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A Sense of Community through Nikkei Identity

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Nikkei refers to people of Japanese heritage who were raised outside of Japan. There are a number of Nikkei from Canada and the U.S. who currently reside in Japan. In 2003, a group of American and Canadian Nikkei long-term residents began gathering to discuss their experiences. Since then the group has started various projects, including one researching identity-related issues, an area little studied to date. Because Japanese and North American researchers hold assumptions about the Nikkei that color their findings, the Nikkei wish to contribute their insider perspective. This paper critically reviews previous research on long-term North American Nikkei residents in Japan. It then reports on an Interactive Group Journal in which participants have deeply reflected on their Nikkei identity. As such, it provides a rich source of data. Analysis reveals aspects of their experiences previously hidden to participants themselves. Positive outcomes of participating in this project are also reported.

日系人とは日本以外の国に移住した日本人、及びその子孫と定義されるが、現在日本には多数の日系アメリカ人やカナダ人が在住している。日本に長期滞在する北米日系人有志が2003年に初めて自らの体験を語る場を持ち、それ以降、様々なプロジェクトを参画してきた。そのひとつがそれまでほとんど焦点があてられることがなかった、日本に長期滞在している日系人のアイデンティティに関する研究である。日本人及び北米人の研究者によってこれまで実施されてきた日系人に関する研究は、先入観に影響されていることが多く、日系人は当事者の視点で研究へ寄与することを望んできた。本稿は、日本に長期滞在する北米日系人に関する先行研究を再考し、在日日系人が自らのアイデンティティに関する経験をグループで綴ったダイアリー研究について論じる。分析の結果、日系人自身が気付かなかった日系人の経験が明らかになった。また、日系人がこの研究に参加することによって得られた成果についても報告する。

Nikkei refers to people of Japanese heritage who were brought up outside of Japan. When they go to Japan they face a range of different experiences. On the one hand, Japanese nationals seem to want to *claim* them simply because of their heritage. On the other hand, these Nikkei do not always behave in ways that fit the expectations of the general Japanese society. When Nikkei meet each other and talk, there is often instant recognition of common experiences despite having very different backgrounds. In a sense, Nikkei reside very near the metaphorical boundary that separates Japan and their home country. At times they are totally accepted by Japanese people, yet they themselves would not claim to be totally Japanese. It is this shifting state of being Japanese in some ways and clearly non-Japanese in other ways that provides an interesting focus for reflecting upon the nature of what *being Japanese actually entails*.

The Nikkei Gathering

In 2003 a few long-term North American Nikkei residents began holding discussions in order to share their experiences. By 2006 the group had become more organized, and it became known as the Nikkei Gathering. Its 20-plus members are mostly from the Kansai area, but there are others from Tokyo, Nagoya and western Japan. They have lived in Japan from eight to over 30 years, and the majority of them are in the language teaching profession. While all have joined the group to share their Nikkei experiences, most hope to go beyond that. Some are interested in sharing and developing teaching materials on the Nikkei experience, a few are interested in working on a documentary, and others would like to write or do research.

Beginning in February 2004, all the discussions of the Nikkei Gathering have been videotaped for two main reasons. One is to maintain an archive for people who are unable to attend the meetings, and another reason is to collect data for research. From the outset one of the members placed a priority on research on this Nikkei group. While there has been a substantive body of research about Nikkei based in North America by both American researchers (starting with Kitano, 1969 to Ichioka, 1976, 1988 to Takaki, 1993, and many others) and Japanese researchers (Minamikawa, 2003; Takezawa, 2003, etc.) and while there is also a growing body of research on Brazilian Nikkei who live in Japan (Higuchi, 2003; Okunishi & Sano, 1995; Tsuda, 1999; etc.), there has been very little research on Nikkei from North America who live in Japan.

Critical review of past research on Nikkei residents in Japan

It is rather surprising to the authors that the few publications about Nikkei residents in Japan which exist are not accurate. It is thus important to set the record straight by systematically pointing out these inaccuracies. The problems can be classified into five basic categories: 1) research framework 2) methodology, 3) ethical issues, 4) assumptions, and 5) findings.

