

# Four Studies into Multi-ethnic Identity in Japan

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This paper is based on four separate qualitative studies that were presented in a colloquium on identity among multiethnic children and their families in Japan. The first two sections center on data collected in group interviews with multi-ethnic Japanese adolescents, the former in an international school and the latter in a friendship group of girls attending various local middle schools. Greer puts forward a flexible, dynamic model of multi-ethnic identity and Kamada examines how Japanese/Caucasian girls attending Japanese schools discursively access their multi-ethnic and gendered 'cultural capital' in order to boost their self-esteem in the constitution of their identities. The third study shifts the focus to parents in international marriages. Here Ascough employs a social constructionist framework to investigate identity development/negotiation among Japanese women. Through an analysis of their life story interviews, she documents the ways her participants seek to attain positive social identities through cross-cultural encounters. Finally, through a trilingual-child case study, Shi examines relationships between language development and personal, cultural, national and social identities, revealing her participant's growing awareness of context-specific identity construction. Throughout the four studies, a fluid, adaptive approach to constructs like ethnicity and "race" is adopted, highlighting particularly the role of language as the medium through which multiethnic people accomplish their situated identities.

本論文は「コロキウム：日本におけるマルチエスニックの子供達と家族のアイデンティティ」で発表されて4つの研究を基にしたものである。

最初の2つの研究(グリア、カマダ)はグループ面接調査法を用い、マルチエスニック日本人青年のアイデンティティを、1つはインターナショナルスクール環境において、また公立学校へ通学している6人の女子学生の友好関係を長期的に質的に研究したものである。グリアは、インターナショナルスクール環境において、順応性がありダイナミックなマルチエスニックアイデンティティモデルを提唱する。またカマダは公立学校環境において、日本人・欧米人ダブル女子がマルチエスニックアイデンティティ形成において自尊心を高めるために、マルチエスニックそしてジェンダーを反映した文化資本概念がどのように関与しているのかを考察する。

アスコウは多文化・多言語環境に接し、どのようにより良い社会アイデンティティ形成・再構築するのかを社会的構築主義の理論的枠組み、ライフストーリーインタビューを用いて考察する。

またシ・ジエは3言語環境の子供が言語発達とパーソナル、文化、社会アイデンティティと、研究の対象者である子供が「環境の独自性」にどのように認知過程との関係性をケーススタディを実施し考察する。

上記の4つの研究から、媒体としての言語の役目に着目し多文化環境で生活する人々がシチュエティド・アイデンティティ(環境に依存したアイデンティティ)の発達形成を通じて、民族性(エスニシティ)は流動的で適応性のある構成概念と認識される。

**R**esearchers and laypeople often use the category 'Japanese' uncontested, implying that those to whom it refers think and act in a consistent manner. Assuming all Japanese are alike may reflect (and ultimately perpetuate) *Nihonjinron* myths of Japanese homogeneity and uniqueness. Being Japanese is more problematic in individual cases than such generalizations seem to permit. What does it

mean to be Japanese when your father is not? How do Japanese women with foreign partners extend their ethnic identity beyond traditional notions of Japanese-ness? Can a non-Japanese child experience affiliation towards Japanese worldviews?

The studies in this paper will explore such questions by documenting the co-construction of identity in four different Japanese contexts; multi-ethnic Japanese teenagers in an international school, a friendship group of multi-ethnic Japanese girls who attend Japanese junior high schools, Japanese women in international relationships, and finally a trilingual Chinese boy raised in Japan.

### Unpacking identity

Identity is a slippery term, but one that we need to come to grips with prior to any discussion on multi-ethnic identity. At its broadest, we take the concept of identity to include all the features that distinguish us from others, such as images, beliefs, and feelings of “who I am.” Identity is grounded in notions of individuality, including personality, physical features, behavioral patterns, and occupation, but also situates the individual within his or her relationship to social groups, such as national and social identities.

Identities are contextually accomplished through and by language.

“It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to - or is denied access to - powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak” (Norton, 1995, p 13).

More than merely a means of communication, language can become a symbol of ethnic identity.

“Our identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communication with other people... Identities are achieved by a subtle interweaving of many ‘threads’: age, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and so on” (Burr, 1995, p 51).

