

# Characteristics and psychological consequences of Japanese adolescents' personal autonomy

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**Abstract** Previous studies on the concept of parental authority during adolescence have reported that the mental health of adolescents tend to deteriorate when parents control their behavior in their personal domain. Three surveys were conducted with Japanese early, middle, and late adolescents to examine whether adolescents that underestimate parental authority and exhibit personal autonomy are mentally healthy. Study 1: six-grade elementary school students ( $N=276$ ), Study 2: junior high school students ( $N=246$ ) and senior high school students ( $N=357$ ), and Study 3: university students ( $N=148$ ).

In each study, judgments of adolescents about personal freedoms involved in moral, conventional, multi-faceted, and prudential issues that would be regulated in Japanese society were examined, and correlations with their self-formation and adaptation were analyzed. The results of in every study, adolescents could distinguish situations in which they could demonstrate their personal freedom from those in which their personal freedom is regulated.

Furthermore, cluster analysis was conducted on judgments about personal freedom. The results indicated that in every study, there were two types of young people, other than those that made a judgment consistent with characteristics of each domain. One type had excessive feelings of freedom and tended to judge that personal freedom should be valued even in conventional and prudential situations. The other type excessively suppressed personal freedoms and tended to suppress it even in personal settings. The former type had relatively bad relationships with their parents and showed lower adaptation to school (Study 1). They tended to have a moral self with a sense of helplessness and social avoidance (Study 2). Moreover, their mental health deteriorated significantly (Study 3). Based on the above results and those of previous studies, it is suggested that too much control by parents and too strong feelings of personal freedom might have negative effects on the development of the self in adolescence.

**Keywords** : Adolescence, personal autonomy, parental authority, adjustment, social domain theory

## I. Backgrounds and purpose

Previous studies on the concept of parental authority and conflicts between parents and

children have indicated that children do not always develop unidirectionally from accepting to rejecting parental authority. Even adolescents

tend to accept parental authority concerning moral deviance and the violation of customs, whereas, even young children tend to resist parental authority in personal affairs. Acceptance and rejection (i.e. autonomy) of parental authority by children, as well as the exercise of authority and acceptance of children's decisions by parents depend on how they interpret and judge conflict situations. Therefore, parent-child conflicts can happen when domain judgments regarding a situation differ between parents and children, regardless of children's age.

When parental authority is exercised over issues in the personal domain of children and children are forced to accept parental authority, how does autonomy develop in children? Hasebe, Nucci, and Nucci (1999) examined this issue in Japanese high school students and reported that recognition of control by parents in self-management and conventional domains are not significantly correlated with the General Symptom Index of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI). On the other hand, recognition of parents' control over children's personal domain was significantly correlated with BSI. Various other studies have reported that excessive control by parents over children's behaviors deteriorated the mental health of children. Moreover, Hasebe (2011) indicated that excessive control by parents could be recognized as "psychological abuse."

Parent-child conflicts are conflicts between the exercise of authority by parents and the exhibition of autonomy by children. Therefore, excessive autonomy of children as well as excessive control by parents need to be investigated. Can adolescents that underestimate parental authority and exhibit excessive personal autonomy achieve healthy self-development and good mental health? In this study, three surveys were conducted with young Japanese people in their early, middle, and late adolescence to examine this issue.

### **Ethical considerations**

Anonymous questionnaires were administered.

Participants were instructed that they need not respond to any questions that they do not wish to answer, and that they can terminate responding to the questionnaire at any time. Moreover, they were instructed that terminating responding to the questionnaire would not affect their academic grades. Furthermore, they were instructed that their individual information would not be identified. Participants' responses to the questionnaire after listening to the above explanations, and submitting the questionnaire were considered to indicate their consent to participate in the survey.

## **II. Correlations between personal autonomy and psychological adaptation in early adolescence (Study 1)**

### **1. Purposes**

Study 1 examined the extent which young people in their early adolescence recognized their personal autonomy when making judgments in socio-moral situations, including moral deviance and the violation of customs. Moreover, correlations between the exhibition of autonomy and psychological adaptation were investigated. Adolescents' deviant behaviors are usually conducted at home or school. Whether a certain behavior is recognized as deviant or not is related to home discipline and school regulations. In Study 1, the Scale of Children's Trust in Parents and the Scale of School Maladaptation were used to assess psychological adaptation.

### **2. Methods**

#### **1) Participants**

Sixth graders enrolled in two elementary schools around Tokyo (n=276; 134 boys and 142 girls; mean age=12.5) participated in this study.

#### **2) Measures**

#### **Judgments of personal freedom in situations involving socio-moral issues**

The following eight situations were considered and sentences expressing three behaviors in each situation were constructed, and 24 items were developed.

**Table 1 Eight situations regarding socio-moral issues and one example of items in each situation**

situations	behaviors
1. Attack and destruction	playing by making fun of a weak child
2. Public morals	cutting in at a line of passengers waiting for a bus
3. Manners	eating while walking during meals
4. Self-management	when returning home, eating without washing hands or gargling
5. Prosocial behavior	not acting when a classmate is alone and looking lonely
6. Family life	buying desired toys with all the pocket money given by parents
7. Friendship	playing with friends dressed untidily and not obeying the rules
8. Personal preference	reading a book in a room on a sunny day

Participants assessed these 24 items using a three-point scale; "1. Mustn't do," "Can do depending on the time and place," and "3. May leave it to individual preference."

