

Masakuni Tagaki

Graduate School of Sustainable System Sciences

Osaka Metropolitan University in Osaka

ORCID: 0000-0003-0586-1486

Beata Borowska-Beszta

Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Institute of Education Sciences

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń

ORCID: 0000-0002-2133-4400

**INVISIBILITY AND VISIBILITY
OF DISABILITY IN JAPAN AND POLAND
AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCT:
SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

**Niewidoczność i widoczność niepełnosprawności
w Japonii i Polsce jako konstrukt społeczny
i kulturowy: podobieństwa i różnice**

Abstract

The visibility and invisibility of disability are present in various cultures. This study aims to analyze the invisibility and visibility of disability in Japan and Poland, focusing on the similarities and differences between the two countries. Cultural analyses of historical, social, and political backgrounds indicate the transition process from invisible disability to visible disability in both countries. Visibility and invisibility of disability are social and cultural con-

structs in Japan and Poland. The results revealed the similarities between the processes and constructs of researched terms and differences. Among the similarities are factors of the transition process from invisible to visible disability. However, the authors distinguished that the eugenic, deinstitutionalization, and empowerment trends in both countries developed differently. The differences in the socio-cultural construction of invisible and visible disability concern the historical and political determinants of both countries' development after the Second World War up to the present time.

Key words: invisibility, visibility, disability, Japan, Poland

Streszczenie

Widoczność i niewidoczność niepełnosprawności są obecne w różnych kulturach. Celem niniejszego badania jest analiza niewidoczności i widoczności niepełnosprawności w Japonii i Polsce, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem podobieństw i różnic pomiędzy obydwoma krajami. Analizy kulturowe tła historycznego, społecznego i politycznego wskazują na proces przejścia od niewidocznej niepełnosprawności do widocznej niepełnosprawności w obu krajach. Widoczność i niewidoczność niepełnosprawności są konstruktami społecznymi i kulturowymi w Japonii i Polsce. Wyniki analiz ujawniły podobieństwa pomiędzy procesami i konstruktami badanych terminów oraz różnice. Wśród podobieństw znajdują się czynniki procesu przejścia od niewidocznej do widocznej niepełnosprawności. Autorzy zauważyl jednak, że trendy w zakresie eugeniki, deinstrytucjonalizacji i empowermentu w obu krajach rozwijały się odmiennie. Różnice w społeczno-kulturowym konstruowaniu niewidocznej i widocznej niepełnosprawności dotyczą historycznych i politycznych uwarunkowań rozwoju obu krajów po II wojnie światowej aż do czasów obecnych.

Słowa kluczowe: niewidoczność, widoczność, niepełnosprawność, Japonia, Polska

Introduction

This study identifies the invisibility and visibility of disability in historical, cultural, and political contexts in Japan and Poland after the Second World War (WWII). Historically, the two countries have main-

tained a cordial relationship despite their geographical and religious differences.¹ They share conservative values in both social life organization and family system. For example, the norm that families should take care of family members with disabilities is similar in both countries – in Japan, it stems from the Confucian-influenced family view, and in Poland from the Christian tradition and Catholic social science. Moreover, the system of approach to disability in both countries emphasizes the medical model of disability and medicalization strongly. This means both countries have dominant cultural patterns based on locating disability in a person, their physicality, and the somatic and psychological spheres. Although the social model of disability is also present in both countries, it is not the dominant way of conceptualizing disability.

Following WWII, Japan rebuilt its economic and political systems and achieved unprecedented prosperity. Japan is associated with Western Countries such as the United States in terms of capitalism and has not been influenced by the communist ideology. Additionally, its uniqueness is that Japan is geographically far from other major capitalistic countries. These aspects significantly differ from other Eastern European countries, including Poland, which were impacted by the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s and the abolishment of the Iron Curtain. However, Poland, a member of the EU, is perceived as an Eastern European country, which is different economically and socially far from neoliberal and capitalistic Western Europe.

Japan has experienced many significant disability policies and social movements, indicating pre-war socio-cultural influences. Religions such as Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism are a part of Japanese life, even though religious faith is weakening.² For example, rituals and customs are followed by respecting the dead and the ancestors. Meanwhile, in Poland, 91% of inhabitants declared themselves Christians and Catholics in 2020, and cultural and religious traditions in that country are interwoven. However, because of historical, geographical,

¹ E. Pałasz-Rutkowska, *On the opposite sides of the Iron Curtain? Bilateral political activity of Poland and Japan after 1957*, "Silva Iaponiarum," 2019 no. 1.

² T. Kobayashi, *The ISSP survey on religion: Survey results in Japan*, https://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/research/yoron/20190401_7.html (accessed: 16.10.2022).

and political differences between Japan and Poland, there are noteworthy distinctions between the two countries regarding the visibility and invisibility of disability. In the context of the introduction concerning the specific constructs of invisible and visible disability in Japan and Poland, the authors intend to answer the following questions that form the basis for this study's theoretical analyses:

- How was disability constructed to be visible or invisible in post-WWII culture, what were their respective disability policies, and what meanings emerged in the disability movement?
- Given the background of the Iron Curtain (1945–1989) and post-socialist periods in Poland (1989–2022), how was invisible or visible disability in public spaces constructed?
- Finally, what similarities and differences exist in the constructs of invisible and visible disability in Japan and Poland?

Defining the invisibility and visibility of disability in Japan and Poland

Invisibility and visibility of disability are viewed with key interrelated vectors: historical, political, social, and cultural.³ In the section on Japan below, the author analyses the representation of disability in religion and folklore in the past, eugenics and segregation policies during and after WWII, disempowering attitudes towards people with disabilities (hereafter, PWDs), and their exclusion from social activities. The author considers their active assertion in the disability movement. Finally, the author discusses the management of visibility in interpersonal contexts in public spaces in terms of the current disability policy, focusing on how people give meaning to the behavior and attitudes of PWDs regarding bodily control or failure, autonomy, or dependency.⁴

³ M.F. Olney, K.F. Brockelman, *The Impact of visibility of disability and gender on the self-concept of university students with disabilities*, “Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability,” 2005 no. 18(1).

