The Impact of Life Stages on Parent-child Relationships: A Comparative Look at Japanese & American University Students

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Introduction

Adolescence is often considered a period in a person's life when important physiological and emotional changes occur (Erikson,1963; Friedenberg, 1962; Hamburg, 1974). When discussing adolescence, however, it should not be forgotten that it is just another stage in one's life span between birth and death. By adopting a life-span perspective, researchers are more likely to consider contextual factors which affect adolescents and less likely to ignore the possibility of the individual going through many changes in his or her life span (Lerner, 1987). This paper uses data obtained from undergraduate university students in the United States and Japan to address questions related to adolescence.

We explore the extent to which relationships between adolescents and parents reveal cross-cultural similarities or differences. We also explore how changes in child-parent relationships, and the reasons which purportedly account for those changes, reveal cross-cultural similarities or differences.

While many would assume that major differences in family relationships naturally exist between two societies that are as culturally different as the United States and Japan, there is a theoretical reason to anticipate the opposite. Goode (1970) proposed that families in industrialized societies show structural and normative changes which tend to converge. If this is true, then patterns of parent-child relationships in the two societies should reveal considerable similarities.

We provide a brief overview of this topic and then present an analysis of data collected from a sample of Japanese and American undergraduates. We identify similarities and differences in the parent-child relationships, as well as the changes that occurred over time. Our analysis offers some grounds for suggesting that industrialization, as Goode argues, could create similar patterns of change in relationships within the family in culturally dissimilar societies.

The Invention of Adolescence

The concepts of childhood and adolescence did not exist in Europe during the Middle Ages. Philippe Aries (1962) tells us that medieval children were not treated much differently from adults once they no longer needed to wear swaddling clothes. Age-grading was not practiced and young children often worked, or even married, during what are today considered elementary school years.

This situation changed largely as a result of Catholic Church leaders adopting the belief that while children were born innocent, they were corrupted by the sinful ways of the adults. Clerics began to preach that it was a parental duty to keep children as innocent as possible. The gradual dissemination of this view among the middle-class contributed to the gradual decline of apprenticeship and the rise of schools as we know them today. Newer schools ultimately assigned pupils to age-graded classes starting at around age six, a practice which gradually eliminated the earlier pattern of classes that included a wide range of ages of pupils.

The construction of childhood as a separate stage in a person's life began during the fifteenth century in Europe and spread slowly throughout the continent. Adolescence was invented several hundred years later. Gillis (1981) documents the social conditions that created adolescence in England during the period from 1870 to 1900. According to Bakan (1976) adolescence came into existence in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The development of adolescence as a stage separate from childhood and before adulthood required legitimizing a non-adult status for those who formerly were considered old enough to work. The passage of child-labor laws, which restricted employment of children younger than sixteen years old and the establishment of a separate judicial system to treat minors promoted the belief that teenagers were not quite adults. This, in turn, made mandatory school attendance until age sixteen the norm throughout most of the nation (Bakan, 1976).

The crystallization of adolescence as a separate stage in a person's life also had a noteworthy effect on the life trajectories of the American population by creating a period wherein many young people are in a state of psychosocial limbo; they are no longer children, but not yet legally adults. This contradiction probably accounts for some of the behavioral patterns that we associate with adolescents in this country. The behavioral manifestations of this psychosocial separation is represented by age-graded cliques as well as interest in engaging in activities such as sexual contacts, driving a car, and drinking, which are supposed to be reserved for those deemed to be legally "adult."

Adolescence in Japan seems to have become fairly similar to adolescence in the United States. Those under twenty cannot vote and those under eighteen are not tried as adults for minor crimes. Like their American counterparts, there are Japanese youths who conduct car and motorcycle races on city streets, but the majority of Japanese adolescents, especially males, view formal education and career preparation as their primary tasks.

It seems reasonable to suggest, however, that leaving high school and either taking a full-time job or enrolling in a university represent visible turning points in the lives of both American and Japanese adolescents. In both societies, full-time employment is likely to change the status of the adolescent with the family since

both parents and children view this as a significant step toward adulthood.

Similarly, becoming a university student is probably viewed in both societies as important preparation for adulthood. Although it does prolong the financially dependent status of the adolescent, most students in the United States see "growing up" as one of the main purposes of being a university student (Becker, et al., 1968). This is an important change in perspective from that which characterized their years as a high school pupil. Japanese university students, on the other hand, supposedly enjoy their university years as a "honeymoon" between the secondary school rigors of preparing for university entrance examinations and the anticipated demands of work after graduation. It is likely, however, that having done well on the entrance examination and being accepted by a university provides them the status of a future white-collar worker and that may be psychosocially quite meaningful as a turning point in their lives.

