



Article

Caring without Tolerance: Care Literacy as an Enabler of an Inclusive Society

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Abstract: Japanese society has been undergoing significant social changes in recent years, which has led to a greater variety of lived experiences in juxtaposition with pressures to conform from its group-oriented cultural context. Achieving inclusion in an increasingly heterogeneous society depends on how relatedness connects people, for example, in caring for others. The purpose of this study is to examine aspects of caring for others in Japanese society based on in-depth narrative interviews conducted in 2022 involving 18 informants. The fieldwork findings point to constraints on individual autonomy from relations stemming from care being intertwined with a broader relational context. Additionally, cultural conformity pressures lead to a propensity to assess social practices and, in turn, provide “excessive care”. Yet, such “excessive care”, as premised on cultural conformity, is at odds with increasingly heterogeneous choices. This leads to the emergence of intolerance, which suppresses individuals’ autonomy and agency. Instead, to achieve an inclusive society, these findings point to the need for appropriate relations of understanding, tolerance and caring. This would be enabled by fostering “care literacy” across communities and stakeholders, thus supporting the transition towards a more inclusive society.

Keywords: care literacy; diversity; tolerance; social technology; relatedness; social conformity; Gaze; Japan



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1. Introduction

Japanese society has been undergoing significant social changes in recent years due to factors such as the rapid aging of the population, declining birthrates, the diversification of life courses, increasing participation of women in the workforce, rising rates of life-long unmarried individuals, and changing values. Such trends reshape patterns of social connections and lead to a greater variety of lived experiences. This raises the challenge of enabling people from diverse backgrounds and walks of life to live their daily lives comfortably and be included as a valuable part of the local community and society as a whole. While Japanese society has placed human relationships at the core of the culture (Davies and Ikeno 2002; Doi 2014; Hendry 2003), issues such as social withdrawal (Hikikomori), bullying, suicide, and truancy are significant social problems, which point to stresses on underlying interpersonal relationships and the attendant challenge of social inclusion (Furlong 2008; Sakamoto et al. 2021; Toda 2016). Motivated by the need to foster more inclusive communities, in 2023, the Japanese government funded a five-year major Strategic Innovation Programme (SIP) on “Developing Inclusive Community Platforms” (Cabinet Office 2023). One of the four sub-themes of the programme aims to take an innovative approach to understand and address inclusiveness of a community. This sub-theme led to the fieldwork on which this article is based.

Achieving inclusion in an increasingly heterogeneous society depends on understanding the social fabric of a community. The network of relations that weaves people together

rests on a variety of bases, as captured by Carsten's notion of "relatedness" (Carsten 2000, 2004). Rather than identifying relations based on kinship, relatedness reflects connections that matter in everyday life. The bases for such relatedness are potentially varied, including, for example, shared commensality (Lambert 2000), reciprocity (Stafford 2000), and parenting (Berend 2016) including gay fathers (Goodfellow 2015). Such examples place emphasis on understanding relatively specific connections between individuals. In considering a community and society, relatedness may be extended to include a broader set of connections between people who do not know each other directly but that are also important to everyday life. Such a spectrum of relatedness, from closer and tighter to more distant and lighter connections, is a means of considering inclusion. Based on relatedness, this is a person-centric perspective of inclusion as dependent on how the person sees their contact with others in their community and society at large, and which everyday practices underpin these relations. To understand inclusion, one important pattern of relations concerns people reliant on others for some degree of care. A second interesting case for a sense of inclusion across society is how people feel about interactions with the others they do not necessarily know as part of daily life.

Indeed, the ultimate objective of this research is to contribute to the collaborative endeavour of constructing a societal framework where individuals experience a sense of comfort in their daily lives through the profound resonance of diversity within the social fabric. To connect across such social domains to achieve societal impact, a potential approach is actionresearch (c.f. Akiyama 2015), which co-creates, with multiple stakeholders, an inclusive sustainable Japanese society. In this way, we can create an understanding of key issues to be addressed; this led to the fieldwork upon which this paper is based.

Specifically, this paper examines aspects of caring for others in Japanese society based on narrative interviews which took place in the Greater Tokyo Area in 2022. The purpose of this paper is not the generalization of the findings but rather to understand the challenges in interpersonal relationships in people's lived experience, how people are related in their everyday life, and what cultural logic underlines such interpersonal relationships. In this paper, we provide insights based on fieldwork.

