

**I AND MY FAMILY -  
COMPARING THE REFLECTIVE COMPETENCE OF JAPANESE AND GERMAN PRIMARY SCHOOL  
CHILDREN AS RELATED TO THE “ETHICS OF CARE”**

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**Abstract**

This paper compares the concepts of Japanese and German primary school children as they relate to the “ethics of care.” To do this we have used the research methodology of expanding and replicating an experiment to test whether the results can be interculturally confirmed. In our design we replicated the experiment in children’s philosophy on the question “What are Family Ties?” carried out by Toshiaki Ôse in September 2002 with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of the municipal primary school Hamanogô in Chigasaki.

**Key-words:**

Japanese education ; German education ; comparative education ; ethics of care



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<sup>1</sup> Source of photographs :

Kanagawashinbunhodobu ( Ed.) *Inochi no Jugyo*, Tokyo: Shinchosha 2005.  
Ose Toshiaki, *Kagayake! Inochi no jugyo*, Tokyo: Shogakkan 2004.



## **Introduction<sup>2</sup>**



As a stimulus for discussion, Toshiaki Ôse told the story of the natural disaster that had befallen the village Kambara:

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<sup>2</sup> Compare: Dobashi 2007.



死の直前まで「命の授業」を行った大瀬敏昭さん。絵本の読み聞かせや(右)、歴史上の災害を辿りながら(上)、命の尊さを伝えた。

“On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, 1783, the village of Kambara was almost completely destroyed by a volcanic eruption of Mount ASAMA. The inhabitants who were trying to escape into the open countryside were swallowed up by a muddy stream of volcanic ash, stones and boulders. Those weakened by sickness and age, who could no longer run so far, tried to flee to a small hill nearby where the little temple Kannon-Dô stood. A long staircase led up to it. Everyone who made it to the 15<sup>th</sup> step was saved. A young woman who had lifted an old woman onto her back also wanted to run to the temple. But at the foot of the staircase she collapsed and was overtaken by the volcanic mudflow.”



Seeing a photograph of the skeleton of a young woman who during her flight carried an old woman on her back, the Japanese teacher Ôse had thought “What are the ties of family?” In this context the children were asked to interpret the situation.

The recorded lesson is reconstructed as a philosophical dialogue following the five-finger-method of Ekkehard Martens<sup>3</sup>, organized around a sequence of questions.

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<sup>3</sup> Martens, 2003.

#### Reference

- Dobashi, Takara: “INOCHI“ oder die „Endlichkeit des Lebens“. *Toshiaki Ôse philosophiert mit japanischen Kindern*. In: Eva Marsal, Takara Dobashi, Barbara Weber, Felix G. Lund (Herausgeber): *Ethische Reflexionskompetenz im Grundschulalter. Konzepte des Philosophierens mit Kindern*. (Frankfurt/ M. Hodos, Peter-Lang Verlag) 2007, 355.368
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- Hayashi, Takeji / Itô, Kôichi: *Jugyô wo Tsuikyûsuru to Iukoto*, Tôkyô: Kokudoshya 1990.
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1. *Phenomenological question: “Describe the two skeletons. In what situation were the two women when they died? Please use your imagination and try to come to a conclusion based on the position of the bones.”*
2. *Hermeneutic question: “Why were you thinking they were parent and child? Couldn’t they also have been mother and daughter-in-law, or have some other relationship?”*
3. *Analytical question: “How would a situation have to be for me to be able to help someone else?”*
4. *Dialectical question: “What would you do if you were in the young woman’s situation? Would you or would you not help? What reasons could be given for one or the other position?”*
5. *Speculative question: “How would your family behave in such a situation? Would you help one another?” What do you think, how would the old woman have behaved if she had been your mother or how would you have behaved?”*

We replicated this lesson about 4 years later, in January 2007, in the fourth grade of the Peter Hebel Primary School in Karlsruhe. To stimulate discussion, Ôse’s questions, his pictures, and his story served as the basis of our proceeding.

### ***I. Comparison between Japanese and German children: reasons to help / reasons not to help***

In order to discover what place the family has in the ethical value-pattern, in its coordinates of emotion and motivation, and in the intellectual hierarchy of argumentation, we investigated the question: “Under what conditions would the children help or not help in this extreme situation, where the act of helping could lead to the loss of one’s own life?”

