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Original Article

Critically Rethinking Postmodern Social Work in Japan: Academic Madness or a Genuine Alternative?

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Abstract The last two decades witnessed a growing amount of literature discussing the influence of postmodern thinking on social work policy and practice. In case of Japan, some academics paid attention to this discussion in the latter half of 1990s, but their number remained small. On the other hand, some ideas that have affinity with postmodern thinking, like empowerment, strength approach, and narrative approach, have gathered considerable attention among Japanese people. This paper investigates this unique situation in the field of social work in Japan.

Postmodern thinking began to be discussed in Japan in the latter half of 1990s, when social reforms introduced a market based mechanism in the welfare system. By that time, social workers had achieved little social recognition in Japan, being less than a decade since the occupation became a nationally certified qualification. Thus, general approach was taken as responding to the demand to establish large narratives of social work first, rather than the destructive discussion of postmodern thinking against the larger narratives. Even so, the postmodern approaches and models have been appreciated in Japan, and through these practical approaches postmodern thinking became popular there.

Key words: certified social workers, postmodern, education, narrative approach, empowerment

I. Introduction

The last two decades saw a growing amount of literature discussing the influence of postmodern thinking on social work policy and practice (Walker, 2001). In case of Japan, some academics paid attention to this discussion in the latter half of 1990s. When the author of this article was a graduate student in those days, articles in professional British journals looked very bold and exciting. Kihara (2012) describes how the discussion had developed in Japan as below:

> Although postmodern thinking in the field of social work has become main stream in the Western academic world, it is still considered a mad discussion in Japan, compared to the discussion on evidence-based practice. Some academics like Noguchi, Kamo, Mishima, and Kihara made critical studies on the postmodern thinking; however their discussion cannot be regarded as full-scale (Kihara, 2012: 87).

Sociologists took the lead in the field of social work in Japan, as they did in the West (Rojek, 1986; Rojek, Peacock, Collins, 1988; MacBeath and Webb, 1991). The sociologist Noguchi wrote an influential article, "A Structural Approach: The Possibility of Postmodern Social Work" (Noguchi, 1995), which was published in *Studies on Social Work*. It was also sociologists that in 2003 translated Margolin's book, *Under the Cover of Kindness: The Intervention of Social Work* (1997), which critically discussed the authority of social workers based on Foucault's theories.

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Kihara (2002, 2009), a leading scholar in social work, expected that social work theory in Japan would shift to a postmodern perspective (Kihara, 1996, 2000). Kamo (1995a, 1995b) also took steps to introduce social constructivism. Mishima introduced the postmodern discussion in the UK to Japan (1998), and made arguments about the situation of today's social workers (2007). However, these attempts to introduce postmodern thinking into the field of social work were regarded as heretical, against the interests of social work nowadays.

Three questions can be raised here. The first question regards the time it took for postmodern thought to be discussed in Japan. Japan began to discuss postmodern social work theory a decade later than the discussion began in the West. Technical issue should not have prevented the dissemination of the information in this highly developed IT era. The issue had been more or less ignored in Japan until about 2000, this time-lag in the transmission of postmodern ideas to get from the West to Japan is significant.

Another time-lag can be found domestically as well. Lyotard's *La condition postmoderne* (1979) was translated into Japanese in 1986.[1)] This means that it was in the 1980s that postmodern idea became popular in Japan. Its popularity, however, gave little influence on practice or research of social work of the time in Japan. Why these two time-lags, one across the national border and the other within the country, existed for the postmodern thinking to become influential in social work policy and practice in Japan?

The second question is why the discussion of postmodern thought in the field of social work in Japan did not become so popular. In the middle of 1990s, postmodern discussion "was received as a strange idea by those who were excited with 'scientification' of social work" (Kihara, 2009: 153). Even today, the discussion is regarded as a mad discussion, had in the ivory towers with no real effect on 'real life' and the postmodern discussion failed to involve the Japanese welfare field as a while.

On the contrary, ideas affiliated with postmodern thinking like empowerment, strength approaches, or narrative approach, have become popular in the field of Japanese social work. These ideas are almost always introduced in textbooks of social work. The third question is why did the Japanese social work field adopted postmodern ideas in their certification system through the approaches listed above, while regarding postmodernists in social work as strange people?

