). Since neoliberal deregulation in the 1990s, the decline of men's life-time full employment and women's entry into the workforce, especially in the expanding non-regular service sector, has led to a 'spiraling crisis of family care' (Peng, 2002). Insufficient income protection outside employment and lack of public social care accelerated the pace of population ageing by raising the opportunity costs of family formation. Faced with concerns of rising pension costs (Shinkawa, 2011) and the effects of a shrinking working-age population on economic productivity (Iwata, 2016), the LDP government finally began to concede the need to revise the family-dependent social settlement (Peng, 2002).

Subsequent developments in social care have followed trends in the United Kingdom (UK) and other Western countries, which emphasise user choice, 'ageing in place' (Izuhara, 2003) and 'asset-based approaches' (Daly and Westwood, 2018). In the UK, these trends are often framed as responses to 'cuts to public spending' (Needham, 2014), which entails the expansion of family care (Pickard *et al.*, 2012). However, a particular feature of the Japanese case is that care in the community is interpreted as a way to outsource care, not only from the state, but from the family. Community care is presented as a way to defamilise care in the face of budget constraints. This is because, due to the different timings of welfare state formation and demographic transitions *vis-à-vis* European welfare states, the crisis of family care and pressures for welfare expansion in Japan coincided with the post-industrial counter-pressures of stagnant economic growth and increasing job insecurity, coupled with the added fiscal pressures of rapid ageing (Miyamoto *et al.*, 2003).

Since the ageing rate reached 14 per cent in the late 1990s, government policies have emphasised the role of elderly citizens themselves in shouldering the burdens of an ageing society. The 1995 'Basic Law on Measures for the Aging Society' proposes to create 'A fair and energetic society where people can be ensured that they have the opportunity of participating in diverse social activities or working throughout their lives' (Government of Japan, 1995). The 1999 'Gold Plan 21', which set a five-year plan for health and welfare policy for the elderly, sought to 'vitalize the image of the elderly' (MHLW, 2002). More recently, the government's

expectation for older people to become productive citizens is reflected in the Abe government's 'Plan for the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens' (the 'Plan'), which gained cabinet approval in June 2016. According to the 'Plan',

> A society in which all citizens are dynamically engaged is a society participated by all citizens, whether they are women or men, the elderly or youths, people who have experienced a failure, people with disabilities and people fighting an illness, can play active roles in their respective homes, workplaces and local communities or any other places. (Official Website of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2016: 3)

Alongside proposals to extend older people's participation in the workforce to compensate for a decreasing working-age population, older people are also expected to be the providers of welfare by participating in mutual aid activities. These expectations can be observed in the series of reforms to the long-term care insurance (LTCI), which was implemented in 2000 to provide institutional and home-based nursing care for all persons over 65 years of age. To cope with soaring costs due to rapid ageing, subsequent revisions have sought to shift the emphasis on service provision to prevention and care in the community (Kono, 2000; Saito, 2010*b*; Morikawa, 2014; Hashimoto, 2016; Mori, 2016). Since April 2006, local municipalities have been obliged to set up 'community general support centres' to co-ordinate collaboration between professional health, welfare and social care providers as well as community actors for promoting 'community-based integrated care' (MHLW, 2004). Meanwhile, among households with members above 65 years old, co-residence with adult children has decreased dramatically from about 70 per cent in 1980 to 39.0 per cent in 2015, while elderly-only households have increased from less than 30 per cent to 56.9 per cent in the same period (Cabinet Office, 2017). To address this structural change, further emphasis has been placed on home-based care and daily living assistance such as meal deliveries and watching over elderly residents. The 2014 reform further expanded the content of daily living assistance to include community cafes, salons and care support provided by volunteers, non-profit organisations, co-operatives and other private providers (Hashimoto, 2016; Mori, 2016). Moreover, it explicitly promotes the participation of healthy older people as providers of these daily living assistance services (MHLW, 2014; Mori, 2016).

