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FATHERS' PARTICIPATION IN THE LIVES OF THEIR 4 MONTH-OLD INFANTS : THE UNITED STATES AND JAPAN

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Abstract

The United States and Japan are economically and educationally quite similar, yet each has unique cultural values and beliefs about children and parenting. This research makes cross-cultural comparisons between fathers' participation in the lives of their first born 4-month-old infants in the United States and Japan. In addition, sources of individual differences in fathers' participation are examined separately in the United States and Japan. Families with first born 4-month-old infants were recruited in Japan through Public Health Centers (n=45), and in the United States through birth records (n=45). Based on interviews with mothers, the day to day participation of fathers in the lives of their infants in the United States was found to be substantially greater than the participation of fathers in Japan. The variability among the reports of the amount of caregiving done by fathers was greater in the United States. Japanese and American mothers responded similarly to questionnaire items indicating the fathers' interest in and enjoyment of fathering; questionnaire responses were more variable among mothers in Japan. High variability suggests cultures in flux, and demographic and societal changes worldwide are leading to changes in fathers' roles. In the United States it may be actual participation in caregiving that is changing, in Japan it may be fathers' interest and commitment to fathering that is changing. Examinations of factors related to individual differences in fathers' participation in the care of their infants indicated that, in Japan, participa-

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tion was related to the mothers' reports of support from their husbands and to social class; in the United States, participation was related to fathers' ages.

Key words : Fathers, Infants, Japan, United States, Caregiving, Cross-cultural

INTRODUCTION

The United States and Japan are economically and educationally quite similar, yet each has unique cultural values and beliefs about children and parenting (Azuma, 1986; Bornstein, 1989; Fogel, Stevenson & Messinger, 1992). Cultural differences in families may be particularly evident during the transition to parenthood, a time when rapid changes within the family seem to call forth traditional roles (LaRoosa & LaRoosa, 1982). Thus the present study focuses on families with first born 4-month-old infants and makes comparisons between families in the United States and families in Japan. Because fatherhood may be psychologically and sociologically more optional than motherhood, it may be particularly subject to the influences of cultural, familial and individual factors. Thus the focus of this research is on a cross-cultural comparison of fathers' participation in the lives of their first born infants.

Although traditional American families and traditional Japanese families were similar in that fathers were seen as symbolic heads and as breadwinners (Azuma, 1986; Pleck, 1987), there are significant cultural contrasts in families today. The commitment to role perfectionism in Japan (Befu, 1986) inclines many Japanese fathers to work long hours and many Japanese mothers to commit fully to the maternal role. In Japanese families, particularly the nuclear families of today, many mothers assume considerable *de facto* power, and the major family coalition that emerges is between mothers and children (Kashiwagi, 1993; Ishii-Kuntz, 1993; Smith & Schooler, 1978). In contrast, for families in the United States, there is much more role diffusion wherein many fathers participate in the role of employee, assume an active role in caring for their young children, and have other roles. Role diffusion for many mothers in the United States may include combining the roles of employee and mother with other roles within the family, the circle of friends, and the community (Shand, 1985).

To consider contemporary family life in context, it is necessary to examine demographic and societal changes in Japan and the United States. Perhaps the most significant factors in Japan include the substantial decrease in the number of three generation households and the low rate of fertility. The birth rate in Japan has gone from 18 births per 1000 population in 1960 to 11 per 1000 in 1993 (UNICEF, 1995). In the United States it has gone from 23 per 1000 in 1960 to 16 per 1000 in 1993. In contrast, perhaps the most significant changes in the United States include changes in women's attitudes towards work and family and the substantial increase in maternal employment. In the United States today over half of the mothers of one-year-olds work outside the home at least part time. These demographic and societal changes clearly influence contemporary families (Shwalb, Imaizumi & Nakazawa, 1987).

Going beyond descriptions of fatherhood in Japan and the United States, this study uses a multifactorial approach to understand sources of individual differences in fathers' participation in the lives of their infants. In the 1995 review of fatherhood,

Parke indicates that fathers' participation is influenced by factors including (a) the timing of parenthood (father's age), (b) the husband-wife relationship, (c) social class, and (d) fathers' employment patterns. More specifically, age cohort effects suggest that societal changes in the roles of fathers may particularly be reflected in the behavior of younger fathers, yet older fathers may be at a point in their career to relax and enjoy parenthood. Mothers may be gatekeepers of fathers' access to their infants (Lamb, 1987), and mothers who feel supported by their husbands seem to provide more access and encouragement (Parke, 1995). Socioeconomic factors may be a source of influence on individual difference; families with higher social status may be more free to embrace changing societal norms (Riley, 1990). Constraints on fathers that are placed by the world of work may also influence fathers' involvement with their infants. This discussion of factors influencing fathers' participation in the lives of their infants is largely based on research in the United States, however, the complexity of the construct of culture, including cultural prescriptions for work and leisure, national economics, and the roles of education and religion suggests the importance of examining sources of individual difference in fathers' participation separately in the United States and Japan.

