

Perceived Social Support and Parenting Beliefs in Japan: A Person-Oriented Approach

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Abstract

Japanese mothers (N = 116) of preschool children (ages 5-6) responded to a questionnaire concerning their satisfaction with social support provided by husband, own mother, relatives, and friends; memories of childhood parental support; and parenting beliefs (role conception and self-efficacy). Using cluster analysis, three subgroups of mothers with different patterns of perceived social support were identified. All-supported mothers (n = 44) were satisfied with past and current support received from all. Mother-supported subgroup (n = 53) was satisfied with own mother's support, but were less satisfied with husband and friends support. Friend-supported mothers (n = 19) reported negative childhood relationship with parents and were dissatisfied with support from kinfolk. Interview quotes are presented to illustrate the findings.

Key words: Parenting, Social Support, Parental Role, Parenting Self-Efficacy, Mothers, Japan, Person Oriented Approach

1. Introduction

When people receive adequate support from those around them, they tend to feel better about themselves and function well in daily life situations (Belsky, 1984). Further, the social support provided to parents may influence children's development directly or indirectly through their parents, and the childrearing support system surrounding a family may be conceptualized as part of the child's "developmental niche" (Harkness & Super, 1995) that parents construct through their social interactions with friends and family. Younger children, in particular, rely heavily on their parents to construct their developmental niche. While many studies provide us with ideas about how such childrearing support systems can be structurally and qualitatively different in other cultures such as Japan than in Western societies, there has been very little systematic study focusing directly on patterns of Japanese mothers' social support systems. Media reports of an increasing frequency of reported child abuse (Lah, 2011, February 15) and other indicators of stress among human relationships involving mothers of young children in Japan (e.g., Benesse, 1998) suggest that social relationships can be a source of satisfaction as well as anguish, even in a society frequently characterized as "collectivistic" (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Most existing research on social support and the family takes a variable-oriented approach, where the major concern is to understand the association among two constructs of interest. An example of such an analysis is one which examines the extent to which social support can predict a certain outcome (e.g., psychological well-being, parenting quality). The basic goal of the variable-oriented research paradigm is to identify the most parsimonious model that has maximum generalizability to the population under study. However, a growing body of developmental research emphasizes the variable pathways through which humans develop and function (Cairns, Bergman, & Kagan, 1998). Based on this premise, it is equally important to identify various types of individuals, or people in varying situations, to whom different models may apply.

In the person-oriented approach, a key goal is to identify subgroups of people with similar constellations of psychological or situational characteristics. In the child development literature, this approach is exemplified by the work of Diana Baumrind (1989), who identified a typology of parenting styles based on key parenting values and behaviors. In the social support literature, variable-oriented studies usually examine the antecedents or consequences of individual indicators of support. The present study departs from this approach by identifying subgroups of Japanese mothers who report particular constellations of support that they obtain from a variety of sources. We then compared these subgroups with regard to their demographic characteristics and their parenting beliefs, including their conceptions about the role of parent and their self-efficacy.

1.1 Perceived Social Support

In this study, we focus on mothers' subjective sense of the adequacy of the support they receive from a variety of actors. The tradition of examining perceived social support extends back to the work of Cobb (1976), who defined social support as information that leads a person to believe that he or she "is cared for and loved ... esteemed and valued ... and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligations" (p. 300). In the subsequent decades since Cobb's work was introduced, many researchers have taken a cognitive approach to social support, focusing on people's subjective appraisal of their social support system (e.g., Lakey & Drew, 1997; I. G. Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990).

Perceived social support appears to be a powerful predictor of one's well-being (e.g., Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Ward, Sherman, & LaGory, 1984). Because of its trait-like stability over time and its weak association with objective measures of received support, some researchers infer that perceived social support reflects a recipient's enduring internal belief system rather than being solely a reflection of social interactions (e.g., Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Lakey & Drew, 1997; B. R. Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990, I. G. Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986). This stable internal belief system or "support schema" may be formed in early childhood through interactions with parents and others (Lakey & Dickinson, 1994; B. R. Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason). In addition to forming a general support schema, individuals also appear to develop relationship-specific support schemata; these two types of schemata are likely to be distinct constructs, even though they may be strongly associated (Pierce, B. R. Sarason, & Sarason, 1990). For example, an individual may not perceive others as supportive in general but still may perceive a specific friend to be very supportive (Pierce, I. G. Sarason, & Sarason, 1991).

This study explores Japanese women's perceptions of the childrearing support that they receive from each of the following sources: their husband, own mother, friends, and relatives. In addition to eliciting these relationship-specific perceptions of support, we examine their perceptions of parental support they received during childhood. We view these representations of early relationships as contributors to their general support schema – a concept similar to the "internal working models" referred to in the attachment literature (Bowlby, 1973). This paper attempts to identify various subgroups of Japanese mothers of young children according to their patterns of perceived social support.

1.2 Perceived Social Support in Japan

Culture is likely to influence the expectations a mother holds of herself and others as well as the social expectation she perceives to be imposed upon her. There is some indication that social relationships in Japan are qualitatively different than those in the United States (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000), and that mothers' beliefs and perceptions about their role and identity are shaped in a culturally distinctive way (Goodnow & Collins, 1990).

1.2.1 Role of the Husband

Japanese men appear to have a rather restricted role in the contemporary Japanese family, both as husbands and fathers (Shwalb, Imaizumi, & Nakazawa, 1987). The marginalization of middle class men may have been further accelerated by the nature of the corporate workplace, which demands long hours, including after-hours socializing. Indeed, in one study 76% of fathers surveyed described themselves as "not so active" or "not active" in rearing their children (Shwalb, Kawai, Shoji, & Tsunetsugu, 1997). Compared to older generations, Japanese men with young children today express a stronger desire to be involved in childrearing (Equal Employment, 2001). However, there remains to be a gap between hopes and reality; men in their 30s and early 40s continue to work the longest hours (Equal Employment, 2001).