Research context and background on Health Co-ops

The study reported below is a single instrumental case study of community participation in mutual aid activities by older members of a Health Co-op located in a suburban district of a metropolitan city in Japan. Health-care co-operatives in Japan originally arose as grassroots movements to provide health care for industrial workers and farmers in the pre-war period. Some of these health-care co-operatives gained legal status as a 'Health Co-op', based on the 1948 'Consumer Cooperative Act'. While Health Co-ops have enjoyed a steady presence in the post-war decades as a third-sector organisation based on the principles of democratic governance and user participation, they have expanded their activities in the context of welfare

reforms since the 1990s. With the introduction of the LTCI in 2000, which opened up competition among for-profit and non-profit providers, Health Co-ops have extended their services to long-term care and become participants in the community-based integrated care system (Saito, 2010*a*; Kurimoto and Kumakura, 2016). According to Kurimoto and Kumakura (2016), Health Co-ops were estimated to provide 1 per cent of the elderly care market as of 2005. As of January 2017, there are 111 Health Co-ops operating throughout Japan.[2]

The author's first contact with the Health Co-op studied here was in September 2015, as part of another study on the service quality of health-care co-operatives in Japan. Since then, the author has participated in and observed two board meetings and two general meetings attended by both board members and regular members, as well as talked to members on an informal basis. In this process, the author came to see that this Health Co-op is an association deeply rooted in the local community, whose purpose is mutual and community benefit, while its core members are predominantly close to, or well above, 65 years old. Alongside providing health care and long-term care services, the Health Co-op provides daily living assistance and preventive care services through the participation of local resident Co-op members. Co-op members organise activities such as health checks, walking and exercise groups, group lunches and dinners, and study groups for studying topics of members' interests, such as the social security system, health and long-term care policy or peace issues. Other activities include running a community salon as a meeting place for residents.

Method

An instrumental case study selects a bounded case to illustrate a particular issue or concern (Creswell, 2013) and is suited for exploring how and why questions in a real-life contemporary context (Yin, 2014). Although this Health Co-op was established long before the start of community-based integrated care, and did not arise as a response to current policy developments, its activities have evolved and expanded with current long-term care policies. Thus, older community members' engagement in this Health Co-op is a contemporary phenomenon in a real-world context suited for exploring how participants themselves interpret these roles.

Sample

The core empirical data for this study were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 minutes each with 18 local resident board members of the Health Co-op between November 2016 and January 2017. Board members are comprised of individual Co-op members who are local residents or paid employees. Out of the 36 board members, 27 were local resident members. The employees were excluded from the interviews, since the purpose of the study was to understand the meanings of older people's community participation as opposed to their participation in paid work. All 27 local resident board members were invited to participate, while 18 agreed to be interviewed. Local resident board members receive an 'activity fee' of about 55,000 yen (US $500) a

month to cover expenses required for their activities such as transportation fees and lunches. While their roles differ from ordinary members in having organisational and management responsibilities in addition to their day-to-day participation in community activities, local resident board members were selected for the interviews since they comprise community members who are not only formal members, but are actively involved in the Co-op's community activities.

Participants

Table 1 shows the profiles of participants. Thirteen out of 18 respondents were female, which corresponds to the overall gender balance of local resident board members. Female respondents' ages ranged from 54 to 74, while those of male respondents ranged from 65 to 74.

Ten respondents were living either as a couple with their spouse, or alone after their spouse had passed away, while four respondents were co-residing with their married child's family. Other living arrangements include as a family with unmarried or school-aged children, or with respondents' own parent. As with many other members of their cohort, ten women and two men reported having resided with their own parents or parents-in-law during some period of their marriage. All of the women interviewed had been housewives and primary care-givers, but most had taken part in some form of part-time work at different stages in their lives, including as administration staff in a company or clinic, a civil servant, a public health nurse, a cram school instructor, a factory worker, a lorry driver, a shop assistant and supermarket staff. Some of these had been full-time jobs before marriage or in between and after childbirth. The male respondents had all worked as full-time employees of a private company prior to retiring. These life trajectories conform to the standard lifecourse and gender roles of post-war cohorts in Japan (Miura, 2012).

Data collection

Interviews were conducted in a private room at the general hospital managed by this Health Co-op. The hospital serves as a site for member meetings and a hub for community activities. A broad topic guide based on the research aims was used to achieve commonality, but questions were open-ended to allow interviewees to shape their own stories. The interviews began by asking respondents to describe how and why they started to participate in the Co-op's activities and in what kinds of activities they take part. In order to draw out the meaning of their community activities, informants were then asked why they continue to participate, what they gained from participating and what they would lose most from ceasing to participate (Lie et al., 2009). In addition, respondents were asked to compare their activities with their experiences in paid work and/or in family care provision.

