BELIEF ABOUT STABILITY OF PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS IN INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Eighty-five Japanese female subjects (50 unmarried, 35 married with children) were asked to (1) estimate the stability of eight personality characterisics of children of one to five years of age, and (2) to rank eight personality characteristics in order of their social desirability. Subjects were divided into 2 sub-groups; one was asked to consider boys and the other group, girls, as the targets. Although all subjects tended to overestimate the stability, mothers were more accurate than non-mothers. The group difference was interpreted as resulted from childrearing experience. The target's sex did not affect estimation of stability or social desirability. Desirable characteristics were estimated to be more stable than undesirable characteristics.

Key words: belief, stability, desirability

Moss & Susman (1980) wrote, " A long-standing, pervasive assumption held by lay persons and psychologists alike is that an individual's behavior is generally predictable across a variety of situation and over time." Do peoples really hold such an assumption? How do peoples evaluate the stability, or predicatability of prsonality characteristics over early chindhood? The main purpose of this study is to address these quesitions.

Traditional psychoanalytic theory argued that adult psychological disorders were the consequence of early psychic traumat, and there was a relative lack of modifiability of personality after early childhood. Although most psychoanalysts and psychologists no longer adhere to these traditional arguments, they do not necessarily reject the notion of the stability of personality over early childhood.

The research on the issue of the stability of personality characteristics has been realized in the longitudinal studies on personality characteristics to some degree. As for studies that focused on early childhood period, most of the longitudinal studies on personality characteristics have dealt with temperamental characteristics. Since many psychologists think that temperament is largely genetic or constitutional in origin, and is relatively stable, at least, within early childhood, the issue of stability is more critical than usual in the study of temperament. The results of these temperamental studies are, therefore, the most reliable source of information for considering the stability of personality characteristics over early childhood. The stability in question is typically estimated by examining the magnitude of correlation coefficients, and the magnitude of correlation coefficients obtained in these longitudinal studies is low in general.

The New York Longitudinal Study is one of the most extensive studies of the development of temperament from infancy through early childhood (Thomas and Chess, 1977). It was found that the result of assessment of the babies in their first year were not predictive of any of the variables later at five years. The highest correlation coefficient between 1 and 5 years obtained in the NYLS was only .21 for "threshold of responsiveness," while the median correlation coefficient was .10 for "intensity."

Not suprisingly, the magnitudes of correlational coefficients obtained in other longitudinal studies of temperament over this period were also low. For example, Huttunen and Nyman (1982) reported on the stability of temperamental characteristics of 299 children between age of 6-8 months and 5 years. The correlation coefficients obtained by them ranged from $-.02$ to $-.32$, with a median of $-.24$. It is safe to note that strong stability over early childhood is rare. To be more concrete, a stability coefficient over.30 in rarely obtained, if not impossible.

The stability of personality are, as stated above, usually shown in terms of correlations. Thus, when assessing the belief about stability of personality characteristics, it is convinient to have a metric which can map subjects' responses onto the statistical method of measuring correlations. Kund and Nisbett (1986) recently proposed just such a metric. According to these authors, subjects were asked to estimate the probability that two pairs of observations would have the same rank order at different times. The general format of questions in the present study is "Suppose X was more A than Y at one year what do you suppose is the probability that X is more A than Y at five years?" This probability(p) can directly yield Kendall's τ ($\tau=2p-1$). Tau (τ) then yields, by derivation, an estimate of Pearson's r (r-sin($\pi\ \tau/2$)).

The studies of judgment and inductive reasoning show that people have a tendency to believe in the existence of strong correlations where such belief is belied by more objective evidence, or people are prone to forming an illusory correlation. (Chapman, 1967, Chapman & Chapman, 1967, Golding & Rover, 1972, Jennings, Amabile, & Ross, 1982). Do people believe personality to be more stable than it really is over early childhood? This is the first question of the present study. Since subjects were asked to estimate the stability between 1 and 5 years, if a correlation coefficient estimated is better than .30, this subject may be considered to overestimate the stability of a personality characteristics over early childhood, because the result from the longitudinal studies of temperament mentioned above indicated that the level was always below this value.