### School maladaptation and trust in one's parents

Six items from the "Scale of Trust Between Parents and Children" developed by Sakai et al. (2002), e.g., "Can you tell everything to your parents?" and "Can you trust your parents more than anyone else?" as well as nine items from the "Scale of Feelings While Staying in the Classroom," e.g., "I'm alone at school" and "I'm irritated when staying in my classroom," were used. Participants assessed the 15 items above using a four-point scale, ranging from "Not at all" to "Always."

### 3) Procedures

Participants responded to the questionnaire

in class. The time for making responses was approximately 25 minutes.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 1) Analysis of discretionary judgment types

The discretionary judgment, i.e. "a person can freely do what he/she wants," was regarded as an expression of personal autonomy. Scores of three items were added about each situation and discretionary judgment scores (range 3-9) for eight situations were calculated. The table 2 indicates the mean values of discretionary judgment scores for each situation. The results of factor analysis using the principal factor method and Promax rotation indicated two interpretable factors (see Table 3). Based on the patterns of factor loading, Factor 1 was named autonomy in the socio-moral domain, and Factor 2 was named autonomy in

**Table 2 Mean values of discretionary judgment scores for each situation and scale scores regarding adaptation**

	Attack and destruction	Manners	Personal preference	Self-management	Prosocial behavior	Public morals	Family life	Friendship	trust in one's	school maladaptation	
	range	3~9	3~9	3~9	3~9	3~9	3~9	3~9	6-24	9-46	
male	Mean	3.11	3.63	7.59	3.82	4.35	3.40	6.01	5.87	17.67	18.75
n=134	SD	0.36	0.96	1.38	1.21	1.56	0.69	1.64	1.22	3.76	5.15
female	Mean	3.07	3.59	8.06	3.85	3.96	3.27	5.91	6.11	16.95	19.68
n=142	SD	0.31	0.90	1.02	1.20	1.14	0.55	1.46	0.92	3.62	4.97
Total	Mean	3.09	3.61	7.83	3.83	4.15	3.33	5.96	5.99	17.30	19.23
n=276	SD	0.33	0.93	1.23	1.20	1.37	0.62	1.55	1.08	3.70	5.07
gender	<i>t</i> values	1.03	0.38	3.21	0.17	2.40	1.61	0.53	1.90	1,623	1.53
differences	<i>df</i>	274	274	274	274	274	274	274	274	274	274
	<i>p</i>	n.s.	n.s.	**	n.s.	*	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

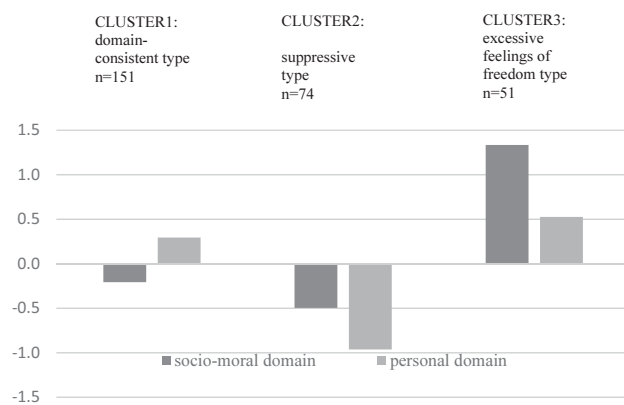
the personal domain. Using the s two factors scores, K-means cluster analysis was conducted and the following three types of clusters were identifies (see Figure 1 and Figure 2); the "domain-consistent type" ( $N=151$ ), showed low discretionary judgment scores in the socio-moral domain and high discretionary judgment scores in the personal domain, the "suppressive type" ( $N=74$ ), showed low discretionary judgment scores even in the personal domain, and the "excessive feelings of freedom type" ( $N=51$ ), showed high discretionary judgment scores even in the socio-moral domain. Gender differences indicated that the number of boys in the domain-consistent type was small, whereas those in the excessive feelings of freedom type was large ( $\chi^2(2, N=276) = 7.84, p < .05$ ).

**Table 3 Results of factor analysis**

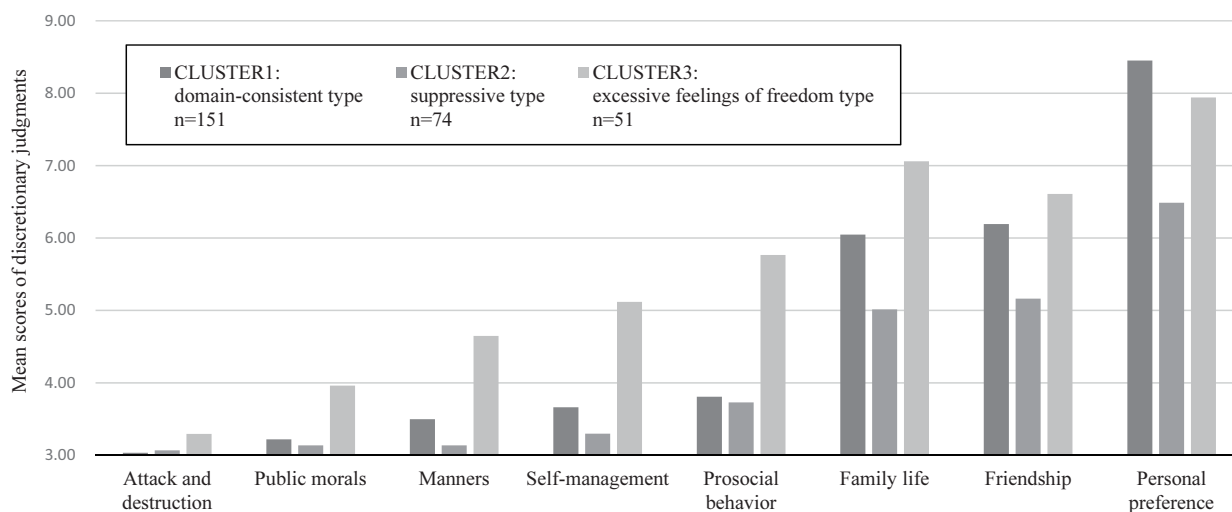
	Factor1: Socio-moral	Factor2: personal
Prosocial behavior	<b>.625</b>	-.106
Public morals	<b>.502</b>	-.005
Self-management	<b>.485</b>	.111
Attack and destruction	<b>.411</b>	-.139
Manners	<b>.403</b>	.207
Family life	<b>.342</b>	.218
Personal preference	-.171	<b>.693</b>
Friendship	.117	<b>.442</b>
Interfactor correlations	1.000	.273
	.273	1.000

