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Title

Mothers' challenges with the parental control of 3-year-old children in Japan: A qualitative study

Key messages

1. The challenges that mothers faced in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children represented a departure from the belief that there is a correct way of exerting control over their children while remaining conscious of their own parental responsibility.

2. This departure from the notion of a correct way of parenting was a turning point for their growth as parents.

3. Due to societal monitoring of parents and mothers' multiple roles in the family (e.g. housework), it can be difficult for mothers to fully overcome the challenges of parental control.

Abstract

Background Parents often struggle against the negativism of 3-year-old children in exerting parental control. While most research on parental control is from western cultures, Japanese mothers may face unique challenges because of their sociocultural background. We therefore explored mothers' challenges in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children in Japan.

Methods A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted. The participants were 10 Japanese mothers with children aged 3–4 years. We conducted individual semi-structured interviews and analysed the data via qualitative content analysis.

Results We found four categories and a structure of the challenges mothers faced in exerting parental control. Mothers' control attempts had four main intentions, each with a different subject (i.e. the children, themselves, the family, and society). Most challenges with parental control stemmed from mothers' 'consciousness of parental responsibility'. In confronting the child in their attempts to exert parental control, mothers perceived a 'struggle with the child's negativism', which led them to recognize that they could not find a correct method of discipline. Furthermore, in the face of conflicting roles, mothers experienced 'confusion in seeking the righteous answer as a parent'. Some mothers began to feel that they were discovering their maternal role in their own way rather than finding a correct answer, which formed a 'conviction that my own parenting is not incorrect'.

Conclusions The challenges mothers faced in exerting parental control over their 3-year-old children served as a turning point for them to reflect on themselves as parents. However, due to societal monitoring of parents and mothers' multiple roles in the family, it can be difficult for mothers to fully overcome the challenges of parental control. It is necessary to foster social capital in the community to which the mother belongs and to create an atmosphere in which community members can watch over parents warmly.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Parental control is a principal area of parenting research that has been considered fundamental to the parenting context (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009). It is defined as 'the act of determining and enforcing child's actions that parents believe are good for their children, regardless of their children's will' (Baumrind, 1967). Parental control is considered to consist of two dimensions: psychological control and behavioural control (Smetana, 2017). The former is the use of controlling or manipulative tactics to appeal to the child's internally pressuring forces, such as shame, guilt, and separation anxiety (Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). The latter, focuses on managing children's behaviours by creating a regulating structure through supervision, setting limits, and establishing and enforcing household rules (Barber, 1996). Moderate levels of both psychological and behavioural control are effective in promoting children's social development. Specifically, parental control is necessary for helping children acquire behaviours that are appropriate and acceptable in their specific cultural contexts. However, excessively high levels of either form of control can adversely influence development (Kakihara & Tilton-Weaver, 2009). On the other hand, excessively low levels of either form of control can result in children being excluded from their community because they do not obey cultural rules (Grusec & Davidov, 2010).

Japanese mothers often face challenges in their parenting because of the sociocultural background of modern Japan. These challenges principally arise from the concentration of parenting responsibility on the mother (Inoue, 2012), and the remnants of Japanese traditional gender ideology. Although Japanese mothers spend more than 7 hours per day on housework and child care, Japanese fathers still spend only 67 minutes per day on these activities, which is the lowest among advanced countries (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2017). The challenges also arise from the lower support given to the mother by the community and family. Nowadays, Parents in Japan are raising children during a time of a declining birth-rate and a rising incidence of the nuclear family, coupled with weakened community relationships (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2007). A third reason is that mothers in modern Japan often lack parenting knowledge and skills, which may be attributed to the fact that women generally have few opportunities to interact with children before they become mothers. A Japanese survey reported that many parents have little confidence in their own parenting (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2012).

This cultural background similarly causes mothers to face problems in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children. They particularly struggle with the strategic resistance and self-assertion of such children (Ujiie, 1997). For example, parents often engage in bargaining with children in an attempt to control children's behaviour. In collectivistic cultures such as Japan, symbiotic harmony in the parent–child relationship is valued over the generative tension valued in individualistic countries such as the United States (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000). Conflicts between parents and children can threaten this harmony, which may make mothers less willing to exert parental control.

