Mirror effects: Biracialism in Japanese schools

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Japan is often portrayed as a homogenous country, despite the fact that immigration, the number of international marriages, and consequently the number of biracial children have been steadily increasing. This study examines the intersection between language, gender, ethnicity, and identity in young, biracial people with a particular focus on the impact of gender on language and identity. In this study, 20 young, biracial people responded to a questionnaire, and took part in interviews covering issues ranging from family background to perceived images of biracial people in Japan. The data showed that both educational background and gender have a significant impact on the development of cultural identity, and the ability to respond to the differing roles required in their heritage cultures. The perceptions of these young, biracial people provide an effective cultural mirror, which clearly reflects attitudes both in Japanese classrooms, and in society at large.

日本はしばしば単一民族国として描写されますが、実際は、移民、国際結婚の数、結果として二人種混合（ハーフ）の子供は着実に増加しています。この研究は二人種混合（ハーフ）の若者の言語、性別、民族性、アイデンティティの交わり、特に言語とアイデンティティーが性別に与える影響に焦点をあて調べています。本研究は20人の日本で二人種混合（ハーフ）とイメージされる家族背景の若者たちがアンケートと詳細なインタビューに回答しています。このデータは学歴、性別の両方が彼らの文化的アイデンティティの発達、世襲の文化に必要とされる異なった役割に応える能力に大きな影響を与えてていることを示しています二人種混合（ハーフ）の若者の認識は教室と社会全般の両方での姿勢としてに明らかに反映され有効な社会の鏡を提供しています。

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of foreigners who have come to Japan, the number of international marriages, and consequently the number of biracial children. For these children, building an identity is complex as their cultural identity is inextricably bound to the building of a gendered and linguistic identity. This paper examines the realities of biracial, young people who have grown up in Japan with one Japanese parent and one Caucasian parent from countries including Britain, America, Australia, and Poland, and how the intersection of language, culture, and gender has shaped their identities. Using a questionnaire, 20 young biracial people were surveyed about their beliefs and perceptions in regard to education, family, language use, gender, and friends. Through an analysis of the responses it was found that education, either in the Japanese system or international schools in Japan, had a significant effect on the development of the gendered, cultural, and linguistic identities of the participants.

Background

In his paper "The ethnography of speaking", Hymes (1962) called for an approach which combined linguistics and anthropology, and so the ethnography of communication emerged. Hymes emphasized the need to see patterns of communication as social phenomena which needed to be studied in context. One of the focuses of the ethnography of communication is the speech community. There is a great deal of disagreement surrounding the definition of speech community, an abstract concept in which there is no limit on size or location, however, a broad definition of a speech community is a group who is connected by shared knowledge and attitudes towards the language they use. In recent years, the theory has been criticized for its narrow view of the world and lack of connection to other social theories (Bucholtz, 1999; Fasold, 1984; Milroy, 1982). Furthermore, Piller (2000) notes:

> The days of traditional real speech communities have long been dead and gone. At least in urbanities, where speech communities are divided along the lines of gender, regional and national origin, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, or interest groups. (para. 6)

In particular, it is considered inappropriate to use the speech community for gender and identity studies, as it has tended to focus on centralized members, which has resulted in groups such as women and ethnic minorities being marginalized. The focus on centralized groups also results in a rather fixed view of society, which does not easily allow for change, interaction between groups or fluidity of identity.

Recent studies on identity reveal that individuals are able to hold multiple identities simultaneously and move between them according to the situation. Bucholtz (1999, p. 209) states that, "Contemporary feminists view identities as fluid, not frozen; they note that, although identities link individuals to particular social groups, such links are not predetermined". She adds that, "Individuals engage in multiple identity practices simultaneously, and that they are able to move from one identity to another" (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 209). In addition, Piller (2000) states:

> Cultural or national identity may be salient in one interaction but not in another, or at one point of an interaction but not at another … and at many points of an interaction other aspects of a person's identity will override cultural/national identity. Instead, gender, ethnicity, social class, professional status, status differences etc. may be foregrounded. (para. 7)

The community of practice theory, which includes language as well as other social practices in its analysis, moves from micro level analysis to macro level analysis emphasizing the importance of the individual and their own perceptions is compatible with, and appropriate for, research examining the identity and practices of biracial, young people in Japan. It combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods, allowing information found at the level of the individual to be used to explain the complexities of groups and societies.

