The Father Role as Viewed by Mothers of Japanese Junior College Women

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Abstract

Ninety one middle-class Japanese women recalled and compared the roles of their husbands as fathers, at different stages of their college-age daughters' lives. They also compared the fathers with their own fathers, and described the problems faced by fathers in their generation. Most participants were from small cities and towns in the Tokai region (Aichi, Mie and Gifu) of Japan, and responded by mail to a 4-page questionnaire. The purpose of the survey was to generate research questions rather than to test hypotheses. Most fathers reported spending the greatest amount of time with daughters during infancy and early childhood, but a majority reported feeling the most responsibility for their daughters when they were in secondary school or college. Perceptions of the period of greatest paternal influence were spread evenly across childhood and adolescence, and several mothers were unable to give an example of paternal influence. The two periods at which fathers were said to be closest to their daughters were the preschool and college years. Finally, mothers suggested adolescence and the college years as the periods during which the paternal role is most important. Mothers generated about the same number of differences and similarities in comparing their husbands with their own fathers. The most frequently cited difficulties facing fathers of daughters were in discipline, understanding of females' feelings, and communication. The mothers' responses were compared to those of fathers in a previous survey (Shwalb, 1993). The results were also
discussed in terms of characteristics of the sample, and several avenues for more direct follow-up research on fathers were also considered.

Introduction

Two themes appear to dominate current discussion of the paternal role in Japan. First it is frequently stated that the role of Japanese fathers is negligible, and that the mother has almost exclusive responsibility for child-rearing and child development within the family (Shwalb, Imaizumi, & Nakazawa, 1985). For instance, it is noted
that since a large proportion of fathers leave home early in the morning and return from work after 8 PM each night, they have no time to fulfill a paternal role. Therefore the structure of the modern Japanese family is seen as a mother-child alliance with an absent father (Vogel, 1992). A new line of research on father absence concerns men who are transferred alone to cities away from their families ("tanshinfunin"). This research reflects the view that Japanese fathers' influence ironically lies in their absence (Nakazawa, Tanaka, & Nakazawa, 1993).

A second theme in Japanese writings about fathers suggests that the paternal role is changing in Japan, and may become very significant for child development (Kashiwagi, 1993). For instance, Chiga et al. (1991) reports that Japanese fathers who witnessed their children's birth (a rare occurrence in Japan) became relatively more involved as fathers throughout infancy. And as Shiomi (1989) wrote, parenting is a learned role, so that Japanese fathers have the potential to influence their children in much the same way as do mothers.

Examination of the literature on fathering in Japan indicates that the quantity of research did not accelerate over the past generation, as it did in the United States (Lamb, 1985). In addition, two criticisms concerning the quality of Japanese father research might be directed at the present study: (1) data from mothers about fathers is more common than data from fathers themselves, and (2) self-report measures, while a convenient approach, are of limited value as assessments of actual paternal behavior. Since it is said to be difficult to contact busy Japanese fathers, data has been collected on such topics as mothers' and children's perceptions of their fathers (Fukaya, 1978).
The results of numerous questionnaire surveys provide valuable information about Japanese fathers (e.g. Fukaya & Morikawa, 1990), but very few studies of actual father behavior are available. The present study also consisted of self-reports, but took an approach different from previous surveys.

The purpose of this survey was to take a cross-generational, developmental and general view of the Japanese paternal role, by asking middle-aged women (mothers of junior college women) to think back on their husbands' experiences as fathers over the past two decades. The questionnaire developed was intended to generate research issues rather than to probe specific hypotheses. **Research Questions**

The present investigation concerned three issues. As an exploratory study, this survey first sought to characterize the father-daughter relationship at different developmental periods between infancy and early adulthood. Mothers were asked to look at seven periods of their daughters' lives (infancy/toddlerhood; preschool; lower elementary school; upper elementary school; junior high school; high school; and the college years). They were asked to identify the period when their husbands spent the most time with their children, felt most responsible for the child, had the greatest influence, felt closest to the daughter, and were generally most important as fathers. These variables are distinct phenomena, and a previous survey of fathers (Shwalb, 1993) indicated that men treat these questions as separate issues.