METHOD

Subjects

In Japan all infants receive developmental and medical check-ups at around the age of 4 months. By coordinating with the Public Health Centers in Osaka and Hyogo Prefectures that conducted these check-ups, 45 mothers of first born 4-month-old infants were recruited to participate in this research. All mothers whose homes and apartments were accessible by public transportation were invited to participate, and most mothers responded favorably to the invitation. In the United States, birth records in the state of Wisconsin were used to recruit 45 mothers of first born 4-month-old infants. Only two-parent families were included. To assure the comparability of the samples, families in the United States were selected so as to approximately match the fathers' educational levels and ages in the Japanese sample. These were largely middle class families with only five fathers having less than a high school education, more than half of the fathers having at least two years of education beyond high school, and only six fathers having education beyond college.

Interviews

Interviews in the homes of mothers in Japan and the United States were used to describe the fathers' participation in the lives of their 4-month-old infants. Interview topics included demographic/descriptive information, mothers' reports of fathers' caregiving and mothers' reports of fathers' contact with their infants. *Descriptive* information included asking how many hours in a week the father had responsibility for his infant without the mother being present; in other words, how much time did he spend home alone with his infant. To assess *caregiving*, factual questions were asked of mothers about how many times in a week the fathers did various caregiving tasks. Tasks included feeding the infant, diapering, bathing, putting the infant to sleep at

night and getting the infant up and dressed in the morning; the total number of all these tasks that were performed in a week was also tallied. To assess *contact*, mothers were asked whether fathers ate at least one meal a day with their infants (scored as one point) and whether fathers participated daily in playing with or caring for their infant at least 10 minutes (scored one point). These two items were selected from the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984). Interviews in Japan were conducted in Japanese by an American; interviews in the United States were conducted by Americans.

Questionnaire

Two scales were selected from a questionnaire by Lederman and Weingarten (1981) to measure the mothers' reports of the fathers' (a) parental support and (b) spousal support. The two scales of the questionnaire were originally written in English; for this study they were also translated into Japanese and the translations were checked by independently translating the Japanese back into English. Questionnaires were returned by mail after the home visit.

Parental support scale. A questionnaire scale was used to assess the mother's report of the father's interest in and commitment to fathering (Lederman & Weingarten, 1981). Questions included items such as "The baby's father gets annoyed when I ask him to help with the care of the baby" (reverse scored), "The baby's father shows an interest in the baby," and "The baby's father enjoys holding the baby." Mothers responded to these items on a four point scale indicating the extent to which each statement described the father, from "very much so" to "not at all." Thus mothers with high scores on this 11 item scale reported that their husbands were helpful with the infant and showed interest and enjoyment; the maximum score was 44. Cronbach's alpha estimate of internal consistency reliability for this scale was .83.

Spousal support scale. An additional scale of the questionnaire (Lederman & Weingarten, 1981) assessed the mother's sense of her husband's support for her. There were questions such as "I feel close to the baby's father," "It is hard to talk with the baby's father about problems that I have" (reverse scored), and "The baby's father cares about how I feel". Thus mothers with high scores on this 12 item scale felt supported by their husbands. Cronbach's alpha estimate of internal consistency reliability for this scale was .84.

Analyses

The first set of analyses compared the United States and Japan on interview reports of participation by fathers (caregiving and contact) and questionnaire reports of fathers' parental support (*t*-tests were used). *F*-tests compared the variability of the responses in the United States and Japan. The second set of analyses examined sources of individual differences in fathers' participation separately in the United States and Japan. Independent variables included fathers' ages, spousal support, social class, and fathers' work hours; as dependent variables, fathers' participation was assessed by the measures of caregiving and contact.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participation by fathers: United States vs. Japan

Descriptions. The first analyses examined the mothers' interview reports of the fathers' participation in the lives of their 4-month-old infants. Fathers in the United States spent significantly more time home alone with their infants than did fathers in Japan: 12.0 hours vs. 0.8 hours per week ($t=5.6$, $p<.001$). No father in Japan spent more than 4 hours a week home alone with his infant, in the United States, six fathers spent at least 40 hours a week home alone with their infants. As would be expected, American mothers who worked longer hours had husbands who spent more time alone with their infants ($r=.47$, $p<.001$).