Still, there are rather few studies focusing on parental control in contemporary Japanese mothers. Most literature has come from western cultures and focused on elucidating the concept of parental control or the outcomes of parental control in the child. For example, researchers have

examined the relations between parental control and children's depression (Soenens, Park, Vansteenkiste, & Mouratidis, 2012), anxiety (Ballash, Leyfer, Buckley, & Woodruff-Borden, 2006; Van Der Bruggen, Stams, & Bogels, 2008; Luebbe, Tu, & Kredrick, 2018), and behavioural problems (Mabbe, Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Leeuwen, 2016; Leung, Shek, & Lin, 2017; Baumgardner & Boyatzis, 2018), as well as the particular differences between psychological control and behavioural control (Kakihara & Tilton-Weaver, 2009; Li, Zhang & Wang, 2015). Qualitative studies in Japan have explored the internal process of mothers regarding parental control, such as how the mother–infant relationship transforms as a result of parental control (Takahama, Watanabe, Sakagami, Takastuji, & Nozawa, 2008) or on mothers' adaptation to their toddlers' negativism (Sakagami, 2003). Negativism is rebellious behaviour or self-assertion against parental control, and is typically exhibited by 2- to 3-year-old children. However, both these studies were focused on parent–child interactions, and were conducted approximately 10 years ago. In modern Japan, research on the parental control of mothers that focuses on their interaction with the community and society is required.

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the challenges that mothers face in exerting parental control in order to determine what support they require in exerting such control. These challenges may be especially prominent in modern Japan, where mothers remain the primary caregivers and receive less support from communities and families. In the present study, we explore mothers' challenges in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children in Japan. The following two research questions were addressed in this study: (i) What are the features of the challenges the mothers face with the parental control of 3-year-old children in Japan? (ii) How does Japanese sociocultural background influence the challenges in controlling a 3-year-old child?

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Study design and theoretical paradigm

We used a descriptive qualitative approach to explore mothers' challenges with the parental control of 3-year-old children in Japan. This approach has been known to offer a comprehensive summary of a given phenomenon and its everyday aspects (Sandelowki, 2000). In order to grasp the challenges of parental control from the standpoint of mothers in their interactions with the child, family, community, and society, we adopted symbolic interactionism as our theoretical paradigm. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meanings that mediate the interpretations of interactions during dynamic social activities (Blumer, 1969). Thus, we based this qualitative study on the assumption that mothers act in a way that is consistent with the meaning they attach to their interpretations of their interactions with their children, family, community, and society.

2.2 | Participants

In this study we used objective sampling. The research participants were 10 mothers in their 20s to 30s whose children were aged 3–4 years old. Seven participants had 3-year-old children, and three of them had 4-year-old children. All children were first born, and none of them were receiving medical care or early remedial teaching at the time. The participants were recruited from a kindergarten, a nursery, and two child support centres in a city in Japan by the institutions' staff. The

staff identified the mothers who were open to discussing their opinion and experiences as participants. All participants agreed to participate voluntarily after being provided with an explanation of the study by a researcher.

2.3 | Data collection

Data were collected from each participant in single individual semi-structured interviews held between June and September 2016. The interviewer and the participants met for the first time during the interview. With participants' permission, the interviews were recorded with an IC recorder. These interviews were conducted in a room in one of the cooperating institutions or at participants' homes on a one-on-one basis. The interview guide consisted of several questions, such as: 'In what situations do you attempt to control your children?', 'How do you deal with your children's defiance?' and 'How did you feel at that time?'. The mothers of 4-year-old children were interviewed about parental control when their child was 3 years old. Data collection was terminated when we confirmed that content leading to the generation of new categories will not be extracted from the participants' narrative. The interviews were conducted only by the first author, who has experience in child rearing support, and was considered skilled in building trusting relationships with research participants.