The narrative interviews revealed the complex interplay of social forces and individual agency, which (re)shape lived practices and experience. The interview survey revealed that "excessive caring" has permeated interpersonal relationships, in turn contributing to the emergence of an intolerant society—one of caring without tolerance. The underlying challenge here is that people's agency, which is a fundamental aspect of human existence, is often manipulated and even denied by "excessive caring" provided by other people in their community. We conclude that excessive intervention in interpersonal relationships underscores the need for tolerance, emphasising the importance of fostering a tolerant disposition and behaviours conducive to understanding differences. This could be facilitated by the social technology of "care literacy" (Costantini et al. 2021), which could contribute to the collaborative construction of a society characterised by pleasant and meaningful connections.

2. Methods

Fieldwork was conducted to identify key themes related to achieving greater inclusion. The approach taken is for qualitative fieldwork, as this allows for themes to emerge and be identified based on an understanding from the perspective of those involved.

The fieldwork was conducted in September and October 2022, in the Greater Tokyo Area based on participant observation. We met with 18 participants in total, conducting 11 qualitative in-depth narrative interviews, which generally lasted around one to two hours on Zoom, and two focus group interviews involving a total of 8 participants (Appendix A). As around the time of the interviews there was ongoing concern regarding the spread of COVID-19, we opted to conduct the interviews and focus groups via Zoom.

The initial interviews were arranged through personal contacts and subsequently utilised snowball sampling. This approach is appropriate given the need to find a range of

people involved in situations with different inclusivity challenges and open to discussing the situation. Such people can be challenging to identify and engage, and so a snowballing process was deemed suitable, in which we asked interviewees to suggest potential participants. The informants represented a diverse range of demographics and backgrounds, with 11 women and 7 men with an age range from 20s to 70s. The informants included university graduate students, middle-aged adults, and older adults. The informants included caregiving and welfare professionals, staff of NPOs in the domain of care, and foreign scholars specialising in Japanese society.

We employed the narrative interview method, as this enables researchers to distinguish what informants say, what they think, what they think they should do, and what actually they do (c.f. Goodman 2002), facilitating an understanding of the underlying cultural logic influencing their thoughts. The interviews and focus groups were recorded with consent and transcribed. To analyse the interviews and focus groups, we conducted semantic analysis of words and phrases, which enables identification of cultural meanings (c.f. Spradley 1980). Specifically, the transcripts were reviewed and then coded to identify key categories and the terms used by respondents to refer to these. Integrating across the interviews and focus groups, we identified main themes and the associated similarities and differences across participants in connection with these themes.

3. Results

3.1. Constrained Autonomy

A main theme that emerges is a perception of those receiving care that the assistance they receive undermines their autonomy. A person cared for may receive support for a daily life practice for which they have some degree of capability, so the care may help but be unnecessary; receiving such care can lead to a diminished sense of self-efficacy. Further, caring occurs within a broader relational context; indeed, caring may condition the relationship. That is, the care receiver may lose own autonomy in shaping relationships once care and its attendant sense of dependency are a part of the relationship. One informant, Akiyo (in her 40s), whose 13-year-old daughter has a disability, explained her feelings regarding care provided to her daughter:

My daughter's teacher told me, "I was really happy when Mina (one of my daughter's friends) said to me "I'll take care of Haruna (Akiyo's daughter)!" I was also happy to hear that, but at the same time, I mean, they are classmates. So I didn't want her to take care of my daughter, I wanted her to treat my daughter as friend. . . . Whether they have disabilities or not, it's about having the same thoughts or heading in the same direction. It's not something special; we're all there to support each other. . . . I feel really sad when people say things like "I will offer support for you" or "I feel sorry for (people with disabilities or illness)".

Akiyo does not question the direct value of the care offered. Indeed, she appreciates that this would be helpful, though only when taking a narrow perspective just focused on care, whereas she places emphasis on the broader context of friendship. Thus, Akiyo wishes for her daughters' care to be considered a part of her "relatedness" to her classmates, which expands the scope of the relationship; at the same time, "relatedness" may encompass and interweave elements of the relationship that results in constraints. For another informant, Mariko (in her early 50s), the broader relational context of the teachers caring for her disabled son is a source of frustration that limits her efforts to shape her son's care experience:

The relationships are already intricately woven into the hierarchical society. So, it seems safer not to say anything since it might worsen the relationship. . . .