Our studies draw on discursive psychology discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Billig, 1988), which looks at how people give accounts of events by drawing on repertoires in their speech to accomplish various functions, as well as Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis (PDA) (Baxter, 2003) which examines how people are positioned or position themselves or others in interconnected social discourses. Both frameworks are based in social constructionism (Gergen, 1999), which takes as its premise that there are no absolute ‘truths’ that cannot be challenged and reconstructed.

The four studies in this paper then, view identity as flexible, dynamic and situated. They are driven by discursive context and adaptive to the circumstances in which individuals find themselves.

## Study 1

### Multi-ethnic Identity: Living with paradox



**Figure 1: A self-portrait by a Filipino-Japanese teenager.**

Although not nearly as bewildering for multi-ethnic people themselves as it can be for those around them, multi-ethnicity seems to be something of a paradox. How can a person be both Japanese and non-Japanese? To many, the term ‘multi-ethnic Japanese’ itself seems illogical. A paradox consists—by definition—of two co-existing qualities that appear contradictory but on deeper consideration express a

genuine reality. By viewing these two facets as flexible and co-constructed, the paradox may in fact become a fitting way to begin to consider the notion of multi-ethnicity within Japanese contexts.

This study is part of a broader investigation into bilingual interaction and identity in a Japanese international school (Greer, 2003). The key consultants were multi-ethnic Japanese teenagers between the ages of 15 and 18. Most had a Japanese mother and an American father and reported that Japanese was their stronger language.

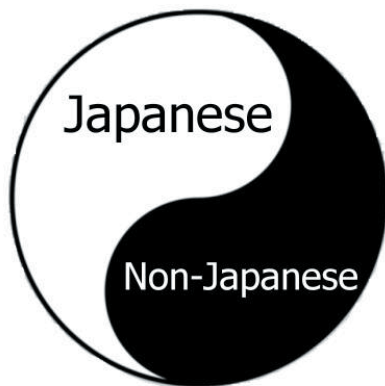
The present analysis is based on data collected during a series of five focus group sessions that considered the following three questions.

- In what way do the participants see themselves as Japanese and/or non-Japanese?
- How do other people perceive multi-ethnic Japanese?
- What part does language play in shaping their multi-ethnic identities?

Each focus group discussion lasted around 50 minutes. The conversations were transcribed, coded for content and analyzed according to a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Throughout these discussions, the participants related their experiences both in Japan and abroad. So-called half-Japanese are often assumed to be somehow split evenly between their two cultures, as reflected in the self-portrait in Figure 1 above. However, the teenagers in this study revealed instead that being ‘*haafu*’ was fluid and changing, more akin to stirring milk into coffee than to two discrete

halves. Therefore I have adopted a Yin Yang style diagram (Figure 2) to model a dynamic, effervescent portrayal of the multi-ethnic paradox.



**Figure 2: A fluid depiction of multi-ethnicity.**

Using this reconceptualization I will explore some of the fluid dualities and complementary mutualisms that face multi-ethnic Japanese young people.

### **Ethnification**

A recurring theme that emerged from the focus groups was what Day (1998) has termed *ethnification*, or “ethnic identity as a situated accomplishment of interlocutors” (1998, p 151). The participants reported that their ethnicity was made relevant in and through everyday talk, through reference to linguistic and cultural differences, which variously

discursively positioned them (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999) as ‘expert’ or ‘novice’, ‘marginalized’ or ‘privileged’.

The most readily apparent focus for such ethnification is their appearance, which is usually noticed, but not always accurately interpreted. Those participants who appear phenotypically ambiguous reported that others often attempt to ethnify them according to existing ‘racial’ categories, such as Chinese, Spanish or simply ‘gaijin’. As one participant stated, “I get mistaken for any culture really”.

Another major focus reported as an ethnifier was language. Although all of the participants were bilingual to varying degrees, they frequently reported that others used their linguistic competence to position them as different. The English language provides multi-ethnic Japanese with access to privileges outside the realm of most Japanese people’s experience, but also marginalized them as being other than ‘normal’ Japanese.