⁴ E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Hoboken 1963; K. Charmaz, D. Rosenfeld, *Reflections of the Body, Images of Self: Visibility*

In this section on Poland, the discussion is grounded in historical and socio-political changes in Poland related to the Iron Curtain and the post-socialist era. The analyses begin with explaining the construct of invisible disability (understood as excluded or segregated). This is followed by an analysis of the change from invisible to visible disability during the Iron Curtain period (perceived as empowered, liberated, and related to social participation) and an analysis of it in the context of the second post-socialist period in Poland. Invisible disability as a category of disability studies is underrepresented in Polish social research. Basic definitions of invisible and visible disability in Poland focus on the issue of invisible disability in public spaces⁵ and the invisibility of people as a manifestation of inequality between non-disabled and disabled citizens.⁶ The second part of this manuscript considers invisible disability as a construct in the support system⁷ and as a subjective context of creating and articulating their own identity by PWDs, coming out of “invisibility”⁸ and transforming disability invisibility into visibility. The visibility of disability in this manuscript’s section on Poland is understood as the visibility of disability in interpersonal contexts in public spaces. As a result of socio-political and cultural changes, it became an element of post-socialist Poland since the beginning of the 90s.

The authors of this study adopt a common definition of the studied phenomena and believe that the phenomena of invisibility and visibil-

ity and Invisibility in Chronic Illness and Disability, in: *Body/embodiment: Symbolic interaction and the sociology of the body*, eds. P. Vannini, D. Waskul, London 2006.

⁵ B. Borowska-Beszta, *Niepełnosprawność w kontekstach kulturowych i teoretycznych*, Kraków 2012.

⁶ E. Ciaputa, A. Król, M. Warat, *Genderowy wymiar niepełnosprawności. Sytuacja kobiet z niepełnosprawnościami wzroku, ruchu i słuchu*, in: *Polscy niepełnosprawni. Od kompleksowej diagnozy do nowego modelu polityki społecznej*, eds. B. Gąciarz, S. Rudnicki, Kraków 2014.

⁷ E. Płońska, *Niewygodni, niewidoczni i niechciani – formy wiktymizacji osób z autyzmem*, in: *Aksjologiczne i prawne aspekty niepełnosprawności*, ed. A. Drabarz, Białystok 2020; S. Rudnicki, *Niepełnosprawność i złożoność*, “*Studia Socjologiczne*,” 2014 no. 2(213).

⁸ M. Racław, D. Szawarska, *Ukryte/niewidoczne niepełnosprawności a polityka tożsamości i etykietowania w życiu codziennym*, “*Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*,” 2018 no. 14(3).

ity of disability are dynamic processes grounded in the culture, history, and policy directions of both countries. Therefore, the authors cover discourse on disabilities from the micro level, such as person-to-person interrelationships,⁹ to the macro one, such as disability-related policy and law. The concepts of invisibility and visibility are considered social and cultural constructs in Japan and Poland.

Invisibility and visibility of disability in Japan

Disability in Japan

The Cabinet Office of Japan¹⁰ estimates that 9,647,000 Japanese people have disabilities (about 7.6% of Japan's population). The Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities (Japanese Law 84) categorizes "disability" into physical, intellectual, and mental (including developmental) disabilities. Physical disabilities encompass five categories: mobility, vision, hearing, speech, and internal (e.g., heart disease, kidney disease, or other chronic debilitations).

Representation of disability under religion and folklore in the past

Before WWII, Japanese social attitudes toward PWDs were influenced by religion, such as Buddhism and Shinto, and folklore.¹¹ For example, karma in Buddhism was persuasive, as it was believed that good deeds lead to good results and evil deeds lead to dire consequences. Disability resulted from the sins and immorality of PWDs and their families in their present or previous lives. PWDs were considered dishonorable or

⁹ E. Goffman, op. cit.

¹⁰ The Cabinet Office of Japan, *Annual report on government measures for persons with disabilities 2020*, Tokyo 2020, <https://www8.cao.go.jp/shougai/white-paper/index-w.html> (accessed: 17.10.2022) (in Japanese).

¹¹ E. DePoy, S. French Gilson, *Studying disability: Multiple theories and responses*, Thousand Oaks 2011; Y. Okuyama, *Semiotics of otherness in Japanese mythology*, "Disability Studies Quarterly," 2017 no. 37(1); A. Mishima, A.H. Kozo, *Disability and social barriers through comics*, Tokyo 2019 (in Japanese).

shameful and were sometimes confined to small, dark rooms to avoid being seen. They sometimes worked at festivals and were looked at with curiosity and pity.

PWDs were sometimes divinized as symbols of happiness, such as Ebessan and Fukusuke dolls, which were considered to bring luck to families and success in businesses. The divinization has not brought the lives of PWDs to parity with those of people without disabilities, however, but excluded them as troublesome members of society.¹² Soldiers who sustained disabilities in war were treated more favorably than people with congenital disabilities because they had fought for the nation. There were previously objections against the studies mentioned above that focused on the harmful treatment of PWDs. Miles¹³ stated that Buddhism did not strongly emphasize Western individual personalities and tolerant interdependence. Sugino¹⁴ argued that Biwahoshi, a visually impaired oral storyteller of famous samurai tales, brilliantly transforms auditory information into visual information without the usually written medium and cautions against viewing the visually impaired as being stigmatized.