1.2.2 Role of Grandparents

It was common for extended families to live together in Japan a generation ago. Japanese grandparents continue to play an important role in childrearing today, even when the grandparents live on their own. For example, it is a well-known custom for women to stay with their own parents for an extensive period before and after giving birth.

Furthermore, while mothers-in-law have traditionally wielded substantial influence in the Japanese family (Nakano, 1995); in recent decades more egalitarian relationships have emerged and mothers do not seem to feel it necessary to submit to the will of their own mothers-in-law.

1.2.3 Role of Friends

Some observers view Japanese mothers as isolated from those in their community and lacking in close friendships; this isolation is frequently attributed to geographic mobility and the structure of apartment housing in urban areas (Kashiwagi, 1998; Morley, 1999; Vogel, 1996). On the other hand, Lebra (1984) observed how mothers of preschoolers became acquainted with neighbors and other mothers at the same preschool as their children started to play together. She states, “[t]hese women find one another a main source of instruction and support regarding how to rear children – a source more trusted than any other” (p. 210).

1.3 Parental Beliefs

Developmental psychologists have become increasingly aware that “parents, like their developing offspring, are cognizing individuals with goals, plans, ideas, motivations, intentions, and interests” (Smetana, 1994, p. 1). While the focus of earlier work was on establishing the linkages between parental beliefs and their actions (Goodnow & Collins, 1990), the question of where and how parental beliefs originate is receiving attention as well. One line of work has focused on macrostructures like culture and class as contexts within which particular beliefs develop (e.g., Shwalb & Shwalb, 1996). But researchers have also conceptualized smaller scale social structures such as school and family as giving rise to and maintaining particular types of parenting beliefs. This study extends the focus on microstructures by examining the particular constellations or structures of social support found among Japanese mothers. We view these microstructures as giving rise to certain types of parenting beliefs, but also acknowledge that mothers with certain types of belief seek out particular types of social support.

In particular, we examined mothers’ views of (a) their own role in educating and socializing their children, and (b) their confidence in being able to perform the role of parent in a competent fashion. Parents’ role definition and parenting self-efficacy are both essential components of parents’ decisions about what sort of activities they should become involved in on their child’s behalf. In the United States, research indicates that parents who see themselves as having responsibility for guiding their child’s education (rather than leaving it solely up to teachers and administrators) are more likely to participate in school-related activities, but only if they feel confident about their ability to communicate with teachers, understand the lessons, and so on (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). In this study, we extend this examination of role definition and self-efficacy by investigating how patterns of social support outside the school act as a context for these two types of beliefs on the part of Japanese mothers.

1.3.1 Role Conceptions

The notion of role construction in this paper refers to the expectations a particular mother holds about her own obligations to her child, in contrast to the expectations she holds concerning the obligations of her child’s teachers. In role theory, a particular individual’s role expectations are viewed as forming in response to the collective expectations of an important referent group, which could include the microstructures of immediate and extended family, friends, and coworkers, as well as cultural models associated with macrostructures like class and culture (e.g., Biddle, 1979). These expectations are assumed to be somewhat stable, both on the part of the collective and the individual, but it is also clear that they change along with changes in societal structures. In Japan, mothers’ roles are clearly delineated in several ways. First, there are distinct expectations for men and women, with women being expected to take full responsibility for child care and house work whether they are employed or not (Morley, 1999). Men are not expected to undertake many household chores, and fathers of young children typically spend around 17 minutes a day with their children (Ministry of Health, 1998).

Second, women are not expected to take full time jobs when their children are young, consistent with the view that they are the most important caregivers of their young children; in fact, only 15% of women with young children work full time (Kodomo Mirai Zaidan, 2000). These clear societal expectations lead to the hypothesis that mothers in Japan view themselves as the most responsible for their children’s education and socialization. On the other hand, nearly every Japanese child attends at least one year of preschool (Holloway, 2000); this universal attendance reflects a belief that early educational experiences are crucial to preparing a child to enter elementary school, particularly because they need to learn how to get along in a group setting (Peak, 1991). Therefore, it may be that Japanese mothers have clear ideas about the division of responsibility between themselves and the preschool teacher (Benesse, 1998). Furthermore, the social support experienced by each mother may condition mothers’ role expectations beyond these global cultural expectations.

A generational difference in views about mothers' role is emerging in Japan; younger women in their 20s and 30s are more likely to acknowledge the importance of cooperation among the husband and wife in raising a young child while older generations tend to think that it is solely the women's responsibility (Equal Employment, 2001). Mothers who are closely aligned with members of their own generation (i.e., husband and/or peers) may hold less traditional parenting beliefs than those whose primary connection is with their own mothers and extended family. If so, peer-oriented mothers may be more likely to feel that it is the family's responsibility to provide positive opportunities for their child. In contrast, women whose primary affiliation is with their own mothers may be more tied to traditional views in which the mother is seen as the primary caregiver who relies on the preschool teacher to complement her childrearing.

1.3.2 Parenting Self-Efficacy

In the United States, mothers who perceive themselves as competent parents are generally more likely to advocate for their children in school and other settings, more tenacious in solving problems that arise with their children, and more effective in their socialization practices (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Ozer, 1995; Teti & Gelfand, 1991; see also Coleman & Karraker, 1997; Jones & Prinz, 2005). The construct of parenting self-efficacy has been identified as an important mediator between social support and parenting quality (Cochran & Niego, 1995; Izzo, Weiss, Shanahan, & Rodriguez-Brown, 2000; Jackson & Huang, 2000; see also Simons & Johnson, 1996 for review). American mothers appear to gain self-confidence from supportive social contacts, which in turn affects their parenting practices.