Research framework

In 2005 Noguchi wrote a paper based on 17 surveys completed by Nikkei residents in Japan in which she claimed to have adopted a post-structuralist view of identity. Rather

than going to original sources, she has relied solely on one secondary source, Blackledge and Pavlenko (2001). If she had wanted to show that identity is not a static fixed entity but a social construction which is multiple and constantly shifting, then there was certainly no need to cite Bourdieu and the concept of habitus. Bourdieu, would not call himself a post-structuralist, and the concept of habitus is much more complex than the gloss that was used in the article. Like too many articles in our field today, difficult concepts are being used too lightly. In fact, as Lye (2004) states, “Post-structuralism is not a theory but a set of theoretical positions, which have at their core a self-reflexive discourse which is aware of the tentativeness, the slipperiness, the ambiguity and the complex interrelations of texts and meanings” (p. 1). This sensitivity was not used when interpreting the Nikkei responses to the survey. As several of the Nikkei Gathering members noted, too much was taken at face value.

Methodology

Noguchi’s study (2005, 2006) attempted to investigate attitudes and identity issues of Nikkei residents in Japan through a questionnaire of 17 people. This survey had 14 background questions (*e.g.* age, place of birth, etc.) and 11 open-ended questions, such as “Why did you come to Japan?” and “How comfortable would you say you are living in Japan?” There were no guidelines given to the participants as to the degree of detail that they should write, and no sense of the rationale for the questionnaire itself. Investigating complex issues such as identity and heritage language use requires appropriate research tools, and a general questionnaire such as this is not sufficient. It simply cannot

do justice to the complex and nuanced experiences of the target group. When taking into consideration the diversity of the participants themselves in terms of language use as children, generational status, the difference of those who grew up in Hawaii compared to those from North America, the length and place of residency in Japan, the experiences of raising children in Japan, etc., the limitations of this questionnaire become quite apparent.

A number of the participants reported having mothers who were native speakers of Japanese which would certainly have had an influence on consequent identity formation, but this was not analyzed. Similarly, those participants who grew up in ethnic enclaves of the west coast of the U.S. or Hawaii and those who grew up in primarily white communities would certainly exhibit a wide range of ethnic identity formation. As for the Japan experience, whether the participant lived in a community where other English speakers lived or not would certainly influence his/her choice of language use. These are just a few of the issues that were not addressed.

Ethical issues

The questionnaire was completed by e-mail by a majority of the participants, meaning that there was no possibility for anonymity. Although there were promises made that the researcher would get back to the participants, the members of the Nikkei Gathering who had filled out the questionnaire were dismayed to see later that there was frequent use of their long quotes in Noguchi’s article and presentation. The Nikkei community is very small, and despite the pseudonyms, the frequent use of quotes made it quite easy to

trace the participant even with the use of pseudonyms. The Nikkei participants expected that there would be consent forms before publishing or presenting, but none were ever sent. The failure to adhere to the basic principles surrounding ethical administration of questionnaires (Dörnyei, 2003), i.e. confidentiality, informed consent, and sharing the results with the participants, has resulted in many participants feeling that they have been exploited.

Faulty assumptions

The titles of articles often have the word *return* when referring to the experience of Nikkei residents. Nomura (2004), himself a sansei from the U.S., titled one of his articles, “Once and again: Japanese Americans return to Japan: Preliminary findings” (p. 53). Noguchi’s (2005) article is called, “The return: North-American Nikkeijin who put down roots in Japan” (p. 1). (Noguchi, 2005). For the Nikkei Gathering members *return* implies that Japan is *home*. However, for many of these third- and fourth-generation Nikkei, Japan is NOT their home base, and is, in fact, a foreign country for them. In their daily interactions, it is quite common for Japanese nationals to use *return* (*kaeru*) with them—a practice that demonstrates a clear Japan-centric bias. This bias is entrenched in the work of Japan-based researchers who have long used the term, *return migration*; however, the Nikkei individuals who have chosen to live in Japan over the past few decades do not consider themselves to be part of this type of migration pattern.