## 2) Correlations between the types of discretionary judgment and school maladaptation as well as trust in parents

The table 4 shows the mean values of trust in parents and school maladaptation of each cluster. A2 (gender) X3 (cluster types) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the total scores for nine items on school maladaptation (one-factor structure,  $\alpha = .75$ ) and six items on trust in parents (one-factor structure,  $\alpha = .79$ ). Results indicated that only the main effect of clusters was significant for school maladaptation ( $F(2, 270) = 7.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ ); i.e. excessive feelings of freedom type > suppressive type  $\approx$  domain-consistent type. Moreover, the main effects of gender ( $F(1, 270)$



**Figure 1 Patterns of discretionary judgment scores of each cluster**



**Figure2 Patterns of discretionary judgment scores of each cluster for each situation**

**Table 4 Mean values of trust in parents and school maladaptation of each cluster**

	n	trust in one's	school
		parents	maladaptation
		range 6-24	9-46
domain-consistent type	151	17.36 (3.58)	18.54 (4.87)
suppressive type	74	17.96 (3.63)	18.97 (5.21)
excessive feelings of freedom type	51	16.16 (3.96)	21.65 (4.82)
Total	276	17.30 (3.70)	19.23 (5.07)

=4.40,  $I < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ; male > female) and clusters ( $F(2,270) = 4.73$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ; suppressive type > excessive feelings of freedom) were significant in trust in parents.

The results of this study indicated two types of personal autonomy in early adolescence, i.e. an excessively suppressive autonomy (suppressive type) and personal autonomy expressive type even in the social conventional or moral domain (excessive feelings of freedom type). The latter type had relatively high school maladaptation and low trust in parents. These results are different from the findings of previous studies (Hasebe, 2011; Hasebe et al., 2004), which indicated that adolescents included in the excessively suppressive type, in which parents exercise control over children's personal domains, tend to show maladaptive symptoms. Is this phenomenon observed only in early adolescence?

### III. Correlations between personal autonomy in family life and moral-self in mid-adolescence (Study 2)

#### 1. Purposes

Behaviors in socio-moral situations, which tend to cause conflicts between parents and children were examined in junior and senior high school students in their mid-adolescence. From the perspective of "ideal ways to decide behaviors" and "actual ways to decide behaviors," the tendency of adolescents' autonomy was examined and correlations with their self-development were investigated.

## 2. Methods

### 1) Participants

Public junior high school students in urban areas ( $N=246$ ; 117 boys and 129 girls; 12-15 years old; mean age=14.1) and private senior high school students ( $N=357$ ; 188 boys and 169 girls; 16-18 years old; mean age=16.6) participated in this study.

### 2) Measures

#### Discretionary judgments when deciding behaviors at home

Twenty-one items on adolescents' behaviors at home that were related to manners, the amount of pocket money, friendship, tidiness, helping with housework, health management, use of the Internet, hairstyles, appearance, hobbies/preferences, and study were developed (see Table 5). Participants responded about their ideal and actual decision making regarding each item using the five-point scale below, in descending order of the strength of autonomy: 5. Deciding by oneself without consulting parents, 4. After talking with parents, deciding by oneself, 3. Deciding together with parents, 2. Deciding after talking with parents, parents deciding, and 1. Parents making decisions.

#### Self-esteem

Self-esteem was assessed using ten items of the Japanese version (Sakurai, 2000) of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965), in which responses are made on a five-point scale.

#### Moral-self

The scale for assessing the "moral-self," which

is "a person's way of life in the social world," developed by Shuto (2003), was used. The original scale consisted of the following three sub-scales assessed by 25 items (a five-point scale): "a desire to morally improve the self," "a sense of helplessness related to morality," and "self-protective way of life." Examples of the items are as follows. Sense of helplessness scale: "I can behave freely if it doesn't trouble others.", "I am not responsible for the world getting worse.", "I can break the rules if I would not get caught." Self-protection scale: "I want to live a normal life without making taking on challenges and failing.", "I do not want to do things that will damage my future, even if I think it is the right thing.", "I do not want to do anything that will damage my reputation even in personal matters, such as hairstyles or clothes." Desire for self-improvement scale: "I want to improve myself even if I have to work hard.", "The effort I'm making at present will benefit me in the future.", "Following social norms will lead to future happiness.", "I have a role to play in the world." "Relationships with others develop me."

### 3) Procedures

A questionnaire was distributed and administered in class. The time for completing the questionnaire was approximately 20 minutes.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 1) Discretionary judgment in socio-moral situations

Adolescents' social domain concepts and their coordination were reflected in judgments about ideal decision making. Therefore, factor patterns of ideal decision making were applied to the actual decision making. Factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method and oblique rotation was conducted on ideal decision-making scores in 21 situations. As a result, two factors were extracted. Table 5 shows the results of factor analysis on ideal decision-making. Based on the factor patterns and item content, Factor 1 was named autonomy in the personal domain, and Factor 2 was named autonomy in the socio-moral

domain. Two scaled scores of ideal decision-making methods and two scaled scores of actual decision-making that consist of items corresponding to the factor patterns of the ideal ways, were calculated. Table 6 shows the mean values and standard deviation of these scores.