Some studies (like Kihara, 2012; Mishima, 2012) mentioned these issues, but a full-scale study has yet to be conducted. This paper shall now outline the situation of Japanese social workers and trend of research on social work theories by studying the Japanese academic database, CiNii Articles, then describe the unique theoretical characteristics of postmodernism in Japanese social work with particular consideration given to the economic and social background.

II. Social Workers in Japan

In Japan, the Certified Social Workers and Certified Care Workers Act was enacted in 1987, and with this act the national certification system for social workers was established. In order to be a certified social worker, applicants must study subjects on social welfare, which are designated by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, and then must pass the National Examination for Certified Social Workers.[2)] The pass rate of the exam for social workers was only 18.8% in 2013.

As of September 2012, there were more than

[1)] Some books which Japanese postmodernists in social work often refer to were translated into Japanese in those days, like Foucault's *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) in 1977, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (1969) in 1981.

[2)] The Japanese Society for the Study of Social Welfare (JSSSW) Available at: http://www.jssw.jp/english/social/index.html, Accessed: 24 May 2013.

[3)] As of February 2012, there are more than 52,000 registered certified psychiatric social workers. This paper will mainly focus on the certification system for social workers.

157,000 registered certified social workers.[3] The percentage of certified social workers among welfare workers and officers is still low, considering about 28% of the certified social workers are out of employment or working in another field (CSWPNE, 2008), and the total number of welfare workers in Japan which is 2.62 million in 2011.[4]

Due to low exam pass rates, the public recognition of certified social workers is still low in Japan. The Survey on Current Situation of Certified Social Workers, conducted in 2007 by the Japanese Association of Certified Social Workers among its 3,000 members, revealed that only 31% of the members' employers demanded them to have the certification, and 52% found little difference before and after achieving the certification (JACSW, 2007). Another result shows that annual salary of collage graduated certified social workers are lower than the average of total labor.

In response to such a situation and the changes in society, the Certified Social Workers and Certified Care Workers Act was modified in 2007. In the same year, the "Work Team on Reforming Educational Curriculum for Certified Social Worker" was established with social workers and advisory panel. The team issued the "A Proposal on Reforming Educational Curriculum for Certified Social Worker" in 2008 and the new curriculum began in 2009.

III. Social Work Theories in Textbooks and Syllabus

Whilst some textbooks have been translated from English into Japanese, including Turner's *Social Work Treatment* (1996) and Howe's *A Brief Introduction to Social Work Theory* (2009), social work educators tend to use original textbooks written by Japanese authors. As of 2012, Japan has two hundred and seventy colleges and vocational schools for training social workers, and each school has their own curriculum and syllabus. Instructors can choose their textbooks freely from vast collection of textbooks published by various publishers. As there are variety curriculum and textbooks for social workers in Japan, this paper shall examine the proposal of 2008, has influenced today's training contents and textbooks, in order to find the current trend of social work theories and approaches.

The national examination for certified social workers consists of nineteen subjects, and the social work applicant's knowledge of theory is acquired by studying the module entitled "Theories and Methods of Counseling Assistance." The 2008 proposal lists five aims for this subject, starting with "to understand theories on interaction between people and environment in social work" (WTRECCSW, 2008: 24). It recommends that a syllabus should include "interaction between people and environment," and it states an example of expected educational contents like "general system theory, cybernetics, and self-organization." The 2008 proposal states the system theories and ecological perspective based on those theories most important. As an example, the *Instructor's Textbook for Practice of Consultation and Assistance* (JASCSW, 2009), which was edited to train instructors who conduct these practices, shows similar contents. The chapter entitled "Methods and Theories of Social Work' has six out of thirty-five pages devoted to system theories, and only four to six lines each for all other methods and theories. The change of subject name from "Sociology" to "Social System and Social Theory" also shows that a stronger emphasis is placed on system theories after the reform of educational curriculum.

The second aim of the subject "Theories and Methods of Counseling Assistance" is "to understand the various practical models of social work". The subject lists examples of expected educational contents like medical model, life model, strength model, psychosocial theory, functional theory, problem solving theory, task-centered social work, crisis intervention, behavior modification approach, empowerment approach. Most textbooks in training schools include descriptions of strength model and

[4] Without workers in welfare offices (MIAC, 2012).

empowerment models. In addition to that, description of narrative approach often appears in many textbooks in recent years.