A second concern of the present study is the source of the stability in the belief. As Goodnow (1984) notes, people's belief is either constructed from their own experiences or being transmitted from others. It was assumed that the childrearing experiences modified the subjects' belief about the stability of personality which the subjects constructed up until their adolescence. In this study the effect of childrearing experience on the belief of stability will be examined by comparing mothers with female students who have no childrearing experience.

Some longitudinal studies found that there were sex differences in the stability of personality. For example, Halverson, Moss, and Jones (1977) reported that over the first three years of life, behaviors that were related to temperamental predispositions showed greater stability for boys than for girls. Kagan & Moss (1962) reported that

aggression was more stable for boys than for girls from childhood to adulthood. A third concern of the present study is to examine whether the stability of personality characteristics in people's belief depends on the sex of targets.

Finally, a fourth concern of the present study is the effect of the estimated social desirability of a personality charactristic on its estimated stability. Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, and Knight (1984) asked mothers to judge whether each of nine personality charactristics lasted from six to 12 years of age. They found that desirable pernonality charactristics were expected to last and undesirable personality characteristics to change. However, they did not ask mothers to estimate the desirability of each personality characteristics. The social desirability of each personality characteristic was decided by the invesitgators a priori. In order to know more reliable relation between the estimate of the stability and the estimate of desirability, subjects in my study were asked to estimate both the stability and the social desirability of each personality characteristic.

METHOD

Subjects

Fifty unmarried female students from two nurses' training schools and 35 mothers who participated in the Hokkaido University Longitudinal Study served as subjects. Subjects were assigned to one of two conditions: (1) boy condition and (2) girl condition. The two conditions were the same except for the sex of children whose personality characterisics they were instructed to consider. All students did not have children. Their mean age was 19.6 years. On the other hand, the mothers had at least one child of 12 months of age at the time this study was conducted. Their mean age was 29.3 years. All subjects were Japanese.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, for each of eight personality characteristics, subjects were asked to estimate the stability of personality characteristics from one to five years. The eight personality characteristics were shy (*hazukasigaru*), disobedient (*hankouteki*), obiedent (*jyujyun*), distractable (*utsurigi*), timid (*okubyou*), willful (*wagamama*), excitable (*okoriyasui*), and dull (*noroma*). (Note that the original questionnaire was written in Japanese. The words in parentheses are romanization of original words.) The general format of questions was as described above in the style of Kund and Nisbett (1986). Subjects were asked to estimate the probability in the range from 50 percent to 100 percent. Subjects were reminded that an estimate of 50 was tantamount to guessing no stabiity and an estimate of 100 was tantamount to guessing perfect stability.

In the second part, subjects were asked to rank the eight personality characteristics in order of their social undesirability.

In the questionnaire, such stereotypic sex-typing Japanese name as " *Taro* " and " *Jiro* " for boys, and " *Hanako* " and " *Yoshiko* " for girls were employed.

RESULTS

Although all statistical tests were based on subjects' percentage estimates for the

stability of personality characteristics, the results were reported in terms of correlation coeffcients. A 2 (group)×2 (target's sex) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was carried out for the results of the estimates of the stability for eight personality characteristics. The results of the MANOVA using Wilks' Lambda Criterion revealed that a significant overall effect was obtained only for group factor, ($F(8, 74)=2.65, p<.05$). Subsequent 2×2 analyses of variance (ANOVA) for each estimate of the stability of eight personality charactaristics revealed only a significant effect of the group factor for shy, ($F(1, 81)=4.32, p<.05$), for willful, ($F(1, 81)=4.31, p<.05$), and for dull, ($F(1, 81)=4.71, p<.05$). Target's sex did not have any significant effect on the estimate of stability.

