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Ethnography of Performance Activity and Mental Illness:  
Ties formed by “Difficulty of Living” and Knowledge of Survivorship

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The purpose of this study is to clarify what knowledge is used to form ties among people who have mental illness or other conditions that make it difficult to live through performance activities. In this study, “ties” include internal relationships among group members, identity formation, and relationships with society. Knowledge is regarded as techniques and beliefs.

Previous studies show that people with mental illness or disorders form ties within groups through empathy generated from commonality. In addition, they form ties with themselves by establishing their identities by changing the value of their illness or disability, and they form ties with society by either opposition or, conversely, assimilating to the majority. However, some studies state that it is difficult for people with disabilities to form ties with other disabled people because of the diversity of their experiences. There is also the risk that some could feel self-blame if they can’t change the value of their traits. In addition, if they claim their own identity, it could be assumed that their problem is only “their” problem, and that they are not concerned about other people. As such, clarification on how to form ties beyond their own commodity, changing values, and either opposition to or assimilation with society is required.

This study focuses on the ethnography of performance activity as experienced by people with mental illness or other difficulties through their poems, music, and other art forms. Ethnography is a research method based on long-term fieldwork. It requires description of the detail of a person’s life and their ways of thinking, analyzed by a person in a specific research field from holistic viewpoint and referring to previous theories. It is said that “vulnerability” plays an important role in the experiential knowledge of people with mental illness or disability. As such, this study analyzes knowledge from the theoretical viewpoint of vulnerability.

Although performance activity is multi-faceted, in general it refers to ties based on the term *Ikizurasa* (“difficulty of living”), and becomes a place where people actively express their vulnerability or weakness. In addition, it is done beyond the context of social welfare, comedy, or subculture.

The first research finding is that people with difficulty of living form ties with each other by crossing plural contexts such as social welfare or subculture in addition to empathy by commodity, and by using differences as resources. The second finding is that they regard themselves as weak or vulnerable rather than changing the values of their traits. And this way of thinking become knowledge of them. The third finding is that they form ties with society by including many types of people having difficulty of living within their community, and by practicing as a subculture. The last finding is that they form ties by expressing their “survivorship.” Though it is said that vulnerability is important to consider in the knowledge of people with mental illness or disorder, “survivorship” exists on the back of vulnerability, and survivorship connects vulnerability and strength in the form of a practice, such as vivid performance. Previous studies show the importance of vulnerability in the formation of ties by people with mental illness or disorders. This study shows vulnerability or weakness is a representation of survivorship. Vulnerability is spread beneath the knowledge of people with difficulty of living.

This study reveals the knowledge of people having difficulty of living, based on survivorship. Vulnerability is strongly related to survivorship, and it is considered that this finding is true not only for people with difficulty of living in terms of performance activity, but for the general population suffering from mental illness or disability.

Key words: Difficulty of Living, Performance Activity, Knowledge, Vulnerability, Ties, Survivorship