All participants were informed about the research aims and written consent was sought at the beginning of the interviews. Participants were assured of their anonymity and informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All names used in the reporting are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Sample profile

	N
Gender:	
Male	5
Female	13
Age groups:	
50–59	3
60–69	8
70+	7
Living arrangements:	
Alone	3
With spouse only	7
With married child	4
Other	4

Analysis

Each interview was recorded and fully transcribed in Japanese. Notes taken by the interviewer substituted for one respondent who declined to be voice recorded. Data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach, which involves identifying, within the data-set, salient patterns of meaning in relation to the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). After closely reading the data, initial coding was undertaken in a data-driven manner using Atlas.ti software. Codes were sorted into themes by searching for groups of codes that reflect an internally coherent idea, which could simultaneously be distinguished from other themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The relationships between basic themes were scrutinised to discern how they coalesced into an overarching narrative that captures the meanings of the text in relation to the research question. Codes and themes were continuously cross-checked with the original data throughout this process. To increase credibility, findings from the interview data were corroborated with the author's notes from observations of member meetings. In addition, findings were reported to informants in a group meeting approximately one year after the original interviews for member validation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Three main themes emerged: (A) building a mutual support system in times of need; (B) doing things, not out of necessity, but for benefiting others; (C) a process of appearing and acting among others. Interpreting codes into themes involved comparing similarities and differences, or points of contradiction, within and across informant narratives (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). For example, informants often said that community activities are 'for myself', while at other times reporting that in contrast to community activities, paid work is 'for myself'. Other points of contradiction related to whether community activities were 'necessary' or entailed more or less responsibility than paid work; narratives indicated both yes and no. Teasing out the meanings underlying the apparent contradictions resulted in

themes A and B. Another source of contradiction was between participants' stated aims for their activities and their responses to what they actually gained most from them. Codes relating to the latter included, for example, 'doing things with others', 'everyone is different' and 'self-determination'. A notable commonality among these codes was an emphasis on process rather than outcome, resulting in theme C. The themes resonated with Arendt's ([1958] 1998) typology of human activities, which were employed to analyse the themes.

Findings

Fulfilling life's necessities: a mutual support system in times of need

Respondents' narratives revealed a keen awareness of the demographic ageing discourses surrounding them and expressed a sense of crisis about how to support an ageing population. The activities of the Health Co-op were viewed as a way to build a much-needed mutual support system when other sources of support were rapidly decreasing. Several respondents pointed to declining tax revenues, and the possibility of younger generations not being able to receive pensions in the future. Although informants did not endorse cutting public spending for social security or social care, they seem to acknowledge it as an inevitable consequence of demographic change and to accept the view that they could not simply rely on the government. According to one respondent, 'In this ageing society, the idea is that we need to support each other in the community. Just relying on the government all the time won't really get us what we want' (Ms Sato, aged 74).

Besides government budgets, family care is another area of support perceived to be in fast decline. According to a male informant, for the baby-boomer generation, 'When we got married, there was always a grandfather and a grandmother [at home]. We supported them' (Mr Tanaka, aged 66). Most of the women had directly experienced caring for their own or their husband's parents. Family care would involve supporting various aspects of daily living including eating, changing, bathing and accompanying elderly parents to hospital visits. These activities directly relate to the necessities of the life process, which Arendt associates with labour. Women shouldered the 'burden of biological life' within the household (Arendt, [1958] 1998). For some of the female respondents, participation in the Co-op's activities served as respite from care within their homes, and a time when they could share their experiences with others. Being connected with others through participating in the Co-op's activities was a valuable source of emotional support while caring for family members, or in times of sickness themselves. While 12 respondents had co-resided with elderly parents, only four of the respondents were currently co-residing with their married children. A widowed woman who lives with her child's family expressed her sense of loneliness: 'Even though I'm living in the same house. We're a family, but … there's already a family there. I'm also supposed to be a member of the family who's living together, but I sometimes feel lonely.' This feeling of loneliness was coupled with a sense of not wanting to be a burden on their children who faced an insecure job market and less financial security in comparison to previous generations.

