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## Beliefs about Malleability and Desirability

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108 Japanese female subjects (88 unmarried, 20 married with children) were asked to rate seven personality characteristics of children and adolescents using a 4-point scale. Each personality characteristic was expressed in six different statements, designed to capture the subject's beliefs concerning (1) the malleability and (2) the social desirability of each personality characteristic. These statements reflected 4 different views about change in the personality characteristics. A subject's response to each personality characteristic was classified into one of four types depending on the pattern of the response (maturation, environment, maturation-environment, other). The unmarried group was divided into 2 groups; one group of subjects was asked to consider kindergarteners as the target, and for the other group the target was junior high school students. It was hypothesized that beliefs concerning malleability would be sensitive to the age of the target. The result partially supported this hypothesis. Beliefs concerning social desirability were independent of the target age. The differences between the unmarried group and the mothers were small on both scores. This was interpreted as indicative that belief on both aspects was not influenced by childrearing experiences. Further analysis of the pattern of the subjects' answers showed that (1) of all classifications environment was the most frequent classification, (2) the responses of most of the subjects contained more than one classification. Thus, a subjects can not be characterized as being consistently maturational or environmental.

Key words: belief; malleability; desirability; childrearing; view of development

In view of the extent and diversity of socialization research, it is surprising that so little work has been done on how parents think about children or how the cognitive activities of parents influence the parent-child interaction (cf. Goodnow, 1984). Over the last decades, there has been a series of shifts in the factors emphasized by developmental psychologists as determinants of the socialization process. There were shifts from environmental factors to biological factors, and from characteristics of the mother to characteristics of the child. One good example of such a shift is the rise of the study of temperament. But the negligence of cognitive variables in parent-child interaction remains unchanged. This negligence is particularly strange in the light of the general cognitive revival in psychology during the past 20 years.

One reason for the limited recognition of parents as information-processing agents is the partiality for a naturalistic observational methodology in socialization researchers. This partiality is probably related to a general concern about the limited ecological validity of the traditional methodologies that depended on laboratory experimentation. Since the

quality of data collected by the direct observation is the highest in terms of objectivity, reliability and accuracy, so the partiality for a naturalistic observational methodology is natural. However, this partiality produced a tendency not to attach importance to data collected in other ways.

There have been few theories to guide investigations in the field. This is also related to the negligence of cognitive variables. The attitude to let the data speak for themselves is always welcomed in a field that lacks guiding theories. This attitude led investigators to behavioristic dogma. Only data collected with observational method were considered reliable.

The influence of ethology on developmental psychology was important. One message from ethologists to developmental psychologists was to look closer at the stream of behaviors. But this tended to be misunderstood by investigators in socialization to mean that their partiality for a naturalistic observing methodology was justified.

One of the common approaches that has been used in this area will be illustrated. To examine the pattern of interaction behaviors, sequential analysis is often used (Clarke-Stewart, 1978, Maccoby, Martin, and Jacklin, 1979). The essential feature of this analysis is to detect patterns of exchange by computing the probability of their cooccurrence. This approach deals with the exchange of behaviors as chains of stimuli and response. It is assumed that mother reacts to the behavior of the infant in the same way as a simple machine or a lower creature. The Achilles' hell of this approach is that it ignores the fact that there is a high degree of stimulus-independent control of human behavior, which distinguishes human beings from simple machines. The cognitive capacities of mothers seem ironically to be lowered as psychologists recognized more and more the child as a contributor to the interactive process.

There is considerable discontent with methods that rely exclusively on the analysis of observable data. Certain central aspects of human behavior depend on what we believe and what we desire. I begin with the basic assumption that everyone has complex implicit theories about what children are like and why children behave as they do, and these implicit theories are an important input into their socialization actions. This assumption comes from a line of work on naive psychology (Heider, 1958), mental constructs (Kelly, 1963), schemata and scripts (Shank & Abelson, 1977), attributions (Weiner, 1979), implicit theories of personality (Schneider, 1973), and perceptions of others (Schneider, Hastorf, & Ellsworth, 1979).