Compared with mothers in other industrialized countries, Japanese mothers express little confidence in their parenting abilities (Bornstein et al., 1998; Kazui, 1997; Shwalb, Kawai, Shoji, & Tsunetsugu, 1995; Ujiie, 1997). While this lack of confidence may stem from a variety of factors, some observers attribute it to a lack of social support, arguing that Japanese mothers receive much criticism and have few role models to guide their parenting (Kashiwagi, 1998; Kazui, 1997; Morley, 1999; Vogel, 1996). On the other hand, in spite of their lack of involvement in the daily life of the family, husbands may provide a crucial validation of their wife's childrearing activities; Shwalb et al. (1995) found that while 43% of mothers reported being "not very confident" or "not confident" of their childrearing abilities, only 15% of fathers expressed similarly low confidence in their wives. This support may be particularly important if other segments of society are sharply critical of women's childrearing capabilities (Kazui, 1997).

1.4 Demographic Characteristics

The patterns of social support that mothers form may hinge on certain contextual features of their daily lives. In this study we focus on maternal age, child birth order, family socioeconomic status, and family size. To the extent that gender roles are changing slowly with each generation, younger mothers may also have more supportive husbands than do older mothers, whose husbands may adhere to more traditional norms. Women with older and/or more children may be more reliant on their friends because they had had more opportunities to make friends with other mothers. Particular patterns of social support may also be found in a given SES group; in the United States, lower SES mothers are more reliant on family and less on friends than are their higher SES counterparts (Cochran & Gunnarsson, 1990). This may also be the case in Japan, although there is little evidence on which to base a firm hypothesis.

1.5 Person-Oriented Approach in Studying Social Support

This study takes a "person-oriented approach" in seeking to identify subgroups of people who report similar patterns of social support and then to examine characteristic differences among the emerging subgroups. More specifically, we propose to identify clusters of mothers who share a common pattern of perceived support and then to examine the contextual (e.g., family size, educational background) and psychological (e.g., parenting self-efficacy, parenting role conceptions) differences across the subgroups. A person-oriented approach does not assume that all individuals develop through the same pathways or function similarly. A goal of this approach is to identify naturally occurring subgroups of individuals, based on a certain operating system under study, for which different rules or pathways may apply (Bergman, 2000).

This framework conceptualizes the person "as an integrated, hierarchically organized totality, rather than as a summation of variables" (Magnusson, 1998, p. 51). The major focus of this framework is to understand differences among individuals based on the premise that operating factors interact amongst each other in complex and dynamic ways. One statistical method that matches this theoretical approach is the cluster analysis, where *persons* are grouped based on similar patterns of variables under study that pertain to the individual. Applying a person-oriented approach to social support research allows for the study of an individual's social support system as a gestalt or a whole.

Instead of focusing on a particular kind of support (e.g., marital support), the main focus of this approach is to identify groups of mothers with similar social support patterns based on multiple sources. For example, some mothers may rely particularly on their husband for support, while others may turn to their own mother and relatives for support. Yet another group of mothers may have multiple sources of support from which they seek help. The underlying assumption of this framework is that a particular source of support (e.g., support from own mother) may have varied effects on one's life, depending on the nature of her entire social support system. Mothers may rely on support from different sources according to their preferences as well as the availability of support from other sources. Specifically, we examine the following research questions:

1. How many unique subgroups of mothers constitute a typology of satisfactory social support systems in Japan?
2. What are the defining characteristics of the emerging subgroups?
3. Do these subgroups of mothers hold different maternal beliefs about their role as parents and do they differ in their levels of parenting self-efficacy?

2 Method

2.1 Participants

A total of 116 mothers of preschool children in Japan participated in the study. Mothers were recruited through five private preschools in Sapporo and four private preschools in the Osaka region. (Children who attend private preschools constitute the largest proportion of children entering first grade in Japan [Ministry of Education, 2001].) The preschool directors invited participation from mothers whose children were in their final year of preschool.

2.1.1 Parent Demographics

On average, women were 35.6 ($SD = 3.9$) years old and had slightly more than two children ($M = 2.2$, $SD = .7$) Forty-one percent (41%) of the women were high school graduates, 44% had attended a professional school or a junior college after completing high school, and 16% had a bachelor's degree. The greatest proportion of women (41%) reported an annual household income in the range of 5 to 7 million yen (40,000 to 56,000 US dollars at a conversion rate of 1 US dollar = 115 Japanese yen).

2.1.2 Child Demographics

All target children were 5 or 6 years of age ($M = 5.2$, $SD = .4$), and 59 (51%) were girls. Out of the 116 families, the target child was the eldest in 40% of the families, the second oldest in 44%, the third oldest in 15%, and the youngest of four siblings in 2% of the families.

2.2 Instruments

The interview protocol and the questionnaire used in this study were developed based on the findings from a pilot study of 40 Japanese women (Holloway & Behrens, 2002) and in consultation with a bi-national research team. The instruments were designed to cover various areas of child development that are relevant to preschool-age children in Japan. Interview questions and the questionnaire were first constructed in English, and then translated into Japanese by three bi-cultural, bilingual doctoral students. Interview questions were then back translated into English by another Japanese student in order to ensure that the language was equivalent in English and Japanese.

2.2.1 Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions covering various topics including the mother's parenting practices and beliefs, involvement in their child's preschool, and their own childhood recollections. Subsequent to the initial interview, an ethnographic subsample of 16 mothers was selected in Osaka, who ranged on the variables of self-efficacy and educational background. Six months following the first interview, the ethnographic subsample participated in another round of less structured interviews with the same interviewer. The interview excerpts presented in this paper are drawn from these interviews.

2.2.2 Questionnaire

The questionnaire elicited demographic information and an array of parenting-related topics including mothers' own childhood relationship with parents, satisfaction with current social support, parental role beliefs (as opposed to preschool's role), and parenting self-efficacy.

2.2.2.1 Childhood Parental Support

Mothers were asked to indicate how often as a child they felt loved and understood by their mother and father. They were also asked how often they felt that their parents tried to help them when they were troubled. A Likert scale ranging from 1 (*hardly ever*) to 6 (*always*) was used. The statistical average of the 5 items was used to create a single composite score ($\alpha = .88$).