In Noguchi’s work (2005, 2006) an assumption was made that the experiences of *kikoku shijo* (returnees) would help to shed light on the Nikkei experience. *Kikoku shijo* are

young children who leave Japan with their parents to another country for an extended period of time and then they return to Japan. They are still young and in the process of identity formation. In sharp contrast, the Nikkei in the study were all adults when they arrived in Japan with their identity already intact. As one Nikkei Gathering member said, “I think we have more in common with Koreans or Chinese living in Japan than *kikoku shijo*, or any foreigner for that matter. The experiences of *kikoku shijo* are just so different, they really are not comparable.”

Noguchi (2005, 2006) also made a direct link between the Nikkei respondents and bilingual-bicultural families. Noguchi wrote that her previous study “suggested that the older children in a family tend to be more proficient in the minority language, [so] it occurred to me that older children in a family might also have more positive views of their heritage culture and be more likely to explore the family’s background by returning to the ‘home country’” (p. 19). The quote itself illustrates the faulty assumptions being made. Going against the questionnaire results which stated explicitly the respondents *home country*, this article in one stroke has altered their home country to *Japan*. Even a cursory poll of the Nikkei Gathering members show clearly that birth order has no bearing whatsoever on reasons for going to Japan.

In addition, a link was made with bilinguals and identity. “Because language is such an important element of ethnic identity, language choice is also seen as an *act of identity*” (p. 320). For the majority of the Nikkei respondents, when they were forming their identities, language choice was NOT an option. Except for a few they were all monolingual

English speakers. Only after being in Japan did language choice become possible, but by that time it probably did not connote an *act of identity*. Thus, bilingual-biculturals are NOT a group that should be compared with the Nikkei respondents.

Questionable findings

Noguchi (2005, 2006) took certain liberties in interpreting the answers to the questionnaire. In the 2005 article, the average length of residence in Japan was given as 18.6 years. The researcher stated, “By subtracting the number of years of residence in Japan from the participant’s age, I calculated each participant’s approximate age on arrival” (p. 24). She has failed to take into account the likelihood that Nikkei may have made several visits to Japan. For example, one respondent reported that there was a 10-year gap between the first trip and a subsequent trip, so her age at arrival would be “just plain wrong.” If the researcher wanted to know the ages, this should have been on the questionnaire.

The 2006 article stated, “Seven participants said that they viewed themselves as *Japanese American* or *Japanese Canadian*, yet none seems to have been positioned as such by the Japanese they interact with” (p. 325). This is impossible to believe. This is making a sweeping statement that Japanese people who come in contact with the Nikkei respondents do not see them as Nikkei, but as Japanese. This is directly contradicted by the study which follows.

The term *positioning* seems to be problematic here. A questionnaire cannot possibly capture the perceptions of the participants, and it is even more unlikely that a researcher

armed only with a one-time, non-face-to-face questionnaire can make a statement with any confidence about how people position themselves or how others position them. Thus, a statement such as, “... three of the participants did not seem to want to accept such positioning” (2006, p. 325) amounts to the researcher interpreting FOR the participant.

The researcher also inferred from the questionnaire that at some point the Nikkei respondents stopped studying Japanese (2006, p. 323). The Nikkei Gathering members who participated in the questionnaire take great exception to this statement. First, there was no question about Japanese language study in the survey, and, second, the statement fails to consider that language study for a long-term resident could evolve into different means—not solely books, classrooms and teachers. Another faulty inference was “... it is also possible that, like the Chinese immigrants ... they stopped learning in order to preserve a positive self image—in this case [the Nikkei], of native English speaking Westerners” (2006, p. 326). In the first place, there is no basis to compare the Nikkei respondents to Chinese immigrants. It appears that Asian phenotype is the only commonality here. Secondly, the ages and circumstances between the two groups are significantly different. Finally, this statement connects the Nikkei self-image with their learning of Japanese. It implies that a higher proficiency may threaten a positive self-image, which sounds odd even to a casual observer.

The researcher makes yet another conjecture. “I think that it is also possible, however, that many of the participants gave up on pursuing high levels of Japanese proficiency because they did not want to live up to the expectation

that fluent Japanese speakers embody all Japanese cultural values, including *self-restraint* and conformation [sic] to culturally engrained gender roles” (p. 326). There are many kinds of Japanese people, and not all of them conform this way, so it seems nonsensical to conclude that being fluent in Japanese will force them to act in a certain Japanese-like way.