Data

The participants in this study consisted of 20 biracial individuals aged 15 to 25. The parents of these young people came from America, Australia, Britain, and Poland. Twelve of the participants were male and eight were female. The data was gathered using an email questionnaire written in both English and Japanese. The participants were able to choose to answer in either English or Japanese, or both languages, according to their preferences. The majority of the questions were open-ended allowing the respondents to comment freely. It is acknowledged that the self-reporting of data has limitations, as Romaine (1994, p. 37) commented, it is "subject to variance, in relation to factors such as prestige, ethnicity, political affiliation etc." However,

self-reported data provides information from the participants' perspectives and therefore may be considered a valuable source of data. In addition, the advantages of questionnaires are economy, speed, lack of interview bias, and the possibility of anonymity and privacy to encourage more candid responses. Follow up interviews were conducted with four of the informants. The questionnaire and interviews included questions covering the participants' backgrounds, education, language use, culture and ethnicity, family, gender, and friends.

Education

Fourteen participants were being, or had been, wholly or mainly educated in the Japanese school system until at least 18 years of age. Six respondents had been or were attending international schools in Japan. Typically, those in international schools had attended Japanese elementary schools, moving to international schools for secondary education. However, 14 of the respondents had had some experience of schooling in a country other than Japan, ranging from one month to over two years. Seventeen of the respondents were in, had been in, or were planning to go into higher education, including postgraduate education.

When asked if school life was enjoyable, 17 of the respondents replied that their experiences in elementary school had been mixed, but overall had been enjoyable. The level of enjoyment increased for the majority as they moved through the education system and got older. Three of the respondents answered that they had not enjoyed school, particularly elementary school, although they reported that as they got older their experiences became more positive.

All of the respondents, except one, felt that the Japanese school system was not suitable for biracial children. The respondents believed that there was a lack of understanding from teachers concerning biracial children and their needs, and believed that teachers "did not want to know or to change". Several respondents commented that if the aim of the child was "to become Japanese, it is okay", but it is only "suitable for mono (mono-cultural) kids".

Language

All of the respondents believed that language and the ability to speak more than one language provided access to sources of opportunity and power, and that those who were monolingual had limited life choices. One monolingual respondent stated that he felt disadvantaged due to being monolingual. His father was multilingual, his mother and older brother both trilingual, however his younger sister and himself were both monolingual Japanese speakers. He strongly believed that his life would have been different if he had been able to speak other languages: "If you only have Japanese you have to stay in Japan – if you have another language you can live and work in a lot of different places" (trans.).

Fourteen of the respondents were most comfortable speaking Japanese, four were more comfortable in their other language, English, while two were most comfortable mixing Japanese and their other language.

Identity

When asked to define their ethnic background, 16 of the respondents defined themselves as Japanese, three as "mixed" and one respondent defined himself as "king of his own country". In contrast, when asked how others in Japan defined them, three of the respondents answered "foreign". One respondent who has spent time in several countries said, "Other people always see you as foreign; in Japan I'm American, in Brazil I'm Paraguayan, in Canada I'm Chinese". Seventeen of the partici-

pants answered *haafu*. The term *haafu* is a Japanese word which comes from the English word "half" and often has negative connotations among the foreign parents of mixed ethnic children, implying that an individual can access only a part of their cultural heritage. According to Moriki (2000), this usually refers to the Japanese half, while the other non-Japanese side is ignored. However, none of the respondents found it to be a negative term, likewise it is commonly used by Japanese people without negative intent. Indifference was the main response to "double", a term that parents, especially foreign parents often prefer, with one respondent commenting, "Double is a term that foreigners prefer, not biracial kids". Asked what their preferred term was, all respondents chose *haafu*. Asked which term they disliked, several male respondents reported that they felt being called *gaijin* (foreigner) was a deliberate insult, and they objected to that term. Since *haafu* was the term preferred by the participants in this study I will continue to use it.

The majority of the participants did not feel pressure to choose one cultural identity over another. Although one respondent with an American mother stated clearly, "I will be an American. I did not choose this" (trans.). He also stated in relation to his cultural identity, "I do not decide, others decide my identity and I cannot change them" (trans.).

When asked, "Where do you feel you belong?" the majority of respondents said Japan, although several answered "Japan or anywhere". One respondent answered, "I belong everywhere and nowhere". Two respondents, whose mothers were American and fathers were Japanese, stated they felt that they belonged in America.