One participant, Nina, voiced this aspect of the multi-ethnic paradox with a phrase she had no doubt heard throughout her life, “*Haafu, ii na~*”. On the surface, such an utterance implies a sense of awe (*akogare*), but it also makes relevant the interactants’ ethnic identities. Many of the participants resented being typified as worldly or authoritative, especially when they hadn’t lived outside Japan or completely mastered English.

At the same time, they reported that Japanese people often discursively positioned them with non-Japanese (novice-like) attributes by assuming they do not have ordinary Japanese proficiencies, a process of cultural ethnification that Iino (1996) refers to as Gaijinization. During her focus group session Nina gave the following impromptu ‘performance’,

assembling a compilation of ethnic positionings she has heard from Japanese people throughout her life.

納豆食べるの? ああ偉いね。お箸使えるの、ああ! すしおいしいですか。フォークを用意しますか。

[“Oh you eat *natto*? What a good girl! And you can use chopsticks, wow! Do you like the taste of sushi? A fork? Can I get you a fork?”]

Nina’s performance succinctly indexes several of the key frames Japanese use to culturally ethnify non-Japanese as ‘other’. The language in which she voices it makes clear that she is quoting Japanese cultural scripts. Eating *natto* is an initiation ritual for foreigners in Japan, and can be used as an opportunity for Japanese to reconfirm the ‘gaijin’ status of the foreigner they are feeding it to (Iino, 1998). Many Japanese likewise assume that using chopsticks is difficult for non-Japanese and by expressing their amazement speakers ascribe a “gaijin” identity to the recipient and by implication, index their own Japaneseness. Any non-Japanese who has lived in Japan will be familiar with such ascriptions, but when they are directed at people like the participants, it means that multi-ethnic Japanese are being regarded with the same ‘novice’ status that Japanese reserve for outsiders.

### Summary

This section has provided a short introduction to the multi-ethnic paradox in Japanese contexts. Although it may appear uneasy and at times frustrating to those who have not lived it, the dynamic, fluid model of ‘*haafu*’ attempts to depict the constantly changing situated identity construction that encompasses the multi-ethnic Japanese experience.

### Study 2

#### *Discoursal Celebration of Multi-Ethnic Cultural Capital: Japanese-Caucasian Adolescent Girls in Japan*

While the study above looked at multi-ethnic late-adolescents attending an *international school*, this study looks longitudinally at six multi-ethnic early-adolescent girls (ages 12-15) who were all attending different *Japanese schools*. They are a group of best-friends, associated since birth through their foreign parents’ social network. While the broader study is based on data audio-recorded in discussions with the whole group, due to space limitations, the present paper will focus on just one segment of interaction between the researcher and one of the participants, Rina.

#### *Double Dominance*

This study examines how these girls, with their *double-dominance* (indigenous Japanese heritage *and* white-western heritage), construct and celebrate the self-enhancing notion of cultural capital. These girls stake claim to the dominant indigenous Japanese heritage and nationality with Japanese as their first language and the medium of instruction in their schools, socializing and enculturating them in Japanese history, customs, mores, and thought. Furthermore, these girls discursively celebrate their white-western heritage, which provides them with access to the high-status English language via their Caucasian parent who was born and raised in an economically and politically dominant western nation. To ‘act’ *discursively* refers to the functional use of written or spoken language that goes beyond the sentence

to accomplish actions with words; *discoursal* actions have a similar meaning, although this is tied more closely with the idea of using social discourses to position oneself and others.

These girls discursively celebrate their double dominance and (re)constitute “otherness” through their positioning within major discourses. Within Japan, an overarching *discourse of homogeneity* has been identified (Lie, 2001; Miller, 1982) which denies the existence of ethnic diversity. A prevalent essentialist view equates Japaneseness with nationality, language, race, ethnicity, and class (Kamada, 2004; Lie, 2001). Along with the dominant *discourse of homogeneity*, I would like to suggest that there is also a competing *discourse of diversity* struggling to be heard. Standing out as superior, creative or unique has recently come to be heard as *good* difference, allowing for the acceptance of diversity as enhancing and valuable. The sub-discourse of *interculturality*, assigns a high social value to people able to communicate with and understand peoples of other ‘different’ cultures beyond Japan.