The current research

Data collection

It has become quite clear then that the long-term Nikkei residents should carry out their own research. The Nikkei Gathering has accumulated an archive of videotapes and audiotapes which can be used for research. There are three types of data. The first category consists of recordings of long self-introductions, individual interviews and group discussions. A narrative analysis was made of excerpts from the self-introductions (Fujimoto, 2006), and the recurring themes were: 1) being different, 2) not fitting in, 3) having difficulty, 4) having to think about *Who am I?* and 5) thinking of or wanting to hide the fact of being different. The narratives in this analysis consisted of stories before and after arriving in Japan, so these themes are not surprising.

The second category of data came about because of a simple procedural issue. After the first Nikkei Gathering meeting, a mechanism was needed to help keep the interactions focused on Nikkei identity without having to go through the same self-introductions. A simple board game was developed, which keeps players focused on sharing narratives of past experiences—from mundane to significant.

These narratives were unique because they brought up incidents which the Nikkei members had often long forgotten or experiences which usually would not be part of their presentation of self. (Goffman, 1956).

The third category resulted because of the need to delve more deeply to address more serious or sensitive issues. This time four female members (three of whom went on to collaborate on this article) participated in an Interactive Group Journal (IGJ) (see Cole et al. 1998), where they kept an ongoing collaborative journal through e-mail from February to November 2006. The goals in general of all IGJs are: 1) to heighten self awareness, and 2) to engage in a process of critical thinking (Cole et al., 1998, p. 557). For this Nikkei journal there were no strict rules. The participants wrote about experiences and thoughts related to being Nikkei, and they could respond to a previous entry or start a new theme. The idea was to be reflective and to push each other to be critical.

The Interactive Group Journal

The resulting text from the IGJ provides the data for the current research. Creswell (2002) advises that once one has the text database, the analysis should consist of dividing it into groups of sentences called text segments, and determining the meaning of each segment. Words should be analyzed to “describe the central phenomenon under study” (p. 56). Next themes or broad categories of the participants’ meaning should be developed (p. 56). In the current study the researchers read through the text several times taking notes about recurring ideas or recurring words. Since the researchers were also the participants in the IGJ, it

was important to keep an objective stance in the search for underlying meanings.

Research questions

Since the purpose of the study is to try to understand the Nikkei participants' experience at a deeper level than the narrative analysis, it was decided to focus on two perspectives. One was how the participants' expressed themselves as Nikkei, and the second was of their perception of how others view or react to them. The following are the research questions:

- 1) What do the Nikkei writers express when they are striving and struggling?
- 2) According to the Nikkei writers, how are they viewed by others?

The analysis

Nikkei expressing areas of struggle

To address the first research question, all words that expressed a sense of striving were listed along with the context. From the resulting list, three particular themes stood out. 1) The difficulty of gaining acceptance into Japanese society; 2) the positioning of them by other native speakers of English as Japanese nationals; and 3) the challenges posed by not being a native speaker of Japanese.

The difficulty of socializing outside of work in Japan, especially with other women was a particularly salient issue. Expressing their desire to extend their social realm to include Japanese, the participants found that oftentimes

they remained outside certain social circles. Neighborhoods, PTA groups, hobby clubs, and professional circles were the sites of such tension. Even though the initial contacts went smoothly, the participants reported feeling left out and unsure as to what they could do to become accepted members. Here are some examples:

<u>Word/phrase</u>	<u>Context</u>
can't seem to go past those pleasantries	socializing with Japanese women
not included in their outside activities	socializing with Japanese women
blunder my way	socializing rules in Japan
learned that lesson fast	socializing rules in Japan
really tried to fit	adapting to Japanese life

The participants also found that western colleagues at work or in study situations in Japan were often confused about the participants' identity and unwittingly positioned them as Japanese. Such experiences were not occasional flukes, but happened often, resulting in frustration and some resentment. This type of experience echoed what many had experienced in the U.S. as well, highlighting the fact that it was not just a matter of being in Japan, but that many white North Americans have a limited understanding of who to include as fellow North Americans. Expectations that the participants were fluent in Japanese because of their Nikkei heritage were also common.