A second issue concerned considered how fathers are compared to fathers from the previous generation. Fathers of junior college
students in 1993 were born during or shortly after World War II, and thus were influenced in their own childhood by the pre-war mentality, by which fathers were the legal and moral authority within the family. Thus the present study does not study how fathers are changing nowadays or may change in the near future. Rather it reports information about fathers who may represent a cohort in transition between pre-war and post-modern fathers. Similarities and differences were reported here by the mother, who may view her husband's behavior more objectively than could the father himself.

Thirdly, results are summarized below concerning mothers’ perceptions of the problems facing fathers. Since the role of the Japanese father is both changing and ambiguous, it is important to consider what are the areas of difficulty for fathers. Such information would be of value to those who seek to assist fathers in coping with their role in the family.

Method

Procedures

Questionnaires were distributed to attendees at an official gathering of parents of junior college students in Nagoya City, in October of 1993. The instructions asked that only the mother herself complete the form, and that she mail the completed form to the author in a stamped pre-addressed envelope. A total of 90 questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire (copies are available from the author) was four pages in length, and consisted of four main sections: (1) personal and family demographics, (2) comparisons of the time spent together, sense of responsibility, perceived influence, feelings of closeness, and general
importance of fathers at different stages of their daughters' lives, (3) comparisons of the father with her own father, and (4) the image of the "good" vs. "bad" father. In addition, mothers were asked to describe their husbands' greatest difficulties as parents. Only sections (1) and (2) included forced-choice questions.

Participants

The following summarizes the demographic characteristics of the mothers and their families. Their ages were in the mid-forties, i.e. most of these mothers were born during or shortly after World War II. Their modal (63%) level of education was a high school degree, while 13% had only studied through middle school, 14% had attended a junior college and 3% had gone to a four-year college. Most of the mothers were currently employed (70%), and worked approximately 30 hours per week on the average. Most of their husbands were reported as high school graduates who currently worked as managers or section-heads at companies. The majority of fathers therefore worked as "salarymen" rather than in family-owned businesses. Two grandparents lived presently in 15% of the families, and one grandparent (most often the husband's mother) lived in 31% of the families. Thus multigenerational families are slightly over-represented in the present sample. Finally, the number of children was small, with two in 57% of the families, and three in 30% of the families. Very few families (only 7%) had only one child, and 7% of mothers reported having four children. Family size data are comparable to cohort statistics reported for middle-class Japanese families, although the Japanese family has become even smaller and more nuclear in recent years (Japan Aiiku Research Institute, 1989).
Results

Retrospective Views on Stages of Father-Child Relationship

The questionnaire mainly concerned the mother's perceptions of the father's relationship with his daughter (18-19 years old at the time of the study). To gain an overall developmental perspective on the paternal role, we asked mothers to compare the different stages of the daughters' development, between infancy and the present. Each mother was asked to choose the stage of the daughter's development when her husband: (1) spent the most time with her, (2) felt the greatest amount of responsibility, (3) had the most influence, (4) felt personally closest to her, and (5) thought his role as father was generally most important. Mothers also described the contents of the paternal responsibilities, influence, etc. The following summarizes mothers' choices of age periods for each of the five questions. Table 1 displays the distributions of these choices, and also presents the data from fathers (as reported in Shwalb, 1993).

Table 1
Mothers' Choices of Life Stages: Percentages for Five Forced-Choice Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Infancy</th>
<th>Preschool Low Elem</th>
<th>Up Elem</th>
<th>J.H.S.</th>
<th>H.S.</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When did he spend the most time with his daughter?</td>
<td>23 (23)</td>
<td>38 (38)</td>
<td>26 (19)</td>
<td>7 (4)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When did he have the most responsibility for his daughter?</td>
<td>10 (8)</td>
<td>7 (6)</td>
<td>5 (14)</td>
<td>4 (26)</td>
<td>24 (28)</td>
<td>22 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When do you think he had the most influence on her?</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
<td>17 (16)</td>
<td>17 (14)</td>
<td>14 (16)</td>
<td>14 (16)</td>
<td>23 (14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When do you think he felt closest to his daughter?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inf.</th>
<th>Pre-LoElem</th>
<th>Up Elem</th>
<th>JHS</th>
<th>HS</th>
<th>College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 (26)</td>
<td>7 (4)</td>
<td>6 (11)</td>
<td>17 (15)</td>
<td>26 (21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When do you think the paternal role is most important?</td>
<td>0 (10)</td>
<td>14 (17)</td>
<td>5 (11)</td>
<td>32 (26)</td>
<td>19 (13)</td>
<td>24 (13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 90. Percentages of fathers' responses (see Shwalb, 1993) are given in parentheses.

