
Research Notes

**Issues in Adult Career Development Interventions in Japan
from a Social Justice Perspective**

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【Abstract】

This paper reviews the recent labor situation in Japan, highlighting the existence of income and gender disparities resulting from the increase in the number of non-regular workers, and discusses the need for social justice-oriented career support. As a theoretical background for supporting working people oriented toward social justice, this paper highlights three issues in Japanese career support from the perspective of the Psychology of Working: disparities in access to career support resources, the lack of consideration of social and structural factors, and emphasis on autonomous career development. Self-blame results from a lack of consideration of social and structural factors, as well as an emphasis on autonomous career development. As examples of approaches to these issues, the need for practitioners to develop a deep understanding of clients through critical consciousness that encourages reflection and action by the practitioners themselves is discussed.

Key words: Psychology of Working, career development, critical consciousness, social justice, adult workers

研究ノート

社会正義の視点からみた日本の成人キャリア支援における課題

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【要 旨】

本論文では近年の日本の労働状況を概観するとともに、非正規雇用者の増加による所得格差やジェンダー格差の存在を指摘し、社会正義を指向した成人向けキャリア支援の必要性を論じた。働くことを支援するための理論としてワーキング心理学に注目し、日本のキャリア支援における課題として、支援リソースへのアクセスにおける格差、社会的・構造的要因を考慮されないことによる自己非難、自律的なキャリア形成が強調されることによる自己非難の3点を指摘した。これらの課題に対するアプローチの例として、支援者が批判的意識を持つことによって相談者への深い理解を行うことができるように、支援者自身の内省や行動を促す対話の場の必要性が論じられた。

キーワード: ワーキング心理学、キャリア発達、批判的意識、社会正義、成人労働者

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the complex social and economic changes resulting from globalization and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism have reshaped the labor market, making it difficult to view the corporation as a place for career development and income security (Standing, 2011, p.6). Prilleltensky and Stead (2012) argue that many career theories focus on individualism, such as self-efficacy and self-regulation, to make appropriate career choices, and fail to consider how to reshape the world of work for the benefit of workers from an ethical and social justice perspective. McMahon and Knight (2024) also pointed out that, in career development, the Western value-based view of the individual, the concept of career, and the emphasis on personal agency, combined with limited attention to the contexts and systems in which individuals live and work, make it challenging to practice social justice. Some have pointed out that psychological services that merely help people adapt to their circumstances without addressing the preconditions (such as poverty and inequality) for working undermine social justice (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019).

Against this backdrop, critical and emancipatory approaches in social justice-oriented career support, such as the Psychology of Working Framework (Blustein, 2006) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT; Lent & Brown, 2013), are the basis for active discussions among vocational and counseling psychologists. The Psychology of Working Framework and SCCT situate work within sociocultural and economic structures. In Japan, there is a need to resolve issues surrounding people whose choices are limited due to employment instability and widening inequality, and to promote social justice initiatives (Igarashi, 2025).

Therefore, this study reviews the recent labor situation in Japan, focusing on the Psychology of Working Framework and Theory (Blustein, 2006;

Duffy et al., 2016), as a theoretical background for supporting working people oriented toward social justice. This paper aims to clarify the challenges of adult career intervention in Japan from the perspective of the Psychology of Working Framework, drawing on realities of employment and the use of career counseling. The research question of this paper is: "What are the challenges in the practice of career intervention for social justice within the Japanese context?" In this study, the following definition of social justice, which was discussed from the perspective of work-related psychology, including vocational psychology and industrial/organizational psychology, served as a premise for further discussion.

Engagement in context-informed scholarship and practice that addresses inequities and inequalities in peoples' work and life experiences, analyzes injustice within and across multiple ecological levels, and asserts a preferential option for securing basic, non-renounceable human rights over the interests of market, profit, and the maintenance of privilege (McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021, p.2).

This paper is novel in that it examines the Psychology of Working Framework within the Japanese context for the first time. The contribution of this study is to inform the future development of career interventions for social justice in Japan.

