

# Family Roles as Conceived by Japanese Children'

J. L. FISCHER

*Tulane University*

This paper reports and discusses some findings of a study of the personality characteristics of people in various family roles as conceived and reported by a sample of Japanese school children, using the technique developed by the psychologist Charles E. Osgood and his colleagues known as the "semantic differential."<sup>2</sup> This study is part of a research project investigating the effect of household composition on the personality development of Japanese children, although this paper does not deal with household composition except in passing. The field work for this was conducted in the city of Fukuoka, on Northern Kyushu, during the U.S. academic year 1961-1962. As a unit of study we chose a middle-school district in a fairly homogeneous middle-class area of the city and an elementary school district within this. In each grade from third through ninth (i.e., third grade of middle school) three classes were chosen for investigation. This amounted to about 150 students per grade, divided about equally between boys and girls, although the ratio of boys was somewhat higher in the middle school, as was the number of students per class and grade.

The semantic differential questionnaire regarding family members was one of four paper-and-pencil instruments administered during the year. The actual instructions to the children were given in all cases by one man, Mr. Fumitake Yamashita, who assisted full-time during the entire period of field work. Mr. Yamashita had undergone graduate training in anthro-

poloogy and had himself had experience as a teacher in elementary and middle school. The questionnaires were given on a group basis, each class answering separately.

We devised the form of questionnaire in Fukuoka after examining material kindly provided by Prof. Osgood and Dr. Yasumasa Tanaka, then a graduate student of Osgood's. Especially important for our purposes were the results of a factor analysis of a series of adjective scales elicited specifically to describe personality<sup>3</sup> and a series of Japanese adjective scales for personality elicited by Dr. Tanaka for a study he was then conducting.<sup>4</sup> Using this material we endeavored to choose six adjective scales which would cover as many different aspects of the personality as possible. We assumed that most children would be loyal to their families and accordingly tried to avoid adjective pairs one of which would imply severe criticism of family members and therefore be little used by the respondents. On this criterion, scales 1, 4, and 5 were the most successful. The six scales finally chosen were, in order of appearance on the form:

1. "Quiet/noisy" (*shizuka/urusai*)
2. "Bad-natured/good-natured" (*hito ga warui/hito ga yoi*)
3. "Bright/dark" (*akarui/kurai*)
4. "Strong-willed/weak-willed" (*ki ga tsuyoi/ki ga yowai*)
5. "Frightful/gentle" (*kowai/yasashii*)
6. "Different/ordinary" (*kawatte iru/justuu*)

While no factor analysis of these adjective scales in Japanese existed at the time we began our study, the difference in profiles of family members on each of them compared to any other suggests that they are all fairly independent of each other. Additional scales would have been of interest but after pretests we felt that more than six would have been an undue imposition on the time of the teachers and school children.

The family members listed as "concepts" to be rated on the adjective scales included those relatives, from the child's point of view, who might be expected to be living in a traditional Japanese stem family household: grandfather, grandmother, the two parents, two older siblings, and two younger siblings. We also added "self." Of course, not all students had all of these

relatives in their homes or even in existence. We asked them to rate an imaginary relative or a friend's relative if they themselves had none in a certain category. In the case of older and younger siblings there is no definite limit to the number of relatives one might have in each category. We therefore asked those who had more than one in a category to rate the most extreme individual. For instance, if a boy had three elder brothers and four younger sisters he should think of his eldest brother and youngest sister as making the ratings. We also asked the children to indicate for each relative whether or not they had such a relative. Using this information we intend to analyze the differences between real and imaginary relatives at a later date.

TABLE I

MEAN RATINGS ON SIX ADJECTIVES ASSIGNED BY EGO TO SELF AND EIGHT RELATIVES (BY SEX AND SCHOOL GROUP)

