

Between Illness and Victimhood: Ambiguity and Identity in SMON Victims' Narratives

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Background

- In the 1960s and 1970s, drug-induced harm emerged as a major social issue in Japan.
- The Clioquinol intestinal regulator incident, known as the "SMON" (Subacute Myelo-Optico Neuropathy) case, established the term "pharmaceutical harm" (yakugai) and influenced subsequent pharmaceutical harm lawsuits.
- "Pharmaceutical harm" is understood in multiple ways depending on context (Sato 2023).
- However, these existing frameworks do not fully capture the lived experiences of victims.
- Moreover, most prior research on victims' experiences has focused on victims who became plaintiffs, with little attention paid to victims prior to becoming plaintiffs or to victims who did not become plaintiffs.
- This study focuses on the memoirs of SMON victim Rieko Watanabe, examining the background leading up to her becoming a plaintiff.

Purpose & Method

- Data: Memoir by Watanabe Rieko (1975).
- Through narrative analysis, this study reveals how she interpreted the harm and transformed into a "public accuser".

Findings

【Transformation Diagram】

- Analysis of Watanabe's notes and the model created by Ikawa



Four-Stage Model of Victim Transformation (Ikawa, 2025)

※Each stage is a convenient classification. In reality, they overlap and are fluid.

※For reference

• A model based on Kurioka (1986)



This study identified four distinct stages in Watanabe's process of becoming a "public accuser" (plaintiff).

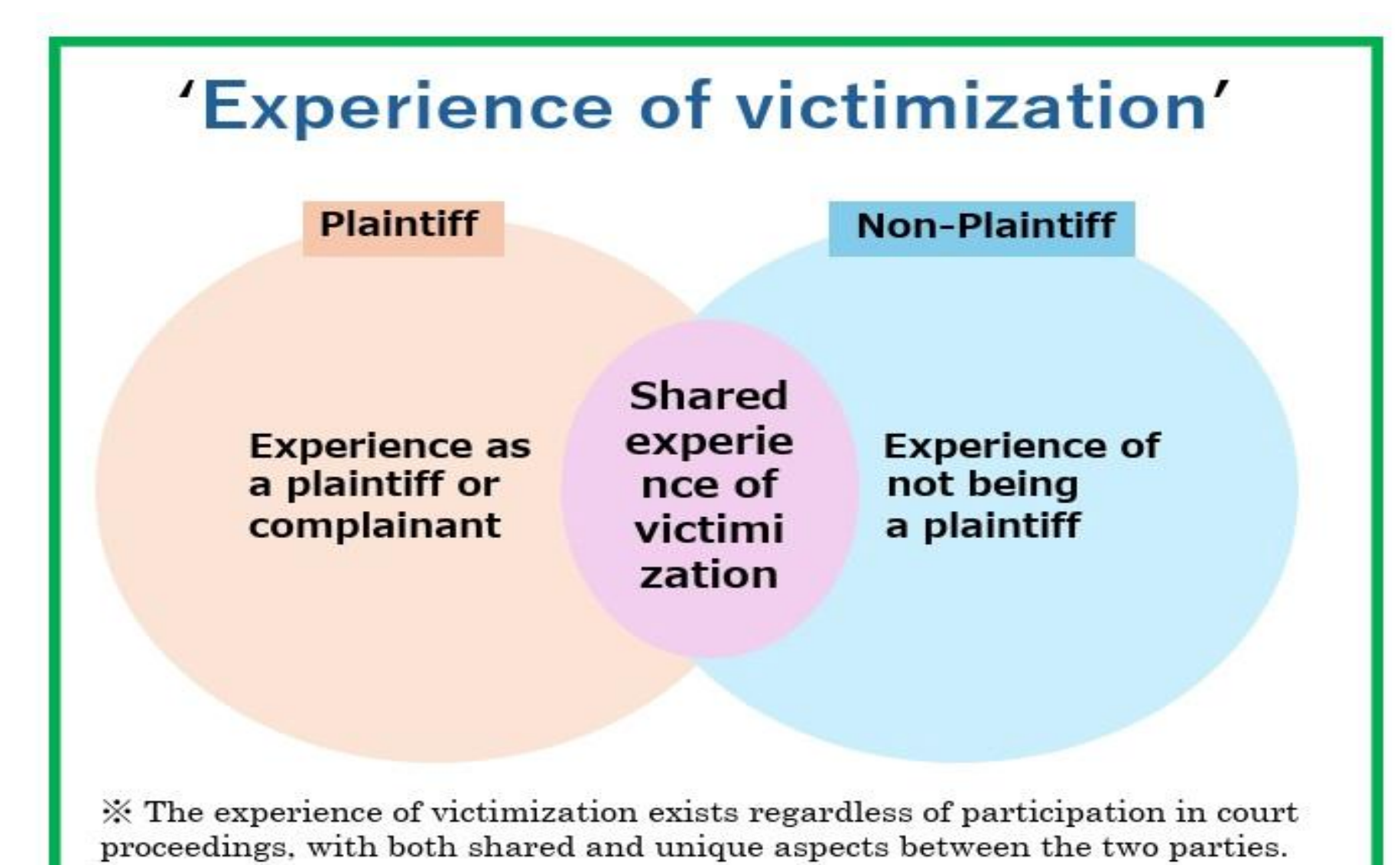
- **Stage ①** : From 'inexplicable symptoms' to 'disability caused by pharmaceutical harm'.
— 'The medicine I took, trusting solely in the power of medicine, was eating away at my legs and eyes' (p.80)
- **Stage ②** : While asserting, "SMON isn't a disease. I want to be called a clioquinol victim" (p. 109), she simultaneously yearned "to be just a human being" and wrestled with the decision to join the lawsuit.
- **Stage ③** : 'In this inescapable struggle, it is essential to transform contradictions through one's own body' (p.195).
Inspired by her classmate's words, she redefines the lawsuit as 'a forum to denounce societal contradictions,' leading to her decision to become a plaintiff.
- **Stage ④** : 'To reclaim my existence in this world, which had been alienated from society due to pharmaceutical harm' (p.243), she embarks on a struggle to regain 'ordinary life' and dignity.