2.2.2.2 Social Support

Eight items ($\alpha = .76$) measured the mother's levels of satisfaction with the quantity and quality of support provided from her husband, own mother, friends, and relatives in relation to childrearing. A 6-point scale where 1 indicated *not at all satisfied* and 6 indicated *very satisfied* was used. The correlations among the quantity and quality of support satisfaction ratings for each support provider was consistently high (r ranged from .74 to .85). The statistical mean was used to create composite scores for satisfaction ratings of social support provided by husband, mother's mother, friends, and relatives (2 items each). An overall satisfaction score was created using the statistical mean of the eight items.

2.2.2.3 Parental Role Conception

A total of 15 items ($\alpha = .91$) elicited mothers' beliefs about parents' and preschool teachers' responsibilities in nurturing certain aspects of their children's development. Mothers were asked to distribute the responsibility (a total of 100%) between the family and preschool teachers for each item. For data reduction purposes, the items were submitted to a principal components analysis followed by a varimax rotation. Factors with initial eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained, yielding four factors accounting for 68.7% of the total variance. Items with loading values greater than .3 were retained. The first factor with four items ($\alpha = .85$) constituted *child's self-care*, the second factor with six items ($\alpha = .85$) constituted *social skills*, the third factor with two items ($\alpha = .68$) composed *socialization with others*, and the final factor with two items ($\alpha = .80$) were related to *academic preparation*.

2.2.2.4 Parenting Self-Efficacy

Twenty-five items ($\alpha = .87$) elicited mothers' sense of parenting self-efficacy. Fifteen of the items focused on mothers' confidence about producing a favorable child outcome ("child outcome efficacy"), and 10 items focused on mothers' sense of efficacy in employing certain maternal strategies with the child ("maternal strategy efficacy"). A 6-point scale was used, where 1 indicated *not at all confident* and 6 indicated *very confident*. All items were submitted to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation to examine whether the two, conceptually-derived factors would be empirically established. The retention of two factors appeared favorable based on a visual inspection of the scree plot and the interpretability of the factors. The eigenvalues of the two factors were 5.48 and 4.03, and together they explained 38% of the total variance. Items with loading values greater than .3 were retained, and item loadings were consistent with a priori conceptual groupings into child outcome efficacy and maternal strategy efficacy. Statistical means were used to create two scales: *child outcome efficacy* ($\alpha = .86$) and *maternal strategy efficacy* ($\alpha = .82$).

2.2.2.5 Demographic Variables

Several questions elicited demographic information such as mothers' age, focal child's birth order, number of children in the family, mothers' educational background, and annual household income.

2.3 Procedure

Female Japanese graduate students interviewed mothers individually for 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a private room in the preschool building, were tape-recorded, and later transcribed. Mothers were asked to fill out the questionnaire after the interview. They received a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation.

3 Results

A preliminary analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the support-related variables. Then, a cluster analysis was conducted to identify subgroups of mothers who reported similar patterns of support. Finally, subgroups were compared against demographic characteristics, perceptions about the parenting role, and parenting self-efficacy. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

3.1 Preliminary Analysis

3.1.1 Descriptive Analysis

Overall, the mothers in this study reported fairly positive childhood parental support and satisfaction with current social support with the exception of current relative support (see Table 2). Mothers in general were most satisfied with current support received from friends followed by their own mother, husband, and then relatives.

3.1.2 Correlation Analysis

Correlations were computed among the respondents' perceptions of childhood parental support and current social support satisfaction (see Table 1). Mothers who reported more positive childhood parental support also reported greater overall satisfaction with current support from their own mother and relatives but not with their husbands' or friends' support.

Mothers who were more satisfied with current relative support were also more satisfied with the current support received from their own mother and friends. Finally, women who were more satisfied with their friends' support tended to be more satisfied with their husband's support. The preliminary analysis suggested that, while these mothers' perceptions of their childhood parental support are associated with their current general views of social support, mothers hold differentiated perceptions of social support according to specific relationships.

3.2 Social Support Typology

3.2.1 Cluster Analysis

The childhood parental support composite and four relationship-specific social support composites were submitted to the cluster analysis, which involved the following two steps. First, a Ward hierarchical analysis was conducted, and the solutions obtained from the Ward analysis were submitted to a K-means analysis (see Huberty, DiStefano, & Kamphaus, 1997). The Euclidean squared distance was used as the similarity index. A three-cluster solution appeared most favorable, based on examinations of the cubic clustering criterion values, R-squared values, and the semi-partial R-squared values. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore how the emerging subgroups varied across the five submitted variables.

3.2.2 Typologies

Figure 1 illustrates the subgroup characteristics based on the five variables submitted to the analysis. Mothers in the "all-supported" cluster ($n = 44$) had the highest mean scores across all variables. Mothers in the "friend-supported" group ($n = 19$) had significantly low childhood parental support and own mother's current support satisfaction ratings but higher ratings for friends' support. The "mother-supported" group ($n = 53$) showed significantly low ratings for friends' support, but higher scores of childhood parental support and own mother's support.

Analysis of the Emerging Subgroups

After emerging groups were identified, the characteristics of the subgroups were studied using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and chi-square tests. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs were conducted with dependent variables that were statistically significant (or nearly significant) according to the MANOVA results. Only those ANOVA outcomes are reported hereafter. Chi-square tests were employed to explore differences among the subgroups on categorical demographic variables.

3.2.3 Cluster Characteristics

One-way ANOVAs revealed that the three subgroups varied significantly across all of the five variables submitted to the cluster analysis (see Table 2). The *all-supported* group, on average, scored significantly higher than the other two groups on ratings of husband support and relative support. On average, the *mother-supported* group was significantly less satisfied than the other two groups with friends' support. Effect sizes indicated that the clustering could statistically explain approximately 62% of the variance in mothers' satisfaction with own mothers' (current) support, 41% of childhood parental support, 40% of relative support, 31% of friend support, and 18% of husband support.