Many people consider that postmodern thinking have influenced social work theories and approaches including empowerment, strength approach, narrative approach, and other such theories. Soeda argues that these approaches are based on postmodern thinking (Soeda, 2003: 191). Adams (2008) notes that "in the postmodern era, empowerment has the potential to become either a unifying or a divisive theme of work," White and Epston (1990), in their discussion of narrative therapy, ground their ideas in the work of Foucault, and share a commonality with postmodernist thinking in social work (Kelly, 2011). Thus, it can be concluded that although Japanese educational curriculum of certified social workers centers on system theory, it also demands that the certified social workers understand the postmodern social work approaches and models.

IV. Trend of Research in the Field of Social Work

The kind of social work theories and approaches that are required for certified social workers changes with the times. It is understood that academic discussion by scholars and practitioners decided which knowledge was essential for social workers according to social situation of the time. Today, there are more than twenty academic associations in the field of welfare in Japan, and each association hosts various discussion in their conference and on their journals. The bulletins issued by universities and schools for training social workers also hold various discussions. Now the paper reviews articles in the Japanese academic database, CiNii Articles, until December 2012, in order to find the trend in postmodern discussion in the field of social work.

The database search is conducted with the target of "welfare (福祉) OR social work (ソーシャルワーク" with the keywords of "postmodern (ポストモダン)", "postmodernism (ポストモダニズム)". In order to find research trends in the field of social welfare, the search is limited to academic journals in the field of welfare, and articles, research notes, proceeding by scholars in the field of social work.

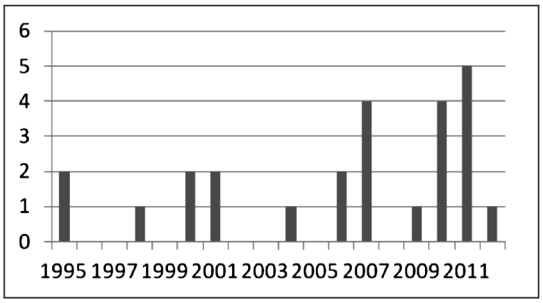

Figure 1 The number of articles: "postmodern"

A total of twenty-five articles were found (Figure 1). The publication of articles with keyword "postmodern" began in 1995, had some increase in the latter half of 2000 and then more or less stayed stagnant.

As discussed above, system theories are considered most important in the educational curriculum for Certified Social Workers, and eco-system model is considered as a theory to support the construction of generalist social worker image. In order to find how many articles have written on these theories and models, the database search is conducted with the target of "welfare (福祉) OR social work (ソーシャルワーク)" and the keywords of "ecological (エコロジカル) OR ecology (エコロジー) OR *seitai* (生態)", and "system theory (システム論 OR システム理論)" with the limitation to academic journals in the field of welfare, and articles, research notes, proceeding by scholars in the field of social work.

The search found seventy-four articles with the keywords of "ecological OR ecology OR seitai," and thirty-three with "system theory," one hundred and seven articles in total (Figure 2). Discussion of ecological perspective began in the middle of 1980s, and had gathered attention so that the professional journal, *Studies on Social Work*, ran a special feature in 1990. These keywords have positioned as a major research theme