Relative	Elementary School N = 285						Middle School N = 240					
	BOYS						GIRLS					
	Adjective*						Adjective					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
GFa	2.56	4.02	1.97	2.23	3.54	3.92	2.71	4.17	2.08	2.28	3.79	3.81
GMo	2.16	4.31	1.97	2.68	4.10	4.19	2.54	4.09	2.15	2.69	4.06	4.04
Fa	2.73	4.16	1.77	1.88	3.17	4.13	2.85	4.06	1.98	2.17	3.32	4.08
Mo	2.50	4.23	1.73	2.94	3.59	4.38	2.66	4.22	1.80	2.53	3.86	4.14
EBr	3.00	3.87	1.84	1.97	3.19	4.02	2.98	4.03	1.80	2.32	3.60	4.03
ESi	2.82	3.75	1.78	2.74	3.66	4.15	2.70	4.02	1.76	2.65	4.02	4.20
Ego	2.90	3.92	1.70	2.51	3.54	4.17	2.77	4.07	1.69	2.78	3.84	4.12
YBr	3.61	3.54	1.71	2.42	3.40	3.83	3.55	3.84	1.62	2.22	3.67	3.97
YSi	3.22	3.72	1.85	2.68	3.55	3.72	3.14	3.74	1.68	2.53	3.76	4.12
	Elementary School N = 283						Middle School N = 208					
	BOYS						GIRLS					
	Adjective*						Adjective					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
GFa	2.58	4.31	2.37	2.48	3.83	3.90	2.72	4.25	2.16	2.59	3.86	3.93
GMo	2.32	4.41	2.05	2.89	4.23	4.21	2.68	4.12	2.16	2.64	4.10	4.18
Fa	2.74	4.90	1.75	2.06	3.74	4.23	2.89	4.23	1.92	2.33	3.65	4.18
Mo	2.62	4.28	1.66	2.55	3.78	4.50	2.86	4.32	1.50	2.51	4.00	4.55
EBr	3.23	3.83	1.73	2.17	3.59	4.08	3.08	4.08	1.60	2.31	3.82	4.14
ESi	2.58	4.13	1.76	2.63	3.98	4.24	2.62	4.25	1.59	2.55	4.11	4.37
Ego	2.91	3.88	1.78	2.65	3.85	4.16	3.07	4.01	1.69	2.73	3.70	4.32
YBr	3.55	3.67	1.56	2.44	3.52	4.15	3.65	3.93	1.47	2.37	3.68	4.01
YSi	3.18	3.84	1.55	2.47	3.81	4.01	3.29	3.96	1.59	2.38	3.87	4.14

\* Scoring was on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 indicating most and 5 indicating least or the opposite of the trait specified by the adjective. Key to adjectives:

- |               |                 |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1—Quiet       | 4—Strong-willed |
| 2—Bad-natured | 5—Frightening   |
| 3—Bright      | 6—Different     |

A summary of the statistical results is given in Table I.

In this table our sample of students is divided into four groups: boys and girls in elementary school and in middle school. For each of the four groups of students, the table gives the average value for each kind of relative on each of the six personality adjective scales. The scales each contained five points, one of which the respondent was required to choose. For statistical purposes we have assigned the value of "1" to the extreme position by the first adjective of each scale pair with successive numbers up to "5" for the extreme position by the second (opposite) adjective. Thus, for example, on the first scale "1" means "very quiet," "2" means "somewhat quiet," "3" means "neither quiet nor noisy" or "about equally quiet and noisy," "4" means "somewhat noisy," and "5" means "very noisy."

Needless to say, English translations of the adjective scales are only approximate and for convenience in reference. For instance, the adjective *akarui*, here translated as "bright," might also have been translated as "sunny" or "cheerful," since it refers in Japanese to disposition rather than intelligence as it does in English. Nevertheless its basic meaning is that of "bright" in an optical sense. The meaning of the adjective scales will be somewhat clarified in the discussion of results which follows.

A full discussion of the contents of the table would require considerable space. Moreover, some of the differences in ratings of relatives are rather small and statistically very unreliable. I shall therefore confine myself to noting and discussing briefly for each of the six scales the maximum contrasts between relatives, and certain other outstanding patterns which seem to say something of interest about family structure in our sample.

Scale 1. "Quiet/noisy." For both sexes and both age groups of respondents, male relatives are consistently rated as "noisier" than the corresponding female relative. All four sex-age groups rate "younger brother" as "noisiest." Both age groups of boys and the elementary-school girls rate "grandmother" as the "quietest," although middle-school girls rate "elder sister" as more "quiet" than any other family member. The middle-school girls' rating of "elder sister" as most "quiet" may reflect the increasing pressure on children for proper behavior as they enter adolescence and approach adulthood. "Quietness" would seem to be a

generally desirable personality trait, but one which is especially important for women.

