

## Chapter #14

### HOW DO EMERGING ADULT CHILDREN READ THEIR PARENTS' MINDS?

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#### ABSTRACT

Ames and Mason (2012, for a review) argued we read others' minds based on others' behaviour and our own minds. On the basis of the argument, this study hypothesised that young adult children infer their parents' attitudes towards their spouses based on their parents' emotional expressions and disposition as well as their own attitudes towards their parents. The research was conducted by way of a survey among 335 undergraduates. It required participants to respond to questions about their parents. The hypothesis was tested by analysing 199 answers from participants whose parents were married couples and all lived together. The results indicated children read their parents' attitudes towards their spouses based on their parents' emotional expressions. Moreover, some variations were observed with regard to gender differences between children and parents. While sons did not infer their mothers' minds by their mothers' disposition, daughters did. While children inferred their mothers' minds by projecting their own minds, they did not infer their fathers' minds in the same manner. A future study including an examination of children's perceived similarity with their parents, perspective taking of their parents as well as the self-other overlap between children and parents could be useful.

*Keywords:* mind reading, family relationships.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Japan, the birth rate is declining and few children are born out of marriage. An increase in the number of unmarried people has been pointed out as one of the causes of the declining birth rate (Cabinet Office, 2018). The marriage rate (per 1,000 population) has been decreasing since 1971, reaching its lowest point at 5.0 in 2016 (Figure 1). With this background, young people's attitudes towards marriage are drawing social attention. On the other hand, it has been verified that youth's marital attitudes relate to their parents' marital quality, both in the U.S.A. (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Kapinus, 2005; Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, & Hill, 2012) and in Japan (Mori & Katsurada, 2017; Saito, 2012; Yamauchi & Ito, 2008).

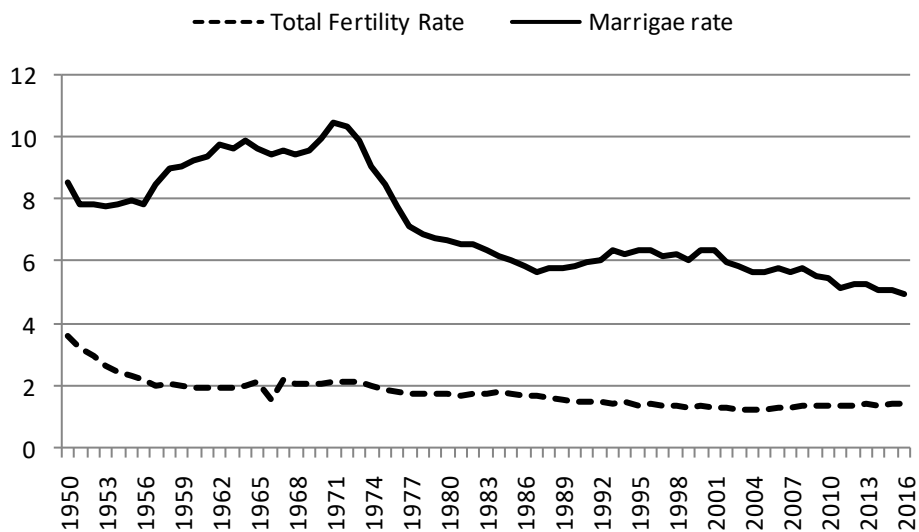
Regarding young adults' attitudes towards divorce, Kapinus (2005) analysed 334 children, who were nineteen years of age or older, using data from the 'Life Course Panel Study' (Booth, Johnson, White & Edwards, 1991). The results indicated that children who felt that their parents should divorce had positive attitudes towards divorce. Cunningham and Thornton (2006) examined 679 mother-child pair data from the 'Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children'. They found that, at age 18, children who reported that their parents' marriages were happy had negative attitudes towards divorce. However, mothers' reports of their own marital quality did not correlate with their children's attitudes towards divorce.

Concerning young children's marital attitudes, Willoughby et al. (2012) analysed 335 college students' and their parents' data from the 'Researching Emerging Adults' Developmental Years'. They indicated that young adults who reported that their parents were happy in their marriages during their childhood tended to consider being married as an important goal. Similar results were obtained from Japanese surveys. Yamauchi and Ito (2008) conducted a survey and examined 213 undergraduates' data. The results showed that the better they assessed their same-sex parents' marital relationships, the more positive their marital attitudes were.