3.2.3.1 Overall Support Satisfaction

When the clusters were compared with each other on the average current support satisfaction score, a clear divergence among the three groups yielded (see Table 3). Not surprisingly the *all-supported* group was the most satisfied, followed by the *mother-supported* and then the *friend-supported* group.

3.2.3.2 Demographic Characteristics

On average, mothers in the all-supported group were significantly younger than the mother-supported group, but not the friend-supported group, $F(2,113) = 4.24, p < .05$, effect size = .07. Women in the mother-supported group tended to have higher levels of education than did women in other two clusters (although not statistically significant); more than half (57%) of the women had completed junior or 4-year colleges. On the other hand, there were no mothers in the friend-supported group who had completed a 4-year college.

3.2.3.3 Parental Role Conception

Mothers in general indicated that they had more responsibility than preschool teachers for their children's learning of self care, social skills, and academic preparation; however, they were likely to claim that it was the preschool teachers' role to teach children how to socialize with others. The *all-supported* mothers were marginally more likely to claim the family as being responsible for their children's academic preparation (see Table 3).

3.2.3.4 Parenting Self-Efficacy

All-supported mothers reported significantly higher levels of *maternal strategy efficacy* than their counterparts in other subgroups (see Table 3).

3.3 Interview Data

To provide a more concrete and detailed sense of the views of these women, excerpts were drawn from interviews conducted with one woman in each of the clusters. All names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

3.3.1 The All-supported Group

Mothers in the all-supported group (38% of the entire sample) reported having had positive relationships with their own parents and expressed satisfaction with their current social support. This group is exemplified by Asako, who was among the highest in our sample in terms of her satisfaction with social support. As she recounted incidents about her early relationships with her mother and father, Asako revealed how her parents ignored the prevailing social norms that restricted girls' involvement in sports and supported her passionate interest in soccer.

When I was growing up it was not considered socially acceptable for girls to play soccer, so it seems like my father had his hesitation as well. He didn't watch me practice soccer. My mother, on the other hand, wrapped herself in a big jacket and stood outside – even on cold nights – to watch me while I was jogging. She'd say, "it could be dangerous for girls at night."

[My relationship with father, who was a soccer coach,] was full of rivalry, especially concerning soccer (laugh) ... My mother would sometimes persuade him to practice soccer with me ... then he would become really serious. He'd kick the ball really hard – so hard that my feet might swell and that I might ask him to stop because of the pain. But then, that would make me fight back [and think], 'I'm never gonna give in!!'

Thinking back to my childhood, I truly appreciate my parents for letting me do something that wasn't allowed, or I mean, something that girls didn't do at the time...

Asako reported that her husband also supported her involvement in soccer. At the time of the interview, Asako reported playing on several local teams as did her husband, and they frequently practiced together. Additionally, Asako gave her husband high marks for his participation in rearing their son.

I knew he would be a doting father even before we got married. He doted on his nephew, as if he was his own child ... my husband would bring his nephew to our dates, and so we were more like a 'family' than a 'romantic couple' on a date (laugh)...

Asako also described being embedded in a large network of extended family members. She has lived in the same community for her entire life, and her in-laws, mother and her older sister live minutes away.

My older sister and my mother who live close by, and my husband, they are all very supportive ... so I am able to continue playing soccer today ... it wasn't at all like I had to give it up due to marriage. I'm doing what I want to do. I'm surrounded by cooperative people; they are very helpful, and I am happy about that.

Asako also reported having cordial relations with friends she had met through sports or her son's preschool, in addition to friends from her own school days. She was satisfied with the quality of these friendships, but she did not appear to share deep thoughts or emotions with them.

Well, if my mother and husband weren't understanding, I'd probably lean more toward my friends. But, since the two of them think seriously [about childrearing], I don't feel the need to come to "this side" [toward friends]. And, if I felt totally helpless, or couldn't find an answer myself, I'd probably seek [friends'] childrearing advice, but at this point, I'm not like that. I can find answers among my husband and my mother. So, I chat with my friends about idle, everyday issues, not about anything that goes beyond that.

Overall, Asako appeared quite content with her social network. Her husband's involvement in childrearing surpassed her expectation, her mother and sister provided extensive emotional as well as instrumental support, and Asako enjoyed getting together with her relatives. Notably, everyone in her network supported not only her childrearing but also her involvement in sports. Although she did not feel strongly connected to her friends, it did not bother her because she had such supportive relationships with her family members.

3.3.2 The Friend-Supported Group

The *friend-supported* group is the smallest group, constituting only 16% of the women. These mothers reported unhappy childhood memories and a low level of satisfaction with their mothers' support. Many mothers in this group expressed their dissatisfaction with the support provided by their relatives and in-laws.

Their level of satisfaction with friends' support was significantly higher than that of the *mother-supported* group and was as high as the *all-supported* group. For these 19 women, the support provided by their friends and their husband may be compensating for the inadequate support they received from their own parents. Hiromi, mother of a daughter in third grade and a son in preschool, is a member of this cluster. When Hiromi was in the fourth grade, her mother left the family because she was being abused by her alcoholic husband. For much of her remaining childhood years, Hiromi and her sister moved from place to place, living at times with their father and other times with their grandmother or in a boarding school. As the following excerpts illustrate, Hiromi perceived these adverse experiences as interfering with her childrearing abilities.

I really dislike children. I've always been so. It may be because I was never treated as a child myself. My marriage was my first experience living with the same person for a long time. So, it was difficult for me to adjust to a [stable] life where a person is there in the morning and comes home at night. Well, (3 sec. pause) this is a normal life, but for me, this wasn't normal. That's why I actually like spending time alone.

Hiromi reported that she now visits her mother several times a year, without telling her father or sister. Her mother enjoys giving presents to the grandchildren, and Hiromi appreciates her generosity. But when it came to emotional support, the roles are reversed and Hiromi becomes the care provider.