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to confirm the internal consistency of the two scales of ideal decision-making, which indicated an alpha coefficient of .92 for ideal ways in the personal domain and .80 in the socio-moral domain, whereas there was an alpha coefficient of .89 in actual ways in the personal domain and .77 in the socio-moral domain. A2 (school years) X2 (gender) ANOVA was conducted on the four scaled scores. The results indicated a significant main effect of the school year on both decision-making methods, regardless of the domain ( $F(1,598) = 65.15, p < .001, \eta^2 = .10$  in ideal decision of personal domain;  $F(1,599) = 48.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$  in ideal decision of socio-moral domain;  $F(1,597) = 90.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$  in actual decision of personal domain;  $F(1,599) = 55.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$  in actual decision of socio-moral domain). In other words, senior high school students exhibited more autonomy than junior high school students. In the socio-moral domain, the main effect of gender was significant for both decision-making methods ( $F(1,599) = 16.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$  in ideal decision;  $F(1,599) = 10.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$  in actual decision); such that boys exhibited more autonomy than girls even in situations that were socially regulated.

### 2) Discretionary judgment patterns in middle adolescents

The above four scaled scores were standardized and K-means cluster analysis was conducted. The results indicated the following three clusters (see Figure 3). The table 7 shows that the number of respondents included in each cluster. Cluster 1 includes adolescents that exhibit moderate autonomy in the personal domain for both ideal and actual decision-making and suppressed autonomy in the socio-moral domain. Therefore, they were named the "domain-consistent type"



**Table 5 results of factor analysis on ideal decision-making**

	Factor1: personal domain	Factor2: socio-moral domain	communalities
Types of music listened to	<b>.890</b>	-.312	.599
Going out on dates	<b>.795</b>	-.092	.564
Posting on other's blogs	<b>.756</b>	-.005	.567
Watching movies and DVDs with violent scenes	<b>.723</b>	.011	.531
Deciding the time for reading cartoons and playing games	<b>.656</b>	.076	.488
Cleaning own room	<b>.653</b>	-.059	.390
What to buy with pocket money	<b>.632</b>	.049	.434
Watching animations and DVDs with sex scenes	<b>.616</b>	.066	.426
Letting parents read a diary or blog	<b>.608</b>	-.020	.357
Choosing clothes to wear when going out	<b>.602</b>	-.119	.302
Having a blog	<b>.586</b>	.247	.555
Thinning eyebrows	<b>.577</b>	.204	.497
Choosing club activities	<b>.552</b>	.108	.379
Eating junk food	<b>.525</b>	.117	.353
Hours spent studying at home	<b>.495</b>	.064	.283
Setting the curfew	-.089	<b>.708</b>	.444
Setting filters on the cell phone or personal computer	-.004	<b>.705</b>	.495
The amount of pocket money	-.288	<b>.688</b>	.349
Staying at the same-sexed friend's house	.209	<b>.582</b>	.509
Meeting an email friend for the first time	.181	<b>.532</b>	.416
Going to a cram school	.157	<b>.475</b>	.328
Sums of squared loadings after rotation	7.382	4.479	
Interfactor correlations	1	.522	
	.522	1	

**Table 6 Scores of discretionary judgments on ideal and actual decision-making and self-related variables**

		Ideal				Actual				Desire for self-improvement	Sense of helplessness	Self-protection
		autonomy in the personal domain		autonomy in the socio-moral domain		autonomy in the personal domain		autonomy in the socio-moral domain				
		range	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-5	Self esteem	10-50			
junior high school	Male	N	117	117	116	117	116	115	116	115	116	114
		Mean	4.25	3.38	4.26	3.21	30.13	3.36	2.68	3.02		
		SD	(0.71)	(0.88)	(0.77)	(0.89)	(6.26)	(0.86)	(0.83)	(0.84)		
	Female	N	129	129	129	129	126	127	129	123		
		Mean	4.27	3.00	4.32	2.85	28.23	3.58	2.50	2.99		
		SD	(0.56)	(0.72)	(0.58)	(0.72)	(5.41)	(0.65)	(0.61)	(0.53)		
Total	N	246	246	245	246	242	242	245	237			
	Mean	4.26	3.18	4.29	3.02	29.14	3.47	2.59	3.00			
	SD	(0.64)	(0.82)	(0.68)	(0.82)	(5.90)	(0.76)	(0.73)	(0.70)			
senior high school	Male	N	187	188	187	188	184	183	186	186		
		Mean	4.60	3.77	4.71	3.60	29.17	3.39	3.02	3.00		
		SD	(0.73)	(0.90)	(0.65)	(0.90)	(5.47)	(0.60)	(0.62)	(0.55)		
	Female	N	169	169	169	169	165	169	167	168		
		Mean	4.75	3.59	4.84	3.50	27.93	3.59	2.97	2.89		
		SD	(0.43)	(0.83)	(0.43)	(0.85)	(5.15)	(0.58)	(0.69)	(0.54)		
Total	N	356	357	356	357	349	352	353	354			
	Mean	4.67	3.68	4.77	3.55	28.58	3.49	3.00	2.95			
	SD	(0.61)	(0.87)	(0.56)	(0.87)	(5.35)	(0.60)	(0.65)	(0.55)			
Total	Male	N	304	305	303	305	300	298	302	300		
		Mean	4.47	3.62	4.54	3.45	29.54	3.38	2.89	3.01		
		SD	(0.74)	(0.91)	(0.73)	(0.91)	(5.80)	(0.71)	(0.72)	(0.67)		
	Female	N	298	298	298	298	291	296	296	291		
		Mean	4.54	3.34	4.61	3.22	28.06	3.58	2.77	2.93		
		SD	(0.54)	(0.84)	(0.56)	(0.86)	(5.26)	(0.61)	(0.70)	(0.54)		
Total	N	602	603	601	603	591	594	598	591			
	Mean	4.50	3.48	4.57	3.33	28.81	3.48	2.83	2.97			
	SD	(0.65)	(0.88)	(0.65)	(0.89)	(5.58)	(0.67)	(0.71)	(0.61)			