Time spent together. The mother was first asked at what stage of the daughter's development the father spent the most time with her. Most (about 80%) selected either infancy, preschool or the lower elementary school years as the period of greatest contact. Here, preschool (38%) was most frequent, followed by infancy/toddlerhood (23%) and lower elementary school (26%). The most frequently reported activities were taking the daughter on short outings, and playing or bathing with the child. Very few mothers chose either upper elementary school (7%), junior high school (2%), high school (1%) or college (2%) as the time of greatest father-daughter contact. In simple terms, these data suggest that fathers and daughters appear to do very little together after the girl is 10 years old.

Feelings of responsibility. Nearly the opposite trend was apparent for this question, compared with the question about amount of time. Most mothers (75%) reported the greatest amount of paternal responsibility for their daughters as during the junior high school, high school or college years. The years of junior college (when paternal responsibility concerned the transition into the adult world), and lower elementary school, were also cited by about 15% of fathers as periods of greatest responsibility. Two main areas of paternal responsibility concerned (1) helping the child to make educational and
career choices, and (2) setting an example of how a mature adult behaves and thinks. Very few mothers reported infancy or early childhood as periods of particular responsibility. So while fathers spend the most time with daughters during early childhood, their interactions are mainly in leisure activities. Actual responsibility for the child's development is left to the mother.

Perceived influence. Compared to the two previous measures, perceived influence was spread out evenly across the life stages, between preschool and college age. The content of this influence of course changed, beginning in early childhood with concern for the child's safety and nutrition. The most frequently reported types of influence were (1) as a support for the mother, (2) showing the child the value of hard work, and (3) assisting the daughter in her choices regarding high school, college and employment. It was also notable that 15% of mothers did not answer this question, several could not give a specific example of paternal influence, and a few others stated that the fathers had no significant influence on daughters. This indicates that it may be difficult for mothers to understand how fathers influence their daughters.

Perceived closeness to the child. When asked at what stage fathers seemed to be emotionally closest to their daughters, the most frequent choices were the preschool and college years (26% each). High school (17%) was the next most frequently chosen period, and few fathers chose the remaining life stages. The perceived closeness in preschool years coincide with the reports of frequent shared activities between father and daughter, and the closeness reported for the college
years may reflect the emergence of an adult-adult relationship.

*The most important period of the father role.* The modal response to the question of "during what period is the paternal role generally most important?" was that of junior high school (32%), followed by the college years (24%), high school (19%), and the preschool years (14%). The importance of the preschool years was related to the fact that fathers shared the most activities with daughters at this age. In the junior high school years fathers were considered important because this is a period when daughters were most rebellious, insecure and increasingly interested in the opposite sex. In high school and in college, fathers' importance was again related to their impact on children's life choices. Mothers assigned very little importance to the paternal role during the periods of infancy (2%) and elementary school (10%). As in the case of paternal reports (Shwalb, 1993) it was clear that "importance" was distinguished by fathers from "influence," "closeness," and "time spent together." *Mothers Compare Their Husbands and Their Own Fathers*

*Similarities.* When mothers were asked to compare their husbands (as fathers) with their own fathers, they listed approximately the same number of similarities and differences. Examples of the similarities are given in Table 2.
Table 2

Examples of Cross-Generational Similarities Between Fathers *Both my husband and my father are/were:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hard workers</th>
<th>Gentle</th>
<th>Stubborn</th>
<th>The silent type</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Sensitive</th>
<th>Interested in the child</th>
<th>Cheerful</th>
<th>Responsible toward the family</th>
<th>Heavy drinkers</th>
<th>Active taking the child on outings</th>
<th>Responsible member of community</th>
<th>Irritable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequently listed similarities were that both the husband and mothers’ own father were (1) hard workers, (2) gentle, (3) stubborn, and (4) talked very little (“silent types”).