That is, feedback or complaints about specific aspects regarding care for her son might trigger a reaction on other aspects of her son's experience due to interwoven relations of those involved in care.

Additionally, the boundary between giver and receiver of care creates directionality in support. Some individuals experience discomfort as a result of the directional nature of care relationships. This was explained by Haruka, who is in her 20s and involved in an NPO for *Hikikomori*, which refers to social withdrawal and is an increasing social problem in Japan. She has substantial experiences of being involved with people with Hikikomori, including in her personal environment, and shared her views:

People (social withdrawers) don't want to be seen as weak or vulnerable because they're different from others, or they don't want to be in the position of being cared for as the weaker party. . . . This is a kind of friction, occurring between people and oneself.

Thus, the process of caring and being cared for can slide towards dichotomised relationship of giver and receiver of support, which care receivers expect not just to reflect a difference but also to incorporate a power relation. In such situations, those at the receiving end risk feeling marginalised relative to those providing care. The source of difference seeds a sense of exclusion, rather than leading to an inclusive caring process.

Providing support that the recipient does not desire may not only elicit discomfort but may also entail the risk of diminishing the recipient's sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Another informant, Haruto, a graduate student in his mid-20s, articulated his sentiments and reflections regarding his father who contends with physical challenges in his daily life:

My father is capable of handling things on his own and prefers to address them independently. So, when someone encroaches on his approach. . . , it doesn't sit well with him. He possesses a sense of self-efficacy and competence, and is confident in what his abilities are. So, an intervention is as if he were told that he cannot handle things alone, which can undermine his confidence. This makes him feel as though his autonomy is being questioned or dismissed.

Individuals facing challenges in performing daily activities may indeed require some level of assistance; a gap in necessary care is problematic. Additionally problematic, however, is "excessive care". The provision of care beyond what the individual deems necessary may foster a perception that support is offered due to an inherent deficiency in the individual's abilities, potentially undermining their sense of competence. Self-efficacy, characterised by the belief in one's capability to successfully execute tasks, is integral to fostering a sense of control over one's actions. To cultivate self-efficacy, Albert Bandura discusses four elements deemed essential (Bandura 1997): direct experience of achievement, learning from indirect experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional response to physiological states. Indeed, self-efficacy has been evidenced to impact life and mental health outcomes for disabled people (Rogowska et al. 2020; Wilski et al. 2024). The implications of excessive care include hindering individuals' ability to achieve based on their own means, which compromises their sense of accomplishment from personal efforts. Additionally, excessive care is likely associated with verbal dissuasion from utilising own capabilities, as the care substitutes for these. This limiting of their experience may also affect their self-assessment and self-enhancement, which are important in shaping a sense of identity (Gregg et al. 2011). Ultimately, excessive care may dampen the sense of self of the recipient to the extent that it negates a person's inherent agency.

To mitigate the risks of excessive care in warping relations and undermining self-efficacy does not necessarily mean seeking avoidance of care relations. In contrast, Masato (a graduate student in his 20s) explained how during COVID-19, experiencing a sense of not being socially connected impacted him:

I believe that being in a situation where one cannot rely on anything can lead to a sense of constriction. . . . The value lies not in the act of relying per se, but rather in having places where one feels it is permissible to seek support. Having such places that one can call their own contributes to a sense of comfort. It's a space where one's presence is validated, where one feels one belongs.

That is, Masato's insight is that the significance of having several sources of support represents a form of personal sanctuary, as these are sources open to providing care and inclusive in their involvement. Such an arrangement enhances the comfort of daily life. This is related to the work of Shinichiro Kumagai (Kumagai 2013), who articulates the imperative to diversify the sources of dependency within one's social network:

Expanding the number of sources on which one can rely, such as friends or society, elucidates the capacity for independent living and self-sustenance. . . .conventional understanding often equates independence with the absence of dependency. However, true autonomy entails in the cultivation of multiple sources of reliance. This conceptualisation is universally applicable, irrespective of disability status.