The Problem

American adolescents seem to present more problems of control to their parents than adolescents in other societies (Kandel and Lesser, 1972). Japanese adolescents are depicted in the American scholarly writings as extremely docile in comparison to American adolescents. Given the rather brief overview presented above, what reasonable questions can be asked about the relationship between adolescents and their parents in the United States and Japan? A logical hypothesis is that there will be a higher incidence of tension and conflict between parents and adolescent children in the United States than in Japan. Whether this popular belief is supported empirically constitutes our major line of inquiry.

The Sample

This questionnaire was originally constructed by one of the co-authors of this paper to study the effects of families on the attitudes of Japanese university students. Parts of this questionnaire were translated from Japanese to English and some of the items were deliberately left open-ended in order to obtain as much information as possible. The questionnaire was administered to 330 American undergraduates late in 1989. The Japanese version was administered to 349 undergraduates in May 1990.

The American sample includes only the White respondents and is more heavily female than the Japanese sample (75 percent versus 61 percent). The American undergraduates' ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-nine years (with twenty as the mode), while the Japanese sample is much more homogeneous, with ages ranging from twenty to twenty-five years (with twenty-one as the mode). Eighty-six percent of the American and 98 percent of the Japanese students lived with their fathers most of their lives. Ninety-nine percent of the Americans and 98 percent of the Japanese students grew up with their biological mothers. Both samples comprise large numbers of education majors and most students had fairly similar socio-economic backgrounds as indicated by their fathers' educational attainment.

Variables

We used nationality and gender as the independent variables in this paper. Since we viewed this as an exploratory study, we were primarily interested in discovering the cross-national similarities and differences between our two samples and did not collect much demographic information from our respondents.

As dependent variables, we used the student responses from a few items which were intended to assess perceived relationships with parents over their relatively short life span. The first item asked, "Have your opinions about your father changed since you were a child?" The students were asked to check "No," "Yes, once," or "Yes, more than once." If they answered "Yes," they were then asked to respond to several open-ended items which were to indicate when, why, and how their opinions changed.

While the open-ended items provided a wealth of information, they did pose some difficulties in coding. We used more than eighty categories each to code the "Why?" and "How?" responses. A few responses included fairly unique experiences such as a parent's death, a student's treatment for emotional problems, a student "learned how babies were made," etc. Responses were coded into conceptually coherent categories in order to enable a comparison by nationality and gender.

We first categorized the responses to the "How?" question in terms of whether the response indicated an emotionally positive, neutral, or negative change. Recorded responses were categorized as "became better," "neither," or "became worse." We also recoded the responses to the "Why?" question in terms of the attributed source of the change. We selected all responses which attributed a change in attitude to the student and labeled those as "change in self" responses. Typical responses placed in this category were statements such as "I grew up and developed a better understanding," and "I matured and saw things differently." When the source of the change was attributed to events such as "mother took a job" or "father had an affair," we categorized such statements as "other change."

Results

The first important finding is that a majority of both Japanese and American university students experienced changes in their attitudes towards their parents. Those most likely to report changes in attitudes toward their fathers were the American females. Table 1.1 shows that 70 percent claimed that their attitudes toward their fathers had changed at least once by the time they were surveyed. The group that reported the fewest attitudinal changes towards their fathers was the Japanese female students; 52 percent of them claimed that their attitudes towards their fathers had not changed at all.

In contrast, both American and Japanese students were less likely to report changed opinions towards their mothers. The Japanese male undergraduates showed the highest percentage (77 percent) of those who reported "no change" in the way they viewed

Table 1.1
Frequency of Changes in Opinion of American & Japanese
University Students toward Fathers

Percentage of:	American Males	American Females	Japanese Males	Japanese Females
No change	36	30	42	52
Yes, once	18	21	31	25
Yes, more than once	46	49	27	22
N	**76**	**231**	**134**	**206**

Table 1.2
Frequency of Changes in Opinion of American & Japanese
University Students toward Mothers

Percentage of:	American Males	American Females	Japanese Males	Japanese Females
No change	63	46	77	62
Yes, once	18	24	12	28
Yes, more than once	19	30	11	10
N	**79**	**245**	**132**	**210**