**Differences from fathers.** Table 3 displays several examples of generational differences in paternal characteristics. The most frequently cited differences were that the mothers’ husbands tended to be (1) involved in more activities outside of work, (2) more concerned with the child’s education, (3) more gentle toward the child, and (4) materially more affluent, compared to fathers from the previous generation.
Cross-Generational Differences Between Fathers

Compared with my own father, my husband: Has interests outside work Is concerned with the child's education Is gentle with the child Has more money
Tries to be liked by the child Has a short temper Is strict with the child Drinks less alcohol Communicates with the child Is sensitive Plays with the child Helps with housework Is less irritable Goes out more with the family

The Problems Faced by Fathers

Mothers cited various difficult aspects of the father-daughter relationship. Examples of these problem areas are listed in Table 4, and included the following. Most often, mothers reported that fathers had difficulty disciplining girls. The next most frequently cited problem was that, as opposite-sex parents, fathers had difficulty understanding the feelings and thoughts of their daughters. Additionally, some mothers stated that (1) fathers did not understand what their role in raising a daughter should be, (2) because their

Table 4

Cross-Generational Differences Between Fathers
husbands were raised by pre-war born men that they had difficulty relating to females in an egalitarian manner, (3) the husbands often would not listen to the daughters' viewpoint, and (4) the fathers had difficulty communicating. It was notable that aspects listed as "problems" in the father-daughter relationship did not concern issues such as life decisions, etc., which had been cited as aspects of paternal influence. Rather, fathers' greatest difficulties seemed to lie in their emotional relationship with the daughter and in their inability to communicate.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulties Faced by Fathers of Daughters</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding daughter's feelings</td>
<td>Cannot understand own paternal role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot relate to females democratically</td>
<td>Cannot relate to females democratically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not listen to child's viewpoint</td>
<td>Does not listen to child's viewpoint</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty communicating</td>
<td>Difficulty communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talks to the child through me</td>
<td>Talks to the child through me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty understanding teenagers</td>
<td>Difficulty understanding teenagers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating to the school and community</td>
<td>Relating to the school and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child will not listen to him</td>
<td>Child will not listen to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sees females as inferior</td>
<td>Sees females as inferior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-tempered</td>
<td>Short-tempered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuses to be wrong</td>
<td>Refuses to be wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never at home</td>
<td>Never at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permissive</td>
<td>Permissive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot relate to an adult child</td>
<td>Cannot relate to an adult child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Discussion

The data reported here are preliminary, but this survey suggests several research questions for subsequent research on Japanese fathers. The number of respondents (91) was small, and only fathers of female junior college women were sampled, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Two other factors which complicate the results are that the data (1) are maternal self-reports rather than information directly from the fathers, and (2) represent mothers’ recollections over a 20-year period (and in thinking about their fathers the recollections span over 40 years) rather than contemporary thinking. But since the family must be viewed as a system (Mikyake, 1985), it is important to have multiple perspectives on the paternal role. And the retrospective approach of the questionnaires tapped into the lengthy experiences and wide perspective of the mothers. *Comparison with Paternal Reports*

Compared with the responses of fathers, there was notably little difference in the maternal reports here, indicating that mothers and fathers share a similar perspective on the father-daughter relationship. For instance, the data in Table 1 indicated very similar trends in the periods chosen by men and women as significant with regard to paternal involvement, responsibility, influence, closeness to the daughter, and overall importance of the paternal role. A few differences were observed, but due to the small size of the samples (60 fathers and 91 mothers), the differences are not large enough to indicate a significant difference in maternal and paternal perspectives. One example of a mother/father difference was in response to the question about the most important period for the paternal role. Mothers tended to chose high school and college as a more important period than did fathers, who chose earlier life stages as slightly more important. However, both mothers and fathers chose junior high school most frequently among all the life periods.