Because [my mother] only raised me until I was in fourth grade, she ceased to develop as a parent. She depends on me, emotionally. When I see my mother like that, I realize that [it is important for] parents to complete childrearing. You know, my mother cries and calls me about the most trivial things. But I tell myself that I am the only one who can support her emotionally, so I listen to her. I think that [my relationship with my mother] is improving, thanks to my husband ... According to my husband, I have an emotional outlet. But my mother doesn't, since she is living by herself now. So, I am her only outlet. I can see it now, you know, I vent my emotions to my husband, and he handles it pretty well. That's why I'm prepared to listen to my mother. Yeah, I think I owe it to my husband.

Because her husband is so supportive, Hiromi considers her marriage to be a context for her personal development as well as an opportunity to provide her children with a secure environment that was not available to her as a child.

There were two times in the past when I 'lost' myself. And my husband, well, he became upset, too, but he tried to calm me down ... I had to set my children aside, because I became a child myself! I feel ashamed of myself looking back, but my husband just worked it out with me then ... Thanks to my husband who takes care of me at home like that, I became able to socialize with people outside the home.

Well, because my husband accepts me entirely at home, I can now feel like I want to become a normal person ... for my husband, and for my children. I guess it's important that I listen to my children [in the way that my husband does to me] at home.

Hiromi also expressed the enjoyment of having close friends with whom she could share her thoughts and feelings.

Because we see each other much more often, I feel that the mothers at the preschool understand me much more deeply than do my old friends from school. I became good friends with a mother I met through the local Child's Club. We get along really well. I can talk to her about everything, including issues between my husband and I.

Hiromi appears to be actively seeking to redefine the nature of family life. Although it presents a great challenge, her husband and friends are bolstering her confidence through the process.

3.3.3 The Mother-Supported Group

This group is the largest (46% of the women) and most variable of the three. On average, the mothers in this cluster were the oldest and had the most education. Kayoko, age 45 and the mother of two children, is a member of the *mother-supported* cluster. She counts her own mother as the only consistent source of social support in her life. Kayoko was the third child out of five, and was the oldest daughter in the family. Her narratives illustrate the family's economic hardship during her childhood years, and the fragile nature of her early relationship with her parents.

Well, we were pretty poor, and, both [of my parents] were working. So, I don't quite remember spending much time with my mother, besides at dinnertime.... [My father] liked to drink a lot, and I sort of remember him becoming violent after a few drinks.

Kayoko's father died soon after she graduated from junior high school, and she began working at a candy factory to help supplement the family income. Kayoko's relationship with her mother improved when Kayoko married and started her own family. In fact, it appears as if her mother was the only person with whom Kayoko felt she could be herself. At the time of the interview, her mother was living alone in an apartment near Kayoko's home. Kayoko reported visiting her mother every day. With her mother, unlike with her friends, she felt more freedom to express herself, even if it sometimes resulted in arguments:

Well, [my mother] can't go shopping because it's too far for her. So, I deliver groceries every day. So I see her every day. [My time with her is] full of arguments. I talk back a lot, so we get into arguments all the time. I am really direct towards my mother... We do get into quarrels when I see her, but I can talk to her about everything... I think we have a good relationship now.

Kayoko had been married for almost 20 years at the time of the interview. However, she reported that she and her husband rarely discussed childrearing issues:

[I] have different opinions than he does. It's not because he relies on me [that we do not communicate]. (6 sec. pause) I go ahead and make decisions by myself, because I feel that whatever I say will never be accepted [by him].

In general, her emotional connection to husband was fraught with tension and anxiety. When asked about what she expected from her husband as a father or a husband, she replied,

[I] think expecting anything of him is (laugh) perhaps too late.... Well, if I ask for something, I know that we will get into an argument, so I am afraid to say anything.

When asked if there were any friends with whom she could consult childrearing issues, Kayoko answered, "No, I don't have any." When further probed whether she consulted with anyone about her child, she said, "Well, I don't have any friends. I wonder whether my child has difficulty making friends because her mother doesn't have any." Kayoko felt that she was not good at making friends and worried that it had affected her daughter's disposition.

During the second interview, six months after the initial one, however, Kayoko spoke enthusiastically about some new friends she had met through her daughter's preschool. However, even her connection with these friends seemed superficial. When asked whether she felt relieved talking with mothers at the preschool, she remarked,

You know, when you see other people talking, it can make you feel uncomfortable, because you worry that they might be talking ill about you ... So [I feel relieved] when I am talking with others, because [at least I know that] they are not talking about me.

Even though Kayoko lacks the confidence to develop close relationships with most adults, she derives some comfort from her relations with her mother, and feels that she is closest to her mother among all people in her network.

4 Discussion

4.1 Three Types of Social Support System in Japan

Three subgroups of Japanese mothers were identified based on their social support satisfaction and recollections of childhood parental support. *All-supported* mothers were satisfied with their past relationship with parents and the current social support provided by various actors. *Friend-supported* mothers reported having had negative early relationships with their own parents and were dissatisfied with current support from blood relatives, but they were more satisfied with the support provided by their husband and friends. The *mother-supported* subgroup reported average ratings of childhood relationship with parents and own mothers' current support, but reported less satisfaction with support provided by husbands, friends, and relatives. Contrary to what may be implied by some Western literature on Japanese families that emphasize the positive or harmonious nature of parent-child relationships (e.g., Rothbaum et al., 2000), this person-oriented analysis yielded a subgroup of mothers (i.e., *friend-supported* mothers) who reported having experienced difficult childhood relationship with their parents and were not satisfied with current social support provided by kinfolk. Interestingly, however, these women appear to have been successful in establishing a reliable social network consisting of nonkin members despite the challenges that may have faced them. Perhaps these mothers gained confidence from overcoming difficult kin relationships and meeting supportive friends, which in turn have helped them to feel increasingly comfortable about initiating new contacts and extending their social network. Compared to the *friend-supported* cluster, the *mother-supported* group was less successful in establishing supportive friendships, despite what attachment theory may have predicted based on these women's early internal working models (Bowlby, 1973) formed with their parents.