While independence implies singular reliance on oneself, dependence on one other person raises the risk being dominated by provider of care and support. In contrast, the notion of multi-dependence places emphasis on broadening the spectrum of reliance. By fostering multi-dependency on several people for care and support, individuals can attenuate vulnerability to the exertion of influence and control by any single source. Ideally, this shift towards multi-dependency facilitates a transition from hierarchical to egalitarian relationships between support providers and recipients, fostering more equitable and comfortable relational dynamics. However, such a broader network incorporates more socially distant people, including more generally the community in which the person lives. As involving a larger, more distant set of people, such care relations are not just shaped by interpersonal dynamics but also by more general norms of care in the community.

3.2. From a Conditioning Gaze to the Emergence of Intolerance

A challenge informants raise is that comfort in everyday life is reduced by other people's inclination towards evaluative practices, that is, people generally assigning value judgements to other people's behaviours and attitudes. In Japan, this inclination finds its roots in cultural underpinnings, notably collectivism, which, in turn, manifests as conformity pressures that regulate individual will and diversity. This was recognised by the informants, as articulated by Masato:

There is an underlying sense of communal consciousness, like everyone being the same. . . . It's often described positively as a bond, but I think of it negatively as a constraint.

The amicable collective bonds that were supposed to foster a sense of comfort have become "excessive", resulting in the entrapment of individuals. Haruto also expressed a similar view as Masato:

I think that people are excessively interested in other people, or rather, it's like, seeing people through a critical lens. There might be a tendency to expect too much for others to conform to certain expectations. . . . I feel like there's a sense of national character at play here. It's like, "This is our standard, so why aren't you conforming? You should be the same as everyone else", that sort of thinking.

In order to integrate into the collective fabric of a group-oriented society, established norms and behaviours, such as politeness, are prescribed by society, with an expectation that individuals will adhere to them (Coulmas 2023). Further, there may be a lack of tolerance towards those who deviate from the norm. Indeed, from the perspective of an informant who is a foreign scholar specialising in Japanese society, this can be taken to the limit: "You know, in Japan everything has to be perfect. . . so too much intervention here. . .". Thus, individuals often gauge their behaviours using prevailing social norms and expectations. Consequently, they seek to behave in line with such norms, as Masato explained:

Everyone has various thoughts in their minds. . . (but) There's always a difference between what one truly thinks and what one expresses outwardly. . . .It's all about fitting in well with the group(ism).

As individuals inform their own behaviour by looking at other's adherence to norms, they consequently generate a collective gaze on others' alignment with social norms. In turn, this leads to a sense of collective pressure towards social conformity, such that the gaze conditions behaviour, as relayed by Haruto:

Certainly, I do find myself quite concerned about how others perceive me, especially in public settings. Rather than simply doing what I want to do, there's often preoccupation with how I might be perceived by those around me. . . .For instance, I really enjoy taking walks and capturing photos of flowers or small birds—it's something I find quite relaxing. But whenever there are people around, I can't help but feel self-conscious. You know, when I'm crouching down to get a close-up shot of a flower or trying to capture a tiny insect buzzing around, I can't shake off this feeling that passersby might be staring at me strangely. . . . So yeah, there's definitely this underlying anxiety and tendency to be overly conscious of my surroundings.

Indeed, another informant, Aoi, who is an employee of a company and in his mid-30s, explained how the risk of being perceived inappropriately hinders him from doing something that would help someone else: "I kind of expect a "Thanks in return, after all. . ." when I give up my seat on the subway", and he continued, ". . .(but) at the same time there's this fear of being perceived strangely if I approach someone I don't know to offer them the seat. . . so I end up not offering the seat. . ." Thus, there is a tension in feeling part of a collective which individuals may experience as a sense of confinement. The cohesion inherent in cohesiveness constricts individual autonomy and agency. This dynamic bears resemblance to Foucault's discourse on the power of the gaze (Foucault 1977). Foucault discusses this disciplinary mechanism using the case of the panopticon, a circular prison facility with a central watchtower for surveillance. The architectural design results in the internalisation of the notion of being under constant surveillance, thereby fostering the prisoners' compliance. Foucault argues for such a mechanism to apply more generally, with the pervasive influence of the social "gaze" serving as a powerful tool for regulating human agency and homogenising diverse expressions of individuality. In the context of Japanese society, this has been argued to condition women's traditional position in the family, to the extent that social pressure is evident through suicide and depression (Akita 2015). Group-based relationships that have traditionally been central to societal dynamics that foster social conformity pressure are juxtaposed with evolving societal values that are becoming gradually diverse, albeit not at an expedited pace.