Invisible disability by Eugenics and segregation policies and their objections

Eugenics policies

The eugenics movement prevailed after WWII, and the Eugenics Protection Law of 1948 (Public Law 156) was strongly endorsed by the government,¹⁵ adding genetically inherited diseases and infectious dis-

¹² Y. Okuyama, *op. cit.*

¹³ M. Miles, *Disability in an eastern religious context: Historical perspectives*, “Disability and Society,” 1995 no. 10(1).

¹⁴ A. Sugino, *Disability identity and acceptance of disability: A perspective of disability studies and social work*, “The Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Social Works,” 2018 no. 34.

¹⁵ Y. Matsubara, *Thinking about the eugenics problem (4) – National Eugenics Law and Eugenics Protection Law*, “Women’s Communication,” 1997 no. 466 (in Japanese).

eases such as leprosy. The 1952 amendment added mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities as qualifying debilities. Notably, the number of sterilizations, either requested by the doctor or the patient, peaked in the mid-1960s.¹⁶

The Eugenic Protection Act was renamed the Maternal Protection Act and has provided for sterilization and induced abortion since 1996. The Act removed hereditary disabilities that were the subject of sterilization considered in the Eugenic Protection Act. The consent of the individual or spouse is required for sterilization. The government of Japan enacted a law to pay victims of forced sterilization under the former Eugenic Protection Law 3.2 million yen each,¹⁷ and the then Prime Minister apologized to them. The victims have filed lawsuits nationwide in pursuit of state compensation since 2018, and the district court has acknowledged that forced sterilization violated Article 13 of the Japanese Constitution, namely, “the right to self-determination regarding reproduction.”

Segregation of people with intellectual disabilities and mental disorders

After WWII, Japan promoted the institutionalization of people with intellectual disabilities, mental disorders, or leprosy. It was partly aimed at increasing the efficiency of care for people with disabilities and reducing the burden on their families. However, other intentions may have been based on eugenic ideology: to eliminate disabled people who were not profitable for post-war economic growth and to prevent the birth of similarly disabled people.¹⁸

¹⁶ M. Okamura, *History and problems of the Former Eugenic Protection Act: With a focus on forced sterilization*, “The Reference,” 2019 no. 69(1), <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11233894> (accessed: 17.10.2022) (in Japanese).

¹⁷ Mainichi Shimbun, “Japan enacts law to pay victims of forced sterilization 3.2 million yen each. The Mainichi” 2019, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20190424/k00/00m/010/251000c> (accessed: 7.09.2021).

¹⁸ T. Kanata, *Japanese mental health care in historical context: Why did Japan become a country with so many psychiatric care beds?*, “Social Work,” 2016

The government has encouraged people with intellectual and mental disabilities since the 2000s to leave disability colonies and live in the community – a change initiated by the disability movement. Since the International Year of Disabled Persons, efforts have been made outside the country to stop abuse against people with mental disorders in hospitals in the 1980s. However, even when they leave the colony, they cannot find appropriate residences, such as apartments with caregivers. In addition, PWDs' elderly parents expect institutions to care for their disabled children after their deaths. The murder of PWDs in a Japanese care home instigated discussions on the social visibility of PWDs. Satoshi Uematsu, a former employee of a disability institution in Kanagawa Prefecture near Tokyo, killed 19 persons in that care home.¹⁹ Even though the Japanese community severely condemned the incident for its brutality, some disability leaders pointed out that Japanese society did not notice that many PWDs live in large shelters, which is a background of the murder. Many victims maintained their anonymity for fear of stigmatization. This murder was reviewed as eugenics by many disability leaders.²⁰

Refusing traditional representation of pity and helplessness

Combining the visibility of disability with disability identity and anti-eugenics

Some disability organizations have invoked social attention to their paralyzed or deformed bodies as a basis for their identity as people

no. 52, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0037-80542016000400002&nrm=iso (accessed: 17.10.2022).

¹⁹ *Japan Times. Knife attack leaves 19 dead, 25 hurt at Kanagawa care facility.* The Japan Times 2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/07/26/national/crime-legal/man-arrested-fatally-stabbing-15-people-wounding-45-kanagawa-facility-disabled-nhk/#.XqObmWj7TmZ> (accessed: 7.09.2021).

²⁰ S. Hanasaki, *Tackling the idea of eugenics through applied theatre praxes in Japan. Research in drama education*, "The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance," 2017 no. 22(4).

with physical disabilities. For example, “*Aoi-shibano-kai*,” a group of people with cerebral palsy, argued that paralyzed bodies should be affirmed as such.²¹ They also appealed to society, stating that people with severe disabilities should be socially viewed using their visible disabled bodies. They even insisted that one’s denial of one’s own paralyzed body could be a sign of an “internalized eugenic ideology,” in which it would be better to have no disability or be healthy. They staged a radical protest sit-in in the 1970s to show that people with severe motor impairment did not have access to public transport. Some actions, such as blocking the paths of buses, were criticized as excessive but still supported as a necessity to attract social attention.

Kim Manri, who contracted polio, established “*Gekidan Taihen*,” a group of people with mobility impairment who portrayed their deformed bodies and movements as performing art (e.g., *Gekidan Taihen*) in the 1980s. This activity challenged the existing standards of aesthetics and normality regarding the body and movement.²² Hanasaki²³ remarked that Kim’s philosophy on performance was an attempt to object to eugenics and the current view of aesthetics because she had been a member of “*Aoi-shibano-kai*” before founding the performance group.

Disability movement for obtaining services and empowerment in Japan

The disability movement in Japan has been developed by organizations established for each disability type, such as physical disability, intellec-

²¹ M. Morioka, *The problem of inside eugenic ideology: A study based on the thought of Aoi-shibano-kai*, “Annals of Educational Studies Osaka University,” 2006 no. 11 (in Japanese).

²² M. Kim, M. Sakiyama, K. Hosomi, *Shapes of the moment – Taihen trajectory. Gendaishiso*, “The Review of Contemporary Philosophy,” 1998 no. 26 (in Japanese); T. Maruoka, *Sharing stigmas of systemically disability by a theater group mainly consisting of people with severe cerebral palsy*, “Japanese Journal of Social Welfare,” 2019 no. 60(1) (in Japanese).