Caregiving. Fathers in the United States were significantly more likely to feed their infants, diaper their infants, get their infants up and dressed in the morning, and put their infants to sleep at night (Table 1). The only task that fathers performed more often in Japan than in the United States was to bathe their infants. Co-bathing in Japan provides an opportunity for intimacy that is quite different from the usual bathing of infants in the United States in a small tub. The total number of caregiving tasks performed in a week was greater in the United States than in Japan.

Table 1
Fathers' participation in infant caregiving

Times per week	Japan		United States		means		variances	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -test	<i>F</i> -test		
Feeding	1.7	2.6	7.7	8.2	4.71***	9.90***		
Diapering	5.2	5.0	13.0	10.6	4.46***	4.43***		
Bathing	3.5	2.6	0.9	1.6	5.56***	2.68***		
Up and dressed	0.1	0.5	1.5	1.9	5.12***	12.58***		
Put to sleep at night	0.8	1.6	2.0	2.2	2.97**	1.77+		
Total, all tasks	11.2	8.2	25.2	19.5	4.45***	5.67***		

+ $p<.10$ ** $p<.01$ *** $p<.001$

Contact. Overall, 75.6% of the fathers in Japan were reported to provide some care of their infants daily or to play with their infants daily. In contrast, 95.6% of the fathers in the United States had these forms of daily contact ($\chi^2=7.28$, $p<.01$). The percentage of fathers eating a meal with their infants at least daily was 35.6% in Japan and 77.8% in the United States ($\chi^2=16.33$, $p<.001$). Thus, consistent with our previous work (Barratt, Negayama & Minami, 1993), the day to day participation of fathers in the lives of their infants in the United States was substantially greater than the day to day participation of fathers in Japan.

Opportunities for Japanese fathers to participate in the lives of their infants may have been limited by the demands of their work (Befu, 1986; Ishii-Kuntz, 1993). For many Japanese men, the work day includes a long commute and perhaps mandatory socializing with colleagues. The average Japanese father in these families left home about 7:30 in the morning and returned home shortly after 8:30 in the evening. Thus the work day and commute combined to keep the average father away from home more than 13 hours each day. Since bathing infants is usually an evening task,

Japanese fathers had a particular opportunity to be involved with their infants in this way; however, they seldom put their infants to sleep at night. Fathers' time with their infants was further limited by the fact that half of the fathers worked a 6 day week; Japanese fathers were away from home an average of 71.1 hours per week (S.D.=11.4, range 50 to 96). Thus practical constraints from the world of work may account for part of the limited involvement of Japanese fathers. Consistent with reports by Lebra (1984) of earlier generations, the limited involvement of Japanese fathers in the care of their infants, as well as the limited use of baby-sitting in Japan, means that Japanese mothers have fairly exclusive responsibility for their infants. Unfortunately, similar data on American fathers' work schedules was not available for this sample. However, many middle class Americans work 40 hours a week, commute times are shorter than in Japan, and most American fathers return home by early evening.

The questions raised earlier about ongoing societal changes suggested also examining the *variability* of the responses in the two countries. There was significantly greater variability in the overall number of caregiving tasks that fathers performed in the United States than in Japan as well as greater variability on four of the five tasks (Table 1). This suggests considerably more uniformity in the amount of caregiving among Japanese fathers than among American fathers. The cultural homogeneity in Japan and the demands of role perfectionism for mothers and fathers may lead to a uniformity of response during the transition to parenthood. It is possible that this uniformity of response to an American interviewer may represent the "*tatemae*" or public presentation of family life; the "*honne*" or actual family life may be more variable. However, the uniformity of response more probably reflects the cultural homogeneity in Japan that derives from a long and isolated history. In the United States today, even in middle class Midwestern families, there may be more heterogeneity; participation in fathering remains an optional activity: Some fathers choose traditional "hands-off" roles, other fathers become very involved. For example in the United States today, some fathers arrange their schedules to care for their infants while mothers are at work, other fathers assume responsibility for transporting their infants to and from day care.

Parental support : United States vs. Japan

The mothers' reports of the fathers' interest in and commitment to fathering was the focus of the analyses of the first set of questionnaire items. Mothers with high scores reported that their husbands showed interest in and enjoyment of their infants. To check the validity of the questionnaire measure, correlations were examined between participation as reported in response to interview questions about specific caregiving tasks and the parental support scale. There were significant correlations in both cultures between the behavioral reports of the amount of caregiving and the summaries reported by mothers of fathers' interest and enjoyment.