( $n=258$ ; 50.6% of junior high school students, 37.6% of senior high school students; 34.0% of boys, 52.0% of girls). Cluster 2 included adolescents that exhibit autonomy in both personal and socio-moral domains and for both ideal and actual decision-making. They were named the "excessive feelings of freedom type" ( $n=257$ ; 24.5% of junior high school students, 55.3% of senior high school students; 49.8% of boys, 35.6% of girls). Cluster 3 included adolescents that suppressed autonomy for both ideal and actual decision-making, regardless of the domain. They were named the "excessively suppressive type" ( $n=86$ ; 24.9% of junior high school students, 7.0% of senior high school students; 16.2% of boys, 12.4% of girls). The results of a Chi-squared test indicated the number of junior high school students included in the excessively suppressive type was more significant than senior high school students of that type and number of senior high school students include in the excessive feeling of freedom type was more significant than junior high school students of that type ( $\chi^2(2, N=601) = 70.39, p < .001$ ). Moreover, the number of boys included in the excessive feelings of freedom type was larger than girls of that type, and the number of girls included in the domain-consistent type was larger than boys in that type ( $\chi^2(2, N=601) = 19.99,$

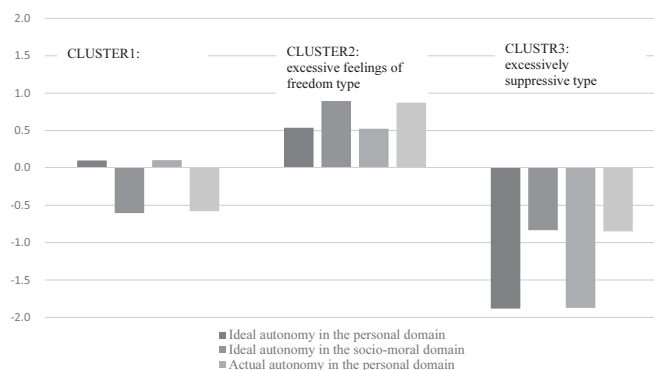


Figure 3 Characteristics of each cluster

$p < .001$ ).

### 3) Correlations between discretionary judgment patterns and self-development in adolescents

Scaled scores of self-esteem ( $\alpha=.88$ ), a desire to morally improve oneself ( $\alpha=.85$ ), a sense of helplessness in morality ( $\alpha=.82$ ), and self-protective ways of life ( $\alpha=.72$ ) were calculated (see Table 8) and a 2 (gender) x 2 (school years) x 4 (clusters) ANOVA was conducted respectively. The results indicated self-esteem and the desire to morally improve oneself were significantly higher in girls, and the sense of helplessness in morality was significantly higher in senior high school students. Moreover, none of the effects were significant for

Table 7 Number of respondents included in each cluster

		domain-consistent type	excessive feelings of	excessively suppressive type	Total
junior high school	Male	45 (38.79%)	40 (34.48%)	31 (26.72%)	116 (100.00%)
	Female	79 (61.24%)	20 (15.50%)	30 (23.26%)	129 (100.00%)
	Total	124 (50.61%)	60 (24.49%)	61 (24.90%)	245 (100.00%)
senior high school	Male	58 (31.02%)	111 (59.36%)	18 (9.63%)	187 (100.00%)
	Female	76 (44.97%)	86 (50.89%)	7 (4.14%)	169 (100.00%)
	Total	134 (37.64%)	197 (55.34%)	25 (7.02%)	356 (100.00%)
Total	Male	103 (33.99%)	151 (49.83%)	49 (16.17%)	303 (100.00%)
	Female	155 (52.01%)	106 (35.57%)	37 (12.42%)	298 (100.00%)
	Total	258 (42.93%)	257 (42.76%)	86 (14.31%)	601 (100.00%)



**Table 8 Mean values of self-esteem and moral-self scales of each cluster**

		Self esteem	Desire for self-improvement	Sense of helplessness	Self-protection
domain-consistent type	n	255	251	255	254
	Mean	28.42	3.57	2.75	2.96
	SD	(5.39)	(0.69)	(0.69)	(0.60)
excessive feelings of freedom type	n	250	256	256	253
	Mean	29.14	3.42	3.00	2.93
	SD	(5.64)	(0.63)	(0.71)	(0.60)
excessively suppressive type	n	84	85	85	82
	Mean	28.99	3.44	2.56	3.13
	SD	(6.03)	(0.69)	(0.67)	(0.65)

self-esteem, the desire to morally improve oneself, or self-protective ways of life for interactions between the main effects of clusters and other factors of clusters. On the other hand, the main effect of clusters was significant for the sense of helplessness in morality ( $F(2,584) = 4.06, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ ). Furthermore, multiple comparisons were conducted between the sense of helplessness and the three autonomy types, which indicated the following; excessive feelings of freedom type > excessively suppressive type  $\approx$  domain-consistent type.