To be able to compare the children’s statements, we set up a theoretically designed and inductively tested system of categories, and entered the quantified contributions of the children into it. The unit (N) does not represent an entire statement, but a single argument, since many children included several arguments in a single speech sequence. Contributions in the remainder

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Ôse, Toshiaki (Repräs. der Verfasser) unter der Leitung von Prof. Dr. Manabu Satô: *Gakkô wo Tsukuru*, Tôkyô: Shôgakukan 2000.

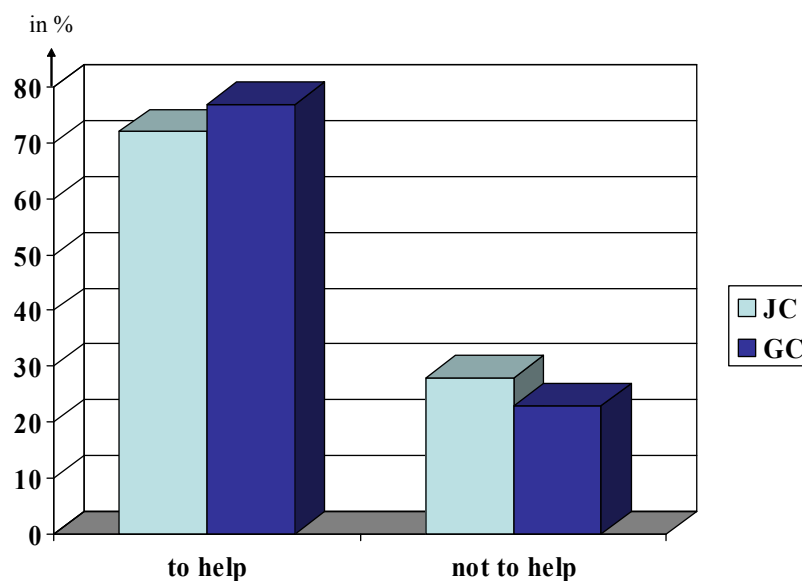
Satô, Manabu: *Karikyuramu no Hihyô*, Tôkyô: Seshiki Shobô 1996.



category, such as information questions, were not included; only thematic statements were compared. Because this study only considers two school classes and so cannot claim to be representative, no significance tests were carried out. Quantitative analysis of the qualitative, content-analytical research was only done in percentage values. Nonetheless, we may assume that the children developed and examined the main arguments in a process of common investigation within the *community of inquiry*. To make the children's testing process visible, at least rudimentarily, the categories are clarified with central examination sequences from the *community of inquiry*.

**Reasons to Help / Reasons Not to Help**  
**Comparison between Japanese and German Children**  
 (in percentages)

**Japanese Children (JC): Units N = 89 / German Children (GC): Units N = 147**



	Japanese Children (JC)	German Children (GC)
<b>Reasons to help</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>Reasons not to help</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>23%</b>

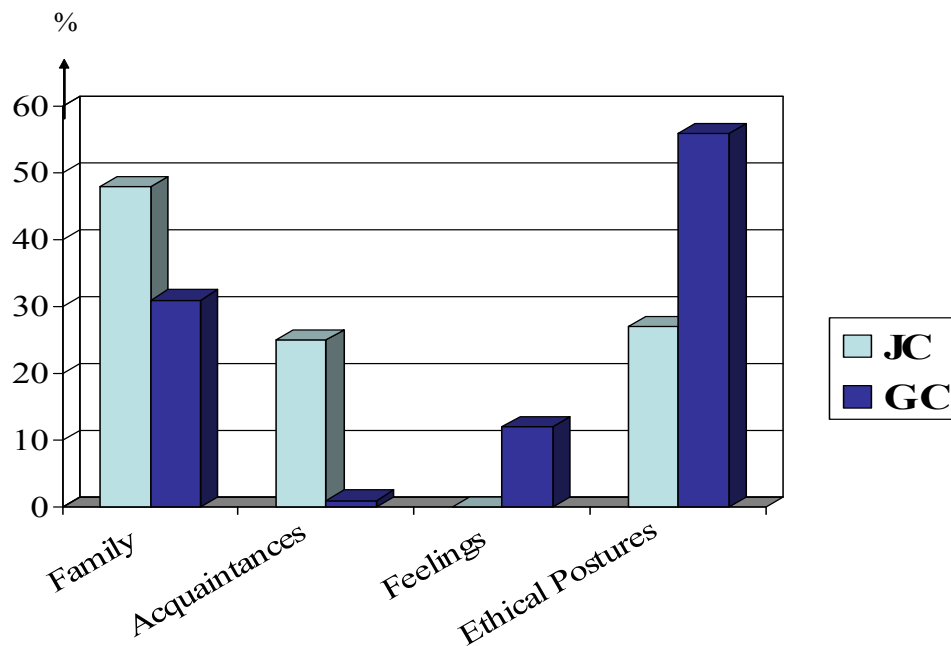
Comparing the reasons given for helping or not helping in a life-threatening situation as percentage values, there is not much difference between the Japanese and German children. They all present mostly arguments for why they would aid a helpless person despite the danger to