Consequently, as a result of the emergence of gaps between prevailing societal norms and increasingly varied individual values, individuals may find it challenging to act in accordance with their personal values or may hesitate to express their thoughts candidly due to fear of criticism or ostracization. Aoi continued: "The idea of "inside" and "outside" is quite strong culturally. It's scary to approach strangers because I worry about being seen as weird". His voice echoes the view that individuals may feel compelled to conform to societal norms by suppressing their agency and aligning themselves with the prevailing social order; further, they may seek ways to isolate themselves from society, such as becoming Hikikomori (social withdrawers) (Chan 2016). One of the reasons some people become Hikikomori is their parents' expectations of them. As explained by Haruka from the NPO for Hikikomori:

Parents may feel disappointed but from the child's perspective, there's also an expectation to be loved even if they don't live up to their parents' expectations. They want to be loved for who they are, even if they're not *perfect*. (Authors emphasis is added)

"Perfect" in this sense means living up to parents' expectations, which may in part reflect generational differences in the life aspired to.

In contrast to withdrawal, for those for whom the dominant group norms resonate, there is a tendency to provide actively their perspective. The sense of alignment with such

norms legitimises pointing out where someone deviates from such norms. This, however, presupposes that the receiver of advice also wishes to align with such norms rather than recognising and valuing differences in perspectives. This is illustrated by Tomoko in her early 60s who runs a NPO assisting people in need of care. She shares her view on this with a tone of voice expressing discomfort:

You know, what really gets on my nerves is when people start dropping hints or giving advice, like “Oh, maybe you should try doing this instead”, or constantly chiming in with their opinions without being asked. It can be really annoying.

As it is socially justifiable to lead others to fit into social expectation, people have relatively total freedom to provide advice and suggestions on how to sort out individual challenges. For the person who provides advice on what to do, they feel they are providing help for the advice receiver to fit into society. However, for the advice receiver, it is a ‘soft order’ which needs to be engaged with, as if ignored, it could render their relationship uncomfortable. Hence, people are inappropriately helpful in excessively aiming to help others to fit into society.

On the other hand, the presence of a broader relationship can tone down the commentary. In contrast, the proliferation of social media has further exacerbated this social control phenomenon. Japan boasts one of the highest rates of mobile phone use in the world, and as a result, a significant proportion of the population engage in communication through social media platforms (cf. [International Telecommunication Union 2022](#)). Regarding this digital context, graduate school student Masato expressed the following observations about the social control:

You know, on the internet, if someone does something a bit out of the ordinary, everyone jumps on and start bashing and it turns into this big uproar. . . . Sure, they can be really compassionate and helpful, especially in times of natural disasters, but when it comes to stuff they think is morally wrong, they’re not so accepting. Especially online, where everyone’s just saying whatever they want, Japanese people tend to band together and escalate the situation, leading to a sort of collective condemnation of things they find morally unacceptable.

People are even more intolerant under such anonymous situations. Such a tendency needs to be placed in the context of the growing influence of social media in (re)shaping practices and norm. Social media has profound implications for how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us ([Couldry and Hepp 2016](#)), and leads to challenges and risks including social comparison and cyberbullying ([Boyd 2014](#)). Further, intolerance may reflect physical and cognitive aspects. Participants of a round table, who are between the ages of early 40s to early 50s, shared their feelings that some Japanese people lack tolerance:

I know that people tend to lack tolerance towards those who move slowly while shopping or even who move slowly due to age. . . . Similarly, there can be frustration when someone cannot operate a smartphone.

More generally, an informant who is a foreign scholar in Japan, therefore having an outsiders’ relative distance when viewing Japanese society, commented that the “Japanese need to care to understand differences”; this in contrast to the readiness to use one’s own perspective to evaluate others. Indeed, the difficulty in Japanese society is not just that conformity is valued but also that differences are socially sanctioned. These differences are relative to prevailing norms but do not allow space for divergence in terms of norms, values and/or lifestyles. The juxtaposition of common norms and diverse ways of living leads to the emergence of intolerance.

