

REPORT

Influential Factors in the  
Intergenerational Transmission of Religion  
The Case of Sōka Gakkai in Hokkaido

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The aim of this paper is to clarify the mechanism behind the transmission of religious beliefs from parents to children in Sōka Gakkai, a new religious movement. In the course of the study, multiple regression analysis was carried out using survey data from second-generation, active members of Sōka Gakkai (SG) living in Sapporo, Japan. The results revealed that the mother's degree of religiosity, level of participation in SG youth groups, age, and gender all had a significant influence on the degree of religious devotion during the middle school years of respondents. In other words, the more enthusiastic the mother's devotion to her religion, the more continuously they participate in youth groups, and the older they were (and women to a higher degree than men), the more likely the religion is to be transmitted to the second generation. Moreover, one interesting difference between men and women became clear: the quality of family relationships does not have a significant effect on men but does on women. For the reasons mentioned above, it can be concluded that gender elements must be taken into account when analyzing the intergenerational transmission of new religions.

KEYWORDS: transmission of faith – Sōka Gakkai – family relationships

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THE AIM OF THIS PAPER is to clarify the mechanism behind the inter-generational transmission of religious beliefs in Sōka Gakkai 創価学会, a new religious movement. Studies on the relationship between religion and family in Japan have mainly focused on the *ie* 家 family system and ancestral rites and rituals. For instance, Reiyūkai 霊友会 and other religious groups derived from it place a high value on ancestral rites (TSUSHIMA 1994, pp. 229–30). KOMOTO (2001, p. 197) points out that one of the characteristics of the view of ancestors in new religions is that it is not a “perception of ancestors as (mere) traditional family lines of ancestry, but is something that has infinite potential for both husband and wife.” KOMOTO also asserts that the act of performing the rites facilitates social relationships and makes followers more aware of how the family came to be (2001, p. 197). This can be seen as a transformation to a more individualistic view of the ancestral rites that place more value on the family and the stability of the household of the followers themselves.

Accordingly, compared with the mode of religious membership in which the religion is seen as the religion of the “family” (*ie*), the mode of religiosity of people who have sought salvation in new religions is based on a more individual choice. With this in mind, in order to clarify the mechanism behind intergenerational transmission in new religious groups, it is first necessary to consider the influences and their inter-relationships operating at the individual family level. In this paper, I focus on these influences and examine the factors that affect transmission in second-generation followers.

Sōka Gakkai is a new Buddhist movement in Japan that was founded in the early Showa Era (early twentieth century) but grew rapidly after World War II. Sōka Gakkai places less emphasis on ancestral rites than Reiyūkai and its derivatives. Although ancestral rites (*kuyō* 供養, *ekō* 回向) are performed as a part of the daily religious practice the organization recommends,<sup>1</sup> the primary emphasis of these rites is not so much on giving offerings to family ancestors as it is on gaining merit through their own good deeds through this practice (SŌKA GAKKAI KYŌGAKUBU 2002, pp. 250–61).

In order to clarify the mechanism of transmission of beliefs from parents to children, an analysis focusing on family relationships in the context of the

1. Sōka Gakkai recommends the daily practice of *gongyō* 勤行 and *shōdai* 唱題. *Gongyō* (“assiduous practice”) means to recite parts of the Hōben 方便 (“Expedient Means,” second) and Juryō 寿量 (“The Life Span of the Thus Come One,” sixteenth) chapters of the Lotus Sutra, and *shōdai* means to recite the phrase *Nam myōhō renge kyō* 南無妙法蓮華經 in front of the Gohonzon 御本尊 (object of worship). According to Sōka Gakkai, this is “the daily principle for achieving revolution in one’s life” (SŌKA GAKKAI KYŌGAKUBU 2002, pp. 250, 253).

individual, rather than the “family” (*ie*), is necessary. And, in religion and family, order is maintained by gender. In this paper, we will also examine the gender influence upon people who work within the Sōka Gakkai organization through exploring the influential factors for the succession of faith.

One major factor affecting transmission among second-generation followers of a religion is the influence of the parents themselves. Findings from previous studies suggest that fathers and mothers influence their children differently; the child’s gender is significant as well (SUGIYAMA 2004, pp. 144–52).

