

1963

Preference For Male Children in Japanese and American Society

Joyce Aschenbrenner

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aschenbrenner, J. (1963). Preference For Male Children in Japanese and American Society. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science, Vol. 31 No. 1*, 9-13.

Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol31/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

Preference For Male Children in Japanese and American Society¹

JOYCE ASCHENBRENNER

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Is a preference for children of a given sex in a society primarily a result of cultural values, of social requirements or of individual needs? Although it is impossible completely to separate these types of influence, since social change may modify cultural traditions, and social interaction and cultural values influence individual needs, perhaps some assessment of the relative importance of various social and cultural phenomena involved in sex preference in a society can be attempted.

The present study is an exploratory treatment of the nature and degree of sex preference in two societies—Japanese and American—and a consideration of possible explanations for differences both within and between the two societies in degree of sex preference. Though it may appear to follow the model of a classical sociological study, this treatment involves an attempt to combine the methods of analyzing data used by sociologists with the functional, holistic concepts of anthropology. Such concepts are introduced particularly in the discussion of the Japanese family, where sex preference is related to Japanese society and culture as a whole, rather than to individual variables alone.

Sex Preference in the United States: Several methods have been used in approaching the problem of sex preference for children in the United States. Winston (1932), studying families in the upper economic and social classes, considers the possibility that the larger sex ratio (ratio of males to females) in higher economic and social classes might be related to a preference for male children together with a knowledge and practice of birth control. He reasons that if there is such a preference for male children, there should be a higher sex ratio for the last child, since the parents would presumably quit having children when they produce one of the desired sex. He actually finds a significantly higher sex ratio among last children in completed families than among the other children and than in incomplete families, and concludes that increased practice of birth control will result in a higher sex ratio in the United States, due to a male preference.

A somewhat different approach is developed in a study of the relationship of family size to expressed sex preference (Kiser and Clara, 1951). The hypothesis that sex preference affects the size of a family, since parents whose preferences are not fulfilled in the first children will continue to have children, is tested and confirmed positively; however, it is not found to be a major determinant in the sense that it influences a majority of the cases. Further, it was found that sex preference is often conditioned by the sex of existing children, and that the

most common preference is for children of both sexes, rather than for a male child. The authors also point out that there has been no suggestion of a trend in the direction of a higher sex ratio with the greater practice of birth control methods.

The study does show, however, a significant difference between stated sex preference of men and women. Husbands show a strong preference for sons, wives a slight preference for daughters. The authors speculate that the heavier male preference among men reflects a culturally conditioned ego satisfaction that accompanies having and raising a son in order to fulfill masculinity.

An analysis of questionnaires given to sociology students indicates a very high preference among men for male children and a fairly high male preference (over 60%) for women. Over 95% of the total sample, however, preferred having children of both sexes over having children of either sex alone. A consideration of such factors as level of aspiration and attachment to one or the other parent in relation to sex preference yielded no significant results; the authors therefore conclude that cultural values were more important than interpersonal relations and personal motivations in shaping the response. Further, they note that since children have lost any economic importance in the American family, and since having a son is no longer regarded as a social or economic necessity, male preference in the United States appears to reflect an orientation toward traditional values rather than a response to contemporary social life. (Dinitz *et al.* 1954).

The conclusion from previous studies concerning sex preference for children in the United States, then, is that male children appear to have an edge over female children in being welcomed into an American family, at least initially, though the magnitude of that edge is undetermined. This situation probably reflects the patriarchal traditions of the American family, with the son carrying on the family name and social status.

Though it has been proposed by Dinitz (1954) that cultural tradition is the most important influence on the matter of sex preference, it is possible that there are important social and psychological factors involved that were not considered in the Dinitz study. It has been suggested here that the heavy preference for sons among husbands in the United States as compared with their wives reflects a strong need on the part of men to have sons with whom they can identify. Though such a psychological need would not be independent of cultural patterning, it indicates a mechanism whereby an individual adapts himself to his society.

The importance of social processes in relation to sex

preference is shown by the apparent diminishing of preference for males in the realities of the family situation, where sex preference is conditioned by the actual make-up of the family and where the greatest preference is for children of both sexes. It has been suggested that since Americans place a high value on having children of both sexes, research on the different functions of boys and girls in American family life should be undertaken. (Freedman *et al.* 1960).