Even though the tallies of fathers' participation in specific caregiving tasks indicated that Japanese fathers participated far less in the day to day care of their infants than fathers in the United States, Japanese and American mothers gave similar responses on the parental support questionnaire. The mean level reported by Japanese

mothers was 39.1 out of the possible score of 44; the mean level for mothers in the United States was 40.8 ($t=1.26$, $p>.10$). In other words, mothers' reports of fathers' parental support were similar in both countries. The Japanese mothers may be summarizing what the fathers say and think rather than reporting on what they actually do. These data may suggest very different expectations by mothers in the two countries: Japanese mothers may have been satisfied with their husbands' low levels of participation because it matched cultural and personal expectations that were lower than the expectations of mothers in the United States. This may also reflect Confucian beliefs about family roles. Mothers in the United States, in contrast, not only received more help, but they had perhaps expected the help that they did receive.

Again, changes in demographics and cultural values suggested examining the *variability* among the responses within each country. Questionnaire responses on the parental support scale were significantly more variable among mothers in Japan than among mothers in the United States ($F=2.29$, $p<.01$). The greater variability among the Japanese mothers suggests that expectations of Japanese mothers as to their husbands' participation in caregiving may be undergoing change. Indeed, in Tokyo today there are courses available for prospective grooms that parallel the long standing courses to prepare brides for marriage. The media reports that some young "salary-men" opt to return to their families at the end of the work day rather than to socialize with colleagues. And further, the decreasing birth rate suggests the possibility of a decreasing commitment by today's young women to the maternal role and opportunities for other roles. These cultural changes in Japan may lead to changing expectations for some young women, thus greater variability among questionnaire responses in Japan than in the United States.

Individual differences

To examine possible influences on individual differences in fathers' participation in the lives of their infants, the following factors were selected as independent variables: (a) Age cohort effects were examined by creating older and younger cohorts of fathers with a median split on fathers' ages. (b) The possible influence of the husband-wife marital relationship was examined with the mothers' questionnaire reports of the spousal support she felt from her husband. (c) The effect of family background, or the socioeconomic status of the family, was examined with the mean level of education of the mother and father. (d) Possible influences of work were examined in Japan by tallying the number of hours fathers worked. Dependent variables for these analyses included the interview assessments of fathers' caregiving and contact.

As can be seen in Table 2, in the United States, infant caregiving and contact with infants were related to fathers' ages. In the United States there was greater participation in caregiving, e. g. performing tasks such as feeding and diapering, by younger fathers than by older fathers; this suggests that contemporary changes in expectations for fathers' care of their infants particularly impact younger fathers. In the United States, however, it was the older fathers who had more contact with their infants at family mealtimes and at other times. Perhaps, consistent with the suggestion of Parke

Table 2
Fathers' participation with infants in younger and older age cohorts

	Mean	SD	<i>t</i> -test
Japan			
Caregiving			
younger cohort	10.9	6.7	0.30
older cohort	11.7	9.9	
Contact			
younger cohort	1.3	0.7	1.31
older cohort	0.9	0.8	
United States			
Caregiving			
younger cohort	31.0	22.6	1.72*
older cohort	21.1	16.0	
Contact			
younger cohort	1.5	0.5	3.81**
older cohort	1.9	0.3	

Note. Caregiving was measured by the total number of caregiving tasks done in a week. Contact was a scale from 0 to 2 with a point for the fathers' eating with the infant daily and a point for daily playing or caregiving.

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .01$

(1995), these fathers were at a point in their careers where they were free to make a greater commitment to family. However, the commitment of the older fathers did not seem to extend to providing extensive caregiving.