²³ S. Hanasaki, *Tackling the idea of eugenics through applied theatre praxes in Japan. Research in drama education*, “The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance,” 2017 no. 22(4).

tual disability, and mental disorder. For example, after the Independent Living Movement in the United States and the International Year of Disabled Persons, the Independent Living Movement in Japan began to develop in the mid-1980s. The disability movement with the local government broadened the disability policy by providing caregivers for people with severe disabilities. The first Independent Living Centre was established in Tokyo in 1986, and by 2016 there were 125 centers nationwide. A progressive policy was enacted in Osaka City, where disability service users introduce proper caregiver candidates to the local government and obtain caregivers based on the local government budget.²⁴

Lawsuits were organized in solidarity with all disability groups in 2008 to challenge the constitutionality of the Services and Support for Persons with Disabilities Act. The Act demanded that users of services for the disabled pay 10 percent of their service fees, though disability service users had to pay the cost according to their financial abilities. The new Act provided that those who use more services would be compelled to bear a higher financial burden. The court case questioned whether the financial burden should be placed on society or PWDs who wish to live a life similar to those without disabilities. The court case was also intended to raise the issue of the underlying concept of law in society. In 2010, the government settled with the plaintiffs, having agreed to the burden policy being revised and a new policy to be discussed in a council forum that included disabled persons.

Visualization of disability in media and other social scenes

The social image of PWDs changed after the late 1990s. Ototake,²⁵ born without limbs, published a bestselling autobiographical essay, “Gotai fumanzoku” (the all-defective body), which is a parody of five-body satisfaction. He described how he enjoyed his school and social networks with the support of those around him, which was not differ-

²⁴ S. Yamashita, *The disabled people's movement in connection with the institutionalization of care services*, “Journal of Welfare Sociology,” 2019 no. 16 (in Japanese).

²⁵ H. Ototake, *No one is perfect*, Tokyo 1998 (in Japanese).

ent from the lives of people without disabilities. Some media welcomed him as a critic of disability issues. It suggested questioning social images such as the pity and helplessness that Japanese people have for PWDs.²⁶ Iwakuma²⁷ remarked that popularity was a social phenomenon because the author rarely complained about having a disability or negated the intolerant society. Unlike *Taihen*'s, his essay did not question the self-evident body or aesthetics; however, it did provide an opportunity to talk about PWDs. In the past decade, PWDs have become more visible in the media due to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics. For example, dancers with amputee limbs have performed in television music programs, a blind person won a comedian's contest, and a disabled person played a leading role in a TV commercial. People with severe physical disabilities were elected to the House of Councilors in 2019 and the House of Representatives (the Diet) in 2021. According to Kamibo,²⁸ several dozen Diet members have physical disabilities.

Management of visibility of disability

Policies on invisible disabilities

Since 2000, Japanese society has developed means to highlight invisible disabilities. Government research reported that not all disabilities are visible, making it difficult for those dealing with them.²⁹ Examples include inner disability, intellectual disability, developmental disorders, and incurable diseases. People with incurable diseases gained

²⁶ T.S. Lebra, *The Japanese self in cultural logic*, Honolulu 2004.

²⁷ M. Iwakuma, *Disability in the far east: Japan's social transformation in Perceptions of people with disabilities*, "Review of Disability Studies," 2011 no. 7(3&4), <https://www.rdsjournal.org/index.php/journal/article/view/123>.

²⁸ K. Kamibo, *Why aren't more disabled people elected to the Diet? The barrier to election is special treatment*, 2021, <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASPC-J73QCPC4UDCB01C.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²⁹ The Cabinet Office of Japan, *What I ask people to know about my disability*, Tokyo 2005, <https://www8.cao.go.jp/shougai/kou-kei/toujisha/gaiyou.pdf> (accessed: 17.10.2022) (in Japanese).

social visibility as service consumers using disability services through the Act on Comprehensive Support for Persons with Disabilities, 2012. Natural disasters such as earthquakes and heavy rain promoted social attention to people with visible and invisible disabilities. Many local governments have shared their lists with resident organizations' leaders to assist them in disasters. However, some disabled people do not consent to share their profiles with neighbors because they fear their disability will be revealed.³⁰

The enactment of the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Japanese Law No. 65) in 2016 might highlight invisible disabilities. This Act is in accordance with the disability movement and the Japanese government's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2014. The current Act aims to avoid "failure to provide reasonable accommodation" without causing a cumbersome burden at the spontaneous request of a person with a disability on the scene. However, PWDs might be concerned that if they reveal their situation, they could obtain reasonable accommodation but might also be stigmatized.³¹

Pictogram for invisible disabilities and dilemma of disclosing disabilities

There are several pictograms of PWDs to make their disabilities noticeable. The "help mark" is an example the Tokyo Metropolitan Government designed in 2012 (see Figure 1). This red tag is to be hung on a bag or wheelchair so that people with invisible disabilities may obtain assistance from surrounding people in public places such as trains and stores. Disability in this context includes artificial limbs and pros-

³⁰ A. Matsukawa, S. Tatsuki, *Factors predict the agreement or disagreement of personal information provision in times of disaster: Through questionnaire and workshop at Seika Town in Kyoto*, "Social Science Review. Doshisha University," 2017 (in Japanese).

³¹ M. Tagaki, *Meaning of disability and management of its visibility: A Review of a Qualitative inquiry on people with oligodactyly*, "Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science," 2012 no. 55.

thetic legs, inner disabilities, and mental or developmental disorders, although help marks are available upon request to all PWDs.