Relating to young people's desire to marry, Saito (2012) conducted a survey and analysed 362 undergraduates' data. The results indicated that youth who perceived that their mothers were satisfied with their marital relationships were likely to want to get married. Mori and Katsurada (2017) also conducted a survey and analysed 266 undergraduates' data. They found that the better young people assessed their parents' marital relationships, the more strongly they wanted to get married.

From these results, it is concluded that young adults' perception of their parents' marital quality influences their marital attitudes. Considering this, how do emerging adult children perceive their parents' marital quality? If this becomes clear, we can find some clues to young people's positive attitudes towards marriage and consequently to raising marriage rates.

Figure 1.  
Total fertility rate and marriage rate (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2018).



Ames and Mason (2012) define mind perception/ reading as the everyday inferential act of a perceiver ascribing mental states such as intentions, beliefs, desires, and feelings to others. They reviewed previous studies on mind perception and showed that we read others' minds through their behaviour and by projecting ourselves. First, we have the tendency called 'false consensus' (e.g., Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), in which we tend to assume that others share our own views. Therefore, children will read their parents' minds by projecting their own minds. Second, when we read others' behaviour, we are likely to

attribute their behaviour to their stable dispositions. This trend is well known as the 'fundamental attribution error' (e.g. Jones & Harris, 1967). According to this understanding, it is considered that children read their parental marital quality based on their parents' dispositions.

In the meantime, Gray (2008) divided the constructs of interpersonal perception into those within people and those between people. We perceive not only others' personality, thoughts, and feelings which exist within people, but also relationships which exist between people. Previous research on judging relationship quality between others found the 'expressivity halo' effect (Bernieri, Gills, Davis, & Grahe, 1996; Kimura, 2015; Kimura, Daibo, & Yogo, 2010; Kimura, Yogo, & Daibo, 2005). The more abundantly others express their emotions in their interactions, the better we judge the relationship. For example, Bernieri et al. (1996) asked 45 undergraduates to view 50 video clips (50 seconds each) of different interactions involving unacquainted opposite-sex individuals debating, and to judge the relationship quality within each video clip: 'Do they like each other?' 'Are they enjoying what they are doing?'

Indeed, if others express only their positive emotions, their expressivity is linked positively to judgments of relationship quality; however, parents may express not only positive but also negative emotions. When children perceive that their parents express negative emotions towards their spouses, children will judge their parents' marital relationships negatively. Thus, it is predicted that children's perception of their parents' marital quality positively correlates to the parents' expressiveness of positive emotions and negatively correlates to the parents' expressiveness of negative emotions.

In addition, this study distinguishes between fathers' and mothers' marital quality. Some previous studies (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Kapinus, 2005; Mori & Katsurada, 2017; Willoughby et al., 2012) integrated both of them as parents' marital quality and Yamauchi and Ito (2008) focused only on same-sex parents' marital quality. On the other hand, Saito (2012) distinguished them and found that children's perception of their mothers' satisfaction with their marital relationships was linked to children's desire to marry, but that of fathers was not. Furthermore, Aloni and Bernieri (2004) investigated the man's love for his romantic partner and the woman's love for her romantic partner separately in investigating judgments of love in couples. As it would be natural to assume that fathers and mothers may have different attitudes towards their spouses, this study also considers fathers' and mothers' attitudes towards their spouses separately. Similarly, this study takes children's sex into consideration in order to confirm whether the way for children to read their parents' minds varies from sons to daughters.

## **2. OBJECTIVES**

Considering these, the present study examines how young adult children infer parents' attitudes towards their spouses. Specifically, the following hypothesis is investigated: children infer their parents' attitudes towards their spouses ('Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their spouses') based on their parents' emotional expressions ('Children's perceptions of their parents' expressiveness towards their spouses (negative/ positive)') and dispositions ('Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their children') and their own attitudes towards their parents ('Children's attitudes towards their parents').