2. The Japanese context

As in other countries, precarious and non-regular workers are increasing in Japan, constraining equitable access to decent work opportunities. In Japan, non-regular workers are defined as part-time workers, temporary workers, contract workers, agency workers, commissioned workers, and other workers not included in regular employment (Ministry of Internal

Affairs and Communications [MIC], 2025). As a foundation for this discourse, this study examines the current Japanese context and priority policies regarding professional development, focusing on employment stability, income adequacy, social justice, and the assurance of safe and healthy working environments.

2.1 Employment Trends and Stability

The Japanese employment rate in 2023 was 78.9% for men and women combined, one of the highest among major countries, due to the rising labor participation rates of older adults and women (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training [JILPT], 2025a). The average unemployment rate in 2024 was 2.5% (MIC, 2025); labor shortages are expected to persist as the working-age population continues to decline. Various labor policies have been introduced to enable flexible work styles.

Conversely, the percentage of employed people in non-regular employment is approximately 37%. Although it has been decreasing slightly in recent years, it has nearly doubled compared to approximately 20% in 1990 (MIC, 2025). The Japanese economy has remained stagnant since the 1990s. Specifically, there has been a shift from an internal labor market-oriented HRM system based on age and lifetime employment to a more performance-oriented approach, shorter-term, and more fluid forms of employment (Benson & Debroux, 2003; Poon & Rowley, 2010), along with a focus on employment arrangements with defined job scopes, which is called "job-based employment" in Japan (Hama-guchi, 2024).

2.2 Income Adequacy

Nominal wages (the amount of money a worker earns, not adjusted for inflation) in Japan have generally been on a downward trend since the late 1990s (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

[MHLW], 2023). However, a series of revisions of the minimum wage and wage increases by companies over the past few years resulted in a 5% wage increase in 2024, the first in 33 years since 1991 (JILPT, 2024a).

Conversely, the problem of the working poor has also been noted in contemporary Japan. In 2021, the relative poverty rate was 15.4%, which is the same level as that in the U.S. (15.1% in 2021) and South Korea (15.3% in 2020) (JILPT, 2025a). Regarding the background of such poverty in Japan, according to Moriguchi (2017), Japan once realized an equal society on a household basis. However, the income gap has widened due to the declining birth rate, aging population, changing household structure, prolonged recession, and increased part-time employment. In recent years, the impoverishment of low-income groups, rather than their enrichment, has become more pronounced.

2.3 Social equity

While most male workers work more than 40 hours per week, female workers tend to work 20-34 hours per week, with a high proportion of part-time work (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). In the Japanese-style corporate system, long working hours are the norm for male regular employees. This occurs against the backdrop of the gender role division of labor, which forces women to choose between regular employment with long working hours and irregular employment with short working hours when entering the labor market (Moriguchi, 2017). In Japan, the percentage of women in management positions is 14.6%, which is lower than that in Sweden (43.7%), the U.S. (42.6%), and Australia (41.1%) (JILPT, 2025a). This still limits the scope for women to be actively engaged.

2.4 Working Hours and Occupational Safety and Health

The Japanese government launched the Work Style Reform in 2018 to promote reduced working hours and improved work-life balance. This reform introduced an overtime cap reducing the average monthly overtime hours by 5 hours (Burdin et al., 2024). The percentage of employed people working 60 hours or more per week has been declining annually, from 12.0% in 2000 to 4.6% in 2024 (Cabinet Office, 2025). Although the number of Karoshi cases has been declining in recent years, the number of workers' compensation cases attributed to mental disorders is increasing (MHLW, 2025a). The percentage of individuals with highly stressful situations is approximately 70% (MHLW 2025b). Worker engagement was extremely low, with 7% of the workforce engaged compared to an overall average of 21% for 150 countries (Gallup, 2025).

Therefore, although Japan maintains a low unemployment rate, income inequality is widening due to an increase in the number of nonregular employees. Furthermore, despite the government's policy responses and changes in the employment environment, the pattern of men occupying regular

employment and serving as primary breadwinners remains unchanged. Contrastingly, women are still irregularly employed and the secondary breadwinner. Consequently, a high rate of irregular employment and low wages for women have been maintained (JILPT, 2024b).