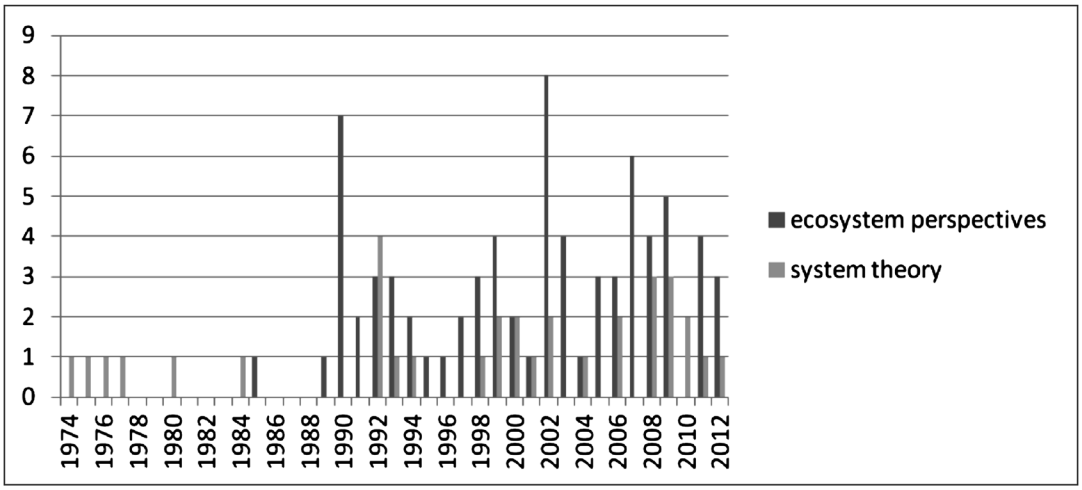

Figure 2 The number of articles: "ecological OR ecology OR seitai," "system theory"

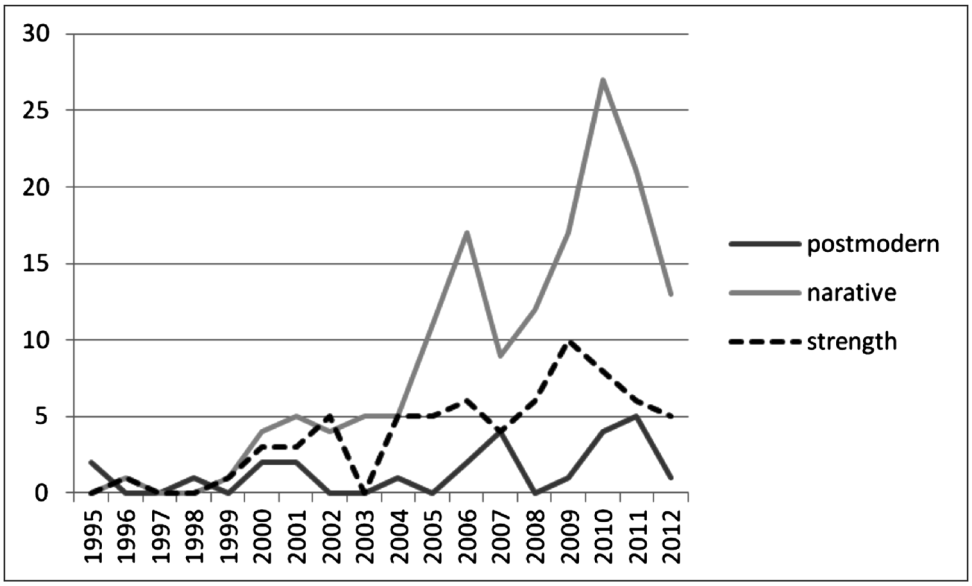

Figure 3 The number of articles: strength, narrative, postmodern

until today, and its number surpasses that of articles with postmodern keywords. The graph shows an interesting move of stable amount of articles in the 1990s, and another increase in the 2000s. The number of articles on system theories is less than that of ecological perspective; still its issue of the former began in the middle of 1970s, earlier than that of the latter.

Next, in order to study the trend in research on postmodern theories and approaches (Soeda, 2003), similar database search was conducted; the target of "welfare (福祉) OR social work (ソーシャルワーク" and the keywords of "strength (ストレングス)" and "narrative (ナラティヴ, ナラティブ OR 語り)".

The result found one hundred and fifty two articles with the keyword of "narrative," sixty-eight with "strength," totaling two hundred and

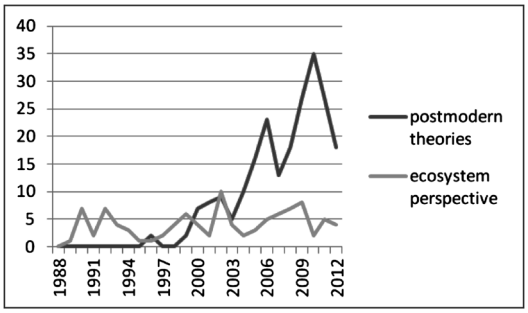

Figure 4 The number of articles: postmodern theories and eco-system perspective

twenty articles (Figure 3). Some pioneering studies were published in the latter half of 1990s, then the number has increased significantly since the 2000s. Some influential literature was published on postmodern in those days (Kamo, 1995a; Oda *et al.*, 1995; Hazama, 2001). The Figure 3 also includes the search result with the keyword of "postmodern" as comparison.