A second influential factor is the degree of active participation on the part of the second-generation follower. O’CONNOR et al. (2002) conducted a long-term study of factors influencing religious activity among young middle-class adherents. They pointed out the significance of active participation in a variety of youth programs at churches.

A third influential factor is the influence of friends and acquaintances within the organization. According to a study of Sūkyō Mahikari 崇教真光 (a new religious movement), friendship within the organization, especially among men, can influence the strength of religious belief (SUGIYAMA 2004, pp. 144–52).

I have chosen to focus here, however, only on familial influences, and so I must leave investigations of the influence of friendship for future studies. Thus, the specific task of this paper is to examine the influence of the parents’ religiosity and of the level of participation in religious activities on the part of the second-generation followers themselves. At the same time, I shall also perform a gender-specific analysis in order to determine how the effect of gender is reflected in transmission.

### *Hypotheses*

The primary factor affecting intergenerational belief transmission is the influence of the parents. HOGÉ et al. (1978) pointed out that the religious dedication shown by parents in their actions, such as going to church, has a stronger influence on children’s religious activities later in life than the frequency or zeal of direct religious educational activities aimed at children. In the present analysis, parents’ attitudes toward religious education and toward religion are treated collectively as “mother’s/father’s religiosity” (See table 3). Simply put, the parents’ religiosity has an influence on the children. An analysis of survey results concerning Sūkyō Mahikari indicates similar results only for women followers (SUGIYAMA 1994, p. 61). These findings suggest that the mode of influence on the child might be different from father to mother. From the above, the following hypothesis can be formed:

Hypothesis 1: The firmer the parents’ belief in their religion (that is, their religiosity), the higher the probability of transmission is, particularly in the case of the mother.

O'CONNOR et al. (2002) support the "social learning theory" propounded by BANDURA (1977) and later applied by HUNSBERGER (1983) as the optimum theoretical framework with which to explain the extent of youth participation in religious activities.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, from a study on "religious switching" and religious mobility (a study on people who have changed their religious affiliation), it has been found that participation in church activities during youth stabilizes the religious orientation of second-generation followers (LOVELAND 2003). From the findings above, we can establish the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Continued religious activity by the person will have a direct influence on the transmission of religion.

Close family relationships are effective in helping to resolve conflicts of opinion between parent and child (RUETER and CONGER, 1995). And if close family relationships serve to ease conflict, we can predict that they should also have a positive effect on intergenerational religious transmission (KIRKPATRICK et al., 1990). As for apostasy, men and women differ in terms of the influential factors: when there is a good family relationship present, women tend to leave religions with less frequency (SANDOMISLY and WILSON, 1990).

Hypothesis 3: Good family relationships will raise the probability of religious transmission, particularly in women.

Although hypotheses one and two have been explored by research in Europe, and specifically concerning Sūkyō Mahikari through the research of Sugiyama, this paper examines whether this trend can be seen in Sōka Gakkai as well. Furthermore, whether family relationships shown in hypothesis three are positive factors in transmission of belief has not yet been established.

### *Data*

A survey was conducted between November 2002 and January 2003. The survey group consisted of active Hokkaido Sōka Gakkai members living in the city of Sapporo, Japan.

The Sōka Gakkai is comprised of separate divisions. These are the Young Women's Division (comprised of unmarried women and women under 40 years old), the Young Men's Division (comprised of men up to about 40), the Women's Division (comprised of married women or women over 40), and the Men's Division (comprised of men over 40). There is also a Future Division, (*mirai bu* 未来部), to which survey respondents belonged. As of 2002, there were 822 Sōka Gakkai districts in Sapporo and approximately 120,000 members. Of this

2. This theory claims that learning is not an act of imitating what is taught, but is carried out through voluntary interpretations and selections of the learned, emphasizing that the learning and execution of an action may not necessarily match.