2.4 | Data analysis

We adopted an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis to analyse the data. Qualitative content analysis focuses on the subject and context of a text, and offers opportunities to analyse manifest and descriptive content as well as latent and interpretative content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). With an inductive approach, the researcher looks for similarities and differences within the data, and then organizes data into categories and/or themes with various levels of abstraction and interpretation (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017). To concretely describe mothers' difficulties, we focused on coding the manifest content of the texts. This coded content was subsequently sorted into categories with relatively low levels of interpretation and abstraction.

The analysis was conducted according to the following procedure. First, we treated the serial transcriptions of the recorded interviews as data. The authors read and reread the transcriptions carefully to obtain a sense of the overall context of the mothers' narratives. Second, we carried out open coding with a focus on the parts of the data that concerned mothers' challenges with parental control of their 3-year-old children. Throughout this process, we created theoretical memos by asking continually, 'What is this about?' and 'What is this?' Third, these theoretical memos were used to extract groups of semantic content, which were used as initial codes, while considering the overall context and meaning of the data. These initial codes were reviewed by the authors with constant reference to the raw data and theoretical memos; their similarities and differences were noted and used to integrate them into a final set of codes. These final codes were in turn grouped into subcategories reflecting more comprehensive concepts, and subsequently these were integrated into more abstract categories. Finally, we determined the relationships between the categories in order to structure the challenges that mothers faced.

2.5 | Ethical considerations

An author provided written and oral explanations to all study participants on the study procedure and how their personal information would be handled. We then obtained participants written informed consent. This study was conducted with the approval of the ethical review board of the institution to which we are affiliated.

2.6 | Trustworthiness

We confirmed the trustworthiness of the study based on the dependability, credibility, and, confirmability, as propounded by Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The dependability was confirmed through discussion among the research collaborators, all of whom excel in qualitative research, throughout the entire research process as well as through describing the results in detail. The credibility was confirmed via member checking—we had subset of participants check the subcategories and correct them as needed. The confirmability was confirmed through a detailed description of the analysis process and describing the results in detail.

3 | RESULTS

Table 1 shows the participants' characteristics. They ranged in age from their early twenties to their late thirties. All participants were from nuclear family households. Seven of the participants had two children, while three participants had one child. Seven participants were housewives, two were employed, and one participant was on maternity leave. Three participants were raising boys and seven were raising girls. The children ranged in age from 3 years 2 months to 4 years 6 months at the time of the interview.

Through the qualitative content analysis, we extracted four categories: (i) consciousness of parental responsibility; (ii) struggle with the child's negativism; (iii) confusion in seeking the righteous answer as a parent; and (iv) conviction that my own parenting is not incorrect. These categories comprised eight subcategories and 46 final codes reflecting mothers' challenges in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children. We also observed four intentions behind the exertion of such parental control. From these categories and mother's intentions, we identified the structure of mothers' challenges with parental control.

3.1 | The structure of mothers' challenges in the parental control of 3-year-old children

Figure 1 depicts the structure of the challenges the mothers faced in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children. There were four main intentions underlying mothers' attempts to exert control, all of which had varying subjects (i.e. the children, themselves, the family, and society): 'to protect and help my child grow', 'to comply with a societal atmosphere', 'to manage our family lifestyle', and 'to gain time for myself'.

The origin of the various challenges with parental control was the mothers' *'consciousness of parental responsibility'*, which referred to how the parents were motivated by both an inner sense of responsibility and outer pressure from society.

In confronting the child in their attempts to exert parental control, the mothers perceived a

'struggle with the child's negativism'. Mothers reported that the age of their child offered difficulties, thus causing them to feel 'anger at the child's negativism due to limited patience'. Furthermore, mothers began 'hoping for somebody to stand by my side in any situation'.

While struggling with parental control, the mothers recognized that they were unable to find the "correct" method of discipline'. Depending on the situation, mothers often felt that they had to exercise parental control in a way that was not child-centred. Given these conflicting roles, the mothers experienced *'confusion in seeking the righteous answer as a parent'*.

Through trial and error in dealing with the child's negativism, mothers reconsidered their role as a parent. They began to see that there was no 'correct answer' in raising a child and formed a *'conviction that my own parenting is not incorrect'*, thereby reaffirming their confidence as mothers.