Figure 1

It might be argued that a pictogram decreases the dilemma of disclosing their condition, but people with invisible disabilities who looked healthy at first glance were not offered seats in trains or buses by other passengers despite carrying a help mark.³² Additionally, they often wonder whether they may sit in a priority seat when someone else who needs assistance is nearby. In Japan, train couches have priority seats with stickers on the side showing a pictogram of the person who may occupy the seat, such as a pregnant woman or a person with a small child (see Figure 2).

³² M. Mochizuki, *Help Mark: To help invisible disabilities*, “NHK World-Japan,” 2018, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/217/> (accessed: 18.03.2021).



Figure 2

Invisibility and visibility of disability in Poland

Disability in Poland

The current report of the 2021 National Census of Population and Housing indicates that the number of Polish residents with disabilities is 5.447.5 million. Currently, the percentage of PWDs compared to the total population in Poland is 14.3%.³³

Cultural background

When considering the detailed data characterizing contemporary Poland geographically, culturally, and demographically, today's Poland is a member state of the European Union, a Baltic state of Eastern Eu-

³³ Narodowy Spis Powszechny Ludności i Mieszkań 2021, *Starzenie się ludności Polski w świetle wyników narodowego spisu powszechnego ludności i mieszkań 2021*, 2023, <https://stat.gov.pl/spisy-powszechnne/nsp-2021/nsp-2021-wyniki-ostateczne/starzenie-sie-ludnosci-polski-w-swietle-wynikow-narodowego-spisu-powszechnego-ludnosci-i-mieszkani-2021,3,1.html> (accessed: 4.08.2023).

rope, comprising an area of 312,696 km², and is the ninth largest country in Europe. Poland's population numbers 38,265,000,³⁴ whose main religion is Catholicism and Christianity, culturally established since the Middle Ages. At present, 91.1% declare they belong to the Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic rite and consider themselves Catholics.³⁵ According to Ciaputa et al.,³⁶ the categories of invisibility and visibility of disability in Poland are understood as social constructs based on marginalization, exclusion, and cultural aspects of constructing "invisible citizens" created by the given historical, cultural, and socio-political conditions during two main periods in Poland. These are the period after WWII, when Poland was behind the Iron Curtain (1945–1989), and the period from which Poland is considered a post-socialist bloc country (1989–2023) after the abolishment of the Iron Curtain.

Before WWII and due to the then geopolitical situation and intellectual and medical trends, Poland took an active part in the European eugenic discourse. It collaborated with the *Polish Eugenics Society* active in this field and its leader, venereologist Leon Wernic.³⁷ However, Poland never passed eugenics laws due to the resistance from conservative circles and the hierarchies of the Catholic Church.³⁸ Second, after the end of World War II (1945–1989), the political situation of the country influenced the shaping of the construct of invisible and visible disability significantly. Poland became economically and politically dependent on the Soviet Union for four decades, as it found itself in the

³⁴ Rocznik demograficzny, *Poland 2020*, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/statistical-yearbooks/statistical-yearbooks/demographic-yearbook-of-poland-2020,3,14.html> (accessed: 8.10.2021).

³⁵ Rocznik demograficzny, *Wyznania religijne w Polsce 2015–2018*, 2019, <https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/other-studies/religious-denominations/religious-denominations-in-poland-2015-2018,1,2.html> (accessed: 8.10.2021), p. 34.

³⁶ E. Ciaputa, A. Król, M. Warat, *Genderowy wymiar niepełnosprawności. Sytuacja kobiet z niepełnosprawnościami wzroku, ruchu i słuchu*, in: *Polscy niepełnosprawni. Od kompleksowej diagnozy do nowego modelu polityki społecznej*, eds. B. Gąciarz, S. Rudnicki, Kraków 2014.

³⁷ E. Ciaputa, A. Król, M. Warat, op. cit.

³⁸ M. Gawin, *Rasa i nowoczesność. Historia polskiego ruchu eugenicznego*, Warszawa 2003.

Eastern European bloc behind the Iron Curtain. Third, analyzing developments chronologically, the next stage for creating the construct of disability and changing its visibility in public spaces turned out to be the time of post-socialism (1989–2023), characterized by the implementation of the concept of *empowerment* and the adoption of important legal acts, changing the position of invisible disability in Poland.

Invisible disability behind the Iron Curtain

The phenomenon of invisibility of disability in Poland after WWII was developed by political and socio-cultural factors. Dependence on the Soviet Union (USSR) after WWII was associated with being the subject of the multi-faceted concept of Soviet *defectology*, dominant in the issues of defining and dealing with disabilities and PWDs. Ties with the Catholic Church have been preserved in Poland, however, despite the progressive *Sovietisation* manifested in the fact that the state took control over every area of human activity.³⁹ The developed definition of disability in medical and social sciences and the treatment of disability were then specified within the framework of the concept of Soviet *defectology*, which contributed to inequality, marginalization, and the construction of invisible disability on the plane of public life for four decades. *Defectology* was related to the medicalization of disability and defined disability as “pathology,”⁴⁰ grounded the idea of creating closed stationary institutions for children with disabilities and new professionals – *defectologists*.⁴¹ These ideas were implemented in Poland behind the Iron Curtain. Moreover, making disability invisible behind Iron Curtain was a deliberate action of the socialist authorities, leading to the almost complete removal of the visibility of disabled people from public spaces due to the authorities’ shame of their dis-

³⁹ A. Rychard, *System instytucjonalny komunizmu: jak działał, zmieniał się i upadł*, in: *Modernizacja Polski. Struktury, agencje, instytucje*, ed. W. Morawski, Warszawa 2010.

⁴⁰ A. Byford, *Lechebnaia pedagogika: The concept and practice of therapy in Russian defectology, c. 1880–1936*, “Medical History,” 2018 no. 62(1).

⁴¹ Ibidem.

bilities.⁴² Such social and cultural construct of invisible disability was socially preserved for over four decades and resulted in significant removal by non-disabled citizens of the appearance of people with intellectual, physical, sensory, or psychiatric disabilities from public spaces.