We suspect that, having a history of unsatisfactory kin relationships, the *friend-supported* mothers sought support from non-kinfolk, whereas the *mother-supported* mothers may have felt less of an urge to extend their network outside of the family. This finding highlights the dynamic nature of social support networks; mothers may (or may not) seek for support from an individual depending on the availability of support from another individual. It also implies that mothers' ratings of perceived support were not totally colored by their childhood experiences with parents; for example, *friend-supported* mothers were able to feel satisfied with friends' support despite their significantly low ratings of their own childhood relationship with their parents. We also observed an interesting trend in the relation between social support and mothers' educational background. Among those mothers who graduated from 4-year colleges, more than 70% were classified into the *mother-supported* cluster, and none belonged to the *friend-supported* group. Since the majority of college students in Japan rely entirely upon their parents for tuition and living expenses, it is not surprising to find a link between attending college and receiving parental support. This also suggests that there may be a strong correlation between the amount of parental support women receive before getting married and that which they obtain subsequent to getting married. In contrast, less educated women tended to be more often found in the *all-supported* cluster. This trend is consistent with what Cochran and Henderson (1990) found in the United States where mothers with less education tended to perceive difficult kin in a more positive light than did their more highly educated counterparts.

4.2 Social Support Typology and Maternal Beliefs

We found that *all-supported* mothers claimed more family responsibility for academically preparing their children than did the *mother-supported* women, although the observed difference only approached statistical significance. It may be the case that the highly efficacious, *all-supported* mothers felt self-confident and resourceful in helping their children prepare for school in the home environment, whereas *mother-supported* women, who tended to have more education as a group, held stronger beliefs in institutional education. *Mother-supported* women, being the oldest group and close to their mothers, might share their mothers' views about the important role of the school. It is possible that the older generation of women hold stronger views about the importance of learning in the context of the group, and hence place greater emphasis on the role of teacher than do the more individualistic members of the younger generation.

The *all-supported* mothers felt the most efficacious as parents, suggesting the positive effects of having multiple sources of childrearing support on their sense of parenting self-efficacy. Interestingly, the *friend-supported* mothers reported relatively high levels of *child outcome efficacy* than did the *mother-supported* group, while the two groups reported similarly low levels of *maternal strategy efficacy*. The mothers in the *all-supported* and *friend-supported* groups may have many opportunities to interact with other mothers and children, which helps them to realize that their own children are doing as well as others, or to accept that individual differences exist among children, consequently boosting their sense of efficacy that is related to children's outcomes. Perhaps the *friend-supported* mothers felt inadequate to successfully employ maternal strategies in their childrearing given the lack of a contented childhood representation of parents (see Grusec, Hastings, & Mammone, 1994, for a study with an American sample), but those mothers might have felt more efficacious in creating new contacts and favorable social contexts that would benefit the children in the course of their development.

The mothers in three clusters reported variable levels of perceived general childrearing support. However, their levels of perceived support did not simply translate to their levels of parenting self-efficacy. While the present study is limited to descriptively understanding the link between perceived social support and parenting self-efficacy, the findings imply that the relationship between mothers' sense of efficacy and the degree of their overall support satisfaction is not simply linear. Rather, it appears that support from different sources have varying impact on the social ecology of mothers and children alike, which in turn affect particular aspects of maternal beliefs. In other words, the data suggest that different aspects of maternal self-efficacy are socially constructed through different kinds of life experiences.

4.3 Person-Oriented Approach

The main objective of a person-oriented approach is to identify naturally occurring subgroups of persons to whom different developmental or functional rules may apply. The emphasis is on studying differences among individuals that manifest as unique constellations of operating factors. The present analysis took a person-oriented approach and identified three, qualitatively unique support systems of Japanese preschool mothers. Focusing on the "pattern" as the unit of analysis, this paper was able to shed light on the dynamic interactions among mothers' perceptions of childrearing support, maternal beliefs, and social structural elements. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was not in identifying strong predictors of parenting self-efficacy.

We agree with Magnusson's (1998) contention that the "appropriateness of each [approach] cannot be evaluated with reference to how well one or the other of the two approaches predicts a certain outcome: The only criterion is how well each of them contributes to the understanding of the processes of individual functioning and development, which are our main concern" (p. 61). In light of this argument, this study provided evidence for how parents' microculture, in the form of social support system, is associated with their beliefs about parenting.

4.4 Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The subgroups identified in this study do not represent an exhaustive list of the social support typologies found among Japanese mothers of preschool aged children. Few of the mothers in our sample were working full time outside the home; mothers who are employed are likely to experience support from their co-workers as well as friends and family members. Our sample also did not include mothers whose child had a serious disability; for mothers of such children, medical and educational professionals may play an important role. Therefore, the current findings should be generalized to the greater population of Japanese mothers with caution. In the future, these subgroups may be used as a framework for in-depth qualitative or quantitative analyses that investigate the functional properties of and the processes within each social support pattern. It may be the case that, different rules apply to mothers with different patterns of perceived social support. These subgroups are not intended to represent static or permanent categories, although a certain degree of stability and generality is implied. It is expected that they change over time as parents and children develop, which is an interesting topic to explore longitudinally (Bergman, 2000). In addition, comparable research in various cultures can examine whether similar social support typology exists and whether its association with parental efficacy holds across cultures.