Sex Preference in Japanese Society: As one might assume in a male-dominated society such as the Japanese, Japanese parents traditionally show a great deal of preference for a male child. According to Embree, when a daughter is the first-born people say politely, "That is fortunate—now, when the son is born, there will be a nursemaid to carry him about." (1939:88).

All children are desired and welcomed, and a woman gains in stature with the birth of her first child, whether it is a girl or a boy. It is the arrival of the first male child, however, that establishes a wife as second to her husband's mother only among women of a household (Smith 1956).

The preference for a male child is carried over into the socialization of the child, Japanese boys being given somewhat preferential treatment over their sisters. Children are the center of attention in a Japanese family, and childhood for girls and boys alike is pleasant and permissive. A girl is somewhat more restrained in her behavior than a boy, however, and is taught to defer to a brother, as well as to her elders. According to Gorer (1943) the greatest fear is that a girl will not be feminine enough—that she will try to adopt her brother's role. Therefore, the worst insult that can be made to a girl is that she is like a boy. On the other hand, there is no Japanese term corresponding to 'sissy'; merely to be born a boy is enough to make one superior to any female.

A preference for male children among the Japanese, then, is seen as merely one aspect of the intensive cultivation of the ideal of masculine superiority—feminine inferiority that is a dominant theme in Japanese culture. Such a view of sex inequality is firmly rooted in the Japanese family, which is fundamental to Japanese social structure. The family is viewed as existing continuously from the past into the future, independently of the birth or death of individual members. The highest duty of a Japanese is the maintenance and continuance of his family as an institution. (Ariga 1954).

The head of the family, traditionally, is the oldest male. He makes all of the economic and policy decisions for the family. All members of the family must obey him, but he, in turn must act in such a manner as to bring honor and respect to his family name.

Within the Japanese family, personal relationships are subordinate to functions and roles. In the establishing of a family of procreation through marriage, considerations of the well-being of the entire extended family group play a dominant role. Traditionally, the eldest son establishes a nuclear family within the main line of the

patrilineal group (*honke*); the younger sons establish branch families (*bunke*), which are in a subordinate relationship to the *honke*. In large families, even servants establish *bunke*, which are considered a part of the family group. In case a male heir is not born to the family, a son is often adopted; he receives full benefit and responsibility as family head, though his personal ties with the family are much weaker than those of a son (Nakano 1962).

A daughter, on the other hand, has close personal ties in her family of orientation, but little social status. She is destined to leave the family and must give all her loyalty to her husband's family; this is necessary because of the potential conflict and resulting damage to the husband's family if a wife's ties and those of her children to her own family are strong. (Embree 1939) Her submission to the aims of the family are guaranteed by the enculturation of the female child.

Children are considered as instruments for carrying on traditions in Japanese society; children of both sexes are highly valued as social assets. However, male children are an unequivocal advantage to family, whereas female children are somewhat mixed blessings. A strong overt expression of preference for male children in the case of the Japanese openly reflects a social structure dominated by males and a patrilineal tradition.

A matter that should be considered is that of possible changes in degree of male preference as a result of changes in social structure in modern Japan. It appears that a necessary condition for such a change would be a weakening of the Japanese family system. Are there indications of such a change in Japanese society since World War II? In an article dealing with postwar Japan, Norbeck notes a weakening of kinship relationships, a trend towards smaller families and less hierarchical relationships (1960). Because of economic change and industrialization, the elderly have lost their economic importance, thus their control over the young, even in some of the villages. In addition, the eldest son has undergone loss of status, since the younger son often migrates to the city and receives more education; he may thus appear more eligible to prospective in-laws than a son tied to an estate that is often unproductive (Masuoka 1962).

Statements concerning change in the family must be made with caution, however. It is generally agreed by most observers that the extended family remains an important institution in Japan, particularly in rural Japan. In the cities the nuclear family tends to dominate, though it has been pointed out that families that appear to be independent may in fact be controlled by an extended family group that exists despite spatial separation (Nakano 1962).

On the basis of considerations above, it can be stated that because of the strength of the patrilineal family in Japan a great difference between social status of men and women exists; therefore, a considerable preference for male children over female children should be expected. Westernization, particularly in postwar Japan, has led to some weakening of the family structure, es-

pecially in the urban areas. In families of middle class professional men, many of them headed by younger sons, it should thus be expected that concern for a male heir and the emphasis on dominant-subordinate relationships should not be as great as traditionally. Therefore, while there is probably still a strong male preference in these families, it should not be as great as in the past, nor should there be as strong a motivation to express such a preference.