Socio-cultural production of invisible disability behind the Iron Curtain was implemented on schedule, also because for the socialist government, the “handicap” and “invalidity” of citizens were contrary to the successes of the Sovietisation process.⁴³ This means that congenital or acquired disability meant as “pathology” was politically unacceptable because it did not fit the Soviet ideal of a labour man – an efficient, strong, and healthy builder of socialism and a source of pride.⁴⁴ Moreover, ideologists of the only Socialist Party in Poland developed then three tools to direct social policy towards disabled people and their families, leading to the construction of the invisibility of disability in public spaces. These were, first, the *productivization* of war invalids⁴⁵ and people with inborn sensory or physical disabilities. The *productivization* of “invalids,” which developed the construct of invisible disability, negated and rejected the disability phenomena in the human who became the hero of the work by performing 200% of the norm in the factory. The second tool was the planned *isolationism* of PWDs in stationary rehabilitation institutions, resembling Goffman’s⁴⁶ total institutions, as reported by Polish authors Tarkowska⁴⁷ and Zbyrad.⁴⁸ The

⁴² M. Brenk, *Aktywizacja osób niepełnosprawnych w propagandzie Polski Ludowej lat 1946–1956*, in: *Reintegracja – Edukacja – Adaptacja. Aktywizacja zawodowa i społeczna osób zagrożonych wykluczeniem*, eds. M. Kowalski, A. Knocińska, P. Frąckowiak, Gniezno 2015.

⁴³ B. Borowska-Beszta, *Amputation of disability as hate speech pattern in Poland*, in: *Disability hate speech: Social, cultural, and political contexts*, eds. M. Sherry, T. Olsen, J. Solstad Vedeler, J. Eriksen, Routledge 2020.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ M. Brenk, op. cit.

⁴⁶ E. Goffman, op. cit.

⁴⁷ E. Tarkowska, *Ludzie w instytucji totalnej*, in: *Upośledzenie w społecznym zwierciadle*, eds. A. Gustavsson, E. Zakrzewska-Manterys, Warszawa 1997.

⁴⁸ T. Zbyrad, *Instytucje opieki totalnej jako forma zniewolenia i kontroli nad człowiekiem potrzebującym pomocy – na przykładzie domów pomocy społecznej*, “Roczniki Nauk Społecznych,” 2012 no. 4(40).

isolationism of PWDs, which did not give the authorities a chance for successful *productivization*, became an element of the construct of invisible disability. The third tool in rendering disability invisible behind the Iron Curtain was the sustained *social stigma* concerning emphasizing the “pathology” of PWDs, in which, according to the slogans of the socialist party, “[he] who does not work, does not eat.”⁴⁹

Constructing invisible disability through marginalization and the process of concealing disability from public spaces, which was strongly applied to people with mental disorders and intellectual disabilities, had complex social consequences. It has moved some non-disabled citizens into the space of cultural tabooing and aversion to disability due to the lack of knowledge about it and PWDs. Summing up, the process of constructing invisible disability has strengthened, for over four decades behind the Iron Curtain, negative cultural patterns of distant, reluctant, and prejudiced social attitudes towards families and PWDs. At the same time, the period of the Iron Curtain in Poland (1945–1989), implementing the construct of invisible disability, normalized the socially reduced role of a person with a disability as a defective, dependent, passive individual, who was supposed to remain an invisible resident of stationary homes.

Visible disability during empowerment after the Iron Curtain period

Empowerment is the second main concept analyzed when considering the processual and chronological construction and deconstruction of invisible disability in Poland. Empowerment appeared in social sciences, against the background of the theory of social policy in Poland, in post-socialism since 1989. *Empowerment* is considered by social scientists as a theoretical concept or principle,⁵⁰ and in the subjective dimension, *empowerment* is the process of PWDs taking control over their

⁴⁹ M. Brenk, op. cit., p. 316.

⁵⁰ E. Gawlik, *Empowerment (wzmocnienie) dorosłych osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną na przykładzie projektu S3 Sosnowiecka Spółdzielnia Socjalna*, “Czasopismo Pedagogiczne,” 2017 no. 1(4).

own lives.⁵¹ Szarfenberg⁵² believes that the Polish dimension of empowerment means “motivating citizens to become more involved in society, understood mainly as the labour market, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of services through choice and the market.”⁵³ The heritage, concerning the socio-cultural construct of invisible disability in public spaces, has evolved after abolishing the Iron Curtain in 1989 towards accessing PWDs to public spaces and increasing the visibility of disabilities. This process was directly related to the abolition of political, social, cultural, and economic dependence on the Soviet Union. From the beginning of the 90s, the essential legislative work began, devoted to changing the social position of PWDs and deinstitutionalization. From the beginning of the 90s, one can discern in post-socialist Poland a clear transformation of the construct of invisible disability into a visible disability through social campaigns of PWDs, including access to public spaces. After 2009, there was also gradual free access to digital space and a virtual channel to improve the representation and visibility of disabilities online.

The first significant dimension of changes in the presence of PWDs in public spaces and their visibility was Poland’s adoption at the turn of the late 90s of a social model of disability, which resonated with both international statutes and publications on social sciences, especially education.⁵⁴ The Charter of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in August 1997, had become an act and tool for the *empowerment* of disabled people in Poland. This document uses the concept of disability and assumes access for PWDs to goods and services, enabling full participation in society; treatment, medical care, and health services; and rehabilitation and rehabilitation equipment.

⁵¹ M.A. Zimmerman, J. Rappaport, *Citizen participation, perceived control, and psychological empowerment*, “American Journal of Community Psychology,” 1988 no. 16(5).

⁵² R. Szarfenberg, *Empowerment – krótkie wprowadzenie*, 2015, <http://rszarf.ips.uw.edu.pl/pdf/Empowerment2.pdf> (accessed: 8.10.2021).