The present study examined beliefs about two aspects of the personality development of children, the malleability and the desirability. Beliefs about the malleability of children's characteristics is important, because parents who believe that the personality of their children is easy to change can be more concerned with the task of socialization than those who believe that the personality of their children is difficult to change. It was predicted that the assessment of malleability would be sensitive to the age of children to be assessed. As the child grows, the malleability of the child may be believed to decrease.

A second concern of the present study was the effect of childrearing on the assessment of the personality of children. The origin of parental beliefs is one issue that has so far received little attention even in research on parental beliefs, although the importance of the experience of childrearing in belief formation is hardly questioned. I

assumed parental beliefs are the modifications through childrearing experiences of the beliefs formed up until adolescence. This study examined the effect of childrearing by comparing mothers with women who have no experience in childrearing.

## Method

*Subjects* Eighty-eight unmarried female students from two nurses' training schools and 20 who are mothers of children attending a kindergarten served as subjects. The students were assigned to two conditions. The two conditions were the same except for the age of children they were instructed to rate. One group was instructed to rate kindergarteners (kindergartener condition); and the other, junior high school students (adolescent condition). Since the sample size was small, the mothers were assigned only to kindergartener condition. All students were single, and had no children. The mean age was 20. On the other hand, the mean age of the mothers was 30. All subjects were Japanese.

*Questionnaire* For each of seven personality characteristics, subjects were asked to rate six statements on a 4-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The seven personality characteristics were obedient (*jyujyunna*), willful (*wagamamana*), shy (*uchikina*), dull (*noromana*), distractable (*utsurigina*), disobedient (*hankoutekina*) and being bullied (*ijimerareteiru*). (Note that the original questionnaire was written in Japanese. The words in parentheses are romanization of original words). Six statements consisted of items tapping two categories of information, namely subjects' beliefs about the malleability and the desirability of each personality characteristic. The statements were as follows:

1. It is an inherited quality.
2. It is socially desirable.
3. It remains unchanged until adulthood (or until junior high school age in kindergartener condition).
4. Children with this characteristic are liked by people.
5. It is changeable by other's influence.
6. Children having this characteristic do well at school.

## Results

The malleability score was the sum of the scores of the odd numbered items. The desirability score was the sum of the scores of the even numbered items. These two measures ranged from 0 (low) to 9 (high). The mean ratings of three groups are shown in Table 1. The student group in the kindergartener condition (S—K) was compared with the student group in the adolescent condition (S—A). The two groups differed significantly on malleability scores for three personality characteristics: dull ( $t=2.39$ ,  $p<.05$ ), distractable ( $t=2.44$ ,  $p<.05$ ), and disobedient ( $t=2.65$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The scores of S—A were significantly lower than that of S—K on all of these personality characteristics. This was interpreted as indicative that the three personality characteristics were believed to decrease in malleability as age increases. The malleability of the other personality characteristics was believed to be independent of the age. There were no significant differences between the desirability scores of the two groups on any personality

TABLE 1

Mean ratings of the malleability and the desirability of the seven personality characteristics

Personality characteristics	Student		Mother
	Kindergartener	Adolescent	Kindergartener
Obedient	6.25/4.28	6.15/4.48	5.65/4.21
Willful	5.20/2.28	4.98/2.63	5.65/2.53
Shy	5.80/3.18	5.52/2.98	5.21/3.21
Dull	5.30/2.88	4.38/2.83	4.89/2.80
Distractable	5.23/2.70	4.46/2.75	5.42/2.68
Disobedient	6.45/3.33	5.54/2.96	6.84/2.90
Being bullied	6.45/2.30	4.73/2.54	5.95/2.70

(malleability)/(desirability)

TABLE 2

Percentages of responses according to 4 types of classification

Classification	Student		Mother
	Kindergartener	Adolescent	Kindergartener
Maturation	7	10	6
Environment	58	58	64
Maturation -environment	14	12	16
Other	21	20	14

characteristic.