3.2 | Intentions of mothers in exerting control over her children

The first intention pattern observed was 'to protect my child and help them grow'. More specifically, mothers attempted to control their children to promote the children's development, and protect the children's health and lives (e.g. preventing children from jumping out on the roads to prevent accidents). The second was 'to comply with societal atmosphere'. This intention was based on the fact that the mothers felt that there was an atmosphere in society that had to be preserved by ensuring that their child behaved in a socially acceptable manner (e.g. quieting a noisy child on the train). The third was 'to manage our family lifestyle', according to which the mothers attempted to control their children to ensure that the children's actions matched the pace of the family's lifestyle (e.g. ending children's play because the mother had to go shopping). The fourth intention was 'to gain time for myself', according to which the mothers exerted control to make time for themselves (e.g. getting her child to sleep early so that she can watch TV at night).

3.3 | Mothers' challenges in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children in Japan

3.3.1 | Consciousness of parental responsibility

This category refers to mothers' awareness of their own responsibility to discipline their children when the children required it, and their own perceived willingness to play the role that society demands of parents. This category comprised the following two subcategories: '*Aspiring to discipline using tenderness as well as strictness'* and *'A sense of duty imposed on parents by society'.*

Aspiring to discipline using tenderness as well as strictness

The mothers felt that they needed to discipline their children because their children were beginning to act out on their own, which they attributed to the child's age. They were acutely aware of their parental responsibility to discipline their children, and felt that such discipline required a strict and loving approach. They used strictness in order to prevent the children from engaging in maladaptive behaviour. Moreover, the mothers sought to maintain a sense of being 'above' their children, which they felt was important for discipline.

> *I should scold at the time that my child tries to engage in risky behaviours. However, I wish to spend time with my child while smiling as much as possible. [F]*

I think it is strange for parents to obtain permission from their children, because I believe that parents are in a higher position than their children. I feel that a relationship where parents depend on their children's decision-making is wrong. [D]

A sense of duty imposed on parents by society

The mothers mentioned that parents have a responsibility imposed by the society to manage their misbehaved children. They felt pressured by others' potential criticism of their parenting. They found that they were sensitive to the behaviour of their children and others' gazes.

I am afraid of the surrounding gaze. I don't want people around me to think that I cannot discipline my children despite being the parent of my children. [A]

3.3.2 | Struggle with the child's negativism

This category refers to the mothers' perceptions of the difficulties in responding to her rebellious children. It consists of the following 3 subcategories: '*Irritation caused by the child's disappointing behaviour'; 'Anger at the child's negativism caused by limitation of patience'* and *'Hoping for somebody to stand by my side in any situation'.*

Irritation caused by the child's disappointing behaviour

Mothers reported being frustrated when their 3-year-old child disrupted their lives. This frustration often seemed the result of the child's failing to meet expectations of being more 'grown up'.

I thought she was crying so much (though she was a 3-year-old child). I thought it would not be crying so much. The longer the child cries, the more I get irritated. [H]

Anger at the child's negativism caused by limitation of patience

The mothers often felt that they were unable to face the resistance from their children, especially if they could not exert considerable control. They occasionally vented their anger at their children, for example, by hitting them, when they felt unable to cope with their children's disobedience.

After taking care brushing my child's teeth, I have to get the child to go to the bathroom, and then to sleep. I get irritated if it takes time to prepare to brush my child's teeth. I instinctively tell them to 'hurry up'. I would think my child was cute if she would listen immediately. [C]

Hoping for somebody to stand by my side in any situation

They felt that people close to them, such as their husbands or their children's nursery school teachers, were indispensable in helping them introduce discipline. However, mothers often were afraid of others' disapproval of their children, feeling that some people did not even try to express understanding for children in public places.