TABLE 1 Ratio of generations

First generation	48.5%
Second generation	51.5%
N	811

TABLE 2 Ratio of faith successions

1. Ratio of active members among member's adult children over 18 years of age		2. Ratio of active members among member's brothers and sisters	
Number of children	865	Number of brothers and sisters	1200
Number of active members	570	Number of active members	834
Ratio of faith successions	65.9%	Ratio of faith successions	69.5%

population, 25.9% were in the Men's Division, 46.6% were married women in the Women's Division, 16.2% were men 40 years of age or younger (Young Men's Division), and 9.3% were single women (Young Women's Division).

A random sampling was conducted from the list of all Sapporo districts and forty-one districts were selected as target areas. Thirty subjects from each district were chosen and categorized according to the distribution above: 8 men, 14 women, 5 young men, and 3 young women (according to Sōka Gakkai's classification system). I gave the questionnaires to the person in charge of each district,<sup>3</sup> and a total of 1,230 questionnaires were distributed. Since people in individual districts actually distributed the questionnaires, the sampling method was not completely random. The number of valid responses was 822, a response rate of 66.8%.

Looking at the responses by generation, the first generation accounted for 48.5% and the second 51.5%, nearly a fifty-fifty ratio (N= 811) (table 1).

Next, I shall summarize the data on the rate of religious transmission from the survey results. Of the respondents, 602 had one or more children (74.6%). I asked those people the number of children they had over 18 years of age and, of those children, the number of active Sōka Gakkai members. I asked the second-generation members the number of siblings they had, and of those siblings, the number of active Sōka Gakkai members. Table 2 shows the rate of transmission obtained from those numerical values.

A Sōka Gakkai official in Hokkaido commented as follows: "The results were higher than I had expected. This could be because the members whose parents might not have been actively involved in our activities were also included. If we strictly count the number of members who were active, these figures are probably accurate." Although I cannot extrapolate the results to determine a general rate of transmission, a transmission rate of 60% or higher can be expected among active Sōka Gakkai members in Sapporo.

In this study, I conducted an analysis using only the data of the 307 second-generation members who had joined Sōka Gakkai at the age of 15 or younger.

3. The number of people listed per district was approximately 146; the actual number of active members is estimated to be less than half.

TABLE 3 Variables indicating involvement in sg activities between elementary school and high school

Variable names	Original question	Manipulation method	Descriptive statistics
Level of religiosity of respondent during middle school (LR School)	<p>You used to do <i>gongyō</i> and <i>shōdai</i> voluntarily</p> <p>You used to enthusiastically attend sg meetings</p> <p>You were proud to be a sg member</p> <p>You respected Honorary President Ikeda.</p> <p>You had sg members in the neighborhood that you respected.</p> <p>You invited your friends to meetings of sg</p> <p>You were interested in studying the doctrines (<i>kyōgaku</i> 教学)</p> <p>You wanted to continuous sg member</p>	<p>This score is a sum of all answer scores, each on a scale of 1 to 4.</p> <p>The higher this score is, the more conservative.</p>	<p>Cronbach's <math>\alpha = .911</math>,</p> <p>Min=8, Max=32,</p> <p>Mean=20.4, SD=6.4</p> <p>Mean(M)=18.9,</p> <p>Mean(F)=21.2</p> <p>F value=9.04, <math>p &lt; .01</math></p>
Mother's level of religiosity (LR Mother)	<p>Your mother used to do sg activities ardently</p> <p>Your mother used to make frequent references to her religious experiences</p> <p>Your mother used to do <i>gongyō</i> and <i>shōdai</i> often</p> <p>Your mother used to make frequent references to Honorary President Ikeda</p> <p>Your mother used to often tell you to go to sg meetings</p> <p>Your mother used to tell you to frequently do <i>gongyō</i> and <i>shōdai</i></p> <p>Your mother used to tell you to often study the doctrine</p>	<p>This score is a sum of all answer scores, each on a scale of 1 to 4.</p> <p>The higher this score is, the more conservative.</p>	<p>Cronbach's <math>\alpha = .903</math>,</p> <p>Min=7, Max=28,</p> <p>Mean=22.1, SD=5.0</p>
Father's level of religiosity (LR Father)	<p>Your father used to do sg activities ardently</p> <p>Your father used to make frequent references to his religious experiences</p> <p>Your father used to do <i>gongyō</i> and <i>shōdai</i> often</p> <p>Your father used to make frequent references to Honorary President Ikeda.</p> <p>Your father used to often tell you to go to sg meetings</p> <p>Your father used to tell you to frequently do <i>gongyō</i> and <i>shōdai</i></p> <p>Your father used to tell you to often study the doctrine</p>	<p>This score is a sum of all answer scores, each on a scale of 1 to 4.</p> <p>The higher this score is, the more conservative.</p>	<p>Cronbach's <math>\alpha = .942</math>,</p> <p>Min=7, Max=28,</p> <p>Mean=16.7, SD=6.7</p>
The quality of family relationships (Q Family)	<p>Your home atmosphere was very warm</p> <p>Your parents got along well with each other</p>	<p>This score is a sum of all answer scores, each on a scale of 1 to 4.</p> <p>The higher this score is, the more conservative.</p>	<p>Cronbach's <math>\alpha = .855</math>,</p> <p>Min=2, Max=8,</p> <p>Mean=5.6, SD=1.7</p>
Level of participation in sg youth groups (LYG)	<p>Mark a check next to the Future Division groups in which you participated</p> <p>(The larger the variable number, the greater the participation in sg activities)</p>	<p>This variable was made from the sum of the number of sg children's groups in which one participated.</p>	<p>Min=0, Max=8,</p> <p>Mean=2.7, SD=1.2</p> <p>Mean(M)=2.51,</p> <p>Mean(F)=2.81,</p> <p>F value=3.73, <math>p &lt; .01</math></p>
Gender	<p>What is your gender?</p>	<p>Male=1, Female=0</p>	

