Relationship Between Altruism and Autonomy: 
A Study of Rural Japanese Children and Youth

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Abstract

The Asakawa and Iwawaki index of autonomy was used for measurement of autonomy in children and youth. The Mondori et al. scale of altruism was used to measure pupils' altruism. 203 girls and 206 boys from public elementary schools and middle schools 4th, 6th and 8th grade class took part in the study.

Results included following:
1) mean scores of altruism decreased with increase of age;
2) girls showed higher altruism scores than boys in all age groups;
3) "performing one's duty" and "self-assertion" as components of autonomy were effective intervening factors of Japanese altruistic responses; and
4) "self-oriented/individualism" was, in part, negatively correlated with children's altruism.

The present study reveals that some specific aspects of autonomy are related to Japanese altruism in children and youth. Furthermore, the results suggested that the more active and/or positive the person, the more altruistic. Those findings were discussed from social-cognitive and developmental viewpoints.

Introduction

In recent years, some studies conducted in Japan suggested that children's empathy and prosocial responses would be affected by their status vis-a-vis the "other person" (i.e., Asakawa and Shwalb, 1985; Asakawa and Matsuoka, 1987). For instance, Japanese pupils in later childhood and early adolescence tended to respond more empathically for intimate others or for their classmates than the outsiders. Those findings may imply that altruism of Japanese children would become oriented to the "in-group" with increase in age, and that...
such behavioral changes from late childhood through early adolescence might be due to collectivism characteristics of context of Japanese culture. That is, as children increasingly focus on their group norms and/or peer pressure, “in-” and “out-group” effects on emergence of altruistic attitudes may become manifest. At this point, children’s altruistic behaviors might be a product of his/her socialization.

An another investigation on the development of prosocial behavior, Asakawa and Iwawaki (1987) suggested that more autonomous children were more altruistic than less autonomous children; and, further, that more autonomous groups showed less decrease of altruistic scores than less autonomous groups from 4th, 6th to 8th grade. In their study, autonomy was regarded as a concept which is strongly related to the individuation, but contrary to the collectivism.

Autonomy means being governed by oneself. Based upon Piaget’s cognitive developmental theory, Kamii (1985) defined autonomy as the ability to make one’s social/intellectual judgements and decisions for oneself, independently of the external reward system and others’ pressures, by taking into account the points of view of the other people concerned. According to her definition, self-decision-making, self-assertion, lack of compliance to others, individualism and so on, are major components of the autonomy. Findings from some previous researches indicated that those personal factors might have positive effects on the nature of Japanese children’s altruistic behaviors.

The present investigation asks what components of the autonomy would be related to display of altruism in Japanese children and youth. Given the focus on features that spontaneity and subjectivity would be needed for emergence of their altruistic behaviors, it was postulated that autonomy and altruism would be significantly correlated with each other. Another aim of the study is to assess age-related changes in autonomy from late childhood through early adolescence. Since children’s collectivism would increasingly be strengthened during those ages, their development of autonomy might be interfered by their internalized collectivism.

**Method**

**Participants.** 203 girls and 206 boys from public school 4th (48 girls and 47 boys), 6th (87 girls and 78 boys) and 8th (81 girls and 68 boys) grade classes in rural cities (population < 40,000) in Iwate Prefecture, Japan, took part in this study. Mean ages were 9 years 3 months, 11 years 3 months and 13 years 4 months for the three grade levels.

**Procedure.** The Asakawa and Iwawaki (1987) Index of Autonomy for Children and Adolescents (the IACA) was used to measure altruism. The Mondori, Maeda, Asakawa and Yonezawa (1985) Scale of altruism for Children and Adolescents (the SAC) was used to measure subjects’ altruism to the others. The IACA consists of 4 subscales : 1) performing one’s duty based on self-deci-
sion-making (9 items); 2) self-assertion (6 items); 3) self-oriented/individualism (5 items); and 4) noncompliance to pressures from others (4 items). The SAC consisted of 15 items including helping, care, comfort and so on. Both indices were found previously to be reliable and valid.

Both measures were administered in a standardized manner. Instructions to the subjects were given by classroom teachers. For data analysis of the IACA, very autonomous responses in 4 point scale were scored “4” and very heteronomous responses “1”. As to the SAC, altruistic responses in the Yes/No format were scored “1” and non-altruistic responses “0”.

**Results.**

*Age-related changes and gender differences of autonomy and altruism scores.*

Results are separately presented for the autonomy and altruism measure. Table 1 and 2 give the mean scores and S.D. for the IACA and the SAC respectively.

Two-way ANOVAs were initially performed on the subscale for “performing one’s duties.” In this analysis, there were overall main effects for grade and gender (grade: $F=41.91$, $df=2/403$, $p<.01$; gender: $F=7.56$, $df=1/403$).