themselves. But if we look more closely at the arguments, we find differing profiles that may be culturally determined.

**Reasons to Help  
Comparison Between Japanese and German Children  
(in Percentages)**

**Japanese Children (JC): Units N = 64 / German Children (GC): Units N = 114**



	Japanese Children (JK)	German Children (GC)
<b>Family</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Acquaintances</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Feelings</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>Ethical Posture</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>56%</b>

Whereas for the Japanese children the personal aspect shows the highest variance with 72% —primarily people they know are rescued, such as family members, friends, neighbors and villagers they have worked with in the rice fields, for the German children attitudes are in the foreground—68% argue on the basis of the feelings aroused by the helpless person and the resulting ethical imperative. Personal reasons only count for family members. The family is saved out of love and to maintain one's own sense of security. The fact that the Japanese children



reveal no explicit feelings does not mean that they have none. On the implicit level these are evident in their statements as a latent motivational element. The fact that arguments aren't explicitly based on feelings probably has something to do with the culture of *kokoro*. Japanese children are trained to be aware of their own feelings and the feelings of others with great depth, precision and differentiation, but to preserve them as an inner treasure and to not show them outwardly.

Now let us look briefly at the individual categories. For the Japanese children, the category *Family* is the most significant with 48%. They immediately identify the two skeletons as members of the same family. J502: "Because she was carried on her back, weren't they parent and child? That's the only possible answer." For the German children, too, family members are the most meaningful figures. The "family" category is the second most important with 31%. But the rescue here is explained with additional arguments, first with the desire to reciprocate for some of all the parental care, from a sense of the justice of mutual obligation, (as for example D1-w59: "Maybe the old woman was her mother and...her mother had done a lot for her, too."), and second out of a fear of loss: D1-m253 Jan: "If the old woman were a family member of the young woman, then I would rescue her, because otherwise maybe the family would be lost," or out of love: D1-m287 Denny: "Yes, and I love my mother and if my mother dies, then I want to die too."

The category *acquaintances/ being acquainted* is significant only for the Japanese children, with 25%. One fourth of the Japanese children would rescue a person who belonged to their own living space. Spatial proximity is very important to them. As J215 says, "They were neighbors, living in the same village," or J150 (M=Yui) explains: "Since there were only a few people in the village, the villagers met now and then, [...]. And so a frail older woman could have lived there, and that young woman knew her slightly, even though they weren't friends – she had worked with the older woman in the rice field or seen her in the area." This reflects the precise awareness of the various distances, which is also revealed by the degrees of mutual bowing. Likewise, this may also reflect the Japanese consciousness of the "inside" that belongs to the intimate/ personal group, in contrast to the "outside" of strangers. One cares only for one's own group and keeps a distance from strangers.



In the category *feelings*, children mention *fear of death, fear of losing their own lives, fear for the life of the old woman, fear of losing the family, pity, and the desire to help*. As an example I quote a discussion sequence:

D1-m43: She was very frightened and didn't want the old woman or herself to die.

D1-m45: I think if she hadn't had the old woman on her back, then she would probably have gone up the stairs a little faster.

D1-w52: But she wanted to help the old woman so she wouldn't die.

D1-w54: Pity. She was sorry for her.

D1-w56: She risked her life for her.

D1-w58: She didn't want to just think of herself, I think. She wanted, she wanted to help the poor woman. [...]

D1-m69 K Ladem: What Jo just said, now I don't see it that way, uh, that at the end, that if it were a woman she didn't know, that she wouldn't have helped her. Because I would have a different opinion, because I would have preferred to help.

D1-m71 K: I'd also rather say, um, that she wouldn't need to be from the family, but she could be, but I would have helped her anyway, the woman. If I would see that, then I would take pity on her.