<u>Word/phrase</u>	<u>Context</u>
make me cringe inside	being mistaken as Japanese by westerners
ignore the comment	being mistaken as Japanese
conscious to use English	in doctoral class
somehow prove that I am one of you	being mistaken as Japanese by westerners

Another area in which *struggle* words appeared dealt with the use of Japanese as their second language. In both private and public arenas, the participants reported their unease with their ability to use the Japanese language in Japan and were very conscious of how they were viewed. Issues of power were evident as the L2 user felt she was not on the same footing as her husband when Japanese was used, and in some cases, using English was not an option. Feelings of resignation resulting from limited participation in discussions about everyday trivial matters oftentimes led to further discouragement to try to express opinions at all. How the participants continued to deal with these language issues remains an important area for further research.

<u>Word/phrase</u>	<u>Context</u>
SO self-conscious speaking Japanese	in Japan
inadequate, dumb	unable to join discussions in Japanese
fraught with tension	wife/husband relationship
learned to SPEAK BACK	wife/husband relationship

By highlighting the wording used it can be seen how these Nikkei tried to make sense of their lives when they faced contradictions and challenges because of their Nikkei heritage.

Nikkei expressing how others view them

As for the second research question, a list was made of all sentences that contained a perception of how other people viewed the writers, along with how they were viewed and whose viewpoint it was. For example,

“You speak English well.”

Viewed as: non native English speaker

By whom: Japanese and non Japanese

The analysis showed that the Nikkei journal writers were viewed in ten different ways. They were viewed as:

- 1) Japanese (sometimes when the writer intentionally tried to *pass*)
- 2) a person who only *looked* Japanese
- 3) a non-insider (by Japanese)
- 4) a non Japanese who speaks Japanese
- 5) a nonnative English speaker
- 6) a native English speaker
- 7) a monolingual English speaker
- 8) a person with social capital (i.e., has connections or knowledge of English/U.S.)
- 9) a Nikkei

10) as a minority who can relate to another minority.

This multiplicity of perceptions provides a glimpse into the pulls and tensions that the Nikkei routinely face.

This analysis provides evidence of a clear gap between the experience of the Nikkei and that of the non-Nikkei foreigner or the Japanese national.

Discussion of the results

In this research study, the researchers felt it was important to look at the text as objectively as possible, since they were also participant writers. The analysis entailed isolating words and phrases but keeping the immediate context intact, and then examining the resulting text segments to see if there were patterns. In both cases, the text segments collected revealed clear patterns which are recognizable both to an impartial observer and the Nikkei participants themselves.

A qualitative view of the Interactive Group Journal

The value of participating in the IGJ

The whole point of the IGJ was to reflect at a deeper level about the Nikkei experience. While the patterns resulting from the analysis helped to confirm important aspects of the experience of Nikkei residents in Japan, it does present a somewhat terse and limited view. Thus, it is important to also include the writing of an actual participant. The following is a reflection of one of the Nikkei writers about her identity and the value of participating in the Interactive Group Journal.

One participant's reflections

The IGJ gives us the opportunity to write about things that have happened to us, that have impacted us, moments that have remained with us even though we want to forget. We write about feelings. We write about truths. We write about funny and embarrassing experiences, experiences that we can look back on with different eyes, with less emotion or from a different angle as an older and perhaps wiser woman. It has given me a place to go deeper into who I am, where I have been and where I would like to go as a Japanese American, as a person, and as an educator.

While doing some research for a class project on the history of Japanese Americans and African Americans, I came across a PBS (Public Broadcasting System) Web site entitled *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (2003). As I read through the transcripts I came across a section called Go Deeper: Me, My Race & I and under the subheading: *More Things to Consider; Do you think about race?*

Feeling the extra weight of a racial identity doesn't necessarily mean experiencing direct racism every day. It can also be experienced in subtler forms – feeling underrepresented, misrepresented, or tolerating an innocent comment loaded with racial assumptions. Unburdened by daily reminders of one's difference – that is the weightlessness of being white. It is difficult to notice things when they do not happen to you or those around you.

When I read this passage, everything that I had been feeling all my life, but not able to articulate, was staring at me in the face—the *weightlessness of being white!* This was

my struggle—carrying the extra weight of having a racial identity. “You don’t really know what it feels like to be treated differently until you’ve been treated really differently, and not just once, but time and time again.”