I feel bitter now because nobody supported me when I desired such support. [D]

I think that some people in public places maybe gaze at us like we're 'an absolute menace'. I

feel threatened and become nervous. [A]

3.3.3 | Confusion in seeking the righteous answer as a parent

This category referred to mothers' perceptions of the embarrassment that can arise in their attempts to find the appropriate parental response in situations requiring control. This category comprised the following two subcategories: '*Cannot find the correct method of discipline'* and *'Frustrated by the difficulties of child-centred parenting in reality'.*

Cannot find the correct method of discipline

Mothers often sought a 'correct answer' when they had to exert parental control. They sought this answer by obtaining information from the internet and friends. However, as they often could not find a definitive answer, they were keenly aware of the difficulty of disciplining their child.

I really think that I do not know what is correct. There are some competitive children who are motivated by strict discipline, while some children are motivated by praise. Nobody knows what's correct until the child grows up. This is very difficult. [B]

Frustrated by the difficulties of child-centred parenting in reality

The mothers found it impossible to fully realize the ideal parenting behaviour. Furthermore, they found it difficult to know what would or would not benefit their children, and sometimes were forced to use methods that they did not believe was good for the child.

Although I believe that the ideal mothers correct their children without getting angry, I cannot behave as these ideal mothers. I am frustrated about it, then I get irritated again. [A]

3.3.4 | Conviction that my own parenting is not incorrect

This category reflects participants' confidence in their own methods of raising their children and process of overcoming the difficulties associated with control. This category comprised one following subcategory: '*Discovering the maternal role in my own way rather than finding a correct answer'*.

Discovering the maternal role in my own way rather than finding a correct answer

Some of the mothers said there were no correct answers for disciplining, and instead believed that it was necessary to consider their own parenting philosophy. They became able to accept their limitations in achieving the 'ideal' parenting in real life.

Actually, I could not get the answer. I understood that there would be no correct answer through the internet and television. Well then, I got less troubled by coming to believe that I only have to do what I believe is good. [A]

4 | DISCUSSION

4.1 | The features of the mothers' challenges through the parental control of 3-year-old

children

The origin of the challenges with parental control was *'consciousness of parental responsibility'*. In previous studies, parental responsibilities could be conceptualized as emotional, community, and moral responsibilities (Doucet, 2015). Emotional parenting responsibilities referred to the practice of attentiveness and responsiveness. Community responsibilities referred to connecting children with society using skills such as coordination and negotiation. Finally, moral responsibilities were required by the 'social groups' within which the parenting takes place. In this study, mothers' perceptions of parental responsibility aligned most with the community and moral responsibilities. Thus, the challenges with parental control appears to originate in mothers' perception of their duty as a member of society as well as their role as the main socializer of their children.

Mothers experienced a *'struggle with the child's negativism'*. Children's rebellion and assertiveness are well-known major parental stressors (Hilson & Kiper, 1994). Mothers often reacted negatively to disappointing behaviour in their children, which stemmed from their beliefs that 3-year-olds are more amenable, mannerly, and calmer than are 1- or 2-year-olds. Japanese parents also tend to expect that children acquire emotional control, obedience, and courtesy at an earlier age than do American parents (Hess, Kashiwagi, & Azuma, 1980). Control situations in general often betray parents' expectations concerning their children's emotional control, obedience, and courtesy. In this study, the mothers reported being unable to control their emotions if they were given no psychological leeway when fulfilling the roles of childcare and housework alone. Hilson and Kiper (1994) modelled the developmental process of child abuse using cognitive theories of stress, and positioned maltreatment as a maladaptive strategy for coping with stressors. According to this model, the bitter struggle for parental control can in some cases lead to child abuse.

While attempting to exert control over their children, mothers experienced *'confusion in seeking the righteous answer as a parent'.* In this context, the 'correct answer' was a form of parental involvement that best promoted the child's discipline. However, there is no one 'correct' answer to the issue of child rearing and no best way of socializing a child (Grusec & Davidov, 2010). Indeed, some studies (e.g. Blair et al., 2014; Fabes, Poulin, Eisenberg, & Madden-Derdich, 2002) have found that supportive parental involvement is effective in promoting the development of children's sociality, while others (e.g. Miller-Slough, Dunsmore, Zeman, Sanders, & Poon, 2017; Mirabile, Oertwig, & Halberstadt, 2016) concluded that it is not necessarily effective. The mothers' desire for a correct answer is perhaps linked to the Japanese cultural characteristic of avoiding uncertainty (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

Ultimately, the consequence of the struggle for parental control was *'conviction that my own parenting is not incorrect'*. This suggest the mothers' regaining of confidence in their roles as parents, which occurred as an escape from the idea that there is a correct answer to parenting through their adaptation to the child's negativism. Motherhood is not limited to the puerperal period, and women's identity as mothers continue to develop each time they overcome difficulties with raising their child (Mercer, 2004). The confidence obtained through overcoming challenges with parental control may be considered more robust, because such confidence is constructed through interactions with the

community and society as well as the child.