A sense of crisis with regard to government budgets in an advanced aged society, respondents' own experiences of caring for older parents and concern for their own children creates a sense of a potential gap in care for themselves and for their

children in the future. Thus, respondents described their community participation as building a mutual support system – one that extends beyond one's family – which they too would rely on in times of need. A recurring answer to why respondents continue to participate in community activities was that it was 'for themselves'. While respondents gave multiple reasons for why their participation benefited themselves, including preserving their health and preventing dementia, a notable sense in which this applied was based on the idea that they, and their children in the future, would one day need the support of the community.

> I really thought that when the time comes for me to receive care, I need to be the kind of elderly person who is able to smile and say 'please take care of me', 'thank you' … We're not living in an age when you can just say 'I'm not going to depend on anyone'. In return, I want to be helpful to others while I'm healthy. (Ms Kobayashi, aged 68)

To the extent that community activities were seen as a way to compensate for decreasing resources or to provide for life's necessities, informants' activities correspond to Arendt's ([1958] 1998) concept of labour. While informants were keen to emphasise that they were not simply following government policies, they seem to agree with the government discourse that promotes mutual inter-dependence among community members as an urgently needed source of welfare provision in an advanced aged society. However, a notable finding in this study was that a significant part of the support that informants gained through their connectedness was emotional, rather than practical or material. Having people to talk to who understand because they have been through the same hardship was a source of encouragement and a restorative process for those who experienced the toil of caring for family members, weakness in sickness themselves or loneliness from the loss of a spouse.

Making a better community: not out of necessity but for the benefit of others

At the same time, responses to how community activities differ from paid work indicated that the former cannot be characterised only as a necessary activity to maintain the life process. Contradictory responses emerged, both within responses by single individuals and among respondents, regarding the differences between their experiences in paid work and in community activities.

On the one hand, participants reported that taking part in community activities was more relaxed and easy-going, and was something they could do with less pressure than paid work. Freedom and flexibility are features of volunteering that follow from the fact that it is undertaken on a voluntary basis and not for financial gain (Lie *et al.*, 2009). For a male respondent, 'When I was working in the company, it was partly for the company and partly for myself and my family … Now I'm doing this as my family receives a pension' (Mr Hayashi, aged 74). For another male informant, working in a company was aimed at increasing productivity through competition: 'They make you compete for what you should do to increase your salary, what kinds of things you should do to get on top' (Mr Umeda, aged 70). By contrast, the fact that community activities were undertaken, not out of necessity

but as a matter of free choice, was a significant reason for why they were perceived as entailing less responsibility than paid work.

> With the Co-op, it's not a good way to say it, but it's like you do what you like according to your own will. If you don't like it, you can just quit. But, with work, it's also possible to say you can quit if you don't like it, but although I'm a woman, at least for men, there's a sense that you have to make a living out of it isn't there. But Co-op activities are not for making a living, right? It's like, I'm not sure if it's a good way to say it but there's a sense in which you can do it like a hobby. (Ms Nozaki, aged 68)

An informant who had overcome cancer said that it was difficult for her to continue her job since it entailed 'real responsibility' and a 'sort of tension'. By contrast, she felt it was possible to continue her community activities even during her illness, even though they were no less important.

On the other hand, some of the same respondents and others described their community activities as coming with a different kind of mission than that of paid work. This partly related to the fact that community activities are not for pay, and therefore not of a transactional nature. In the case of paid work, 'If I skip work when something comes up and I can't go [to work], we could say I'll instantly lose my salary' (Ms Ono, aged 65). This means that the respondent can take responsibility for skipping work by forgoing her own payment. Since work is something we do for ourselves, the benefits or losses from paid work fall on the individual herself. By contrast, participants described their community activities as being driven by a sense of mission to benefit others: 'Being a board member or a committee member like this is about doing things for other Co-op members. This is a kind of mission. A mission in a different sense from working' (Ms Nozaki, aged 68). The fulfilment from community activities involves 'being even the slightest bit of help for society', and hearing others appreciate what you did.