Scale 2. "Bad-natured/good-natured." In spite of the frequent use of the phrase *yoi ko*, "good children," in Japan, the children themselves rate all the adult relatives as "better-natured" than their age-mates. For elementary-school children of either sex the "best-natured" adult is "grandmother," while for middle-school children the "best-natured" adult is "mother." The shift from "grandmother" to "mother" may be due to the declining importance of grandparents for the middle-school children, due to death and progressive enfeeblement. The middle-school children have a higher opinion of their elder siblings' "good nature" than do the elementary-school children. This suggests that socialization is having a cumulative effect on the children: by the time they get to middle or high school their dispositions in this respect are approaching adult standards.

The one exception to the general tendency of the younger children to rate their peers as relatively "bad-natured" is found with respect to elementary-school girls rating their older sisters as rather "good-natured." That this effect is already noticeable among the elementary-school girls suggests that socialization pressures on girls may start or become effective at an earlier age than for boys.

Scale 3. "Bright/dark." "Brightness" as applied to personality in Japan appears to be a mixture of at least two factors: (1) a stoic cheerfulness which successfully conceals all displeasures; (2) genuine cheerfulness, which is mainly the result of indulgence and being given service, and also of physical health. Each sex tends to think of younger siblings of the same sex as especially "bright." Maybe this is partly the result of envy of the indulgence received by the younger sibling, with the thought, "If I received all that attention I would be 'bright.'" Generally children would tend to be more envious of siblings of the same sex.

Both boys and girls agree that grandparents are the least "bright." Apparently the loss of vitality and health accompanying old age is enough to darken the lives of the old people, in spite of the relatively great respect and indulgence which they traditionally receive in Japan. Alternately, one might take the "dark-

ening" of the grandparents as an index of the cultural decline of respect for old age among the families of our sample children. Personally, in view of other evidence, I doubt that this shift accounts for much of the results.

Scale 4. "Strong-willed/weak-willed." For both sexes, "father" and then "elder brother" are "strongest-willed." This would appear to reflect the prestige of the active male in the Japanese family, and the deference to the first son. For middle-school boys and girls of either school the "weakest-willed" relative is "grandmother," presumably because of her traditional penchant for indulging the whims of her grandchildren. For elementary-school boys, however, "elder sister" is even more "weak-willed" than grandmother. Possibly when they are fairly young elder sisters especially enjoy taking an indulgent pseudo-maternal attitude toward their younger brothers, and the boys themselves enjoy this. Perhaps later, as the boys reach puberty and become more independent of home, more reserve develops in the relationship with elder sister: she is not asked for so much and does not volunteer so much, and thus appears "stronger-willed" than she did when younger.

Scale 5. "Frightful/gentle." For middle-school children of either sex the most "frightful" relative is "father." However, for elementary-school boys the most "frightful" relative is "older brother," while for girls it is "younger brother." "Grandmother" is the most "gentle" relative for elementary-school children of either sex, while "elder sister" is "gentlest" for middle-school children of either sex.

The relative decline in "frightfulness" or increase in "gentleness" of siblings as the children grow older and enter middle school support the idea that sibling rivalry is relatively muted in Japan and is successfully brought under control by adolescence.

In general one would expect the most "frightful" sibling to be an older sibling of the same sex, since the greatest rivalry would be likely to exist between siblings of the same sex, and the older sibling would be powerful enough to be a formidable rival. As noted above, this holds for elementary-school boys (and also for middle-school boys, incidentally), but does not hold for elementary-school (or middle-school) girls, who rate "younger

brother" as the most "frightful" sibling. Probably this may be explained by a difference in the roles of male and female children in the Japanese family, namely, that boys are permitted much more aggression than girls. When this is combined with the greater permissiveness extended to young children to be aggressive it is not surprising that girls should fear their younger brothers above all siblings.