Demirezen (2007, p. 3) quotes a Turkish proverb, "If you speak one language you are one person, but if you speak two languages, you are two people". Individuals who identify with more than one culture may find that balancing these two parts is complex and changeable. One of the respondents stated that, "I find it hard to keep two identities going at the same time in Japan". While many of the respondents felt that it was, "Different – each family, and each person within each family". One respondent refused to, or found it impossible to, choose between two identities and stated simply, "I am human."

Friends

The respondents immersed in the Japanese school system often did not have any biracial or mixed race friends, in contrast to those who had been through the international school system, who had several biracial friends. None of the respondents felt that they needed to have *haafu* friends, although all believed friends were important in the construction of identity.

Three sets of identity related to school experiences

From an analysis of the data related to schooling, three distinct groups emerged. The first group consisted of individuals educated in the Japanese school system, who had assimilated successfully. The second group, those educated in the Japanese school system who had not assimilated successfully, and the third group, those educated in the international school system in Japan.

Group 1

Group 1, those educated in the Japanese school system, was the largest group, consisting of 11 out of the 20 participants. This group strongly identified with being Japanese, and saw few differences between themselves and their Japanese peers. One participant said, "I do all the same things as my friends, I don't feel any different". Another said, "I just live a normal life, same as everyone else at school". They felt that they were a part

of Japanese society and saw themselves living their lives in a Japanese context, "I live here, where else would I go?" They had experienced little bullying, mainly in the form of name-calling in elementary school, which had passed quite quickly.

Group 2

This group was the smallest group, made up of only three participants and consisting of only boys, educated in the Japanese school system. The individuals in this group identified with being *haafu* or foreign. They believed they were outsiders in Japan, and had strong feelings of alienation from their Japanese school peers. Some comments included, "I was told to leave Japan many times" and "My neighbors and kids at school told me to go home every day. I was often punched, so many times I can't remember". They viewed being *haafu* in Japan as a disadvantage and as a weakness, and did not see any advantages in their mixed heritage, saying, "When you are *haafu*, you always stand out, everyone knows who you are, and this means you are discriminated against." Another comment was, "There is too much discrimination in Japan based on appearance." And yet another comment was, "I do not want to live in Japan because of discrimination." They also believed that they would be accepted in their "other" culture, American, for who they were, and wanted to leave Japan and move abroad where they felt they would be happier, saying for example, "I will only be happy when I leave Japan", and "I want to live in America, because I will be free".

Group 3

This group consisted of six members, educated in the international school system in Japan. The individuals in this group defined themselves as primarily Japanese, but also as *haafu*, to varying degrees. They did not feel like outsiders in Japan, they felt like part of society and saw their futures in Japan. Their comments included, "I grew up here" and "I am basically Japanese". And in addition, "I plan to live and work here, as I grew up here". They believed that Japanese people may view them as not Japanese, or as outsiders, however, they did not view this as problematic, and in fact viewed being *haafu* as a powerful asset, expressing the ability to use their cultural heritage as an advantage. One respondent said, "I can be here without feeling totally a part of society. I don't want to blend in, I can be different without worrying". And another, "I belong to both, but neither completely, but I have no complex about that". And, "I think that having two cultures to use is very important and powerful". Several respondents stated that they had not felt positive about being *haafu* when they were younger, in elementary school, but increasingly felt that it was an advantage as they got older.

Advantages of being *haafu*

Asked what the advantages of being *haafu* were, the respondents pointed out several benefits of being able to access different cultures. Firstly, all of the respondents replied that being able to enjoy cultural activities in both cultures, such as Christmas and New Year festivities, was important. As one respondent commented, "We can have double the fun!" Secondly, appearance was viewed as, "a big thing in Japan". Eleven out of the twenty respondents mentioned appearance as an advantage. It is a common belief in Japan that *haafu* people are attractive, combining the positive attributes of both races. Thirdly, all of the respondents believed having knowledge of and being a part of two cultures, or more, widened perspectives and increased, "adaptability and tolerance of difference", and made the world "seem smaller", and that being biracial provided more choices on where to live in the future. The majority of respondents felt that they could live in either Japan or their other country without difficulty. Finally, multi-linguality was viewed by all the respondents as the most important and powerful aspect of

their ethnic heritage providing the respondents with increased choices, and it was generally expressed that being "good at English is important for the future".