In line with this, several informants described their motivations for participating in terms of their wish to make their community a better place: a 'place where you can be happy to have been born' and to 'pass on to your children'. This was sometimes described as a way to 'pay back' to the community after decades of working for themselves, and embodies the desire for 'generativity' – to leave the world a better place – found in older volunteers (Narushima, 2005). According to Narushima (2005: 576), the desire for generativity reflects older people's desire for 'symbolic immortality' by investing 'in forms of life and work that will outlive the self' (Kotre, 1984: 10). To some extent, seeking to leave behind a better community resonates with the Arendtian concept of 'work' aimed at producing a durable endproduct that outlasts the process of production and which artificially constructs the objective world that we inhabit. As a way to create networks of support that would be useful to community members and to future generations, informants' community activities can be interpreted as having work-like dimensions. However, informants' sense of mission to contribute to the common good was not only oriented towards the objective outcome of their activities, but was valued as a process of living out one's life with integrity. An informant who had risen to a management position in his company described how his work had involved

laying-off workers in the backdrop of the 2008 financial crisis. For him, giving back to the community was a matter of living out his 'real way of life' in a way that was sometimes impossible within the constraints of being a paid employee.

Appearing among others: creating a common world through action

Although informants reported securing a mutual support system or improving their community as important reasons for why they participate in community activities, it was notable that their narratives regarding what they valued and gained most from their participation usually did not focus on practical help they received from others. Instead, being recognised and appreciated by others repeatedly arose as a reason for what makes involvement in community activities worthwhile:

> Whenever there's some kind of event, the responses from Co-op members [who say] 'that's good' when I say what I think. When I was a paid employee, it was like being pressed down from above. (Mr Yoshida, aged 74)

> If you ask me why, what's so great [about participating], it's difficult to pinpoint, but I guess it's that I have a place to be. I have a place to appear. I'm recognised [by others]. (Ms Suzuki, aged 70)

Meeting people they would otherwise not have known and discovering what was previously unknown about others was also mentioned as something valuable which informants gained from their activities (Katagiri, 2012; Greenfield and Mauldin, 2017). These responses elucidate the relational and interactive features of informants' activities which correspond to Arendt's concept of action. For Arendt ([1958] 1998), speech and action presuppose the presence of others in front of whom we can appear and be heard. Although everyone has a different point of view, the intermingling speech and action of plural individuals and their common appearance creates a 'common world' that arises between people and relates them to others: 'The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves' (Arendt, [1958] 1998: 50).

Co-op members regularly meet and discuss together to formulate projects, ranging from organising community festivals, opening tea salons and even starting their own care facilities.

> We discuss together about what we want to do, what we're interested in. How should I say … Like if our hips ache, or if our knees ache, what kind of exercise we should do, or that it would be nice to do such and such kind of thing. Or if we want to hear a talk about our teeth, we had a dentist come over … We had everyone write down what we wanted to do for the year, and we do something once a month. (Ms Morita, aged 71)

In addition to such day-to-day activities, opening a care facility or community salon would involve identifying needs in the community, searching for usable buildings – often deserted houses in the local area, collecting stake money from members, finding staff, *etc.* Another project involved forming a group of retired men who could be called on for a variety of tasks ranging from handiwork to searching for

wandering dementia patients. One informant expressed how getting to know different members of the community gave her a sense of shared reality and of situatedness in relation to others:

> When you're set in stone you only see what's in front of you, but you realise that there are these people with such and such kinds of talents. Whether it's a man or a woman, older people have various experiences. Getting to know them makes me feel that I'm living in the community. It makes me realise that I'm living here. (Ms Kaneko, aged 69)

For another respondent, it was through acting in concert with, and being among, others that she could find her 'place of belonging'.

In addition, the process of common appearance and inter-subjective recognition was as much a process of self-formation as one of world-building (Honneth, 1992). The connection between informants' community activities and their personal identity could be gleaned from their responses to how much time was committed to their activities. Although most respondents said that the numerous meetings that their role as board members entailed were intensely demanding in terms of time, they struggled to articulate how many hours or days of the week were spent in their activities since Co-op activities were integrated into their lives. One informant said that although he had switched off from being a company employee when he came home from work, he was never completely free from Co-op activities because there was no distinction between his activities and being an individual community member. When asked what she would lose most from ceasing to participate in the Co-op's activities, one woman replied that 'I would become detached from the world. Probably. If I just became holed up and it becomes a world all on my own, I think I would immediately suffer from dementia' (Ms Yamada, aged 67).