2.5 Career Development Support for Workers

Career development support for working people in Japan is currently based on the 11th Workforce Development Plan (MHLW, 2021; Table 1). The current plan emphasizes the autonomous career development of working people. The focus of this policy is to encourage individuals to take responsibility for their career development and to encourage companies, public institutions, and others to support them.

While there are various compounding factors behind these issues and policies in Japan, viewing the current situation through a theoretical framework will help clarify the nature of the challenges. Therefore, this study reviews the Psychology of Working, which is a theory oriented toward social justice, and then examines issues in career support in Japan from this perspective.

Table 1 The 11th Workforce Development Plan (MHLW, 2021)

1.	Promotion of human resource development in light of changes in industrial structure and social environment In light of the progress of economic and social structural reforms toward the realization of Society 5.0, strengthen human resource development in line with the needs of the times, such as IT human resources, as well as the use of new technologies in the field of vocational skills development and the strengthening of human resource development by companies.
2.	Promotion of autonomous and independent career development of workers In light of the increasing uncertainty in the labor market and the lengthening of professional life, support clarification of career plans and promote the development of a learning environment from a broad perspective so that workers can improve their skills in line with the needs of the times.
3.	Strengthen labor market infrastructure With an eye on the possibility of medium- to long-term changes in Japanese employment practices and the expansion of workers' independent career choices, promote the development of public vocational training as a safety net for employment and tools for evaluating vocational abilities.
4.	Promotion of vocational skills development toward realization of an all-participating society In order to realize an all-participating society in which everyone can choose the way of working according to their wishes and abilities, and everyone can play an active role, support measures will be taken according to individual characteristics and needs so that all people can improve their skills, even if only gradually.

3. Theoretical background of career support aimed at social justice - the Psychology of Working

This section provides an overview of the Psychology of Working, focusing on the structural factors that influence work-related injustice and unfairness. Blustein (2006) argued that the concept of a career—characterized by a series of deliberately selected, hierarchical, and systematically planned jobs—is deeply embedded in a sociocultural context relevant only to a limited segment of individuals worldwide. Counselors must be sensitive to the possibility that individuals from clearly disadvantaged circumstances may be discouraged from pursuing education or careers (Blustein et al., 2002). It was then suggested that the study of work and careers should include a broader range of research participants and related factors (Blustein, 2001).

The Psychology of Working Framework (PWF, Blustein, 2006, 2013) emphasizes the role of work in the fulfillment of basic human needs (Table 2). These include the need for survival and power, social connections and contributions, and self-determination, as well as the need to include the context of social, economic, and political structures and constraints that affect work. This is because the combined effects of low socioeconomic status, racism, sexism, homophobia, and disability status can increase the experience of barriers to choosing and pursuing careers and contribute to reduced volition (Blustein, 2006).

The Psychology of Working Theory (PWT, Duffy et al., 2016) is derived from the PWF. It incorporates structural predictors (economic constraints and marginalization experiences), mediating variables (work volition and career adaptability), and moderating factors (proactive personality, critical consciousness, social support, and economic conditions) as factors that influence decent work. Moreover, it assumes that decent work will lead to three basic needs. It proposes that three basic needs are satisfied, which enhances an individual’s sense of meaning and satisfaction at work, as well as their overall well-being in life (Duffy et al., 2016). The definitions of the concepts that comprise PWT are presented in Table 3.

PWT is unique in its stronger emphasis on structural factors such as economic constraints and experiences of marginalization. Since its publication in 2016, it has become a widely accepted framework in counseling and vocational psychology research (Duffy et al., 2024).

4. Issues in career support for adults from the Psychology of Working perspective

4.1 Disparities in access to support

In recent labor policy, career consulting is highly expected (JILPT, 2025b). Career consulting refers to providing advice and guidance in response to a request for consultation about a worker's job selection, their career path plans, or the development

Table 2 Three basic psychological needs that working satisfies (Blustein, 2006, 2013)

Needs for Survival and Power
Working enables people to sustain their lives and can enhance their power in the world through material acquisition and the attainment of status and prestige.
Needs for relationships and contribution
Working is their primary source of interpersonal connection and links people with a broader social milieu, thereby providing a structured means of relating to their proximal and distal social contexts.
Need for self-determination
Working provides people with opportunities to engage in activities that foster self-determination.
*Self-determination refers to the experience of engaging in activities that are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, meaningful, and self-regulating (Ryan & Deci, 2002).