D1-w212 Sophia: If I had seen that the old woman tripped and was lying on the ground, then I would feel sorry for her, and I would have taken her with me too. You only have one life.

D1-w223 Elvira: Maybe the woman left the old woman lying there at first, but then she went a little further, and then she felt sorry for her.

In the category "*ethical posture of the helper*" there is something unique to the Japanese children: they stand for a "*categorical imperative*" that can be described, independent of any given situation, as the principle of a "duty to help." A good example is J 188, who states apodictically, "You have to save others." On the basis of this thought process, the Japanese children argue using the dimensions *justice* and *helpfulness*, for example J 171 (Boy=Tomonari): "The younger woman, who found the older woman fallen on the path, was certainly a woman of justice. She thought it would be possible to carry her on her back and go to the Kannon temple and save herself." In response to Ôse's question "What do you think? Do people help others they



don't know?" J 235 replied: "They help." When Ôse then had the children vote on it, half of them agreed with this position.

A few children attribute helpful behavior to the personality of the young woman. One example is the Japanese child J 517: "She couldn't give up the old woman, even though she thought, I have to help myself, but I want to help the old woman too, and then in the end with this drive to help she ran away with the old woman." Or the German Lea (D1-w249): "Maybe the young woman was a kind woman, too, and always a helpful woman."

For many children, however, the situational context, which is understood empathetically, leads to the helping behavior, as when the Japanese children give the situation of the old woman as a reason:

JK507: Because she was lonely and lived alone.

JK-508: If someone is lonely and lives alone, then you help them a lot.

JK 509: Because her leg was bad, and she couldn't move it well.

The German children have similar arguments:

D1-w229k: If for example someone had broken something and then couldn't walk so well by himself, then I would help him.

D1-m251 Johannes: Maybe if it were some woman, who maybe also had a little son, or something, then I would help, or if she was pregnant. Because she can't run very well at all.

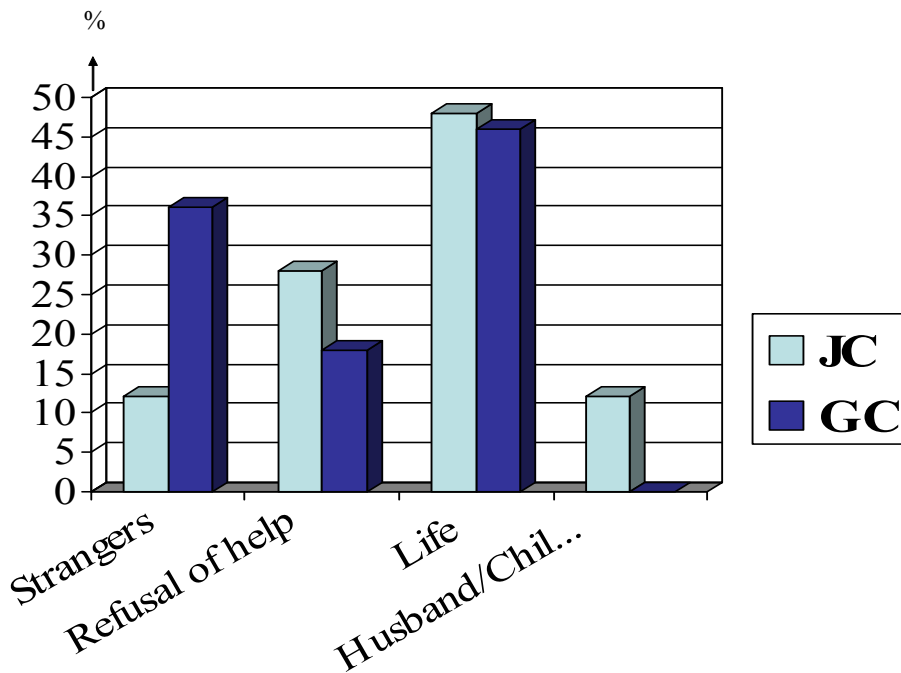
D1-m220 Oskar: If it had been a smaller child, I would have taken it along, first of all because it hadn't-, because maybe it had only lived a short time, and second because it's light, and you could carry it in your arms, for example.

The children have very differentiated interpersonal concepts that lead to a high degree of imaginary helping behavior. But while for the Japanese children the relationship with people in need is central, the German children explain the helpful behavior with the helper's personality variables. This is why some German children justify the rescue of family members with additional ethical arguments, whereas for the Japanese children, this kind of help requires no further justification. Also for the decisive reasons why no help is given we see the slightly different shades in the position of family. Thus the Japanese children have a completely unique



category: 12% feel a special responsibility toward the family one creates oneself, toward one's spouse and one's own children.