Analysis of the Data: The following is an initial attempt to verify some of the conclusions in the foregoing discussion, which, though it is inadequate to the task, indicates possible avenues for further research.

The data is taken from questionnaires administered to 121 American sociology students, predominantly female, in a Midwest university and to 60 Japanese college students in Tokyo, of middle class professional families. The completion of the questionnaires by the Japanese was carried out under inadequately controlled conditions and the language barrier made accurate results very difficult to obtain. This may account for the low reliability in some of the correlations.

In answer to the question, "If you could have only one child, which would you prefer?", 85% of the Japanese, as compared with 54.5% of the Americans indicated that they would rather have a boy. In expressing degree of male preference, the average Japanese response was "somewhat more" for a boy, while the American response was "a little more" for a boy. Since these results have been shown to be statistically reliable, it can be concluded that preference for children of the male sex in the case of an only child is present in both societies, but is greater in the Japanese than the American sample.

When asked "Which would you prefer for the first child?", on the other hand, only 60% of the Japanese expressed a male preference, while 71.1% of the Americans indicated a male preference. Here the situation seems reversed, with Americans showing higher male preference. It should be cautioned that this latter result is not statistically significant. Nevertheless, the findings concerning sex preferred for a first child are important because they show that the respondents differentiated between the questions. That is, despite language difficulties, they understood the difference between the questions and responded accordingly.

The apparently low male preference of Japanese for a first child as compared to an only child brings to mind Embree's quoted statement concerning a female first child caring for her younger brother—perhaps it was more than a rationalization. In the case of an only child, however, it is very important to the traditional Japanese family, at least, that it be a boy; whereas for the Americans there is no such cultural necessity. On the other hand, in our more teen-age dominated society we hear statements about how nice it is for a girl to have an older brother for various social reasons, such as to get her dates; we have few formal procedures for getting the sexes together as do the Japanese. Also, a boy may

feel resentment towards the authority of an older sister. Perhaps it is such considerations that account for the differences between responses for first and for only child in both societies.

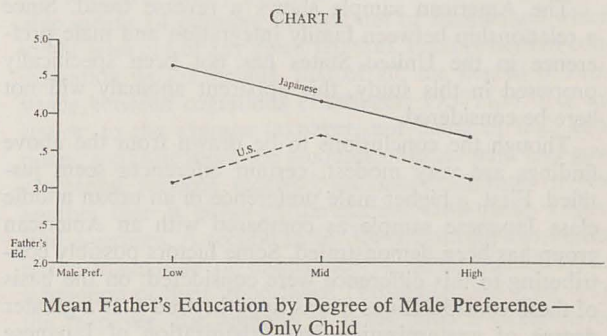
On the whole, these findings are compatible with those in the previous discussion. That male preference is not stronger in the Japanese sample is probably due to the character of the sample—urban, middle class professional. It was previously proposed that the greatest weakening of traditions would probably be found among this group.

Male preference in the American group is strikingly less than in Dinitz' female sample. However, among the male respondents in the group male preference is considerably higher than the total average. This is in accord with earlier studies in which male preference is indicated strongest among men in the United States.

Several phenomena were mentioned as possibly related to degree of male preference in Japanese society in the previous discussion, including education and traditional orientation. Two of these factors—father's education and patrilineal orientation—are considered for Japanese and American society in Charts I and II. In these charts, male preference is categorized as follows: low, indicating great to slight preference for girls; medium, indicating a little preference for boys to preferring boys somewhat; high, preferring boys a great deal more. In these charts, preference for only child is alone considered.

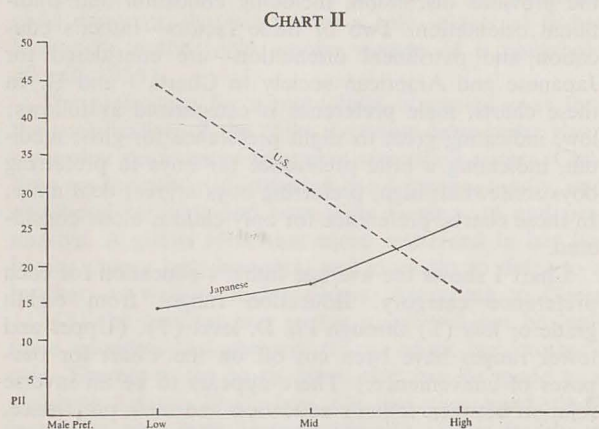
Chart I shows the average father's education for each preference category. Education ranges from eighth grade or less (1) through Ph. D. level (7). (Upper and lower ranges have been cut off on the Chart for purposes of convenience.) There appears to be an inverse relation between father's education and male preference, fathers with the most education tending to have offspring with the least male preference. Though the trend seems clear, it is not strong enough that it could not be due to error in measurement. Therefore, the hypothesis correlating educational level with sex preference should be tested using a wider sample with greater spread in education.