Next, the student group in the kindergartener condition was compared with the mother group in the kindergartener condition. Obedient was the only personality characteristic to show significant difference in the malleability scores ( $t=3.01$ ,  $p<.01$ ). There were no significant differences in the desirability scores for any of the personality characteristics.

Subject's responses were classified into one of four types; "maturation view", "environment view", "maturation-environment view", and "other", according to the following procedures. (1) If a subject responded to item 1 positively and item 5 negatively, this response was classified as showing the "maturation view", (2) If item 1 was negative and item 5 positive, the response type was classified into the "environment view", (3) If both items were positive, the response type was classified as showing the "maturation-environment view", (4) If both items were negative, the response type was "other". The results are shown in Table 2. No significant differences were found between any two groups of subjects in the number of responses reflecting each view. The "environment view" was the most frequent response pattern. But only 15 percents of subjects responded to all seven personality characteristics based on the "environment view". No subject's responses were based purely on the "maturation view", and only one subject's responses were based purely on the "maturation-environment view". No

subject's responses were exclusively "other".

### Discussion

The result partially supported the hypothesis that the assessment of malleability is sensitive to the age of the target. Three personality characteristics out of seven personality characteristics were believed to decrease in malleability as age increased. The assessment of malleability depended also on the personality characteristic. Since the malleability scores for dull and willful in the adolescent condition were especially low, these personality characteristics may be considered resistant to change.

The scores on desirability were independent of the age of the children. The same criteria about what is desirable are believed to be applicable to both targets. The subjects did not consider these personality characteristic to be less desirable for the kindergartener because of their relative immaturity.

Childrearing experiences did not affect the beliefs about malleability and desirability very much. The differences between the student group and the mother group were small in both scores. Only obedience differed significantly in malleability scores between students and mothers. This result indicates that beliefs about malleability and desirability are formed by adolescence, and are not influenced much by childrearing experience. McGillicuddy-Delisi (1982) found mothers' beliefs about developmental processes were related not to parenting experience, but to the mothers' personal history. This finding is consistent with that of the present study.

Many responses were classified as showing the "environment view", namely denying genetic influences and accepting others' influences. This does not mean many subjects are "environmentalist". Only a few subjects responded to all seven personality characteristics in the "environmentalistic" way. Most of the subjects responded in a mixed way. They are eclectic, and their beliefs are a mixture of elements rather than systematically integrated into a system. This result leads to some doubt about Sameroff's approach. Sameroff (1985) formulated stages in the parents' beliefs about the child with four levels analogous to Piaget's sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. These are the symbiotic, the categorical, the compensating, and the perspectivistic. Mothers were classified into one of four levels mainly according to their explanations of child's personality and developmental outcomes. Mothers at the symbiotic level interpret child behaviors as only the result of mothers. At the categorical level mothers give explanations for child behaviors based on either environment or constitution alone. At the compensating level, which typifies the majority of mothers according to Sameroff, mothers understand developmental outcomes as the result of the interaction between constitution and environment. Mothers at the perspectivistic level consider multiple influences on developmental outcomes and can explain them in a transactional way. But the subjects of the present study showed shifts of view of development depending on personality characteristics. Sameroff's approach characterizing parents' beliefs by using Piagetian-type concepts which are very general imposed generality and systematicity, which might not exist in parents' beliefs. It is unlikely that parents' beliefs have structured-wholeness as Piaget postulated for cognitive development. It is unlikely that the quality of beliefs are independent of the content of beliefs.

Finally, several limitations of the present study should be mentioned. First, the questionnaire was not elaborated enough, consisting of only six statements. Second, it assessed only seven personality characteristics. Third, the sample size of the mother group was small, and there was no mother-adolescent group. A study with a large sample is necessary.

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