The participants discursively construct for themselves the notion of cultural (cultural goods, services, educational credentials) and symbolic (legitimation) capital. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) view that these resources (including ‘economic capital’ [money, property] and ‘social capital’ [acquaintances, networks]), can be accumulated, invested, exchanged, exercised, and converted into other forms, I use one example to show how one of the girls, Rina, discursively constructs her own reservoir of *biliteracy* cultural capital in her self-enhancing racialization process in celebration of her multi-ethnicity.

### Rina (age 12)

- 01 L: but you do read? do you pick up English books sometimes and read them?
- 02 R: not SOMETIMES, I much prefer English books
- 03 L: do you?
- 04 R: to Japanese books
- 05 L: really? why?
- 06 R: somehow the Japanese books are very hard to get stuck into
- 07 L: just the, why? because of the content you mean?
- 08 R: content and how they have written the first page kind of counts too, it’s not that
- 09 L: literature, you can get a hold of better things, you think for young kids?
- 10 R: yeah, yeah because most of my books upstairs, I’ve got are English
- 11 L: kind of, what are some of your favorite things that you’ve read, that are English?
- 12 R: recently I’ve read a very interesting, I wouldn’t say it’s my favorite, but it’s not
- 13 meant to be a favorite, but it’s called, it’s a book called, um, “The Giver” by Lois
- 14 Lowry, Lowr, Lowry, I like her books
- 15 L: what’s it about?
- 16 R: oh, it’s very complex, but it’s about, it’s in the future, and, in this, and its, there is
- 17 this community and they are made all equal and um, they go through school until

- 18 twelve and then, after twelve, they're assigned their jobs or work, they still go to  
 19 school, but they go in their recreation time and free hours and to um, the jobs to  
 20 um, be taught, how to do  
 21 L: that sounds interesting, is that a new, is it recent?  
 22 R: I don't know if it's a new or very old book, but it's very difficult, and it's very  
 23 long, it's not LONG, but it's very complex and  
 24 L: uh-huh

Drawing on the discourse of interculturality, Rina emphasizes (line 2) that she *prefers* to read in English, discursively demonstrating pride in her possession of English literacy as cultural capital. Rina produces several adjectives regarding a book that she has recently read, which she uses to position herself as having acquired the highly-valued cultural resource of biliteracy. She also implicitly accredits herself with having acquired the ability to concentrate and persevere (lines 16, 23: *complex, long*) and the intellectual capacity to comprehend profundity (lines 22, 23: *difficult, complex*) through means of her learned ability to read in English.

Rina uses exaggeration to build up a colorful and rich version of reality, which she then retreats from (22-23), “and it’s very long. . . it’s not LONG, . . .”. The initial exaggeration acts as an embellishment, but Rina’s immediate retraction serves to maintain her credibility in front of her peers.

### Summary

In brief, it was shown, with Rina as an example, how these girls create positive capital for themselves based on their multi-ethnicity, including “taking control of” their multi-ethnic identities, in a self-enhancing celebration of their ‘difference’.

### Study 3

#### *Cross-cultural Encounters and Negotiation of Identity*

This section of the paper investigates how Japanese women married to English-speaking husbands develop and negotiate their identities in cross-cultural encounters, in order to foster a sense of positive personal identity. The data consist of narratives collected through life story interviews. The study adopts a social constructionist view of identity and makes use of intergroup theory in its analysis.

#### *Interaction with family members and studying English*

During the interviews, many of the Japanese women discussed their early motivations to attain English fluency in terms of concrete role models and real experiences with cultures in which English is spoken.

M: “I looked up to my aunt; she was fluent in English - on top of that she had the atmosphere of an American woman.”

M’s aunt was born in the Philippines and learned English there. After she returned to Japan, she worked as an interpreter at an American army base. M greatly respected her aunt and wanted to become a sophisticated woman, fluent in English like her aunt.

Y: “My father was very much interested in languages, but struggling to study French himself for his business. So he wanted to create a good environment for me to study English. He took me to various international events. So somehow I had an idea that I was going to become fluent in English and become a flight attendant or something.”

During the period of rapid economic growth in 1970’s Japan, business people started to realize the importance of foreign languages. Y attributes her father efforts in shaping her language proficiency to the consequent development of her internationalized identity.