In the American group no correlation is indicated. Possibly, a lack of such a relationship between education and male preference would reflect a wider acceptance of sex equality in the United States than in Japanese society.



It was suggested in considering the urban Japanese family that the extended family may still be important despite spatial separation. The patrilineal integration index, a measure of the amount of visiting and liking of paternal kin, should reflect such an influence of the family beyond the nuclear level. This index, an analytic, as contrasted with a merely descriptive category, allows us to consider a structural concept combining several descriptive elements as a variable.

A surprising result shown in Chart II is the low patrilineal index average in the Japanese sample, as compared with the American group. While one would expect less family cohesion in this middle class urban group than in traditional Japanese society, one would still expect it to be higher in the Japanese than in the American group. Of course, the Japanese group is from a highly urbanized area, while the American sample is from the midwest, where urbanism and social atomism may be less pronounced than in other sections of the country.



Mean Patrilineal Integration by Degree of Male Preference — Only Child

Though a correlation between high patrilineal integration and high male sex preference seems to be present in the Japanese sample, again, the correlation does not quite reach the level of reliability. Since it has been a fundamental contention in this treatment that preference for children of the male sex in Japanese society is related to the importance of the traditional Japanese family, further testing of this relationship, again using a wider sample, is in order.

The American sample shows a reverse trend. Since a relationship between family integration and male preference in the United States has not been specifically proposed in this study, this apparent anomaly will not here be considered.

Though the conclusions to be drawn from the above findings are very modest, certain inferences seem justified. First, a higher male preference in an urban middle class Japanese sample as compared with an American group has been demonstrated. Some factors possibly contributing to this difference were considered; on the basis of these considerations it was hypothesized that a greater degree of westernization and urbanization of Japanese

families would be correlated with lower male preference.

Essentially the research problem was set up in terms of a continuum, with traditional and modern orientation with regard to certain aspects of society as extremes, and with both societies ranged in between, the Japanese toward the traditional, the American nearer the modern. In the case of the Japanese, the concept of high male preference as more traditional and thus related to other traditional social phenomena seems justified, despite inconclusive statistical tests. Further investigation of such possible relationships is indicated.

Since "traditional" means something different in the United States than in Japan, however, undoubtedly different factors should be investigated here. This is also indicated by the data considered in the present study, in which the phenomena considered appear to have different significance in relation to male preference in the two societies. The problems encountered here illustrate the necessity of making explicit and testing cultural assumptions of United States society before attempting a cross-cultural study. Some possibly relevant phenomena in American society have been mentioned, such as the different roles of children of each sex in the family and the need for vicarious experiences of children of the same or opposite sex. Factors such as these should be explicitly related to hypotheses of the nature of the American family in a study such as proposed here.

A study based on the findings of this preliminary attempt, then, would consider factors possibly relevant to preference for children of a given sex within each society individually; any observed relationships would be compared to determine if statements about sex preference in the societies generally can be made. It has been shown in this study how analytic categories, such as patrilineal integration index, can be employed to arrive at principles of high generality which effect a greater synthesis of data than do descriptive categories.

Differences between societies can be explained structurally—that is, in terms of general social principles—as well as culturally, in terms of traditions unique to a group. It is quite likely that both cultural and structural processes are operating to produce the differences in Japanese and American preference for children of a given sex; further research should reveal the relative importance of these types of processes in both societies.

Acknowledgment: I should like to express my indebtedness to Professor Murray A. Straus, who introduced me to some methods of sociology, made the Japanese and American data available to me, and under whose direction I conducted research for the present study. Also, I would like to express appreciation to Cecilia Sudia, who advised and assisted me in the statistical testing of the data.

LITERATURE CITED

- ARIGA, KIZAEMON. 1954. The Family in Japan. *Marriage and Family Living* 16:362-373.
- BEARDSLEY, RICHARD K., JOHN W. HALL AND ROBERT E. WARD. 1959. *Village Japan*. University of Chicago.
- DINITZ, SIMON, RUSSEL R. DYNES AND ALFRED C.