Table 3 Definitions of key concepts that comprise the PWT

Decent work	(1) A safe work environment, (2) access to health care, (3) adequate income, (4) free time and time for rest, and (5) work that provides organizational values that are in harmony with those of family and society (Duffy et al., 2016).
Structural predictors (economic constraints and marginalization experience)	Economic constraints refer to the limitation of economic resources, while marginalization experiences refer to individuals and communities being relegated to a more vulnerable position in society (Duffy et al., 2016).
Mediating variables (Work volition and Career Adaptability)	Work volition refers to the perception of choice in career decisions, while career adaptability refers to readiness to cope and adapt to current and future work challenges (Duffy et al., 2016).
Four moderators theorizing the influence of the strength of the relationship between predictor variables and decent work.	Positive personality is the willingness to take action in response to environmental changes (Li et al., 2010). Critical consciousness means critically evaluating social oppression and taking action to change social inequalities (Freire, 2000). Social support is support from interpersonal and social relationships that influence an individual's work experience (Duffy et al., 2016). Economic conditions are broader economic factors (e.g., unemployment rates, promotion opportunities) that affect an individual's work (Duffy et al., 2016).

Note: See Table 2 for the three basic needs.

and improvement of vocational abilities (The amended Vocational Abilities Development Promotion Act, 2016). In Japan, those who provide career counseling services with national qualifications are called career consultants and are used almost synonymously with career counselors (Shimomura, 2016). Given this background, the number of career consultants within companies has been increasing, with approximately 40% of the 70,000 registered professionals working within companies (JILPT, 2023). The percentage of Japanese employers providing career-counseling services to their employees is 50%, while the percentage of those with more than 1,000 employees is 70%, with differences depending on the company (MHLW, 2025c). Nevertheless, it should be noted that only approximately 10% of companies offer career counseling services staffed by professionally trained and certified personnel. Consequently, the time, financial resources, and human resource development necessary to deliver individualized support remain significant challenges to implementation (MHLW 2025c). Supervisors are in charge of individual career support in approximately 70% of companies (MHLW, 2025c), and professional support is

not sufficiently widespread in Japan. Furthermore, disparities by employment status also exist, with only about 30% of companies providing career counseling to non-regular employees (MHLW, 2025c). In other words, the mainstream of career support is based on relationships with supervisors in the workplace, which means that career support for non-regular workers is not sufficiently accessible. For career consulting to help promote smooth labor mobility and protect employees in the midst of significant changes in the economic environment, it is necessary to promote the guarantee of the right to career support in Japan, as discussed in Europe (JILPT, 2025b). However, those who have access to career consulting are those who are more privileged. The characteristics of participants with experience are listed in Table 4.

Disparities in access to career support resources may perpetuate the gap between non-regular and female employees, who do not have a standard work style, and those who do.

Table 4 Characteristics of Experienced Career Consulting Professionals (Excerpted from JILPT, 2025b)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Respondents were generally satisfied with their past occupations and careers. ● Many respondents thought that their occupational skills would be “applicable” to other people. ● Many respondents answered that their current occupation is “managerial” or “professional/technical.” ● Many respondents were employed as “full-time/regular employees” and a few as “part-time/part-time employees.” ● Annual income was generally high.

4.2 Self-blame due to lack of consideration of social and structural factors

In Japan, the availability of consultation services outside of the corporate sector, such as at public institutions, is expanding, with 20% of those who have experienced consultation receiving such public support (JILPT, 2025b).