Table 2.1
American & Japanese Students' Perceptions of How Their Opinions
Toward Their Fathers Have Changed

Percentage of:	American Males	American Females	Japanese Males	Japanese Females
No change	77	62	58	55
Yes, once	16	26	26	32
Yes, more than once	7	12	17	14
N	**44**	**159**	**66**	**88**

Table 2.2
American & Japanese Students' Perceptions of How Their Opinions
Toward Their Mothers Have Changed

Percentage of:	American Males	American Females	Japanese Males	Japanese Females
No change	43	69	33	59
Yes, once	52	19	57	31
Yes, more than once	4	12	10	9
N	**23**	**126**	**21**	**64**

Table 3.1
Reasons Given by American & Japanese Students
For changes in Opinion toward Fathers

Percentage of:	American Males	American Females	Japanese Males	Japanese Females
Change in self	78	66	64	77
Other reasons	22	34	36	23
N	**45**	**158**	**67**	**88**

Table 3.2
American & Japanese Students' Perceptions of How Their Opinions
Toward Their Mothers Have Changed

Percentage of:	American Males	American Females	Japanese Males	Japanese Females
Change in self	48	67	73	65
Other reasons	52	33	27	35
N	**25**	**126**	**22**	**66**

their mothers (Table 1.2). This finding is consistent with the depictions of many Japanese mothers devoting themselves to their sons' academic credentials and future careers.

The American females were the most likely to report changed opinions towards their mothers. Journalistic accounts of adolescent females in the United States suggest that they often have stormy relationships with their parents over "control issues," such as appropriate attire and dating issues. It is reasonable to suspect that this is due to parents supervising their daughters' behavior more closely than their sons' behavior. When we asked students to indicate the ages when their opinions changed towards their fathers and mothers, the mode was eighteen years old for American and Japanese students (both male and female) vis-à-vis their fathers. The common turning point in the relationship seems to be enrollment in a university.

In reference to a change in attitude toward their mothers, however, the mode was sixteen years old for American males, eighteen years old for American females, fifteen years old for Japanese males, and eighteen years old for Japanese females. The variation by gender vis-à-vis mothers has not received much attention by those who study families, although this study indicated that boys seem to undergo a change in their relationship with their mother a little earlier than girls

Our data suggests that Japanese university students are a little more likely than American students to report stable relationships with their parents. On the other hand, there also are interesting differences by gender within each society. If we attempt to ascertain the direction of the changes, it is clear that most of the students perceive their relationship with their fathers to have improved. This is especially true for the American students, as shown in Table 2.1. More than 75 percent of the American males and 62 percent of the American females reported that their opinions of their fathers had improved by the time of this survey.

This pattern suggests that many students had some feelings of antagonism towards their fathers, which we suspect began sometime during their earlier adolescent years and is the most likely explanation for them to report that their opinions towards their fathers had "become better."

When describing how their opinions towards their mother changed, both American and Japanese females were more likely than the males to report a change for the better. Tables 1.2 and 2.2 suggest that females in both societies are more likely than males to have difficulties in their relationships with their mothers while in secondary school.

An analysis of the data to see why opinions toward their parents changed indicates that students most often attributed the change to themselves. Most of the students said that their opinions changed because they had changed, matured, or gained a better understanding of their father or mother (Table 3.1 and 3.2).

Conclusion

Several interesting patterns in American and Japanese parent-child relationships were revealed in this preliminary study. Our sample indicates that American females are the most likely

group to have problematical relationships with either or both of their parents. Japanese females' relationships with their fathers seem most likely to remain stable. Japanese males seem to be particularly close to their mothers. Students are much more likely to say that their opinions of their parents improved rather than worsened.

We can conclude that our data support the view that there are cultural differences between American university students and Japanese university students in their relationships with their parents. We can also say that the similarities in these patterns by gender and the changes in relationships reported by the students seem to suggest some degree of cultural convergence between the two countries. In both countries, becoming a university student seems to result in an improvement of the parent-child relationship.

In industrialized societies, most children do not automatically inherit their parents' occupation and have to compete with others to obtain a desirable status in life. This places parents and their children in a contradictory relationship. Many parents want to control their children's lives to promote achievement and to minimize behaviors that most adults define as self-destructive. Many children, on the other hand, desire more autonomy than what their parents are willing to allow. This potentially conflictual relationship is especially acute during adolescence and the data from Japanese and American undergraduates support this interpretation of family relationships in industrialized societies.

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