Three types of personal autonomy were also observed in young people in their middle adolescence, i.e. domain-consistent, excessively suppressive, and excessive feelings of freedom. It was suggested that adolescents of the excessive feelings of freedom type (exhibiting autonomy even in conventional, or prudential situations) do not positively interact with society and tend to live for the moment during mid-adolescence. It might be possible that young people with thoughtless autonomy experience intense pressure from society, have a sense of helplessness, and tend to live with indifference to society.

#### IV. Correlations between discretionary judgment in socially deviant situations and psychological health in late adolescence (Study 3)

##### 1. Purposes

It is assumed that types of autonomy might be related to psychological health if the inconsiderate

exhibition of personal autonomy distorts self-development. This study was conducted with university students in late adolescence for investigating whether the three patterns of autonomy observed in early and middle adolescence could also be found in late adolescence, and if this were the case, how these patterns could be correlated with the psychological health of individuals.

## 2. Methods

### 1) Participants

University students enrolled in universities around Tokyo participated in a survey ( $n=148$ ; 74 men and 74 women; mean age=20.7). All the participants lived with their parents.

### 2) Measures

#### Discretionary judgments when deciding behaviors at home

Adolescents' behaviors that might be restricted by social norms and expectations in the Japanese culture were listed concerning the seven situations indicated below, including the three items; antisocial behaviors, manners, health management, hobbies/preferences, friendships, appearance, and roles as a student. Examples were as follows: "Taking money out of parent's wallet without permission" (antisocial), "Talking to parents and older neighbors using so-called young people's words" (manners), "Eating only instant food that might be detrimental to health" (health management), "Preferring to read cartoons" (hobbies/preferences), "Meeting online acquaintances in real-life" (friendships),

"Having pierced ears" (appearance), "Buying expensive branded goods with savings" (roles as a student). Three following questions were prepared regarding each item:

Question 1: "Do you think you can freely do what you want? (Judgment about badness)" Participants responded to these questions on a four-point scale ranging from "Must not do" to "Can do freely."

Question 2: "To what extent do you think parents can intervene when they want their children to stop doing something? (Parents' authority)." Four choices were prepared; "Parents should leave it to children without intervening," "Parents should give advice and tell children their feelings and opinions," "Parents should clearly tell children their opinions by warning and persuading children," and "Parents should strongly maintain their opinions until children change their ideas and behaviors."

Question 3: "What do you think is the best thing to do when parents and children disagree? (parents' authority/children's self-decision)" Participants responded to these questions on a two-point scale consisting of: "children should obey their parents" and "children should stick to their idea in spite of parents' opposition."

### **Moral-self and psychological adaptation in university students**

The moral-self was assessed using the scale used in Study 2. The psychological adaptation was evaluated using the 60 items of the University Personality Inventory (UPI). UPI is a mental health inventory that was developed in 1966 by student counselors and psychiatrists in the Japan University Health Association for the early detection and treatment of students with problems (Sawazaki & Matsubara, 1988). It is often used as a screening test for new students. The UPI is composed of 60 items, among which four items are a lie scale. The UPI is a questionnaire for examining university students' mental health and for early detection of students that have or might have difficulties in adaptation. The UPI is not intended for scoring the extent of specified mental disorders.

There are "calling criteria" in the UPI for early detection, such as checking more than 35 among 56 items or checking key items including "having no appetite," "having an unhappy past and family," "suffering a little from insomnia," and "feeling like dying." According to Sawazaki and Matsubara (1988), approximately 12% of students meet these criteria. Moreover, it has been indicated that the diagnosis of anxiety disorders can be made using the UPI with approximately 80% probability, and 19 items are identified as effective items for screening for anxiety disorders. This study used all the 60 items of the UPI.

### **3) Procedures**

A questionnaire was administered and collected in class. The response time to the questionnaire was approximately 25 minutes. Before responding to the UPI, the following explanations were given to the participants; (1) the questionnaire is not a test for diagnosing mental health conditions, (2) when participants want to consult about their physical conditions or family problems, they should consult the health management center of the university, and (3) the administrators of the survey can intermediate between students and the center, if the students desire.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### **1) Judgments about badness in socio-moral situations**

Regarding judgments made by university students about badness in socio-moral situations, scores of responses to three behaviors in each situation were added. Higher scores indicated more badness (see Table9~Table11). A2 (gender) x7 (situations) ANOVA was conducted on the combined scores.

The results indicated a significant main effect of situations ( $F(6,876) = 505.66, p < .001$ ). As can be seen by Table 9, the order of badness was as follows; antisocial behaviors > manners > health management  $\approx$  roles as a student > friendships  $\approx$  appearance > hobbies/preferences. An identical analysis was conducted on the scores of parents'

**Table 9 Mean values of judgments of badness (SD) (SD)**

	antisocial behaviors	manners	health management	appearance	hobbies/preferences	roles as a student	friendships
Male n=74	11.32 (0.86)	8.64 (1.38)	7.07 (2.19)	5.58 (1.81)	3.55 (1.05)	6.70 (1.90)	5.55 (1.92)
Female n=79	11.22 (1.11)	8.65 (1.48)	6.89 (2.39)	5.62 (1.80)	3.50 (1.00)	6.86 (2.08)	5.68 (1.95)
Total n=153	11.27 (0.99)	8.64 (1.43)	6.98 (2.28)	5.60 (1.79)	3.53 (1.02)	6.78 (1.98)	5.61 (1.93)

Scores rang from 3 to 12. A higher score means worse judgment.