**Reasons Not to Help**  
**Comparison between Japanese and German Children**  
 (in percentages)  
**Japanese Children (JC): Units N = 25 / German Children (GC): Units N = 33**



	Japanese Children (JC)	German Children (GC)
<b>Strangers</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Refusal of help</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>18%</b>
<b>Life</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>Husband/children</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>0%</b>

To illustrate this I quote an argumentation sequence found only among the Japanese children, which was assigned to the category *husband / children*.

J 207 (girl=Noriko): Assuming that Tomonari (a boy) would take on the role of that young woman, while he's carrying the older woman on his back she might suddenly say "But you are married and have a wife and child. Can you be allowed to take on the risk of losing your own life?"



J 208 (boy=Tomonari): I would let my wife and child run on ahead and stay myself in the village to help.

J 209 (girl=Noriko): You want to stay? Can you take on the risk of dying? I'm assuming that you don't know that old woman. Just assuming. You live together with your wife and child. Your child could be small and your wife still young. At the beginning of the eruption you want to try to save the older women who has fallen, right? You want to help in this hour instead of escaping yourself. Is it permissible for you to cause your wife and child to mourn your death? Is that permissible?

In the conflict between values, the family, or more precisely the family one creates oneself, is placed in the highest position on the scale of responsibility. This dimension is not even considered by the German children. But 18% of the German children are also convinced that a mother would refuse the offer of help out of love for her child; among the Japanese children, 28% believe this. But most of the children would reject this refusal and help in spite of it.

D1- w273: I think that's what my grandmother would say too: "Run, child." But I would also help her. Right now I can't—if I were still so young as now, then I couldn't carry her on my back, but I'd help her anyway.

D1- w275 Sophia: My mother would say that too, because every mother loves her child and I think all mothers would say that to their children.

D1- w277 Elvira: Maybe my mother would say that too, but I don't think I would have left her behind.

D1- w298: If my mother would say that to me, and if I would run to the road, for example, then I would regret it afterwards, because she had done so many things for me. Everything, she's done everything for me. And I've done nothing for her. That is really a dumb situation.

Since 72% of the Japanese children have already emphasized positively that they would first save the people they knew, the negation of this statement no longer plays a large role; they have clearly expressed their position. In contrast to the 36 % of German children who said that not knowing someone was a reason not to help them, only 12% of the Japanese children did so.



The most important reason not to help others in a situation where helping could endanger one's own life is a thorough understanding of self-interest. Here the Japanese children score slightly higher than the German children, with 48% to their 46%. They want to secure their future enjoyment of life, that is, their central motivation is the will to live, or to survive.

Here is an example of the Japanese children's argumentation:

J 96: If this had happened to me, I would have left the woman behind.

J 148 (girl = Noriko): In those days people weren't so kind-hearted. People just took care of themselves. Survival is everything at such a time. People think only of themselves, only of staying alive. For that they need all their strength!

J 205 (girl = Noriko): In other words., we still have plans for our lives. We want to enjoy life ourselves, right?

And similarly, the German children:

D1- m214 Johannes: I would have, I mean, if she weren't a family member, and she was already so old, she would have died sometime soon anyway, I would rather have saved my own life.

D1-m233 Miro: I think when someone has broken a bone or something like that, then you don't die when you help them. But if someone might get killed, then I'd rather save my own life.

D1-m234 Dennis: I also really think it's dumb, when you help other people and risk your own life, and it's also dumb when you die.

D1-m235 Miro: It's not dumb, but I just wouldn't do it. No, it isn't dumb.

D1-m236 Johannes: Actually, I think what Dennis and the other two said is right. It isn't dumb, but I also would save my own life.

D1-m237 Oskar: If it's a friend of mine, or someone from the family, then I'd help them. But if it's someone I don't really know, someone who's older, then I don't really know them, then I'd rather save my own life. But if it's someone I know, someone I like, then I'd help them.