4.2 | Japanese sociocultural characteristics underlying mothers' challenges in controlling a 3-year-old child

While overcoming the challenges with parental control was an important point of development for the mothers, it was clearly not easy to achieve. First, many of the mothers mentioned public surveillance in the context of parental control. In Japan, there is a tendency for parents to face intense, often non-verbal criticism from the public when their children act out in public (Teramoto et al., 2015). For Japanese mothers, parental control is considered not only a responsibility imposed by society, but also a fundamental parenting function that will be criticized by others when performed 'inappropriately'. Second, mothers were expected to exert control with limited support while also balancing their multiple roles (i.e. parent, housewife, employee, and self-actualizer). In recent years, fathers have begun to participate more in childcare given the growing awareness of the importance of such participation (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2017). However, in Japan, the time spent by fathers engaging in housework and childcare remains the lowest among developed countries (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2017).

4.3 | Implications for childcare practice

Our results indicate that it is important for child care professionals to select the appropriate support direction based on the nature of the mother's trouble with parental control. For mothers struggling with child-centred parental control, supporters should support the mother's trial-and-error process of exerting control to help them reflect on themselves as parents. On the other hand, for mothers who struggle with control that is not child-centred, supporters might focus on coping with immediate issues to do with parental control. For example, for mothers who struggle with balancing their multiple roles, support that helps the mothers in managing their own lives and supporting collaborative relationships with significant others can be helpful. Mothers struggling with societal judgment might require community-level rather than individual-level support. Specifically, it is necessary to foster social capital in the community to which the mother belongs and to create an atmosphere in which community members watch over the parents warmly.

4.4 | Limitations

This study has three main limitations. First, the participants were all mothers who could verbalize their own experiences and thoughts about others. Second, the participants were not mothers with poor parenting ability. Individuals with poor parenting ability might have had different perceptions from the participants of this study. Third, there could be differences in perceptions based on the participants' educational background. However, we did not collect data on the participants' education history, and thus could not clarify its effect. Fourth, we could not ensure the transferability of this study. In this study, we could not investigate mothers with various backgrounds (i.e. mothers with disabled children, mothers with mental disorders, and mothers with 3-year-old children in addition to older children). Despite these limitations, this study was successful in describing the

reality of the Japanese mothers' challenges with parental control in detail. In addition, this study identified the growth of the mothers in the face of struggle they experience, through structuring the challenges of parental control. Finally, this study was also able to propose a form of childcare support tailored to the type of the struggle with parental control experienced by Japanese mothers. In the future, we should investigate mothers with different backgrounds, as this would help us enhance the scope of application of our results.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we explored the mothers' challenges in exerting parental control over 3-year-old children in Japan. The mothers' challenges with parental control represented a departure from the belief that there is a correct way of exerting control over their children while remaining conscious of their own parental responsibility. This departure from the notion of a correct way of parenting was a turning point for their growth as parents. To support the mothers' growth as parents, Childcare supporters should select the appropriate support direction tailored to the type of the struggle (child-centred or not child-centred) with parental control.