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁵⁴ W. Dykciak, *Interkulturowe i makrospołeczne konteksty stereotypów w działalności praktycznej z osobami niepełnosprawnymi*, „*Niepełnosprawność. Dyskursy pedagogiki specjalnej*,” 2009 no. 1.

Visibility of disability by empowering legal acts

In addition to the previously mentioned, the CRPD provides for the right of disabled people to rehabilitation, thereby strengthening social adaptation, psychological assistance, and learning in home schooling; to integration or special institutions; to work in the open labor market; and to live in an environment without architectural barriers. The CRPD also emphasizes the right to have social representation of disabled people and to full participation in cultural, political, sports, tourist, and artistic life.⁵⁵ The Act on vocational and social rehabilitation and employment of disabled people was published in Poland on August 27, 1997. The Act changed the terminology for the levels of disability and workability from disability groups I, II, and III to three disability levels in the disability certification: light, moderate, and severe. The second dimension of the construct of visible disability was the concept of empowerment, emphasized in Polish social sciences.⁵⁶ Empowerment, which made disability visible in public spaces, resonated in the constant activities of disability individuals, communities, and associations of parents of PWDs, and covered both real and virtual spaces.⁵⁷

Visibility of disability through deinstitutionalization

The first day-care centers based on deinstitutionalization trends (for adults with intellectual disabilities, multiple or mental disorders unable to work) were established as occupational therapy workshops (OTWs) in the 90s⁵⁸ and were intended for people completely unable to perform paid work on the open market. In the 90s, OTWs were an im-

⁵⁵ Karta Praw Osób Niepełnosprawnych. Uchwalona w sierpniu 1997, p. 970.

⁵⁶ R. Szarfenberg, *Empowerment*, in: *W kręgu pojęć i zagadnień współczesnej polityki społecznej*, eds. B. Rysz-Kowalczyk, B. Szatur-Jaworska, Warszawa 2016.

⁵⁷ E. Gawlik, op. cit.; M. Stojkow, D. Żuchowska-Skiba, *Family networks of people with disabilities and their role in promoting the empowerment of people with disabilities*, "Studia Humanistyczne AGH," 2018 no. 17(4).

⁵⁸ B. Nieradko-Iwanicka, J. Iwanicki, *Zakłady aktywności zawodowej: rola w systemie rehabilitacji zawodowej osób niepełnosprawnych i perspektywy dalszego rozwoju*, "Problemy Higieny i Epidemiologii," 2010 no. 91(2).

portant step towards deinstitutionalization⁵⁹ of people with intellectual and mental disorders who had been isolated in the former political system. These day-care centers for vocational and social rehabilitation have become practical places for implementing the construct of visible disability, which has become a permanent feature of local communities. The first day-care facilities for people with intellectual disabilities and mental or acquired disorders were established in the early nineties.

Łubianka and Mariańczyk,⁶⁰ describing the vocational activation shelters (VAS), also mention the goal of increasing the visibility of PWDs in public spaces. These shelters strengthened the social construct of visible disability. The authors added that VAS shelters allowed PWDs to appear on the open labor market (p. 96). All the above-mentioned structures and day-care facilities for PWDs in Poland improved the visibility of disability and consolidated in the Polish post-socialist social consciousness the construct of visible disability. At the same time, legal acts regulated additional facilities for PWDs and their families, improving the visibility of disabilities in public spaces. These are Art. 8 of the Act of June 20, 1997, and the Road Traffic Law, which provided for mobility aids and covered the so-called parking cards. The second facilitation pertained to concessions in public transport, which was secured by the Act of June 20, 1992, on the entitlement to free and reduced travel using collective public transport. Moreover, the above-mentioned day support centers have become important places of individual empowerment.

Visibility of disability through personal assistance

Additional to the aforementioned key step in constructing visible disability was the popularization of the Internet since 2009, which has become a key tool for individual and family empowerment in Poland and

⁵⁹ B. Borowska-Beszta, *Niepełnosprawność w kontekstach kulturowych i teoretycznych*, Kraków 2012.

⁶⁰ B. Łubianka, K. Mariańczyk, *Aktywizacja zawodowa i społeczna osób niepełnosprawnych na współczesnym rynku pracy – zakłady aktywności zawodowej*, "Przegląd Prawa Administracyjnego," 2019 no. 2.

the formation of planned activism in the circles of PWDs. The next acts strengthening the construct of visible disability were two documents; the first was the regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 7, 2012, on the core curriculum for vocational education (Journal of Laws, item 184, as amended), which regulates education in the profession of assistant to a disabled person. The second regulation, published by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy on August 7, 2014, specifies the description of the profession of assistant to a disabled person, the classification of professions and specialties for the needs of the labor market, and the scope of its application (Journal of Laws No. item 1145, as amended). Both documents were a step towards supporting the independent living of PWDs aided by an assistant, promoting empowerment and social inclusion, and were essential from the point of view of enhancing the visibility of disability in public spaces. However, it should be added that it was only on September 19, 2019, that the Minister of Family, Labour, and Social Policy signed the "Personal assistant for a disabled person" program addressed to disabled people with a certificate of severe or moderate disability. The first ministerial edition of this program was carried out from October 1, 2019, to December 31, 2020. The above data indicate Poland's significant slowness in implementing the elements of the support system for PWDs and improving their independent life, but also the tardiness of legally strengthening the construct of visible disability in public spaces.