The reason for this is that I asked them to answer the survey based on the “time when you were a middle school student” regarding the “religiosity of your parents.” During this period in life, one’s senses of independence and initiative develop. This fact also influences religious activity. One Sōka Gakkai official stated, “there are many cases of second-generation members quitting activities when they are in middle school.” There are various types of social and cultural factors, however, as well as generational, gender, and individual differences when the parent-child relationship and the child’s sense of independence are formed. Thus, the setting of age for grouping in this survey is tentative.

Gender roles seen in the Sōka Gakkai organization do not deviate greatly from the general gender roles in Japan. In fact, there have been no female Vice-chairpersons in Sōka Gakkai. The upper positions are occupied by men, and women cannot go beyond the position of Director of Women’s Division (*fujin buchō* 婦人部長). USUI (1995, p. 172) points out that the organization structure of Sōka Gakkai “sticks to the conventional authority structure from the top to the bottom, placing men in the superior positions with many women diligent in the organization’s activities under them.” Moreover, when a woman staff member of Sōka Gakkai marries, she is obliged to retire (according to interviews with members). This traditional practice accurately reflects the value system with regard to gender in Sōka Gakkai, or the view that when a woman marries, she should lead a domestic life (that is, become a homemaker). For this reason, there is a tendency within the organization to demand that a woman be enthusiastic in her faith so that she can protect her family. Conversely, men are expected to achieve things externally and socially. Ikeda Daisaku, Honorary President of Sōka Gakkai, once spoke of the necessity of college or university educations, but only for men (“NIJŪSSEIKI NO PAIONIA” KANKŌKAI, 1980, pp. 38–39). At present, however, now that awareness of gender equality has risen, his stance has changed (IKEDA 1996, p. 65). Since the 1990s, his tone has changed from “all men should go to college” to “if possible everyone should go to college,” and distinction by gender is not emphasized.

Nevertheless, Sōka Gakkai still performs ordinary religious activities with four organizational divisions divided by gender, and encourages members to actively take advantage of their respective division’s features. These features are based on gender role division whereby it is considered that men chiefly work for wages while women take the responsibility for housework.

Strictly speaking, Sōka Gakkai has flexibly transformed to correspond to changes in the lifestyles of women (USUI 1995, pp. 171–72). In recent years, Ikeda has occasionally shown such changes in his actions, making remarks such as “the twenty-first century is the century for women” and instructing men followers to respect women. Even so, no substantial reforms in organizational structure, such as appointing women to the position of vice-chairman, have been

made, and there is no indication that the organization will soon reject the existing overall organizational structure.