An interesting finding is that the number of articles on so-called postmodern social work approach exceeds significantly those on ecological perspective and system theories, which are effective on structuring general social worker image (Figure 4). In fact, among various social work approaches which are considered to be postmodern, the articles on empowerment had the greatest number. The keyword "empowerment," however, is often used in other fields, so this paper decided not to use it. Still, its popularity is amazing.

On one hand, system theories and ecological perspective are stated as most important in the 2008 proposal of educational curriculum reform and the textbooks following the reform, on the other hand, these results on research trend shows a different picture. Assuming the number of articles reflects the level of interest on the topic, it can be said that interest on postmodern perspective and approaches are much higher than that of system theories and ecological perspective. These results also depict the difference between academic interests and practices in training schools for social workers.

V. What Happened around the Year 2000?

As seen above, the year 2000 was one of the turning points. This section discusses the social background of this period in order to answer the questions raised at the beginning of this paper.

After recovering from the damages of World War II, Japan achieved high economic growth during the 1960s, and today Japan has remains an advanced consumer society. Until early the 1960s, the six major welfare laws that were introduced included, The Child Welfare Act (1947), The Disabled Persons Welfare (1949), The Public Assistance Act (1950), The Welfare of Mentally Retarded Persons Act (1960), The Social Welfare for the Elderly Act (1963),The Welfare of Fatherless Families and Widows Act (1964). Along with these laws the "universal health insurance and universal pension insurance" system was established.

The government proclaimed a political slogan of the "First Year of the Welfare Era" in 1973. As the industrialization and the high economic growth raised the standard of living by expanding the benefits, so the improvement of social security took the direction to formulate a welfare state focusing on allocating the benefits inside the society (Fujimura, 2009).

A policy of actively expanding social security and social welfare systems faced coming to a standstill, however, following the economic slowdown after the oil shocks in the early 1970s. Thus, a full-scale reform was demanded in the 1980s. Various reforms were made in the 1980s, pressured by the concern of social welfare costs increase in a rapidly aging society (aging society = risk idea); the influence of neo-liberal ideology; and the pressure to reduce the public budget. Discussions regarding restructuring continued in the 1990s, and the Subcommittee for Social Welfare Structure Reform in the Central Committee on Social Welfare issued the "Interim Report on Fundamental Structure Reform of Social Welfare System" in 1998. This reform was realized by modifying related regulations like Social Welfare Act in 2000. These reforms state the first objec-

tive as "to establish equal relationship between service users and providers," and aims to replace welfare placement system with contract between the welfare service providers and users to realize the above objective. The actual contents of the reforms are said to be "to secure quality and efficiency of welfare services" and "to build community care system." As a method meant to improve the quality of welfare services and efficiency, it was expected to use economic concerns to introduce market mechanism in welfare service, or to use care management. The progress of marketization and welfare pluralism can be argued as another characteristic of this era.

Workers in welfare field hesitatingly began to use the terms "users" instead of "clients" in their services; sometimes with the honorific title of *sama*, like "user-sama". The report edited by the Japanese Association of Schools of Certified Social Worker says "recently, address terms like users or consumers, in addition to clients, are used", indicating that these terms had rooted by the middle of 2000s (JASCSW, 2005).

The Long-Term Care Insurance System began in 2000, based on the Long-Term Care Insurance Act of 1997. The establishment of this system, based on the social insurance system, was under pressure to reduce the cost for social welfare as its background. Social workers were not expected to play the key role of professionals to conduct care management in Long-Term Care Insurance services. Some social workers came forward; hoping to become care managers, but their offer was declined, and deemed unrealistic because there were too few of them to cope with the workload. Partly as the result of this dismissal, only a small number of social workers are able to work as a certified care manager.[5)] In spite of such neglect, care management skill is regarded as one of most important skills to obtain in training of social workers. The new curriculum since 2009 states care management in its center, and some people argues that method of social workers shift from case works into care management (Shishido, 2010).