Being able to code switch successfully was particularly valued and believed to be powerful by the respondents who attended international schools, "It is cool to switch languages in front of people, but you must show you can speak both languages. To only speak one is uncool." In addition the respondents recognized the ability to swap languages as an advantage, depending on the "situation and who I am talking to". Another respondent said they code switched "for secrets".

Disadvantages of being haafu

Firstly, a lack of in-depth knowledge related to Japanese culture was occasionally felt to be problematic by ten of the respondents. One respondent mentioned a "lack of Japanese general knowledge" as a disadvantage, and another said "sometimes I miss out on things in Japanese culture".

In addition to being a positive aspect of being biracial, appearance was also perceived as a disadvantage, "In Japan people are judged on appearance, so I feel I have to work hard to be accepted … there is a contradiction between who I look like on the outside and who I am on the inside. I feel Japanese, but look foreign". The three respondents who had not assimilated to the Japanese school system felt strongly that their appearance was a hindrance rather than an advantage. A third, and important disadvantage were the conflicts of identity and related "feelings of alienation and discrimination".

Gender

In the area of gender issues, the respondents were clearly divided into two groups, those who had been educated in the Japanese school system and those who had been educated in international schools. Broadly, those from international schools were aware of gender related issues and were able to identify specific examples, whereas those educated in the Japanese system had little awareness of gender related issues, were unable to identify areas of difference, and felt that gender issues were irrelevant to their lives.

Girls educated internationally

Girls educated in international schools stated that they believed that Japan was a more difficult country for women to live and work in than their other cultures. All of the girls in this group showed an awareness of female gender stereotypes, and were able to provide many examples: "sports – girls are the managers, and the boys do the soccer", "clothes – girls have to wear the cute little skirts, otherwise the guys don't look", "there are a lot (of gender stereotypes) compared to Australia", "eating – you have to be perfect in front of boys – they expect the girls to look after them, eat nicely, sit properly (can't lie down on the ground because it is a nice day)". In addition, all of the respondents in this group cited sexual discrimination in the workplace as one of the major problems for women in Japan.

Boys educated internationally

The boys in this group felt there was little difference in their gendered roles in Japan or their other country, but felt that there was a difference for girls, as one respondent stated, "same for men, different for women". They expressed recognition of different role requirements for women, echoing the female respondents' beliefs that Japanese culture was more restrictive for women, "Being a man is easier in Japan, social norms and expectations are easier".

Gender and language

These beliefs were also reflected in language use, as gender related linguistic differences in Japanese for women were identified, but few differences were identified for men. One male half-British/ half-Japanese respondent who had lived abroad for several years said:

> The girly cute language and big exclamations like *kawaii*! etc. are more common to the females in this country. I find it highly annoying. I also don't think that many Japanese men appreciate it either but somehow it seems to be a common trend amongst Japanese females. I'm not sure if there is a common trend amongst the way that Japanese men speak.

Several of the respondents felt that the Japanese language was changing, and that, "There are fewer differences nowadays". None of the respondents were able to identify any gender related differences in English.

Femininity and masculinity in Japan

In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about how femininity and masculinity are shown in their respective cultures, and if they felt there were any differences. Once again, in Japan the lines for female gender roles were felt to be more proscriptive and clearly demarcated. Many comments were made on the role of women in Japan including the following: "Individualism for women discouraged", "Women encouraged to rely on men", "Women in Japan have to do as they are told, women in Australia have their own opinions", "Girls should follow (boys should lead)", "Girls should be passive", "Girls should be quiet, not have too many opinions", "Individualistic women have a hard time". It can be seen from the responses that passivity is considered to be important for girls and women, and that in contrast boys should be more active and lead.

When comparing male gender roles most respondents felt there were few differences between Japan and their other countries. However, four of the male respondents felt that Japanese men were "more feminine" than Western men. One respondent answered, "I think men have to be more feminine in Japan in terms of clothing. Rather, there is not so much expectation for men to be masculine in behavior, hobbies or clothing." Other respondents said that Japanese men are, "less aggressive" and "less boastful", and the way that Japanese men dress is "more colorful and creative."

Femininity and masculinity are socially created concepts, and the meanings that are attached to femininity and masculinity are complex. There is evidence for this complexity in the respondents' answers. Japanese men were felt to be less masculine than Western men in terms of behavior and dress. However, in interactional situations related to women, it was felt that Japanese men were expected to behave in a more masculine manner than Western men. In addition, in Japan, women were expected to behave in a more feminine manner than women in Western countries.