Considerations & Contributions to Disability Studies

- Watanabe's account should be understood not as an "experience of illness" but as an "experience of victimization".
- While joining the lawsuit granted her recognition, it also entails the constraint of identity fixation.
- Attention to the ambivalence in victims' narratives is crucial for deepening our understanding of structural suffering—the distress arising from social exclusion and lack of recognition—within disability studies.

Conclusion

- Victims' transformations are complex and multi-staged, and cannot be reduced to the simplistic framework of patients becoming victims and then accusers, as proposed in prior research (Kurioka 1986).
- This study demonstrates the importance of including not only the narratives of "accusers" as court participants, but also the "experience of victimization" itself – encompassing silence, conflict, and other elements – in the analytical framework.
- By introducing the perspective of "experiences of harm", pharmaceutical harm research can be liberated from being a "litigation-centered narrative", enabling the complex realities of victims to be visualized from multiple angles.



Key References

- 1) Kurioka, Mikihide, 1986, 'Aspects of the Meaning World of Drug Victims,' in Hozuki, Makoto (ed.), The Sociology of Drug Harm: The Irony of Drugs and Humans, Sekai Shisōsha. (In Japanese)
- 2) Sato, Akihiko, 2023, 'The Definition and Concept of Drug-Induced Harm,' in Sato, Akihiko and Hongo, Masatake (eds.), What is Drug-Induced Harm? – A New Sociology of Drug-Induced Harm, Minerva Shobo. (In Japanese)
- 3) Watanabe, Rieko, 1975, Prelude to Love and Struggle: Campus Youth Walked with S.M.O.N., Rippu Shobo. (In Japanese)