- CLARKE. 1954. Preferences for Male or Female Children—Traditional or Affectional? *Marriage and Family Living* 16:128-135.
- EMBREE, JOHN 1939. *Suye Mura*. University of Chicago.
- FREEDMAN, DEBORAH S., RONALD FREEDMAN AND PASCAL K. WHELPTON. 1960. Size of Family and Preference for Children of Each Sex. *American Journal of Sociology* 66:141-146.
- GORER, GEOFFREY. 1943. Themes in Japanese Culture. *Transactions, New York Academy of Sciences* 2-5: 106-124.
- KISER, CLYDE V. AND JEANNE E. CLARA. 1951. Preference for Children of a Given Sex in Relation to Fertility. *Milbank Memorial Quarterly* 4:440-492.
- MASUOKA, EDNA COOPER, JISUICHI MASUOKA AND NOZAMU KWAMURA. 1962. Role Conflicts in the Modern Japanese Family. *Social Forces* 41:106.
- NAKANO, TAKASHI. 1962. Changes in the Japanese Family. *International Social Science Journal* 14:527-538.
- NORBECK, EDWARD. 1961. Postwar Cultural Change and Continuity in N.E. Japan. *American Anthropologist* 63:297-321.
- NORBECK, EDWARD. 1960. Economic Change and Japanese Social Organization, in *Essays in the Science of Culture*. New York.
- SMITH, ROBERT J. 1956. "Kurusu" in *Two Japanese Villages*. University of Michigan.

ANTHROPOLOGY

A Cross-Cultural Evaluation of Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

HAROLD E. NELSON

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Festinger's Dissonance Theory: The purpose of this paper is to attempt an evaluation, in cross-cultural terms, of Leon Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, as a research tool. The specific problem to be treated is a consideration of the extent to which dissonance theory can be made applicable in varying situations in diverse cultural settings. Prior to an exposition of methodology, a short abstract of the hypothesis and some of its ramifications is appropriate.

Festinger (1957:3) has used the term, "cognition" or "cognitive element", to categorize "knowledge, opinion, or belief" held in regard to the nature of one's universe, observable or otherwise, and to man's relations within that universe. Cognitive dissonance refers to a state of inconsistency between two or more of these cognitions, and its counterpart, consonance, refers to consistency between those cognitive elements which bear any relevance to one another. The essence of Festinger's basic hypothesis is that dissonance by nature generates psychological discomfort and will produce in those affected: (1) efforts or pressure to achieve consonance through reduction or elimination of dissonance; and, (2) a tendency to avoid any cognitions which might cause or increase dissonance (Festinger, 1957:3).

A dissonance situation can serve to illustrate the theoretical working of these processes. For this purpose, an application of a dilemma of the contemporary American taxpayer will suffice. The theory states that dissonance exists when two or more cognitions are not consistent with one another. Assuming this to be the case, the taxpayer experiences dissonance when: (1) he believes that additional governmental services are necessary; and,

(2) he recognizes that such services will cause increased expenditures by the government, and he believes that taxes are already too high. According to the theory, the taxpayer will try to reduce dissonance. Here alternatives are present. He may press for reduction in administrative costs to allow a reallocation of funds to favor services, or he may favor increased expenditures with no tax increase by increasing indebtedness. Furthermore, the taxpayer will try to avoid additional dissonance. If he chose the first alternative course above, he might ignore warnings that reductions in administrative costs may contribute to unemployment. If he chose the latter alternative, he might ignore warnings that a heavy insolvency is inflationary and injurious to international credit. In either case, the taxpayer could be considered as avoiding dissonance—increasing cognitions. As other ramifications of the theory are discussed below, they will likewise be applied to our hypothetical example of the taxpayer.

Festinger's theory provides for a theoretically calculable means of deriving the amount of dissonance which might arise out of any given relation. Factors here in consideration would include, first of all, the degree of relevance between cognitions (Festinger, 1957:13). For instance, to the average taxpayer, not being of high economic sophistication, the amounts of taxes paid and governmental services received are more relevant to one another than is either to the current Dow-Jones Industrial Averages. A second factor for measuring dissonance is the magnitude of dissonance between cognitions, as a function of their importance (Festinger, 1957:16). To the taxpayer, the amount of taxes paid is likely to be