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Table 1: Correlation Analysis of Childhood Parental Support and Support-Related Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Childhood parental support	1.00					
2. Husband support	.11	1.00				
3. Own mother support	.47***	.06	1.00			
4. Friend support	.12	.30**	.12	1.00		
5. Relative support	.29***	.10	.42***	.34***	1.00	
6. Overall support	.39***	--	--	--	--	1.00

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2: Summary Statistics of the 3 Clusters: Variables Submitted to Cluster Analysis

Variables	Overall Mean (SD) (N = 116)	C1 All-supported Mean (SD) (n = 44)	C2 Friend-supported Mean (SD) (n = 19)	C3 Mother-supported Mean (SD) (n = 53)	F-test (df)	Effect size	Post hoc contrasts
Childhood parental support	4.02 (1.06)	4.60 (.65)	2.62 (1.00)	4.04 (.88)	38.38*** (2,113)	.405	C1>C3>C2
Husband support	4.39 (1.22)	5.05 (1.04)	4.26 (1.11)	3.91 (1.17)	12.42*** (2,111)	.183	C1>C2=C3
Own mother support	4.41 (1.25)	5.24 (.74)	2.33 (.91)	4.44 (.77)	87.51*** (2,109)	.616	C1>C3>C2
Friend support	4.62 (1.12)	5.32 (.69)	4.79 (.75)	3.96 (1.15)	25.42*** (2,112)	.312	C1=C2>C3
Relative support	3.78 (1.40)	4.86 (.80)	2.66 (1.56)	3.27 (1.11)	36.25*** (2,108)	.402	C1>C2=C3

Note. 6-point scale.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 3: Summary Statistics of the 3 Clusters: Maternal Response Variables

Variables	Overall Mean (SD)	C1 All-supported Mean (SD) (n = 44)	C2 Friend- supported Mean (SD) (n = 19)	C3 Mother- supported Mean (SD) (n = 53)	F-test (df)	Effect size	Post hoc contrasts
General perception of current social support ^a							
Average current support satisfaction	4.30 (.81)	5.12 (.07)	3.53 (.11)	3.90 (.07)	107.70*** (2,113)	.656	C1>C3>C2
Parental role conception ^b							
Child's self care	.63 (.15)	.66 (.15)	.62 (.15)	.62 (.15)	1.05 (2,112)		
Socialization with others	.37 (.14)	.38 (.13)	.35 (.19)	.37 (.12)	.47 (2,112)		
Social skills	.60 (.13)	.62 (.12)	.61 (.15)	.59 (.13)	.61 (2,112)		
Academic preparation	.64 (.20)	.69 (.20)	.64 (.22)	.60 (.18)	2.68† (2,112)	.046	C1>C3
Parenting self-efficacy ^a							
Child outcome efficacy	4.16 (.71)	4.28 (.84)	4.25 (.58)	4.02 (.61)	1.79 (2,113)		
Maternal strategy efficacy	4.18 (.64)	4.37 (.71)	4.03 (.39)	4.08 (.61)	3.18* (2,113)	.053	C1>C2=C3

Note. ^a6-point scale. ^b range 0-1.
 †p = .07. *p < .05. ***p < .001.

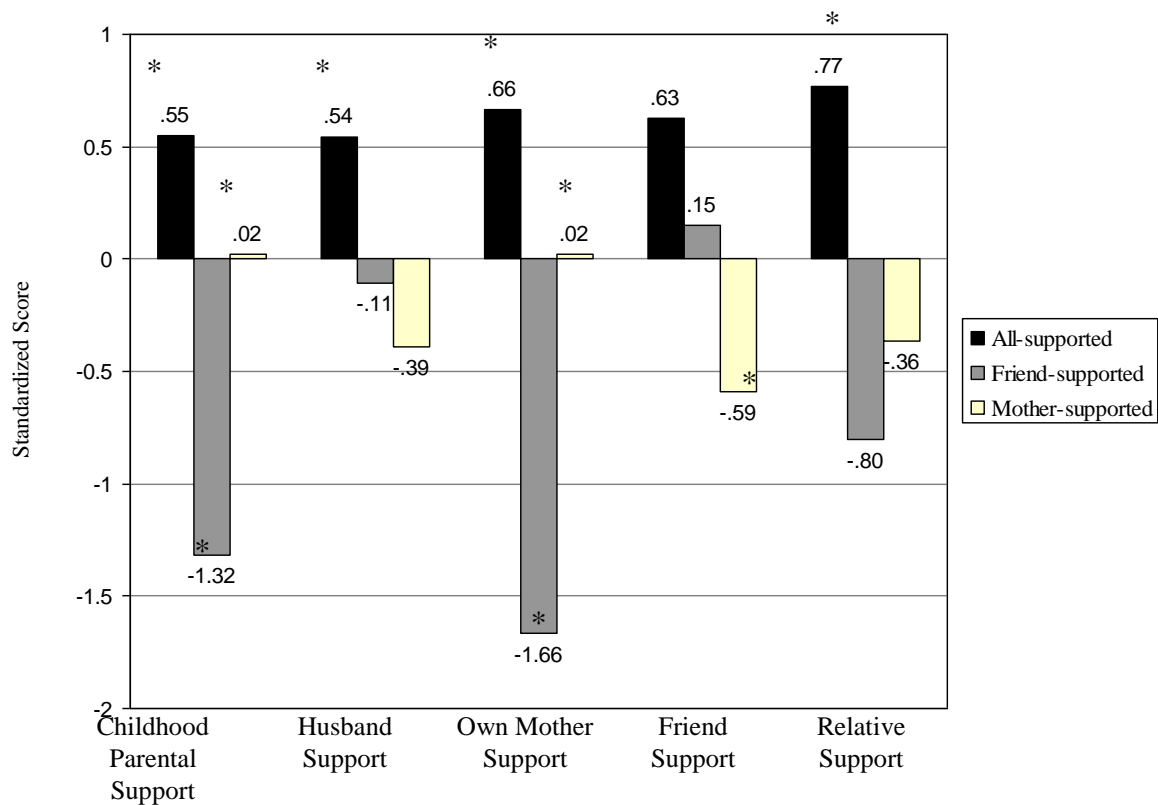


Figure 1. Characteristics of the three clusters. Scores were standardized based on the means and standard deviations. *Significantly different than the other two clusters at p < .05.