Although people take part in various spheres of life including the household and the workplace, Arendt distinguishes the public realm – the common world shared by others – as a sphere of freedom. This freedom is intimately linked to the human condition of plurality since to act and to speak as a free being is for each individual to disclose his or her unique perspective as the 'initiator of new beginnings' as opposed to performing routine tasks or executing externally imposed objectives (Arendt, [1958] 1998). Exercising self-determination and being recognised by others was an important source of respondents' self-confidence and the 'fun' of their activity. Sometimes, paid work could provide such opportunities. One woman who had worked in a supermarket reported that being able to exercise discretion and plan how to sell out the products made her work worthwhile and a source of pride. Nevertheless, others contrasted the hierarchical nature of the workplace, which often hindered their self-determination, with their freedom to initiate their own projects in the Co-op:

> When you're working in a company, you're being controlled [by your employer]. But no one is controlling you in the Co-op. Really. You're let loose so you're free to do as you like. You can start a movement according to your own will. So it's totally different from [working in] a company. (Mr Matsumoto, aged 73)

In fact, the non-hierarchical nature of Co-op activities and individual members' freedom to exercise their self-determination could be a source of tension. Many respondents experienced dilemma as board members who, alongside being community members, were also in a position to manage the Co-op's activities. Management concerns like how to increase members sometimes caused conflict with those who simply wished to participate in community projects. One respondent reported that although it was taken for granted that subordinates follow their superiors' orders in her previous workplace, board members are unable to impose their will or decision in a top-down manner. Another informant described the difficulty of achieving agreement: 'It's difficult to make them all face the same direction when you say "turn right". Each person thinks and speaks according to their own idea so it's hard to make everyone face the same way' (Ms Sato, aged 74).

While informants spoke of the sense of satisfaction and achievement they felt when they saw their projects taking shape, the process of discussing and acting together to realise these projects seem to have independent value from their outcomes. For Arendt, the specific productivity of action is not a tangible end-product, but the power to establish new relations and new realities that arise in and through the interaction of individual initiatives. These processes are filled with unexpectedness, which Arendt characterises as a feature of unique individuals, each as an originator of new beginnings, inserting their words and deeds into the existing 'web of human relationships' ([1958] 1998: 184). According to one respondent, 'when a new board member joins us for a meeting, [he or she brings] new ways of thinking. Yes, it's very stimulating. Like, "Oh, ok, that's how you see things"' (Ms Yamada, aged 67). In addition, the collective and interactive process of plural individuals injecting their speech and action into the common world can lead to surprising, unforeseen consequences:

> There are really different kinds of people and it's troublesome but fun, or should I say it's troublesome and fun at the same time. After achieving something. Turning a difficult situation into a chance. Not just by myself, but the fun of overcoming [difficulties] by putting everyone's wisdom together. The more people come together, the more wisdom is born. (Ms Takahashi, aged 54)

Informants reported how completely unexpected it was for them to be involved in such activities and to achieve what they have achieved. What was unexpected was not only the tangible outcomes of their activities, but that 'those who participated were able to discover a hitherto unknown self and gain confidence'. (Ms Suzuki, aged 70)

Discussion

As with any other activity, participants attached multiple meanings to their community activities. To the extent that informants construed reciprocal care-giving as a way to construct a mutual support system potentially to substitute decreasing pensions and family care, community activities corresponded to the activity of labour. Structural changes to the three-generation family revealed the vulnerabilities associated with human dependence previously contained within the household. Respondents were also sensitive to the government discourse on tightening

government budgets in an ageing society, which was underpinned by their observation of ageing community members. Involvement in the community was a way to form a mutual support system that extends beyond one's family, which they and their children could rely on in times of need. This suggests, as Kittay (2001) argues, that the public visibility of vulnerabilities arising from our own dependencies or from caring for dependants makes us aware of the potential of each of us to have these needs, if not now then in the future, and serves as a catalyst for bonding in the community. On one level, we could say that as members of a health-care co-operative, it was only natural for informants to understand their activities as a way to fulfil community members' common health and welfare needs. However, informants construed their activities as something especially necessary in 'this day and age'. Many respondents understood their activities as pioneering community care now being promoted as government policy.

Nevertheless, responses to how community activities differed from paid work showed that the former were not only undertaken to fulfil life's necessities, but to benefit others and to make their community a better place to live. While this resonates with the Arendtian concept of work – the activity of producing a durable end-product for human use – informant discourses on what they gained most from their participation indicated that the process of engaging in such activities has independent value from their outcomes. Despite their stated motivations, few respondents emphasised the practical help they received from others as the most important thing they gained from their community activities, although several highlighted the emotional support they received from Co-op members in times of vulnerability. Throughout informant narratives, engaging in community activities was valued as a relational and interactive process of being recognised by and recognising others, where acting in concert with others has unexpected implications for the shared reality arising between them. In this sense, community participation for respondents in this study corresponds to action.