Conversely, it has been reported that there is a difference in usefulness depending on the type of support received. Career consulting within companies and private human resource service agencies received by regular workers, highly educated workers, employees of large companies, and high-income earners was rated as highly useful. In contrast, career consulting in public institutions received by irregular workers, non-educated workers, employees of small- and medium-sized companies, and low-income earners was not rated as useful (JILPT, 2025b). One factor contributing to the relatively low level of usefulness in public institutions is that they are more diverse than companies (JILPT, 2025b). This result suggests that it is challenging to consider the context of the problems faced by individuals who utilize public institutions.

Furthermore, the users who pointed out the low level of usefulness referred to in the above survey described how they came to the idea that they “have to do it by myself” as “in the end,” “my decision,” “I have to do something by myself,” and “I have to change” (JILPT, 2025b). These descriptions suggest that, through the interviews, the respondents became highly aware of their own responsibility. In the U.S., the adverse effects of self-blame caused by job-related problems, such as unemployment, have been

noted. For example, according to Sharone (2024, p.110), overemphasizing the need to take control of one’s situation leads to self-blame, making one perceive job search failure as one’s own fault. Cinamon and Blustein (2020) pointed out that interventions, such as reframing and interpretation, are needed to encourage clients not to blame themselves for work-related issues. This is because it allows clients to explore alternative perspectives on what happened at work (Blustein, 2006; Blustein et al.,2019). For those vulnerable to work-related distress, it is important to develop empathy (Cinamon & Blustein, 2020). Such empathy requires a broad awareness of the client’s situation, that is, an understanding that includes social and structural circumstances. This is because overlooking the possibility that work-related problems may be caused by structural factors that are difficult for clients to resolve on their own can increase the risk of attributing the problem to the individual and thereby increasing self-blame.

4.3 Self-blame due to emphasis on autonomous career development

As indicated in the above-mentioned Workforce Development Plan, Japanese workplaces are oriented toward supporting autonomous career development. However, some employees in companies are proactive in their career development, whereas others are not. For example, according to Recruit and Indeed Hiring Lab (2024), the percentage of employees who feel career autonomy is 90% in India, 80% in China and the U.S., and less than 30% in Japan. In this survey, career autonomy is defined as a proactive and ongoing commitment to building

one's own career and learning in a changing environment. Given this reality, one wonders how Japanese employees feel when they are expected to develop their careers autonomously and independently. For example, according to Recruit Management Solutions (2021), approximately 65% of those surveyed found the demands for autonomy in career development stressful and stifling. Furthermore, 75% or more of participants indicated that career autonomy was difficult. The top specific concerns cited were “I have vague anxiety about whether I can keep working,” “I don't know what I want to do,” and “I don't know what I can do.” Understanding how to deal with career autonomy demands can amplify stress. Institutional factors also contribute to the inability of individuals to exercise autonomy in their career development. For example, only 20% of the companies have adopted a staffing system that emphasizes workers' intentions, such as an internal recruitment system, which limits their ability to exercise autonomy in the workplace in the first place (MHLW 2025c).

These conditions may be indicative of a low degree of work volition, as demonstrated by the PWT. Blustein (2001) notes that the opportunity for individuals to express their inner values, interests, and abilities in the workplace is a recent phenomenon. In the workplace, many economic, structural, and social barriers hinder individuals from making career decisions that align with their interests, skills, and values, ultimately leading to a less meaningful work experience (Duffy & Dik, 2009). An individual's career decisions are influenced not only by the mere existence of barriers but also by how individuals perceive the meaning and strength inherent in those barriers (Duffy et al., 2015). In recent years, the utility of job crafting [JC] (the physical and cognitive changes that individuals make at the task boundaries or relational boundaries of their own work; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001)

in career development has also been demonstrated. For example, JC has been shown to mediate the positive relationships between career competencies and perceived employability, work-family fulfillment, and work-family interference (Akkermans & Tims, 2017). Tims et al. (2016) demonstrated that JC can help individuals examine how it enhances the meaningfulness of work by mediating job fit. Conversely, JC can have both beneficial and detrimental effects on performance effectiveness, with task autonomy and social support influencing these relationships (Dierdorff & Jensen, 2017). Depending on the context in which an individual is in the workplace, there is a risk that JC may have adverse effects.