### 3. METHODS

The research was conducted by way of a survey among 335 undergraduates. The participants completed self-report questionnaires on their parents. The hypothesis was tested using the results of the analysis of 199 answers from participants whose parents were married couples and all lived together.

#### 3.1. Variables

Hypothesis was formed on independent variables: 'Children's perceptions of their parents' expressiveness towards their spouses (negative (1)/ positive (2))', 'Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their children (3)' and 'Children's attitudes towards their parents (4)' and a dependent variable: 'Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their spouses (5)'.

'Children's perceptions of their parents' expressiveness towards their spouses (negative (1)/ positive (2))' (e.g. negative: 'My mother expresses dissatisfaction with my father's behaviour' and 'My father shows contempt for my mother's actions'/ positive: 'My mother tells my father that he looks nice' and 'My father expresses affection or love for my mother') were assessed by a Japanese version of Self Expressiveness in the Family Questionnaire (SEFQ; Halberstadt, Cassidy, Stifter, Parke & Fox, 1995; Tanaka, 2009). Respondents registered their perceptions on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all frequently) to 6 (very frequently). After reliability was checked, the scores were averaged on seven items, which ranged from 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating that respondents perceived that their parents expressed more.

'Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their children (3)' (e.g. 'My mother has affection towards me', 'My father trusts me'), 'Children's attitudes towards their parents (4)' (e.g. 'I have affection towards my father', 'I trust my mother') and 'Children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes towards their spouses (5)' (e.g. 'My mother has affection towards my father', 'My father trusts my mother') were assessed by a Japanese version of the Positive Affect Index (PAI; Bengtson & Schrader, 1982). This measure 'assesses sentiment or positive affect among family members as it is perceived and reported by family members' (Bengtson & Schrader, 1982). Respondents registered their attitudes on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (does not describe very well) to 6 (does describe very well). After reliability was checked, the scores were averaged on five items, ranging from 1 to 6, with higher scores indicating that respondents perceived more positive attitudes.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Respondents

The mean age of respondents was 18.35 ( $SD = 0.48$ ) years old. Sons comprised 37.17% (= 71) of the analysis target and the daughters were 62.83% (= 120).

#### 4.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 shows the reliability, means and standard deviations for each variable.

Table 1.  
Descriptive Statistics.

N	Mean (SD)		
	All 191	Sons 71	Daughters 120
(1) Mothers' Expressiveness towards the Fathers Negative ( $\alpha=.91$ )	2.37(1.11)	2.03(0.95)	2.57(1.16)
(2) Mothers' Expressiveness towards the Fathers Positive ( $\alpha=.95$ )	2.63(1.09)	2.72(0.96)	2.58(1.17)
(3) Mothers' Attitudes towards their Children ( $\alpha=.88$ )	3.66(0.86)	3.66(0.75)	3.66(0.92)
(4) Children's Attitudes towards their Fathers ( $\alpha=.93$ )	3.55(0.95)	3.68(0.81)	3.47(1.01)
(5) Children's Perceptions of their Mothers' Attitudes towards their Fathers ( $\alpha=.94$ )	3.54(1.05)	3.65(0.89)	3.48(1.14)
(1) Fathers' Expressiveness towards the Mothers Negative ( $\alpha=.90$ )	2.20(1.10)	1.89(1.05)	2.37(1.10)
(2) Fathers' Expressiveness towards the Mothers Positive ( $\alpha=.95$ )	2.59(1.16)	2.83(0.92)	2.46(1.26)
(3) Fathers' Attitudes towards their Children ( $\alpha=.90$ )	3.38(0.95)	3.52(0.83)	3.30(1.01)
(4) Children's Attitudes towards their Mothers ( $\alpha=.88$ )	3.89(0.82)	3.84(0.72)	3.92(0.87)
(5) Children's Perceptions of their Fathers' Attitudes towards their Mothers ( $\alpha=.95$ )	3.49(1.12)	3.75(0.82)	3.34(1.24)

#### 4.3. Multiple regression analysis

This study used multiple regression analyses to confirm the hypotheses. Table 2 shows how children read their mothers' attitudes towards their fathers (All:  $F(5,185) = 91.18, p < .001$ , Sons:  $F(4,66) = 24.58, p < .001$ , Daughters:  $F(4,115) = 91.09, p < .001$ ). Table 3 shows how children read their fathers' attitudes towards their mothers (All:  $F(5,185) = 104.71, p < .001$ , Sons:  $F(4,66) = 18.93, p < .001$ ; Daughters:  $F(4,115) = 109.83, p < .001$ ).