3.3. Duty of (Excessive) Care

The tendency towards excessive care can be triggered by over-leaning on perceived common norms that, however, do not necessarily apply to the receiver. Excessive care may also occur in a more intimate relational context, in which the closeness of relations may

hinder reigning in excessive care. For instance, graduate student Haruto articulated his sentiments and reflections regarding his father who contends with physical challenges in his daily life:

Certainly, having my mother swoop in at every little thing can feel a bit too much. . . When every action of my father is accompanied by my mother to help him out, it feels like he might be missing out on his own time. . .

Such tendencies to provide excessive care are exacerbated by a government policy that promotes care by family members and those in the community. The Japanese government's long-running approach to welfare provision in the post-war period is characterised by the cost-effective limited role of government and reliance on the support of family and neighbours (Dahl 2018). In relation to this approach, the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (hereafter referred as MHLW) of Japan has promoted the concept of 'the four helps', which underpins the government's welfare policy: one's own care, mutual support in the lived community, public insurance services, and support from the government (MHLW 2016). This approach is feasible as Japanese society values interpersonal relationships, and the idea of supporting each other in the neighbourhood communities is spreading throughout Japanese society. However, as a result of the widespread culture of helping others through various channels, this can foster excessive care. Because people live in a culture that values interpersonal relationships, people from all walks of life give others all kinds of care. For instance, a female informant, Tomoko, who runs a NPO, explained this situation:

Isn't it abnormal to excessively emphasise watching over each other in the community? Maybe it's because the money (government budget) is running out. Basically, self-help is fine on its own. . . That's the way it's supposed to be done in the community. But it is the government that has loudly promoted, "Do it in the community!". I believe that it has changed since then. . . maybe it's become too stiff, painful, and suffocating precisely because we think too much that we have to help each other. Citizens are kind of feeling this sense of duty towards each other, like "we have to help each other out", you know.

Local people are concerned about those close to them and wish to help them. However, the prevalence of the government's promotion of mutual assistance has shifted this from being a voluntary norm towards being a sense of duty. This stimulates expressions of concern and kindness, such as checking in on others and offering assistance. However, the perception of these behaviours, as propelled by a sense of duty, has transformed towards one of a sense of excessive interference and overbearing behaviour. Thus, frequent inquiries such as "Is everything all right for you?" or comments such as "You have to make best efforts for caring her as she is your mother!", and suggestions such as "Let's go see a movie for a break" feel like intrusion and unnecessarily meddling in others' affairs, causing the recipients to avoid those who approach them. This can result in "excessive care", making people feel cramped. Excessive inquires and concerns can create a burdensome and stifling environment for recipients. Consequently, they may seek to avoid such overbearing care by withdrawing from social interactions with friends and neighbours.

4. Discussion

Challenges in achieving inclusion are evidenced in the informants' perspectives and experiences from the perspective of their relatedness (Carsten 2000, 2004). Relations of care are intertwined with other relations, which constrain the autonomy and agency to shape the care experience. A limit to autonomy also arises from the collectivist core of Japanese culture, which fosters a more diffuse sense of social pressure to conform. Indeed, this can readily stray into excessive advice and is also triggered by policies to encourage active involvement in care of others, or even criticism, such as in anonymous fora. Yet, the informants' accounts are not ones of acceptance of the need to align with such norms. Rather, they speak to seeking, or at least wishing to seek, greater autonomy and relations

congruent with greater agency. This reflects broad trends in Japanese society that have led an increasingly heterogeneous society (such as in terms of life courses and values) still starting from a more homogeneous, collectivist culture.

While the fieldwork is focused on Japan, the key themes that emerge point to the potential applicability of these findings to other countries. In particular, at an overall societal level, the findings are situated in a society with strong roots in collectivist and communal culture but that is undergoing societal processes that lead to more heterogeneous lifestyles and life courses. Key shifts include the changing role of women in society and increasing longevity and changing patterns of care, including in the family; to the extent that such trends are prevalent in other societies with a communal culture, such as other societies in East Asia, the findings could be more broadly applicable and of interest for future research. At the same time, some of the patterns observed reflect more specific factors, such as how government policy and cultural nuances (such as the prevalence of politeness, the role of hierarchy, and notions of dependency) have adapted over time. Thus, in exploring themes raised by the research in other settings, interactions with local specificities could be important. Nonetheless, the general context of a transition from a collectivist culture to increased diversity shifts the meaning of and need for inclusion.