## Results

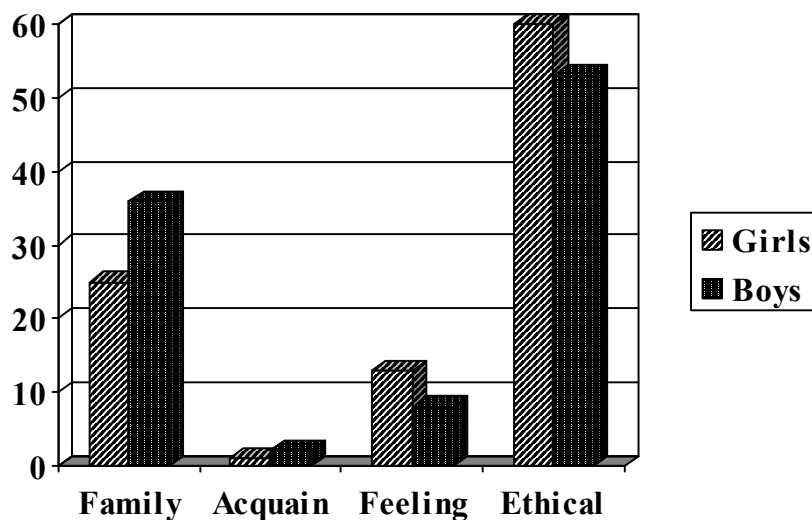




	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>
<b>Reasons to Help</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>66%</b>
<b>Reasons Not to Help</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>34%</b>

The majority of German girls and boys show a high readiness to help; the percentage is higher with the girls, though, at 89% as opposed to the boys with 66%. With regard to content, their profiles are also similar.

**Reasons to Help**  
**Comparison Between German Girls and boys (in percentages)**  
 (Girls: units N=67 / Boys: units N=47)



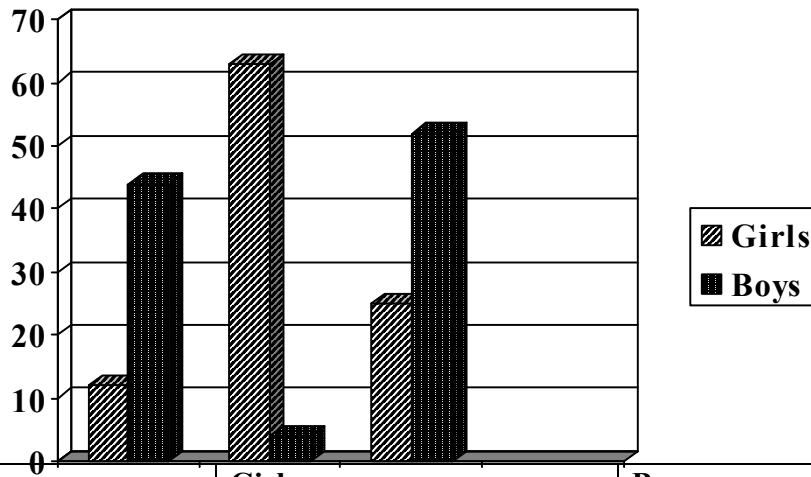
	<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>
<b>Family</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Acquaintances</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>



<b>Feelings</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Ethical Posture</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>53%</b>

Help provided by the boys is more dependent on personal ties, whereas the girls are generally more willing to help out of sympathy for the helpless person, and feel appealed to on an ethical plane.

**Reasons Not to Help**  
**Comparison between German Girls and Boys (in percentages)**  
 (Girls: units N=8 / Boys: units N = 25)



	Girls	Boys
<b>Strang</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>44%</b>
<b>Refusal</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Life</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>52%</b>

In the reasons given „not to help“, however, there are clear differences. While only 12% of the girls would not save someone because he or she is a stranger, almost half of the boys give this reason for not helping. Likewise, half of the boys express a well understood self-interest with regard to their own lives, whereas most of the girls express altruistic motives; 63% of them begin with the proposition that the mother says “Run, child, save your own life.” Only 25% of the girls give their own lives higher priority than the life of the person needing help.



## Conclusion

By using Toshiaki Ôse's Japanese instructional material "What is 'Family'?" the children could reflect on very complex and emotionally disturbing ideas in a trusting community of inquiry, and could assess for themselves their own imagined future behavior.

The German children found the Japanese material very good, especially since it was real and was not artificially constructed. Especially the boys wanted to know whether everything had really happened that way, and then showed great respect for the Japanese.

Thus Toshiaki Ôse's instructional practice made a double research practice possible, in which the children could investigate their own concepts and these could then be evaluated within the framework of a cultural comparison.

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