Therefore, within the current Japanese career consulting system, disparities in access to support persist, and certain factors—such as structural issues and the degree of work volition—have not been sufficiently addressed in existing frameworks. Overlooking these factors may increase the risk of self-blame among those with difficulties working. Support for autonomy is also important; however, it is necessary to consider working conditions as a prerequisite, such as whether the person can work in a decent work environment and whether there is a workplace where human rights and dignity are respected.

Recent studies examined the effects of critical consciousness on career development among students and adults from diverse backgrounds. For example, Autin et al. (2022) examined the role of critical consciousness in moderating the relationship between contextual difficulties and accessing decent work among adults of color living in the United States. The results of the questionnaire survey indicated that higher perceptions of inequality and sociopolitical participation moderated the negative effects of context on work volition and career adaptability. Kim and Allan (2021) examined the

Table 5 Three components of critical consciousness and examples

(1) Critical reflection Structural recognition of social inequality and how historical processes perpetuate contemporary disparities	E.g., if there is a high level of critical reflection on the racial disparities in the information disclosed during COVID-19, instead of looking to individual practices for the cause of the disparities, it suggests that people of color are disproportionately working as essential workers due to racial discrimination in job opportunities.
(2) Critical motivation Individual’s perceived ability and responsibility to achieve social change	E.g., if the level of critical motivation is high, one experiences a sense of urgency to take action to correct the disparity.
(3) Critical action Socio-political actions taken to correct inequalities.	E.g., working together in the community to ensure that companies have a rigorous safety plan for essential workers.

Note: Prepared by the author using Diemer et al (2016); Diemer et al (2022)

influence of critical consciousness as an adjustment factor for the impact of class discrimination and economic constraints on work volition and career adaptability among U.S. workers. The results showed that the degree of the impact of contextual difficulties varied with the level of critical consciousness. Empirical studies on PWT have demonstrated the moderating effects of critical consciousness worldwide. However, no empirical examination has been conducted in Japan, and future empirical studies in the Japanese context are required.

For clients to acquire critical consciousness, practitioners must become critically aware and able to intervene. Critical consciousness includes specific actions (Table 5). Career practitioners are expected to advocate for the structural factors that affect perceived social justice. In fact, the role of those involved in career support in Japan includes suggesting improvements to problems identified within the organizations in which they are involved (Career Consulting Conference, 2024). However, it is also necessary to operate from a broader perspective to practice social justice. Practitioners need to promote both understanding and action to change the client’s subjective resources as well as the objective circumstances that constrain their career options (Arthur & Collins, 2014; Ribeiro, 2021).

However, the practitioners themselves are also

social beings who work in conflict. This is what Prilleltensky and Stead (2012) call the “adaptation-challenge dilemma.” It is a struggle to adapt to the world of work and simultaneously challenge it. Depending on these two positions, there are four possible combinations: (a) adapt and challenge the system, (b) adapt but not challenge, (c) challenge but not adapt, and (d) neither adapt nor challenge (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2012). Since it is difficult for practitioners to have a challenging attitude toward the society in which they live, it is important to understand the power dynamics that affect them (McWhirter 1998). However, questioning and confronting one’s fundamental values, assumptions, and conventions is painful and requires creating spaces for dialogue that both support and challenge (Prilleltensky & Stead, 2012). Just as career support should not reinforce clients’ self-blaming, the education and support of career practitioners should not lead to self-blaming.

5. Limitations of this study

This study was conducted based on a limited literature review and was unable to address the actual situations of people who are required to develop their careers under various constraints. Furthermore, theoretical and practical studies are required to be enhanced in support of the Japanese

context by examining a wider range of practical examples of social justice in career support, as well as empirical studies based on the Psychology of Working Framework and Theory in Japan.

6. Conclusion

This paper reviewed Japan's labor situation, noting income and gender disparities associated with the growth of non-regular employment, and considered the need for career support informed by social justice. Based on the Psychology of Working, it pointed out key challenges: unequal access to support resources, self-blame resulting from limited attention to structural factors, and a strong emphasis on autonomous career development. In response, it emphasized the importance of practitioners fostering critical awareness that both deepens their understanding of clients and encourages their own reflection and action.

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