Scale 6. "Different/ordinary." For the most part the results on this scale pattern quite neatly. The children of either sex rate male relatives as more "different" than the corresponding female relatives; e.g., "father" is more "different" than "mother," etc. For many respondents to agree that people in certain family roles are more "different" suggests that the social structure actually gives more freedom to these individuals to follow their personal inclinations. It is therefore interesting that the age distribution of ratings of "different" follows the "shallow U-curve" of freedom in the Japanese life cycle which Benedict described in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.<sup>5</sup> The most "different" relatives are first, younger siblings, and then grandparents, who are in the "free areas" of relatively early childhood and old age, respectively.

One exception to the pattern outlined above may be worthy of note. Elementary-school children of either sex rate "younger brother," though male, as more "ordinary" than "younger sister." I suspect that this is another bit of evidence of the differential effect of elementary school on boys as compared with girls. It appears that it is harder for boys than for girls to adjust to elementary school. This may be partly because girls anywhere mature somewhat more rapidly than boys, on the average, but also probably involves a comparison of school with home by the children. For boys, who have been more indulged at home than the girls, the relatively impartial treatment which they receive from their teacher seems threatening and restrictive, while to girls, who have been more suppressed at home, the school seems liberating. Other evidence from a dream questionnaire administered both in the homes and in school supports this view. More of the boys who answered the question in school recalled and reported restrictive dreams than those answering at home, while for girls

the reverse effect was observed.\* Since the respondents to the semantic differential questionnaire range from third to ninth grades it seems likely that more of their younger brothers would be somewhere in elementary school. The results of this questionnaire suggest that the boys not only feel the school as restrictive but that the school experience makes them for a while visibly more conformist than their sisters.

In the answers of the middle-school boys the general principle of greater freedom for males in Japan reasserts itself and "younger brother" is rated as clearly more "different" than "younger sister." In the view of the middle-school girls, however, "younger sister" is still rated as a little more "different" (and "free?") than "younger brother," although middle-school girls rate the two younger siblings as almost the same on this scale, while elementary-school girls have a marked difference in rating.

### CONCLUSION

In general, the pattern emerging from the ratings of family members which this sample of middle-class, urban Japanese children produced is consistent with certain traditional features of Japanese family life, such as the greater deference to and indulgence of males, the importance of seniority, greater personal freedom and less responsibility at both ends of life, including specifically the freedom of the grandmother to "spoil" her grandchildren, and moderately strong sibling ties with a fairly effective suppression of sibling rivalry in older children.

These findings are not necessarily to be taken as indicating that the Japanese urban family is undergoing no important changes, but they may suggest that the changes are not yet of truly revolutionary scale in this class group at least. To utilize these findings for the investigation of change in family structure in Japan will require replications of this study in other Japanese samples, ideally over a period of a number of years. It is quite possible that we would then be able to observe differences suggesting that the various family members are rising and falling on different scales and that these movements would make sense in



terms of theories of social change. Hopefully additional field studies can be arranged in the future.

## NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual Midwest Conference on Asian Affairs, Lincoln, Nebraska, October, 1963. Financial support for the field research was provided by the U.S. National Science Foundation (Grant G-16817) and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I would also like to acknowledge with thanks the cooperation in Fukuoka of Prof. Teigo Yoshida and other members of the Research Institute of Comparative Education and Culture of Kyushu University, of the City Board of Education of Fukuoka and Principals M. Inoue and F. Yoshitake of the West Takamiya Elementary School and the Takamiya Middle School respectively, and their staffs and pupils, and of three volunteer ladies, Mrs. H. Morimoto, Mrs. M. Shimizu, and Mrs. S. Morita. I would also acknowledge further financial support from the National Science Foundation for the analysis of the data collected (Grants G-24317 and GS-269), as well as the helpful assistance of the staff of the Tulane University Computer Center. In preparing this paper I have had the useful advice of Mr. Kazukimi Ebuchi of Kyushu and Tulane Universities; he should not, however, be held responsible for the deficiencies of the paper.

2. Charles E. Osgood, *et. al.*, *The Measurement of Meaning of words*, (University of Illinois, 1957).

3. Charles E. Osgood, *Studies on the Generality of Affective Meaning Systems*, (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, Institute of Communications Research, 1957).

4. Personal communication.

5. Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Snow* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1946), p. 254.

6. J. L. Fischer, "Typical Dreams in Japanese Children," Paper presented at annual meeting, American Anthropological Association, Chicago, (Nov., 1962).