### *Analysis*

#### VARIABLES

Multiple regression analysis is a method in which multiple explanatory variables are fit into an equation with a response variable (dependant variable) to analyze how the variances in the former affect the latter. It can be used to find models for prediction or to determine the extent of influence (in terms of probability, or statistical significance) that explanatory variables have on a response variable.

In this paper, the response variable is “level of religiosity of respondent during middle school” (LR School), and for “predicting” the degree of religiosity, the explanatory variables are “mother’s religiosity” (LR Mother), “father’s religiosity” (LR Father), “level of participation in SG youth groups” (LYG), “quality of family relationships” (Q Family), “age,” and “gender.” In simpler terms, the purpose of the present analysis is to determine if and to what extent the six factors above influence the religiosity of children. Factors with a significantly higher  $\beta$  value indicate a higher degree of influence.

I used the “mother’s (father’s) religiosity” as an independent variable to measure the influence of the parents on intergenerational transmission (Hypothesis 1). Next, as a variable for examining continued involvement in Sōka Gakkai activities since one’s childhood (Hypothesis 2), I determined the total number of Sōka Gakkai activities respondents participated in between the elementary- to high-school periods (indicated as “level of participation in SG youth groups”). As a variable representing the quality of family life (Hypothesis 3), I determined the “quality of family relationships” using the same method for quantification. I also examined the influence of age. Refer to table 3 for the details of each variable. Since the evaluation of religiosity during the middle-school years was a self-evaluation about the respondent’s past, we cannot accurately determine the individual circumstances of that period. In a similar manner, parental religiosity, set as independent variables, also likely reflects to some degree the current evaluation of the person. In other words, this setting makes it difficult to regard the dependent and independent variables as separate. I have conducted this analysis with this in mind and wish to treat this analysis as a tentative reference for exploring the factors influencing the intergenerational transmission of religions.

#### *Results of Multiple Regression Analysis and Discussion of Hypotheses*

Tables 4.1 through 4.3 show the correlation coefficients between the dependent variable and individual independent variables.



Table 5 shows the results of the analysis for both men and women combined as well as results by gender. As table 5 shows, “mother’s religiosity,” “level of participation in SG youth groups,” “age,” and “gender” proved to be significant predictor variables overall. In case of men, “mother’s religiosity,” “father’s religiosity,” “level of participation in SG youth groups,” and “age,” and in case of women, “mother’s religiosity,” “quality of family relationships,” “level of participation in SG youth groups,” and “age” each turned out to be a significant predictor variable. Higher degrees of parental religiosity, better family relationships, and higher levels of participation in youth groups led to higher degrees of religiosity in children during middle school years, but more so in women than in men.

Based on these results, I shall examine the three hypotheses mentioned above. The points of Hypothesis 1 were supported since the mother’s religiosity was a significant predictor variable for all groups—the whole, the men, and the women. Also, since the maternal influence appeared more markedly than the paternal in the analysis, it became clear that the mother’s influence is important. However, in the case of men, a strong degree of religiosity in the father also influenced the evaluation of the men’s own religiosity, clarifying that men and women are different in the way this influence appears.

In terms of Hypothesis 2, the level of participation in religious youth groups, an independent variable used to verify this hypothesis, was a significant variable in the all of the analysis results. The analysis data that showed that the higher

TABLE 4.1 Correlation coefficients (Total)

	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 LR School	.37**	.23**	.29**	.16**	.20**	-.18**
2 LR Mother		.32**	.26**	.21**	-.06	.01
3 LR Father			.42**	.03	-.01	.03
4 Q Family				.13*	.01	-.07
5 LYG					-.42**	-.12*
6 Age						-.03
7 Gender						

TABLE 4.2 Correlation coefficients (Male)

	2	3	4	5	6
1 LR School	.35**	.29**	.18	.25*	.22*
2 LR Mother		.24*	.17	.24*	-.10
3 LR Father			.57**	.09	-.01
4 Q Family				.00	.05
5 LYG					-.23*
6 Age					

TABLE 4.3 Correlation coefficients (Female)