Visibility of disability through families' social movements

Another key dimension for the emergence of the construct of visible disability in post-socialist Poland was initiated by public protests of parents of PWDs, which began approx 2012. The main reasons for continuing and developing protest actions were the low income of families with dependent adults with disabilities and social inequality. Godlewska-Byliniak and Lipko-Konieczna⁶¹ write that "in Poland, we are dealing

⁶¹ E. Godlewska-Byliniak, J. Lipko-Konieczna, *Niepełnosprawność i społeczeństwo. Performatywna siła protestu*, Warszawa 2018.

with extremely unequal treatment of PWDs" (p. 11). Social movements of protesting families of PWDs, and independent people with disabilities intending to improve the income but also the livelihood of people with disabilities, have become until today essential grassroots factor in improving the visibility of disabilities in real and virtual public spaces. The visibility of disability as a manifestation of the activism of disabled people intensified in public spaces throughout Poland in 2014, 2018, 2022, and currently in 2023.

Moreover, disability as a visually recognized construct was visualized, documented, and published by online media, the Internet, photos, and TV during the longest 79-day protest in 2018 in a government building of the Republic of Poland by families "regarding the increase of social benefits for PWDs and their guardians."⁶² There was articulated criticism, by a few politicians, relating to the presence of families with children with disabilities in parliamentary corridors.⁶³ Lipko-Konieczna writes that a few Polish politicians have criticized the presence of protesting parents with children with multiple disabilities in the public space of the government building as a performance. According to these politicians, parents make a spectacle of their disabled children by putting them on public display when they should remain hidden under the invisible protection of institutions designated for this purpose. Recalling these words of criticism, the author also named the current attitude of some politicians as a *pathologization* of the presence of disabled people in public space because they suggest openly that "the family [with disabled member] should also remain such an invisible institution."⁶⁴ The above situations indicate an additional dimension of the construct of visible disability, which means that the visibility of disability during the protest in 2018 has become uncomfortable for some politicians and itself is difficult as process.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 11.

⁶³ J. Lipko-Konieczna, *Niepełnosprawność w polu władzy. Zaproszenie do performowania*, in: *Niepełnosprawność i społeczeństwo. Performatywna siła protestu*, eds. E. Godlewska-Byliniak, J. Lipko-Konieczna, Warszawa 2018.

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p. 102.

Meanwhile, further protests in public spaces in 2022 and the government building are currently taking place in 2023, however, with less criticism from politicians. Against the background of the above data, illustrating the multilaterally developing implementation of visibility of disability in Poland, there are existing problems. Although, the legislation created legal safeguards for increasing the visibility of disability in public spaces by defining the responsibility of public institutions in this regard, albeit relatively late. The legal act regarding the accessibility of digital space for PWDs was adopted in Poland only by the Act of Laws 2019, item 848 of April 4, 2019, on the digital accessibility of websites and mobile applications of public entities. On the other hand, the Act of Laws 2019, item 1696 of July 19, 2019, on providing access to public entities of the institution for people with special needs, was enacted only in 2019. Undoubtedly, the advantage of both acts of 2019 is the imposition of obligations on public institutions and the need to adapt buildings and digital space to the needs of people with various disabilities. Both acts, which have empowerment in the background of PWDs in a legal sense, arranged the process of adapting architectural and digital space in Poland. Both acts increase the visibility of disability in public spaces and perpetuate the construct of visible disability.

Discussion and conclusion

In response to the third question, we might conclude that (in)visibility is constructed in both countries' history, culture, and politics, and being invisible or visible does not determine how difficult it is for PWDs to live. Instead, the authors perceive that invisible disability has gradually become visible as a process.

The backgrounds of the two countries in question are diverse. In Poland, the invisibility of disability is related to a given historical period and political dependence on the Soviet Union for over four decades during the Cold War and Iron Curtain periods. Japan did not experience such tremendous political ideology changes as Poland did. People with psychiatric disorders and intellectual disabilities were institutionalized and socially excluded in the two countries. Additionally, Japan

implemented forced sterilization as a policy, unlike Poland. In Japan, disability-related organizations and public authorities have socially recognized the incorrectness of institutionalization and forced sterilization of people with mental disorders or intellectual disabilities. Disability movement leaders actively emphasized the inappropriateness of showing their bodies in public spaces or arts. Goffman⁶⁵ demonstrated that bodies with visualized disabilities could be given social meanings, making them a target of stigma or stereotypes. However, the current study has identified actively diverse meanings in their bodies' interactions with others.⁶⁶

Visibility does not directly relate to either positive or negative connotations in Japan and Poland. PWDs gradually and proudly showed themselves in diverse public arenas such as the media, politics, and sports in both countries. In Poland, there is a strong current public presence of females with ASD and Asperger's syndrome speaking of their own disability diagnostics in adulthood. This type of disclosure trend in Poland is met with public approval. We should highlight that disclosure of disability raises some personal and social tensions in both countries despite the above-mentioned positive effects. Being visible generates new problems, such as inspiration porn in Japan⁶⁷ and also noticed in Poland. Visibility of disability developed disability policies and legislation that promote PWDs to obtain appropriate support in education, disability services, and public accessibility. This might not be easy, especially if it is close to public stigmatization. Disability policies might lead schoolteachers to incorrectly attribute students' problems to disorders without consideration. The Law for the Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities in Japan and pictograms such as the help mark make invisible disabilities noticeable to people in the immediate area. However, some disabled people could feel uncom-

⁶⁵ E. Goffman, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ H. Zitzelsberger, *(In)visibility: Accounts of embodiment of women with physical disabilities and differences*, "Disability and Society," 2005 no. 20(4).

⁶⁷ S. Young, *We're not here for your inspiration*. ABC, 2012 (accessed: 7.09.2021); J. Grue, *The problem with inspiration porn: A tentative definition and a provisional critique*, "Disability and Society," 2016 no. 31(6).

fortable in public spaces. Meanwhile, in Poland, disclosing a disability and making it widely visible even while public protests of families in government buildings were variously commented on increasing the visibility of disability.

Subsequently, it would be practical to focus on specific contexts and conditions of disclosure of disability in both countries, such as education, disability service, media, or disability movement, for further study.

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