Discussion

There appear to be distinct differences between the beliefs and experiences of biracial young people in Japan depending on their educational background and gender. The Japanese school system appears to provide a mono-cultural and mono-lingual focused education, offering few opportunities for biracial children to express their cultural heritage. Indeed, Cummins (1984) found that teachers in Japanese schools actively worked to remove the differences between the biracial students and themselves, and encouraged the development of the majority language and cultural norms and values. Likewise, Kanno

(2004) reported that many Japanese homeroom teachers did not feel it was necessary, or part of their responsibilities, to support languages other than Japanese.

The socioeconomic situation of the respondents' families also needs to be taken into account. The respondents in this study could loosely be defined as "middle class", in that all of their parents were university educated, and the majority of the respondents intended to engage in, or had engaged in, further education. Katz (1996), in his study of children of mixed parentage in London, found that although his participants married outside of their ethnic group, they all married within their class, and this also appears to be true of the parents of the respondents in the present study. It may, however, be contended that students who attend international schools may have more economic resources available to them, which could allow them more choices and may impact on the acceptance or rejection of their *haafu* status. In addition, it may be assumed that there are children from many different backgrounds at international schools and so *haafu* students may not be in the minority.

In this study, both girls and boys reported a large gap between behavior and expectations for women in Japan and their other cultures, with more rigidly defined roles for women. However, the girls are apparently able to move between these roles, responding to societal norms in both of their cultures. In addition, although the girls acknowledge differential role expectations, and believe that life is more difficult for women in Japan, they still want to remain in Japan, and do not feel they need to leave to be fulfilled. It is also evident from the results of the survey that on the whole, Japanese schools place little emphasis on education relating to gender issues.

In contrast, three of the boys felt that they would like to leave Japan, due to the lack of acceptance of their cultural and racial heritage, although they felt no difficulties related to their gendered roles. It appears that biracial adolescents must decide for themselves how their racial or cultural background is to become part of their identity. Phinney and Kohatsu (1997) found that if a young, biracial person in America was able to achieve a positive ethnic identity and function in both of their cultural settings, they would become more successful at home and at school. In this study, the majority of respondents felt more in control of their ethnic and gendered identities as they got older, and many felt a certain sense of power from their mixed heritage.

However, Davies and Harre (1990) proffered that some individuals may feel they are placed or positioned by others in certain ways, regardless of their own opinions or choices. In this study, those who had not assimilated into Japanese society felt that they had been rejected by Japanese society on the basis of their race, and this in turn led to their own rejection of Japanese society and a refusal to be labeled in terms of their racial or ethnic background. Judging from the participants' responses, it would appear that race, and not gender is the defining aspect of their lives.

Conclusion

It has been shown that young, biracial people recognize and react to specific ethnic, gender, and cultural stereotypes in both of their heritage countries, and are actively able to move between and respond to the roles required of them in both of their cultures. However, those who have been educated in international schools in Japan appear to be able to negotiate their identities with more fluidity than those educated in the Japanese school system, and both girls and boys are able to recognize differential gender patterns in both of their cultures. In addition, the girls from international schools are able to conform to expected patterns of behavior in both of their cultures. In contrast, both girls and boys educated in the Japanese school system have little knowledge of the agendas and issues associated with gender.

This preliminary study consists of only 20 respondents; further research is necessary to shed more light on exactly how language, culture, and gender interact. However, several areas of interest have emerged from this study. One is the perceived and real impact of friends on the development of the identity of biracial young people. Another is the connection between gender and language, and the impact on the gender identity of young people. Finally, the Japanese school system's approach to gender issues and the future of gender education in Japan are areas that require further research. The Japanese education system has been in transition, moving from a teacher centered-model to a more individualist model, in order to remain competitive in the world. Japan has also been attempting to move towards gender equality, and in order to do this may need to review the teaching of gender issues in its educational curriculum. The voices of young, biracial people in Japan are important if Japan is to become a more internationalized, multicultural society in the future.

Bio data

Sandra Healy is a teacher at Kyoto Sangyo University. She has been a teacher in Japan for 18 years and is interested in the interconnection of language, culture, and gender, as well as extensive reading and the use of literature in language teaching.

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