Indeed, achieving inclusion in an increasingly heterogeneous society depends on the need for tolerance, as this is an important value in respecting diversity and supporting the co-existence of people from different backgrounds. Tolerance involves the need to reconcile a tension between contributing to a sense of social unity while also co-existing with a growing diversity of practices (Gibson 2006): thus, tolerance is important within individual communities as well as across society. There are tensions that accompany tolerance, as tolerance does not mean accepting the immoral but may mean accepting a different moral perspective; it may also mean acceptance of diverse practices and values even if not requiring agreement (Oberdiek 2001; Scanlon 2003). Tolerance needs to be embedded in society's social fabric. The relations underpinning this social fabric include more closely related people such as family members and friends as well as more distant connections such as with neighbours, other community members, and across society at large.

Such relations, which span the whole spectrum of relatedness, would be inclusive if they incorporated some appropriate degree of understanding, tolerance, and caring for others. To foster such an inclusive society, a key enabler is individuals' "care literacy", which refers to the cultural and social values, knowledge, capabilities, and practices that enable individuals to create communities that are tolerant and conducive to mutual support among people with diverse backgrounds, as well as facilitate individuals' ability to lead comfortable daily lives in their communities and society (Costantini et al. 2021). Compared to other literacies, such as health literacy and IT literacy, a distinguishing aspect of care literacy is that it is characterised by its relational basis. Further, in the context of care literacy, the meaning of care is in the sense of "caring for". By placing emphasis on relations of support and collaboration across a wide range of stakeholders, care literacy plays a role as social technology that contributes to solving social problems. Thus, care literacy has the potential to be a fundamental cultural value for society that aims to achieve inclusivity communities. To this end, cultivation of a culture capable of embracing diversity is pursued through the societal implementation of a form of social technology known as "care literacy".

In developing care literacy, a key consideration, as we have seen from the research results, is that excessive caring for others can cause discomfort for the self and in interpersonal relationships. While too little care is clearly problematic, it is also evident that excessive caring also does not necessarily produce good outcomes. This reveals future research opportunities to explore further, in the domain of care, where there may be too much care or not enough care, and where the border lies between these two situations. Further, in the context of the social practices of care literacy, it is essential to rigorously examine this aspect to evaluate and validate concepts such as "appropriate caring" for others.

5. Conclusions

Achieving inclusion in an increasingly heterogeneous society depends on how relatedness connects people, for example, in caring for others. The fieldwork findings point to the need for tolerance to emerge, so as to give space for individuals' agency and counter-balance a propensity to excessive intervention in others' lives. Such a recalibration of caring for others in the community could be enabled by instilling a 'social technology' of care literacy. This would support the transition towards exercising autonomy, embracing tolerance, and achieving inclusion. The process of achieving such a social impact would benefit from engaging communities, such as through collaborative action-research, to co-develop and bring into practice their approach to achieving an inclusive society.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of The University of Tokyo (protocol code 23-297 and 19 September 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this article are not readily available due to privacy and ethical reasons.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Profile of Interviewees

The table includes all informants with whom we had an interview and focus group. We met with 18 participants in total, conducting 10 qualitative in-depth narrative interviews, which generally lasted around one to two hours on Zoom, and two focus group interviews involving a total of 8 participants. The informants cited in the main text are drawn from those included in the table. Other informants not included in the table are those with whom we had shorter or more casual interactions and discussions during the participant observation.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Work
Akiyo	Woman	40s	Social worker
Aoi	Man	Mid-30s	Employee of a bank
Elizabeth	Man	Early 30s	Researcher
Haruka	Woman	20s	Working for Hikikomori NPO
Mariko	Woman	Early 50s	Housewife
Haruto	Man	Mid-20s	Graduate school student
Ken	Man	Late 40s	Working for a nursing home
Masako	Woman	30s	Researcher
Masahiko	Man	50s	Owns a care consultancy business
Masato	Man	20s	Graduate school student

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Work
Michael	Woman	Mid-60s	University faculty
Miho	Woman	Late 40s	Social worker
Momo	Woman	40s	Working for a day care center
Namiko	Woman	Early 40s	University faculty
Naoki	Man	Late 40s	Owns a care consultancy business
Sophia	Woman	40s	University faculty
Tomoko	Woman	Early 60s	NPO employee
Yoshiko	Woman	70s	Housewife

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