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TABLE 1

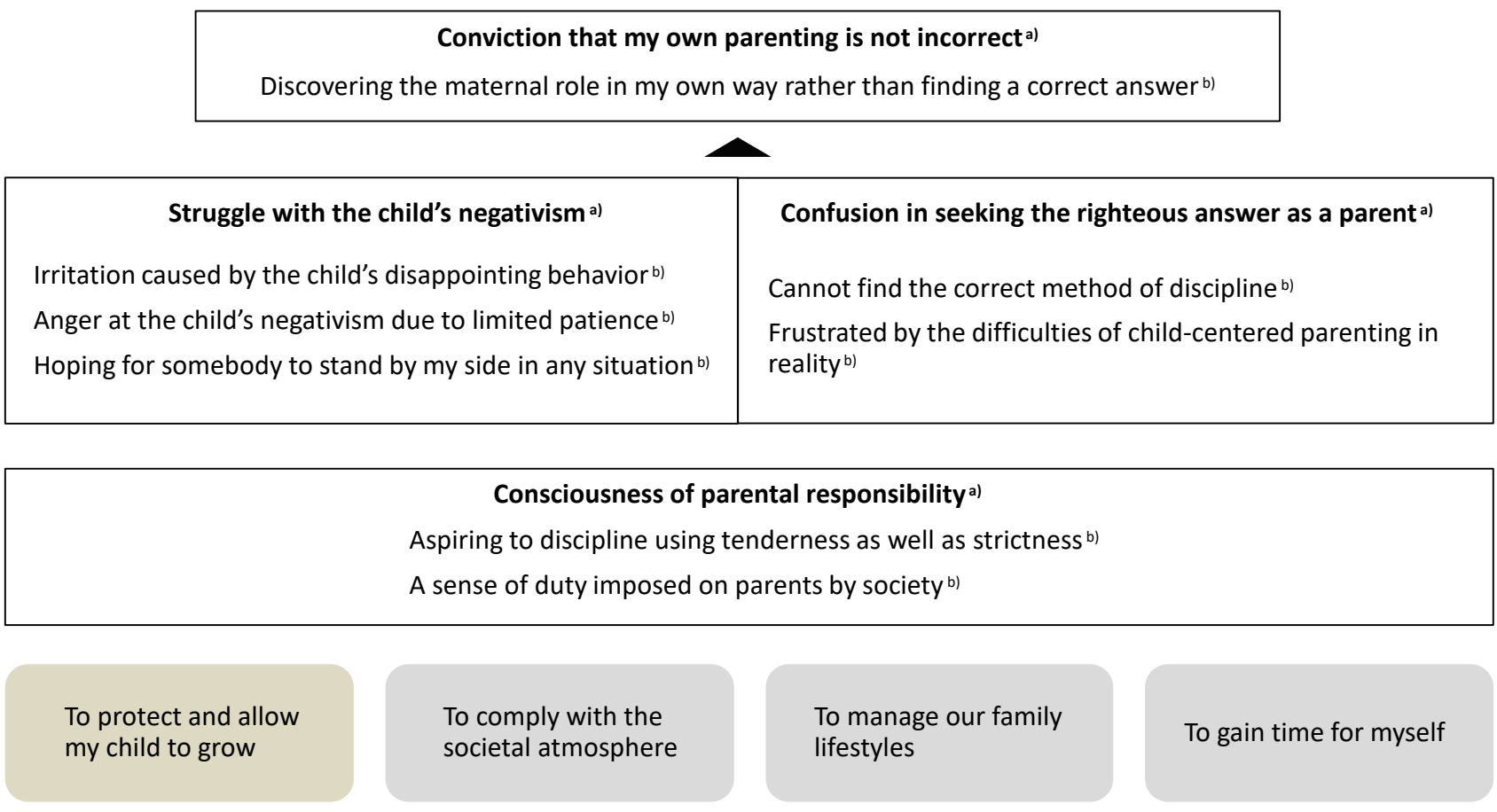
Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Variable	Values	n
Mother's age	25–29	2
	30–34	7
	35–39	1
Family structure	Nuclear family	10
Employment status	Working	2
	Maternity leave	1
	Full-time housewife	7
Number of children	One	3
	Two	7
Child's age at time of interview	3 years	6
	4 years	4
Child's sex	Male	3
	Female	7

Figure Caption

FIGURE 1
Structure of mothers' challenges with the parental control of three-year-old children

※Please see the attachment



The intentions of mothers in exerting control over their children

a) Categories in boldface
b) Subcategories in normal text