Table 1 shows the estimated Pearson's r's for the stability of the eight personality characteristics.

Table 2 shows the mean stability estimates of both high undesirability characteristics (four personality characteristics of undesirablity ranking 1-4) and low undesirablity characteristics (four personality characteristics of undesirability ranking 5-8). A paired-sample t-test revealed that the stability rating of high undesirability characteristics was significantly lower than the stability rating of low undesirability characteristcs ($t(70)=2.68, p<.01$). Since a 2 (group)×2 (target's sex) MANOVA found neither significant main effect nor significant interaction on both ratings, all groups were combined.

TABLE 1

Mean estimated correlations for evaluation of stability of personality caracteristics.

Personality Characteristics	Student		Mother	
	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
Shy	.61	.56	.27	.45
Disobedient	.25	.22	.31	.12
Obedient	.25	.40	.28	.19
Distractable	.43	.39	.34	.61
Timid	.59	.56	.40	.54
Willful	.51	.66	.31	.45
Excitable	.43	.51	.43	.56
Dull	.54	.56	.27	.51

TABLE 2

Mean estimated correlations for evaluation of stability of high undesirability and low desirability characteristcs.

Personality Characteristics	Student		Mother	
	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
high undesirability characteristics	.32	.42	.31	.43
low undesirability characteristics	.48	.48	.37	.59

DISCUSSION

Did subjects overestimate the stability of personality over early years of life? The

pattern of the results suggests that the answer is yes. Most of the estimated correlation coefficients were above .30. Japanese women seemed to believe that personality characteristics were stable more than what the evidence would support. This tendency was consistent with the results which the studies investigating the people's ability to detect the correlation in laboratory setting had found.

There was, however, group difference in estimating the stability. Mothers' estimates were lower, therefore more accurate than the students' estimates. It is assumed that childrearing experience modified belief about stability of personality that the subjects constructed until their adolescence. These results were consistent with this assumption. Childrearing experience seemed to make belief of stability more realistic. However, since mothers were different from students besides childrearing experience, further studies are needed to clarify the effects of childrearing experience on the belief of stabiity of personality characteristcs.

On the other hand, target's sex did not seem to affect the estimate of the stability of personality characteristics at all. No sex difference was found in belief about stability over early childhood. This was perhaps related to the period of life to be estimated. It will be interesting to see whether people's belief about stability over other periods of life will differ depending on the target's sex.

The results were also consistent with the finding of Goodnow et al. (1984). That is, mothers were so-called developmental optimists who believed desirable characteristics to last, undesirable characteristics to change. However, the present study found students also had the same optimistic belief for child development as the mothers. The optimistic belief for child development seems to be independent of childrearing experience. The question is why both mothers and student held optimistic belief for child development. The sample Goodnow et al. used consisted of two groups of mothers living in Australia who varied in their countries of birth, Australia-born mothers and Lebanese-born mothers. They found no ethnic difference in the belief of stability over time. In spite of the difference in culture, mothers of both groups are similar to my Japanese sample in their optimism for child development. This suggests that the optimism is not the result of internalization of cultural norm. This optimism may be independent of cultural background.

Goodnow et al. suggested that the task of chidrearing required optimistic belief for child development. I agree with their suggestion. Some beliefs are constructed or hold on for no other reason than the need or wish to construct or held them on. A good example of motivation-based belief was given by Langer's study (1975). Langer finds peoples behave as if they have control over uncontrollable event (e. g. lottery) even when the fact that success or failure depends on chance is salient. Langer interprets that this result is reflected on the people's motivation to control their environment. The optimistic belief for child development, like belief to have control, may be motivation-based belief. That people believe desirable characteristics to last, undesirable characteristics to change encourages people and help them to get over their trouble when their children have difficulties in development. The " childrearing " business is the business to be unable to give up even when the reward is hardly expected. People may need the optimistic beliefs in order to continue this, not always comfortable, business. This is probably the reason

why people held on the optimistic belief for child development.

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