Becoming a flight attendant was one of the most prestigious occupations for Japanese women at that time. One of the prerequisites for the job was high English proficiency. There were few higher status positions available for women, and jobs such as flight attendants or interpreters often required foreign language skills. A “wall” was created by Japanese male society in enforcing limitations on women in the business world.

M: “I admired Kumiko Torigai (one of the first conference interpreters in Japan), and I wanted to be like her.”

The other four participants also mentioned similar themes in which they identified with particular role models. They often made use of the Japanese word “*akogare*”, meaning “longing for” or “looking up to someone and wanting to be like that person”. According to their narratives, this sense of *akogare* gave the participants a strong motivation to learn English and its culture(s).

R: “I find it easier to say “no” in English. Japanese women, probably particularly middle-aged women, are not expected to express our feelings. So when I was studying English, I was told to say “Yes or no” clearly. Once I got used to saying “No”, it became a kind of really nice feeling for me.”

R thought that Japanese women were restricted in expressing their feelings and opinions straightforwardly, which she felt deprived her of the freedom to express herself. On the other hand, she got the impression that women’s discourse in English could give her the freedom to express herself.

Y: “When I returned from the States, I started working for a travel agency. My boss told me that my English was good, but that I should study Keigo and Japanese history more because I am Japanese. My interests had been in only American culture and English. I had completely ignored “Japan”.

As some of these extracts from the life story interviews show, the participants initially developed Western-influenced identities through their experiences of studying English, which they believed would be more positive. However, when they came back to Japan after spending time in English-speaking countries, they had to re-negotiate their identities to adjust to Japanese society again.

### Summary

We construct the various facets of our identities by interacting with other people. The participants in this study developed their social identities through interactions with

their family members and under various social influences. Far from being static constructs, their social identities are adaptive, negotiable and form constantly contested sites of struggle (Norton, 1995).

#### Study 4

#### *The Awareness and Development of Multi-identities in a Multilingual Child Living in Japan*

This section of the paper investigates multidimensional identities (hereafter multi-identities) through a case study of a trilingual child in Tokyo. Multilingual people possess complex multifaceted identities, which co-exist but can be fore-grounded and backgrounded according to shifting linguistic and social contexts. In order to depict these identities, the following typology was adopted as the framework for the case study:

- Group or social identity
- Ethnic identity
- Cultural identity
- Personal or individual identity
- Language identity
- Kinship and familial identity
- Nationality or national identity

Based on Seelye and Wasilewski (1996), the framework compiled by the author (Jie, 2001) includes aspects of identity in multi-cultural communication. It maintains that multiple types of identities exist in any individual and can

best describe the complexity of multilinguals' identities.

#### *The Case Study*

The participant, JJ, is a trilingual Singaporean (by nationality) Chinese (by ethnicity) boy (11:8) living in Tokyo. He is being brought up trilingually in Japanese, English and Mandarin. He arrived in Japan when he was two years old and studied in Japanese kindergartens and public schools for 7.5 years before transferring to an international school in Tokyo in 2003.

The study relies on qualitative data from several sources. JJ's mother kept a research diary in which she documented his multilingual and multicultural development since birth. She also occasionally audio-recorded conversations with JJ and held interviews with people around him, such as his teachers, his friends and their mothers. Some of JJ's comments, summarized in the following table, demonstrate his developing awareness of his multi-identities.