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Performing duties</th>
<th>Self- Assertion</th>
<th>Self-oriented/individualism</th>
<th>Independent from others</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>27.15 (4.53)</td>
<td>15.47 (3.19)</td>
<td>9.11 (3.58)</td>
<td>10.45 (2.39)</td>
<td>57.09 (5.42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>25.13 (4.39)</td>
<td>14.83 (3.51)</td>
<td>9.02 (3.18)</td>
<td>9.75 (2.20)</td>
<td>56.71 (8.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>20.49 (4.11)</td>
<td>14.19 (3.10)</td>
<td>8.30 (2.61)</td>
<td>10.24 (2.50)</td>
<td>53.21 (6.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>23.59 (3.18)</td>
<td>14.13 (2.74)</td>
<td>8.23 (2.58)</td>
<td>9.98 (2.45)</td>
<td>55.92 (6.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>boy</td>
<td>21.58 (3.64)</td>
<td>15.69 (2.98)</td>
<td>8.64 (2.50)</td>
<td>10.86 (2.18)</td>
<td>56.68 (6.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girl</td>
<td>23.75 (3.56)</td>
<td>15.78 (3.26)</td>
<td>8.69 (2.77)</td>
<td>10.09 (2.11)</td>
<td>58.27 (6.92)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

( ) indicates S.D.

$p<.01$). An interaction between grade and gender was also significant ($F=15.97$, $df=2/403$, $p<.01$). The ANOVAs revealed showed that: (1) mean score of 4th graders was significantly higher than two other age groups, and (2) girls showed higher scores than boys in 6th and 8th grade while boys’ score was higher than girls in 4th grade.
In a two-way ANOVAs on "self-assertion," only the main effect for grade was significant ($F=8.37$, $df = 2 / 403$, $p<.01$). These results revealed that 8th graders showed higher scores than 6th graders, or that 8th graders are more assertive than 6th graders.

In two-way ANOVAs on "self-oriented/individualism" and "Independent from others' pressure," no significant main effect for grade was found. However, boy's mean scores of "independent from other's pressure" was significantly higher than that of girls. This indicates that girls in late childhood and early adolescence are likely to be more influenced by peer groups.

In a two-way ANOVAs on overall autonomy (IACA) scores, there were significant main effects for grade and gender (grade : $F=9.62$, $df = 2 / 403$, $p<.01$ ; gender : $F=7.75$, $df = 1 / 403$, $p<.01$). Examination of the means reveals a V shaped developmental change: the 4th grade shows the highest score ($M=57.91$), the 6th grade the lowest ($M=54.64$) and the 8th grade slightly lower than 4th grade.

3 (grade) × 2 (gender) ANOVAs were also performed for overall altruism scores (see Table 2). In this analysis, there were significant overall main effects for grade and gender (grade : $F=6.16$, $df = 2 / 403$, $p<.01$ ; gender : $F=11.45$, $df = 1 / 403$, $p<.01$). These results indicated that mean altruism scores decrease with increase of age, and that girls showed higher mean scores than boys in three grade level.

In Table 2, mean altruism scores and S.D. for three grade levels are presented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>4th</th>
<th>6th</th>
<th>8th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boy</td>
<td>8.93 (3.17)</td>
<td>7.84 (2.97)</td>
<td>7.65 (2.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>girl</td>
<td>7.40 (2.97)</td>
<td>8.08 (3.53)</td>
<td>8.50 (2.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

( ) indicates S.D.

Relationship between Autonomy Scores and Altruism Scores.

Correlational analyses between autonomy (IACA) scores and the altruism (SAC) scores were performed for each gender group of three grade level separately. As seen at Table 3, "performing one's duties" and "self-assertion" items scores were positively related with the overall altruism scores in all gender groups and every grade level. "Self-oriented/individualism" was significantly related to altruism scores in boy 6th graders and 8th graders of both
Relationship Between Altruism and Autonomy:

Table 3
Correlation between autonomy and altruism scores in three grade levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Performing duties</th>
<th>Self-Assertion</th>
<th>Self-oriented Individualism</th>
<th>Independent from others</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>boy n=47</td>
<td>.275*</td>
<td>.231*</td>
<td>-.103</td>
<td>.044</td>
<td>.308*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girl n=48</td>
<td>.453**</td>
<td>.355*</td>
<td>-.085</td>
<td>.165</td>
<td>.389**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total n=95</td>
<td>.384**</td>
<td>.276*</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>.076</td>
<td>.354**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>boy n=78</td>
<td>.399**</td>
<td>.469**</td>
<td>-.297**</td>
<td>.254*</td>
<td>.427**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girl n=87</td>
<td>.290**</td>
<td>.331**</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>.352**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total n=165</td>
<td>.381**</td>
<td>.393**</td>
<td>-.136</td>
<td>.171*</td>
<td>.410**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>boy n=81</td>
<td>.295**</td>
<td>.311**</td>
<td>-.246*</td>
<td>.129</td>
<td>.303***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girl n=68</td>
<td>.421**</td>
<td>.346**</td>
<td>-.218*</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.332**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>total n=149</td>
<td>.389**</td>
<td>.323**</td>
<td>-.225**</td>
<td>.087</td>
<td>.330**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10

gender. Scores of "independent from others' pressure" was not significantly correlated with the altruism scores except for boy 6th graders.

DISCUSSION

The findings in the present study revealed that children's autonomy changes in keeping with a V shaped curve from late childhood and early adolescence. That is, mean autonomy scores of 6th graders was significantly lower than those of 4th and 8th graders. Lower scores of "self-responsibility" and "self-assertion" in 6th graders are the main basis for such the V shaped developmental change. Steinberg & Silverberg (1986) claimed that depending on parents would shift to depending on their peers from 5th through 8th grade. The findings in the study would be interpreted in the light of the qualitative changes of children's dependency on the others.

The present investigation also revealed that the older age group (8th grade) showed less altruistic responses than the younger group, and that girls' mean scores were more altruistic than those of boys in all age groups. Those results were consistent with the findings from Mondori, Maeda, Asakawa and Yonezawa (1985). One possible explanation for such age-related changes is that middle school youth (the 8th and 9th grade) in Japan would be increasingly competitive with other pupils and are especially competitive with respect to the entrance examination to high schools. Therefore their competitive attitude would restrict from emerging their altruism to the others in general.

Significant gender differences in all grade levels may reflect the traditional gender role which girls should be generous and kind. In this point, Gilligan
(1982) also emphasise that women's morality is strongly connected with their
generosity to the others. This result was also very similar to some research
on empathy and prosocial behavior previously done in Japan. (i.e. Asakawa &
Matsuoka, 1987)

The correlational data indicated that "performing one's duties" and "self-
assertion" were effective intervening factors for altruism in Japanese children
and early adolescence. According to Kikuchi (1984), it was hypothesized that
the norms of responsibility, spontaneity, reciprocity and so on would serve as
determinants of the display of altruistic behavior. The findings in the present
research partially supported his hypothesis. For boy 6th graders and 8th
graders, scores of "self-oriented/individualism" items were negatively correlated
with their altruism scores. This might, in another words, suggest that the "other-
oriented" tendency would be an effective factor in early adolescence. This would
also suggest that their collectivism thought as a product of socialization would
influence on their altruistic behaviors. Related to this result, the “independent
from group pressure” item scores showed no evidence of a significant relation with
altruism scores in those age level. Since there is the possibility that Japanese
children have altruism based on collectivism, this aspect of autonomy may not be an
effective intervening factor for their altruism.

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APPENDIX

Index of Autonomy for Children and Adolescents

PERFORMING ONE'S DUTY
25 I try to get my job done in small group work, even when nobody tells me what to do.
13 I do my best work when I am part of a team.
20 When the teacher is absent, I am willing to study.
32 I can get my group to come to a decision, no matter what others may say.
19 When nobody is around, I often don't do my work.
22 When something is decided, I can usually get it done just the way it is planned.
12 I usually don't need others to decide things for me.
7 I don't care if I don't show my best, as long as my group succeeds.
27 When I make a mistake and get a warning, I obey right away.

SELF-ASSERTION
21 During group work, I can give my opinions when even they are different from others' opinions.
29 When I disagree with somebody, I can take him/her understand my opinion.
11 If I think I am right about something, I don't give up even when friends disagree with me.
31 If my teacher makes a mistake, I can ask the teacher about it.
24 If someone breaks a rule we set for a game (like soccer or dodgeball), I warn him/her.
15 As a pupil I have no business making decisions--that is the teacher's job.

SELF-ORIENTED/INDIVIDUALISM
17 During recess I have the most fun when I do things for myself.
8 A lot of time at school, I feel like I'm on my own.
5 I don't like it during recess or free time, if I have to be alone.
14 Even when I am working in a classroom group, I don't feel like we are a team.
10 One of the things I enjoy about going to school is being with my classmates.

INDEPENDENT FROM OTHERS' PRESSURE
26 Even when I have a really good idea, I don't speak up much because I'm shy in front of others.
18 I am embarrassed about letting classmates know what is special about me.
2 I don't mind showing what I know, even if someone might call me "show-off."
23 I usually avoid arguing with classmates during class.