	2	3	4	5	6
1 LR School	.40**	.23**	.33**	.10	.18**
2 LR Mother		.36**	.31**	.19**	-.04
3 LR Father			.34**	.00	-.01
4 Q Family				.18*	-.01
5 LYG					-.52**
6 Age					

TABLE 5 Multi-regression analysis

	Total	Male	Female
	β	β	β
LR Mother	.287**	.374**	.244**
LR Father	.102	.230*	.068
Q Family	.092	-.095	.178*
LYG	.215***	.210*	.191*
Age	.369**	.379**	.361**
Gender (M=1,F=0)	-.149**	—	—
Intercept	-2.838	-4.979	-2.116
Adjusted R2	.291**	.364**	.216**
N	208	71	132

Dependent Variable: Religious Attitude

\*\*p<.01 \*p<.05

the level of participation in religious youth groups was, the more continuously the person has participated from childhood in religious activities, providing support for this hypothesis.

In the case of women, variance in the quality of family relationship turned out to be significant at 5%, adding support to Hypothesis 3.

### *Conclusion and issues*

It became clear that the correlation between the evaluation of the middle-school degree of religiosity and the evaluation of the mother's religiosity was strong, and continued participation in religious activities raised the level of religiosity. At the time of the survey, the middle-school evaluation of religiosity tended to be higher as the frequency of *gongyō/shōdai* recitation increased (.175), the educational credentials increased (.237), the person's position within Sōka Gakkai rose (.307), the age increased (.196), and the more the person believed that he or she has been enthusiastic about his or her activities (.197).<sup>4</sup>

From the gender-specific multiple regression analysis, the following can be determined. First, the paternal attitude towards religion was a significant variable only in men. As for the correlation coefficient, both men and women showed a significant correlation; there was a strong connection between the religiosity of the men surveyed and that of their fathers. Second, for women only, the level of participation in SG youth groups was not a significant variable. This does not mean that the importance of continued religious activity for women was low. Rather, women had higher scores than men in the level of religiosity; this result was likely due to women tending to maintain level of religiosity continuously (see table 3). Third, family relationship quality had influence on the degree of religiosity in women only. In the multiple regression analysis, this turned out to be significant at a 5% level, and a significant correlation coefficient revealed a significant correlation at 1%.

The level of religiosity of female respondents during middle school (LRSchool) is higher than that of men (the mean score for males is 18.9, whereas the mean score for females is 21.2,  $F$  value=9.04,  $p < .01$ ). Also, the level of participation of females in Sōka Gakkai youth groups (LYG) is higher than that of males (the mean score for males is 2.51, whereas the mean score for females is 2.81,  $F$  value=3.73,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, from the consequences of multiple regression analysis, the gender variable became an important prediction variable (males=1, females=0,  $\beta = -.146$ ). From these findings, we can conclude that there is a trend for women to have a more continuous, higher level of religiosity than men. That there is a strong correlation between the attitude towards religion and quality

4. All numbers are significant at 1%. These numbers are calculated from the whole group. The same trend is seen in women only. In the case of men only, however, educational credentials and age are significant.

of family relationships only in women may relate to Japanese society, in which women in particular have very strong ties to their family, as well as the notion of “gender” that the Sōka Gakkai organization presents to its followers. We can also predict that as the family relationship gets better, women find it more difficult to reject their parents’ religion, one factor that that gives support to the idea that good family relationships will encourage a person to select the same religion. From the perspective of women, unless the family relationship is favorable, the importance of religion decreases. By contrast, we can speculate that men, who are encouraged to be more independent from their families and are required to achieve success on their own, tend to think less about the ideal mode of religious activity in relation to their family.

Although the purpose of this paper was to explore the mechanism of the transmission of religiosity from parent to child in Sōka Gakkai, a new religious movement, the present analysis clarified only which elements were influential in strengthening attitudes indicating the level of religious transmission. Concerning the important issue of gender in particular, I was not able to convincingly determine why better family relationships did not strongly influence religious transmission in men but did in women. Considering the results of the analysis, however, I was able to reconfirm the necessity of including gender elements when examining the mechanism behind transmission. In future studies I would like to conduct a more detailed analysis, including qualitative data such as interviews, in order to explore in more depth the reasons behind the differences between men and women.

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