VI. Care Management and Postmodern Social Work Theories

As a comparison, this section discusses the social welfare reforms in the UK. Neo-liberal/ Neo-conservative New Right began the social welfare reforms in the 1980s. Market mechanism was introduced in the field of welfare service with the establishment of the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act, which followed the Griffiths Report (1988). Some academics characterize such change as "a shift to managerialism" (Parton, 1996; Phillips, 1996; Lymbery, 1998: 863; Powell, 2001). In these changes, British social workers began to play a role in care management as well. Some criticized such a trend, arguing that it can weaken the expertise of social workers (Harris, 2003: 66).

Ferguson argued that care management was "veiled by rhetoric of 'empowerment,' 'choice' and 'needs-led assessment,' and the effect of these changes on traditional social work practice was to be profound" (Ferguson, 2008: 46). In Japan, too, 'empowerment' and 'strength approach' were emphasized in care management (for example, MHLW, 2002; NLI Research Institute eds., 2005). These ideas can be considered as a reason for the increase in academic articles on postmodern social work theories after 2000 as was seen in Figure 4.

In Japan, social insurance for care and care management has been necessary since the introduction of the Long-Term Care Insurance in 2000. When the insurance payments are insufficient to satisfy the needs of the user, the unpleasant role of denying any more budget is played by

[5)] Long-Term Care Insurance Act made care manager an officially certified occupation. The eligibility to take an examination to be certified was open to 21 certified occupations including doctors, nurses, and even acupuncturists. Among 27,905 successful examinees in 2012, social workers accounted for 9.9%, while care workers accounted for 66.4%. In the total of first five examinations (1998–2002), paramedical professionals including nurses accounted for more than 60%, while social workers accounted for only 2.8%. http://www.mhlw.go.jp/houdou/2002/12/h1224-1.html

the system of the Long-Term Care Insurance. It seems as if the Long-Term Care Insurance System helps social works to seek the postmodern ideals.

The paper now discusses the three questions listed in the introduction. The first question asked why postmodern idea was ignored in the field of Japanese social work from the middle of 1990s to 2000. In case of Britain, the reforms leading to the 1990 NHS and Community Care Act are considered to have opened the postmodern discussion. In case of Japan, contrarily, the Fundamental Structure Reform of Social Welfare System is considered to have brought the similar change. It can be argued that postmodern discussion was unrealistic and gathered little attention until the surrounding environment had matured to discuss postmodern thinking.

The second question asks why postmodern ideas in social work were considered strange and raised little discussion. As discussed above, the number of social workers was small and the social importance of their role received little recognition in the latter half of the 1990s. Thus, the pressing issue was to increase the social awareness and to secure the status of social workers. In this situation, a strategy was taken to strongly promote the image of social workers as generalists, by emphasizing system theories as its foundation. However, some argue that the debate about postmodern social work led to an increasing fragmentation of the profession and undermining of its formal knowledge base (Smith and White, 1997; Noble, 2004; Turner, 2011). The situation strategically forced to regard postmodern thinking as strange, as Kihara points that the practical discussions centered on how to train social workers as generalists in the contexts of the Long-Term Care Insurance System and Certified Social Worker System rather than postmodern discussion (Kihara, 2012: 87).

Even in this situation, ideas like empowerment, strength approach, and narrative approach became incorporated into certification system, in spite of their affinity with postmodern thinking. The attention to these approaches rapidly increased around 2000 as seen in Figure 3, and these approaches were used as keywords of academic articles than system theories or ecological perspective, which were regarded as fundamental in the educational curriculum, as seen in Figure 4. The third question asks this point. The reasons behind are considered to be that these were used as skills or perspective for general social workers (Taniguchi, 2003) and used as keywords to conduct care management.

VII. Conclusion

The characteristics of Japanese social work discussion can be argued as below. First, Japanese educational curriculum for certified social workers aims to train generalist social workers with practical skills, by regarding ecosystem perspective as most important foundation. In addition to that, care management skills became essential after the Fundamental Structure Reform of Social Welfare System in the 1990s.

Second, the interest in postmodern social work is high especially in academic discussions in Japan. Japanese scholars prefer more practical postmodern approaches, models, or perspective that can be used by generalist social workers or social workers who conduct care management.

Third, the section of Japanese social work took a strategy to more or less ignore postmodern thinking, which can be dangerous in establishing the status of social work (Dominelli, 1996: 162; Smith, White, 1997; Noble, 2004) because Japanese society needed to mature the grand-narrative of social work first.

Further discussion is needed on postmodern social work theories and approaches, and on danger of postmodern thinking.

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