We all have problems and challenges to overcome, but sometimes we encounter a situation that has no immediate solution. For example, what do you do when you are in your home country and someone says, “Jap” to your face or when someone says, “Konnichiwa” in a mocking voice. Do you hit the person? Do you respond with an equally hurtful remark? Do you just grit your teeth and keep on walking? What do you do when you are in the American city where you were born and raised and someone says, “Go back to your own country.” Or what do you do when you teach at a university and a fellow teacher treats you like you don’t belong... don’t belong in the white English teachers’ group.

A few months ago, nine male and two female teachers were sitting around the table in the teachers’ room during lunch. One of the male teachers nonchalantly said, “Why aren’t there any white women part-time teachers at this school?” “Well, I’m American.” I said. He quickly replied, “No... not Japanese American.” He continued to talk about how amazing it was that there were so few white female part-time teachers teaching there.

As I was driving home that evening, I started thinking about the conversation. Although I am a native speaker, I wasn’t white so he didn’t include me. But why did he have to go on and on about white female teachers. At first I thought I was making a big thing out of nothing, but then it occurred to me that if it were nothing, why was I feeling this pain inside? Why did I feel hurt and insignificant? Was it because

he was putting me in the *sort of Japanese* category because of the color of my skin? I decided to confront the teacher the following day, which was completely out of character for me. I would normally just *grin and bear it* rather than become confrontational.

The next time I saw him I reminded him of the white part-time teachers’ conversation and told him that I was terribly hurt by his words. I asked why he thought I should be excluded just because I was Japanese American. I am still a native speaker. He said that he was just stating that there were so few white teachers and that he didn’t mean anything by it, but that he would apologize if I was offended. After more prompting, he offered further explanation. “Oh, well... I wasn’t trying to ignore you, but I just didn’t know where to place you. You’re Japanese because of your roots and you look Japanese. You have ORIENTAL features...” and I quickly corrected him, “The word is Asian.” He apologized. Although he obviously wanted to end the conversation, I kept prodding him wanting to dig deeper into what he was thinking.

I was completely floored when he said that I could be Japanese if I wanted to whereas we (meaning *white* people) can’t. “If you just learn the language you can easily be a naturalized Japanese.” I exclaimed that he was not taking into consideration that I was born, raised and educated in the U.S. He failed to take into account my family background and history. I had a feeling he was finally getting the point, but I needed to go further. I pointed out that another teacher who is American of Italian ancestry is never referred to as the Italian American, but I’m always the Japanese American. My grandfather emigrated to the U.S. in 1897. That’s 109

years! Isn't that long enough? My family certainly aren't newcomers to the U.S., so why aren't I considered as American as they are?

Was I being too emotional? Maybe, but I felt so good after that encounter. For once I was able to stand up to someone who made me feel small and inferior. It's the weight of having a racial identity—the burden of being different—that follows us wherever we go. And what gave me the strength to finally fight back was the Interactive Group Journal that I have been involved with since February 2006.

As a Japanese American and as a person of color, I think it's time that as one of the participants in the journal wrote, "... (think about) how to deal with those instances of blatant insensitivity." Those words and many others from our journal of enlightenment have stayed with me, and it has encouraged me to stand up for myself and also *for my people*. Another journal excerpt with the words "find our voice in our struggle to belong and to fit in and someday find peace with ourselves" are feelings that I had always had but had never been given a chance to share with others. These and many other pieces from the journal have been a gift of sorts. Moments in my life when I was made to feel inferior or different or *the other* are no longer memories that I need to be ashamed of. The IGJ has provided me a place to release those feelings of sadness which has given me a sense of peace and strength.

Concluding remarks

The Interactive Group Journal has certainly been successful in providing a means for four Nikkei to write about personal

and sometimes sensitive issues. Not all the entries though were special. The majority of the text was spent on everyday thoughts and experiences. The comments of one person sometimes prompted another to tell a story. At other times a writer simply wrote about an incident that happened recently. The writers did not always share the same reactions even though they were all Nikkei women. Despite the diversity, some general statements could be drawn from the analysis, and it is hoped that this study helps further the understanding of the nature of the Nikkei experience in Japan. The group plans to continue with the Interactive Group Journal, not only to further the research, but also--perhaps more importantly--because of the personal enrichment that it offers.

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