Both of these sets of results indicated that children inferred their parents' attitudes towards their spouses based on their parents' emotional expressions and daughters additionally inferred their parents' attitudes based on their parents' dispositions (Table 2 and 3). While sons did not infer their mothers' attitudes based on their mothers' dispositions, daughters did infer their mothers' attitudes based on their mothers' dispositions (Table 2). Both sons and daughters inferred their fathers' attitudes based on their fathers' dispositions (Table 3). While children inferred their mothers' attitudes by projecting their own attitudes (Table 2), they did not infer their fathers' attitudes in the same manner (Table 3).

Table 2.  
Mothers' Attitudes towards the Fathers.

Children's Perceptions of their Mothers' Attitudes towards their Fathers			
	$\beta$		
	All	Sons	Daughters
N	191	71	120
Sex (0. Sons/ 1. Daughters)	.04		
Mothers' Expressiveness towards the Fathers Negative	-.21***	-.25**	-.18**
Mothers' Expressiveness towards the Fathers Positive	.50***	.41***	.55***
Mothers' Attitudes towards their Children [disposition]	.12**	.05	.14**
Children's Attitudes towards their Fathers [projection]	.30***	.39***	.25***
R <sup>2</sup>	.71	.60	.76

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

Table 3.  
Fathers' Attitudes towards the Mothers.

Children's Perceptions of their Fathers' Attitudes towards their Mothers			
	$\beta$		
	All	Sons	Daughters
N	191	71	120
Sex (0. Sons/ 1. Daughters)	-.02		
Fathers' Expressiveness towards the Mothers Negative	-.26***	-.31**	-.22***
Fathers' Expressiveness towards the Mothers Positive	.47***	.33**	.53***
Fathers' Attitudes towards their Children [disposition]	.30***	.35**	.27***
Children's Attitudes towards their Mothers [projection]	.08 <sup>†</sup>	.11	.08
R <sup>2</sup>	.74	.53	.79

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

## 5. DISCUSSION/ FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

As predicted, young people regarded their parents' marital relationships as negative based on their parents' negative emotions and as positive based on their parents' positive emotions. In light of the link between young adults' parental marital quality and their marital attitudes (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Kapinus, 2005; Mori & Katsurada, 2017; Saito, 2012; Yamauchi & Ito, 2008; Willoughby, et al., 2012), these findings suggest that parents' expressivity in their marital relationships may consequently influence their children's marital attitudes. In addition, it was found that parental marital quality was related to children's attitudes towards their fathers, and fathers' attitudes towards their children. These imply that better father-child relationships may lead to better perception of their parents' marital quality, which can be linked to young adults' marriage attitudes as a consequence.

Moreover, this study showed that sons did not read their mothers' minds based on their mothers' dispositions. This suggests that sons read their mothers' minds according to the situations, which may be because mothers' attitudes towards the fathers were clearly different from their attitudes towards their sons. Although this study could not identify the reason, a triad survey targeting children, fathers and mothers will be helpful. Furthermore,

children did not read their fathers' minds by projecting their own minds. This may be because children do not perceive a similarity between themselves and their fathers nor do they take their fathers' perspectives (Ames, 2004); further, children's self-representations do not overlap with their parents' (Davis, Conklin, Smith & Luce, 1996). This study could not verify the reason, but future studies incorporating such variables will clarify the reason.

However, even if youth desire to marry, realistically, it is difficult to marry without a secure economic base. Matsuda (2011) analysed data from the 'Survey on International Attitude towards Society with Decreasing Birthrate' (Cabinet Office, 2011) and indicated that the marriage and cohabitation experience rate of men with non-regular employment and low income was low in Japan compared to the U.S.A. and France. Therefore, employment countermeasures for young men are also needed to increase the marriage rate.

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