**Table10 Mean values of judgments of parents' authority (SD) (SD)**

	antisocial behaviors	manners	health management	appearance	hobbies/preferences	roles as a student	friendships
Male n=74	9.82 (1.48)	6.70 (1.59)	7.85 (1.80)	7.27 (1.72)	4.05 (0.99)	7.81 (1.82)	7.51 (2.06)
Female n=79	9.58 (1.71)	6.59 (1.37)	7.95 (1.79)	7.34 (1.56)	4.10 (1.09)	8.01 (1.77)	7.80 (2.01)
Total n=153	9.70 (1.60)	6.65 (1.48)	7.90 (1.79)	7.31 (1.64)	4.08 (1.04)	7.92 (1.79)	7.66 (2.03)

Scores range from 3 to 12. A higher score means higher acceptance of authority.

**Table11 Mean values of judgments of child's self-decision in parent-child conflict situations (SD) (SD)**

	antisocial behaviors	manners	health management	appearance	hobbies/preferences	roles as a student	friendships
Male n=74	3.22 (0.50)	3.69 (0.96)	4.39 (1.02)	5.16 (0.74)	5.78 (0.56)	5.05 (0.98)	5.15 (0.95)
Female n=79	3.24 (0.52)	3.64 (0.88)	4.34 (1.06)	5.09 (0.71)	5.80 (0.55)	4.91 (0.98)	5.11 (0.88)
Total n=153	3.23 (0.51)	3.66 (0.92)	4.36 (1.04)	5.13 (0.72)	5.79 (0.55)	4.98 (0.98)	5.13 (0.91)

Scores range from 3 to 6. A higher score means higher acceptance of child self-decision.

authority and the same tendency ( $F(6,876) = 395.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was confirmed as badness judgment.

## 2) Discretionary judgments in parent-child conflict situations

The total score of each situation was calculated by coding a discretionary judgment as one point for "acceptance of parents' authority/children's self-decision (Question 3)," which is considered to most clearly reflect adolescents' autonomy in parent-child conflict situations. Factor analysis was conducted on scores of discretionary judgments in 21 situations. As a result, two factors were extracted (see Table 12). K-means cluster analysis on two factor scores was conducted, which indicated three clusters (see Figure 4). Cluster 1 was named the "suppressive type" that tended to accept parents' authority, although they rejected it in "appearance"

and "hobbies/preferences" situations (12 men and 13 women). Cluster 2 was named the "domain-consistent type" that totally accepted parents' authority in "antisocial" and "manner" situations, and somewhat accepted it in "health management" situations, whereas they strongly exhibited self-decision in the "appearance," "hobbies/preferences," "roles as a student," and "friendships" situations (38 men and 40 women). Cluster 3 was named the "excessive feelings of freedom type" that rejected parents' authority except in "antisocial" situations (24 men and 21 women).

## 3) Correlations between patterns of personal autonomy, moral-self, and the UPI

The table 13 shows mean values of UPI mental health inventory and moral-self scale of each

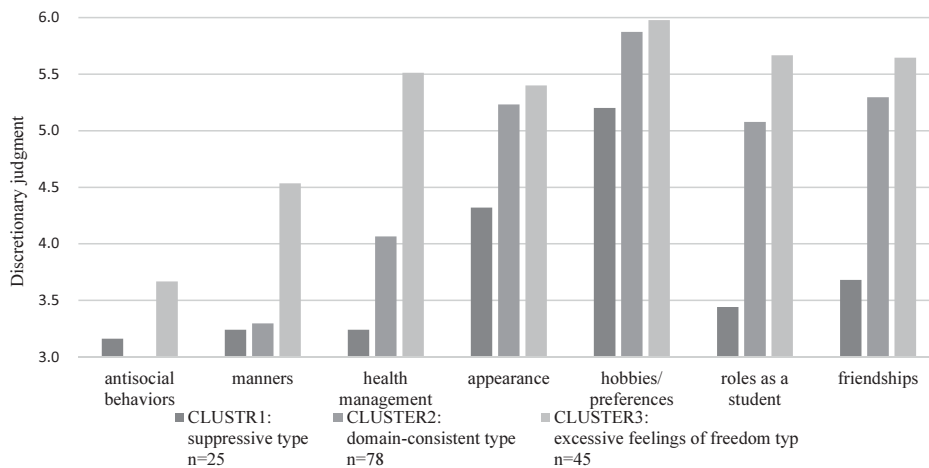


Figure 4 Patterns of discretionary judgment scores of each cluster for each situation

cluster. The results of an ANOVA conducted on the three scaled scores of the moral-self indicated that adolescents included in the excessive feelings of freedom type had the highest sense of helplessness in morality ( $F(2,145) = 3.94, p < .05$ ). Using the 60 items of the UPI, scores of general maladaptation, good health, ill health, anxiety disorders, and depression were calculated and an ANOVA was conducted using the clusters as factors. The results indicated that the main effects of clusters were not significant.

Next, based on the calling criteria of UPI, students were classified into those that met the criteria (the called group) and those that did not meet the criteria (the normal group). The table 14 shows cross-tabulation of the clusters and two UPI groups indicating that many students in the normal group were in the domain-consistent type and many students in the called group were the excessive feelings of freedom type ( $\chi^2(2, N=148) = 7.74, p < .05$ ).