There was little difference in the inter-generational comparisons between husbands and their own fathers, or in the problem areas facing fathers, as identified by men and women. One difference that appeared in response to the question about difficulties facing fathers was as follows. Mothers very seldom mentioned father's role in the daughter's education or life decisions as a problem area, and concentrated on the emotional and communicational aspects of the father-daughter relationship. Many fathers, however, cited their difficulty in advising the daughter about her future. This may reflect the difference in perspective from within the father-daughter relationship and from outside the relationship (the mother's perspective). *Implications*

Consideration of the paternal role across life periods raises important questions for future research, and for the future of the Japanese paternal role itself. First, although infancy is cited as a period during which many (23%) fathers spent significant time with their daughters, it is a period which is given very little mention elsewhere by either mothers or fathers. Despite Chiga et al.'s (1991) finding of the importance of early involvement with babies, and the wide belief that the first few years of life are a crucial developmental period, information about our samples of fathers indicates that they were
detached from their children until the preschool years.

Mothers reported that fathers spent the most time with, and felt the closest to their daughters, when they were preschoolers. This is understandable considering the nature of father-daughter activities (play, family outings, etc.). If this period is the time when fathers are willing to (or allowed by society) to be involved with their children, then institutional changes ought to make the most of this tendency and encourage the deepening of the father-preschool daughter relationship.

Fathers reportedly continue to spend time with their daughters when they are in early elementary school, but on all other measures, the tendency observed here was that neither fathers nor mothers have much to say about the father-daughter relationship between the ages of six and twelve. The reasons for this tendency should be explored in further research, and perhaps changes in the work world and the educational system ought to facilitate a re-creation of the father-daughter relationship in middle childhood.

Mothers reported that the father is an important figure during the adolescent period of rebellion, insecurity and identity formation, although it appears that fathers spend very little time with their teenage daughters. It is likely that this is the period during which men are most busy at work, as they rise within the seniority system to managerial positions. It is also likely that this is the developmental period during which men begin to feel out of touch and unable to relate to their daughters as young women. The data indicate therefore that this is an important period, so men need help to fulfill their potentially important role as the fathers of adolescents.

Fathers of high school and junior college women are reportedly an
important source of information about adult values, behavior, and the adult work world, but men's work roles have the effect of separating them further from their daughters in the periods of late adolescence and youth. An interesting contrast within the present data was that while fathers were seen as feeling rather close and responsible towards their college-age daughters, they reportedly have very little time for their daughters, and very little influence. 

Future Research

The preceding paragraphs suggest some issues of importance across developmental periods, but perhaps research is needed most badly concerning the periods of middle childhood and late adolescence/youth. I believe this because the decline of involvement and responsibility during the elementary school years is so clear in the data, and because the need for more and better guidance for young women as they face educational and career choices is so obvious. It has always most convenient to collect questionnaire data through preschools, but perhaps it is necessary now to consider in studies of Japanese fathers how their role changes during developmental periods which have been neglected. 

A Final Note

The mothers who participated in the present survey, and the fathers studied by Shwalb (1993) grew up in a very different environment than did their college-age daughters. Most of these middle-aged individuals did not attend college and were born into an era when Japan struggled psychologically and materially following World War II. Their daughters are generally first-generation college students who grew up in a materially prosperous society. It is therefore predictable
that there is a generation gap between the thinking of today's junior college students and their fathers. Most of the fathers grew up in a family where the father was expected to be an authority and breadwinner, and was not expected to communicate much with his children. Expectations today are that fathers will be friends to their children, will be interested in both the family and in work, and will communicate more with their children than did their own fathers. Our follow-up research will concern junior college students' perceptions of how their fathers' roles changed over time (see Kubo, 1989). Student data will most likely indicate that the "new Japanese father" has not yet arrived historically, but that today's young women desire a major change in the paternal role in the next generation.

References


Note. (*) = Japanese-language reference.