In Japan the fathers' participation (Table 3) was positively related to the spousal support reported by mothers. This supports the idea of mothers as gatekeepers who encourage more access and involvement when they feel close to their husbands (Lamb, 1987; Parke, 1995). Thus, the participation of Japanese fathers in the lives of their infants is to some extent influenced by their relationships to their wives. In a related finding, earlier research has indicated that Japanese mothers' perceptions of support from their husbands is related to the security of infants' attachment (Durett, Otaki & Richards, 1984). Age cohort did not have an influence in Japan (Table 2). However, in Japan, social class, as measured by the educational levels of mothers and fathers, was also related to fathers' caregiving (Table 3). It may be that in Japan the "new father" is emerging first in the families with higher social status. The participation of Japanese fathers in the lives of their infants seems to have been constrained to some extent by the responsibilities of their work. The total number of hours that fathers spent away from home weekly was not related to fathers' caregiving ($r = -.03$, $p > .10$), but was related to fathers' contact with their infants ($r = -.50$, $p < .001$).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings offer a cross-cultural comparison of largely middle class fathers in Japan and the United States. Though the study is limited because mothers were asked to report on the fathers' participation, findings are consistent with the 1988 report of

Table 3
Correlations between mothers' reports of spousal support from their husbands, parents' educational level and fathers' participation with infants

	Spousal support	Parents' education
Japan		
Caregiving	.38*	.30*
Contact	.29*	.11
United States		
Caregiving	.01	-.10
Contact	.24	.16

Note. Caregiving was measured by the total number of caregiving tasks done in a week. Contact was a scale from 0 to 2 with a point for the fathers' eating with the infant daily and a point for daily playing or caregiving.

+ $p < .10$ * $p < .05$

the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare (Takahashi, Takano, Komiyama, Shindo and Ohinata, 1988). The 1988 report and the present research both indicate that Japanese fathers participate little in taking care of their infants. This is consistent with research describing fathers with older children in Japan and the United States (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994), although, as children become older, Japanese fathers may become more involved than when their children were infants (Lebra, 1984). Perhaps some fathers in the United States participate more in the lives of their infants as they fill in around the mothers whose lives are made busy by role diffusion. In contrast, in Japan, role perfectionism may lead to more specialization within the family such that many fathers concentrate on work while many mothers concentrate on childrearing. Further, there is significantly more variability in participation by fathers in the United States than in Japan. This suggests that ideas about families and role expectations are changing, particularly in the United States, and that some fathers participate far more than others.

Although Japanese fathers participate significantly less in the day to day care of their infants than fathers in the United States, mothers in both countries report that their husbands are similarly interested in their infants. This discrepancy is probably explained by differences in the cultural and personal expectations of Japanese and American mothers. In Japan there seemed to be more variability in the expectations of mothers than in the United States; this perhaps reflects contemporary changes in expectations. Indeed, surveys in Japan consistently find that changes in women's attitudes precede changes in men's attitudes (Iwao, 1993). Some women in Japan may hold the traditional view that the best husband is healthy and absent (Iwao, 1993; Lebra, 1984); others may expect his participation in shared childrearing. Changes in maternal expectations may precede subsequent changes in fathers' participation. It will be very interesting to follow these trends over the next several years to track societal changes and their effects on families at the time of the transition to parenthood with longitudinal research.

In summary, although Japanese fathers provide less caregiving than fathers in the

United States, mothers in both countries report that their husbands show similar interest in and commitment to their infants. Though absent from the home much of the time, Japanese fathers maintain a psychological presence (Ishii-Kuntz, 1992). Further, the findings suggest that there is significantly more variability in actual participation by fathers in the United States than in Japan. In Japan there was more variability in mothers' reports of fathers' interest in fathering than in the United States. High variability suggests cultures in flux, and, in fact, demographic and societal changes worldwide are leading to changes in fathers' roles (Nugent, 1991). Indeed in the United States (Pleck, 1987; Riley, 1990) and Japan (Shand, 1985) there are new cultural norms encouraging fathers' participation.

Mothers may act as the gatekeepers of fathers' access to their children (Parke, 1995); mothers' support is a major influence on fathers' participation (Lamb, 1987). Thus it is plausible that contemporary changes in mothers' expectations in Japan may lead to subsequent changes in fathers' participation. For example, among the Japanese mothers interviewed by Ishii-Kuntz (1993), the mother who commented on the "unfairness" of men's and women's roles had the husband who participated most with his children. Thus, over the next few years, the variability in mothers' expectations in Japan may lead to more variability in actual participation by Japanese fathers. It has taken many years to change the participation of American fathers in family life (Lamb, 1987). Encouraged by mothers, Japanese fathers may also become increasingly involved.

Thus the present research confirms that cultural factors can be a significant influence on fathers' participation in the lives of their infants. Correlates of individual difference emphasized age cohort effects in the United States and effects of spousal support and social class in Japan. Future research should ask fathers directly about their participation, interest and commitment rather than rely on reports of mothers. Larger samples will add to the statistical power of the analyses in future research on fathers' participation in the lives of their infants. Finally, these findings suggest changing values and ideas about family roles, but only longitudinal research can determine this.

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