The results of this study indicated there were three types of personal autonomy in late adolescence, as well as in early and middle adolescence. There were no correlations between the autonomy types and general levels of psychological health. On the other hand, students of the excessive feelings of freedom type that exhibit thoughtless autonomy tended to be psychologically unhealthy. It is suggested that adolescents of the

Table 12 Result of factor analysis on

	Factor1	Factor2	Communalites
roles as a student	.764	.098	.593
appearance	.753	.217	.615
hobbies/preferences	.753	.178	.326
friendships	.560	.114	.599
health management	.672	.369	.587
antisocial behaviors	.112	.715	.524
manners	.151	.477	.250
% variance explained	35.96	13.95	

excessive freedom type have problems in the development of social domain and its adjustment. The above results indicate that distortions of personal autonomy, especially showing feelings of freedom in the conventional domain and prudential situations might cause psychologically ill health in adolescents.

### V. General discussion

In Study 1, discretionary judgments made by early adolescents in socio-moral situations were examined. Study 2 investigated judgments made by middle adolescents about ideal and actual ways of deciding behaviors conducted at home. Study 3 examined discretionary judgments made by late adolescents in parent-child conflict situations. Though the adolescents' age and methods of judgments were different, the three autonomy types; the domain-consistent type that makes judgment consistent with the characteristics of the domains, the excessive feelings of freedom type that tend to think that personal freedom is valued

**Table 13 Mean values of UPI mental health inventory and moral-self scale of each cluster**

		suppressive type	domain- consistent type	excessive feelings of freedom typ	Total	F values
n		25	78	45	148	df=2/145
UPI	General maladaptation	24.76 (11.60)	24.00 (9.55)	26.44 (13.26)	24.87 (11.11)	0.69 n.s.
	Health level	2.00 (1.61)	1.95 (1.24)	2.20 (1.38)	2.03 (1.34)	0.51 n.s.
	Unhelth level	0.88 (0.88)	0.92 (0.88)	1.29 (1.06)	1.03 (0.95)	2.54 n.s.
	Anxiety	8.96 (4.15)	8.53 (3.54)	9.53 (4.86)	8.91 (4.08)	0.87 n.s.
	Depression	6.20 (3.42)	6.03 (2.63)	6.22 (3.33)	6.11 (2.98)	0.07 n.s.
	Desire for self- improvement	3.70 (0.46)	3.88 (0.65)	3.95 (0.42)	3.87 (0.56)	1.63 n.s.
	moral-self sense of helplessness	2.74 (0.38)	2.65 (0.54)	2.94 (0.64)	2.76 (0.56)	3.94 *
Self-protection	3.27 (0.46)	3.16 (0.49)	3.29 (0.64)	3.22 (0.54)	0.88 n.s.	

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

**Table 14 Cross-tabulations of the clusters and two UPI groups**

		suppressive type	domain- consistent type	excessive feelings of freedom typ	Total
UPI "calling criteria"	the normal group	19 15.20%	72 57.60%	34 27.20%	125
	the called group	6 26.09%	6 26.09%	11 47.83%	23
Total		25	78	45	148

even in conventional and prudential situations, and the excessively suppressive type that suppresses personal freedom even in personal settings, were identified by all the studies. The excessive freedom type showed relatively low adaptation to school and low trust in parents (Study 1), had a strong sense of helplessness (Study 2) and had low psychological adaptation (Study 3).

The above results are different from those of previous studies that have indicated adolescents of excessively suppressive type, i.e. parents exercise control over children's personal domains, tend to show maladaptive symptoms. It is suggested that conventional common sense in adolescent psychology, stipulating that parents' strong control over children's personal domain leads to excessive suppression of free will in adolescents, which

distorts self-concept of adolescents and causes their maladaptation, and therefore, parents should value adolescent children's free will, might be too simplistic.

Adolescents with excessive feelings of freedom in the three age groups judged that personal freedom should be restricted in antisocial situations. On the other hand, excessively suppressive adolescents resisted social control and parental authority in the domain of their hobbies and preferences. Adolescents of these types are considered to have developed qualitatively different domain concepts. Poor self-development and maladaptation in adolescents of the excessive freedom type might not be affected by their domain concept per se. Three types of personal autonomy might be developed through individual differences in domain

coordination, not by differences in the development of a domain concept. What is essential for self-development and adaptation in adolescence is not the exhibition or the suppression of autonomy, but the proper development of the boundary between fair social adjustment and personal rights or discretion. It is suggested that how boundary distortions develop and how these distortions affect self-development and adaptation should be examined in the future, from the perspective of social domain theory.

Domain coordination develops through the experience of social conflicts. Both parents and children change their domain concepts through parent-child conflicts (Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Generally, social interactions including interpersonal conflicts lead to the development of morality (Killen & Nucci, 1995). On the other hand, in Japanese society, in which co-existence and harmony are valued, conflicts even in parent-child relationships are not acceptable. It has been reported that the frequency of parent-child conflicts in Japanese adolescence is lower than in Europe and the United States (Tian, Hiraishi, & Watanabe, 2017). Avoiding interpersonal disputes decreases the experience of multifaceted judgments and interpretations, as well as opportunities for sharing others' judgments and for expressing own judgments. That is, the environment for moral development is lost.

In this cultural context, the exhibition of autonomy by adolescents not only causes interpersonal conflicts, but also leads to their exclusion from the group and isolation, which might deteriorate their self-development and adaptation. Adolescents with excessive feelings of freedom that are exhibiting their autonomy even in conventional and prudential situations might develop in those interpersonal relationships characteristic to Japan. Interpersonal relationships include not only harmony but also authority and conflict. Avoiding conflict leads to avoiding relationships. Japanese "spirit of harmony" might inhibit the development of personal autonomy by

avoiding interpersonal conflict.

In the future, it is considered necessary to empirically examine correlations between the development of morality and self-development, as well as adaptation, from the perspective of cultural context.

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