What does this suggest for the model of citizenship in an aged society? As a single case study, this study cannot make any claims to generalisability. However, while labour has been the predominant human activity in the post-war welfare paradigm, this study revealed the potential of community activities by an expanding population of older people to offer opportunities for action, which were not always available through paid work or care-giving in the household. Such opportunities for common appearance and recognition were meaningful for participants for the following reasons.

First, mutual recognition in a sphere of common appearance was an important source of informants' personal identity (Honneth, 1992). Several informants characterised the workplace, aimed at increasing productivity and often hierarchically organised, as having limited room for exercising self-determination (Young, 1990). In the case of Co-op activities, participants could express their ideas and start something new from their own initiative. Many informants highlighted the diversity of perspectives they encountered through their community activities (Katagiri, 2012; Greenfield and Mauldin, 2017). Although revealing diverse perspectives could sometimes lead to misunderstanding and conflict, getting to know other community members and mutually seeing and hearing each other in all their diversity was valued for giving informants a sense of shared reality and of their own self in relation to others.

Second, community activities were a way for informants to influence their common world in and through collective interaction. Informants' community activities demonstrate how power operates through human interaction to create new ways of thinking and acting (Young, 1990). As a freely chosen activity, community participation came with less pressure than paid work, which came with the responsibility to provide for oneself and one's family by competing to produce output. This perception lowered the bar for participation, especially for those who experienced some form of vulnerability such as recovering from sickness or juggling care responsibilities. Retired workers and ordinary housewives could bring about unexpected change by acting together, which transformed their perceptions of themselves and of others. Thus, such non-labour forms of social participation have special significance for older people who are no longer the main actors in production.

Despite this, recent government policies threaten to crowd out action, both by extending older people's labour market participation, as well as by transforming community participation into a necessity. The 2016 'Plan for the Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens' poses economic growth as the ultimate policy solution for coping with a declining working-age population, and promotes the extension of working lives for achieving this goal (Official Website of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2016). This strategy, however, fails to account for the multi-dimensionality of the human condition depicted by Arendt's typology. As Biggs *et al.* (2017) argue, overly productivist adaptations to longer life can result in the 'commodification of life's time', diminishing people's potential to realise alternative priorities that increased longevity can offer.

Meanwhile, in July 2016, the government introduced the concept of 'all-inclusive care community' (*chiiki kyosei shakai*) as the centrepiece of its strategy for welfare reform. The concept seeks to expand mutual aid among community members to cover not only elder care, but also child care, disability, unemployment and poverty, while reducing dependence on state services (MHLW, 2016). This increasingly strains community members to deliver solutions to multiple, cross-cutting needs. Informant narratives already hinted at the potential tension between action and labour in their activities. One respondent mentioned the issue of elderly poverty and her hope to start a community business to create employment for older community members. Another informant spoke of the responsibility she feels as the Co-op is 'relied on' by the local government as an actor in community-based integrated care.

Conclusion

Examining informant narratives through the lens of Arendt's typology has allowed us to see behind the outward manifestations of older people's community activities and to articulate the multiple meanings inherent in them. Policy discourses often frame older people's participation in community care as a way to fulfil welfare needs in the face of population ageing, or highlight the various beneficial outcomes of such participation, such as older people's improved health and wellbeing. However, this study found that, first, there is a different logic to participation than fulfilling needs or producing good outcomes from the perspective of participants. Participants valued their community activities as a *process* of creating – and changing – their common world through the interaction of individual initiatives.

Second, community participation offered an important opportunity for older people to exercise self-determination and be recognised by others in ways that were not always possible in paid work or in the household. Thus, overly necessitating or instrumentalising older people's community participation could undermine a valuable opportunity for people to realise the human condition of plurality.

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Notes

1 Here and elsewhere, 'work' refers, unless specifically stated, not to the Arendtian concept, but to its common usage as contributing to the productive economy through participation in paid employment.
2 For more background on health-care co-operatives in Japan, *see* Hino (2009) and Kurimoto and Kumakura (2016).

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