Table 1. Evidence of multiple facets of JJ's identity

Identity	Data	Age	Source
Social Identity	“Others will look at me if I speak English or Chinese.”	5	Diary
	“Mom, don’t talk to me in Chinese or English. It’s embarrassing.”	7	Recording
	[At a swimming school] “I don’t want to be looked at every time my name is called.”	10	Recording
Cultural Identity	“Japanese people don’t always have to say EVERYTHING. You got to watch and feel more. Not like Americans, I think.”	11	Diary
Language Identity	“Am I English if I speak English?”	5	Diary
	“Mom, why can I speak three languages?”	7	Recording
	“Shhh, let’s speak English. Nobody will understand us.”	8	Diary
Familial Identity	“You always tell me that I have to speak your languages! Sometimes I like it, but sometimes I don’t.”	9	Diary
	[Watching an Olympic match on TV] “Mummy, ご免ね [I’m sorry], I don’t support Chinese [national] team.”	11	Diary
Personal Identity	M: “JJ, Why do you like sushi so much?” JJ: “Cos I like it.” M: “Just that?” JJ: “Just that. It’s me. It’s MY style. I got to have sushi before and after an overseas trip, ね.” M: “Is it because you are quite Japanese?” JJ: “No. Don’t you think I eat sushi more than Japanese? It’s just ME, JJ.”	10	Diary
Ethnic Identity	“My friends said because you and dad are Chinese, I am Chinese. But I wasn’t born in China like you. Can I still be a Chinese?”	6	Diary
	“When I go to China or Singapore, I feel the same. Ha, ha, especially in the game centers. I feel like a real Chinese.”	8	Interview with Japanese friend’s mother

While there is insufficient space to deal with each of these comments in detail, I will offer the following observations in relation to each of JJ's multi-identities. Firstly, interaction within various social environments, including family and outside communities, helps form and shape individuals' social identities. Likewise, aspects of cultural behavior are manifested and made relevant through an individual's cultural identity. Even at a young age, JJ recognized the clash of cultures he occasionally felt in being a simultaneous member of more than one social group.

As the vehicle through which identities are chiefly expressed, language plays an important role in identity development. Numerous data have been collected concerning JJ's linguistic and social development, dating as young as 2 years old. His relative early awareness of this type of identity may suggest that being trilingual provided JJ with opportunities and stimuli to develop his language identity.

Perhaps the most significant social group for any child is the family. Familial identity examines how members of a family view themselves in relationships with other family members. Typically, children tend to ponder over the explicit and implicit expectations of their parents. Multilingual children often need to deal with their parents' expectations and "un-expectations" of language and cultural development in different languages as well as cultural contexts resulting from either their parents' language and cultural background or the relocation of their residence.

Whether multilingual or monolingual, everyone develops a personal identity. However, multilingual people often grow up amid challenging and/or confusing multiple ethnic, culture, language and national issues within families and

communities (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001). Ethnic identity here includes genetically inherited aspects of 'race'. Parents' ethnic backgrounds precondition aspects of their children's identity. Though this may seem like a rather simplistic observation on the surface, it is, in fact, a very complicated issue for multilinguals, as ethnicity is often interwoven with other types of identities. Multilinguals often inquire about their language and cultural identities because of their ethnicity, which may not necessarily be outwardly observable. JJ sometimes wondered about his language and cultural identities as he became aware of his ethnicity. Likewise, issues of citizenship can cause individuals to reflect on their national identities. As the number of people working, marrying and migrating overseas increases, the understanding of (and emotions attached to) the notion of nationality seem to be changing as well. For children like JJ who have lived with their parents in a supposedly foreign country for much longer than their "own" country, it is difficult to judge the level of their awareness and/or loyalty to the their so-called homeland.

### Summary

Although limited by space, this case study has sought to document aspects of the participant's multi-identities. The data seem to indicate that JJ's awareness of his multi-identities was formed through various situations in daily life (thus the context-specific nature) and developed through his behaviors or "acts of identity" in response to changing circumstances around him. It was evident that being trilingual and multi-cultural had greatly contributed to the complexity of his multi-identities.

## Conclusion

This collection of papers has aimed to explore the co-construction of identity in four different Japanese contexts. Throughout the studies, we have adopted a fluid, adaptive understanding of social constructs like ethnicity and “race”, in recognition that such notions are only significant to the extent that individuals make them relevant in conversation.

Language is the medium through which acts of identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) are most often invoked, ascribed and contested. Multiethnic people regularly accomplish their situated identities in two or more languages. We have noted instances in which multiethnic people in Japan use language to contest “gaijin” ascriptions from others, or to claim biliteracy as a cultural resource. We have seen how Japanese women’s notions of ethnicity have been renegotiated as they become proficient in English, and how a trilingual Chinese boy in Japan has developed a multi-faceted identity over time.

While necessarily brief, it is hoped these studies will act as a springboard for further research into the discursive construction of identity in multiethnic Japan.

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