

The Self-Perceived Identities of Adult Bilinguals raised in Japan

Amanda Taura & Sandra Healy

Abstract

This paper examines the identity of eight bilingual adults raised partly in Japan. Their rich narratives outline their feelings about their own appearance, the necessity to prove their own identity, their exclusion from the group or community, their position as a bridge between their two cultures, and some celebrations or adversities they have experienced within their two cultures.

Introduction

This case study seeks to examine eight life narratives written by adult Japanese-English bilingual and bicultural individuals to understand their self-perceived identities. They have all spent part of their life and education in Japan; however, some of them are now residing outside Japan and their length of time in Japan differs from person to person. Their stories show in a small way, how they perceive themselves and their experiences while growing up in Japan. This study does not seek to include large numbers of bilingual individuals, but rather concentrates on a small number of adults focusing on their stories in depth to identify common themes. Obtaining these personal stories from adult individuals was difficult due to the sensitive nature of their stories, and the busy schedule of their lives as working adults and it was difficult for them to choose to take the time to sit down and write a story. Though the number of individuals is small, the results show similar themes emerging which warrants trying to obtain a larger sample in the future. In addition, two of the individuals have a third culture which makes their feelings even more complex. The background information gathered from the individuals is included in the section on the participants. Real names are not used for the individuals. Rather they were asked to supply a preferred alias, and while some chose to use a first name different to their own, others chose to use initials. It was entirely their own choice. The aliases are used in the text here, when describing their narratives.

Being bicultural is not an unusual thing in Europe, where country borders are no longer barriers, and people travel freely around the continent as a whole. Even in the U.S. today, according to Benet-Martinez (2006) the 2002 U.S. Census found one in five people or 20% of the population has lived in another country prior to arriving in the U.S., which means that they are likely to be bicultural. In Japan, however, it is a different situation. Koyama and Okamoto (2010) state that the percentage of ethnic groups in Japan make up only 1.7% or around two million foreign nationals out of the total population of Japan; however identifying who has a bicultural or multi-ethnic background is problematic as shown with the census questionnaire in Japan. There is not one question that particularly asks for bicultural or multicultural background information. Everyone who has Japanese nationality is simply classified as Japanese, despite there being non-Japanese citizens who have chosen to be naturalized as Japanese citizens, particularly Korean and Chinese residents, or children born to families where one of their parents may be non-Japanese, and the other Japanese.

The offspring of a marriage with parents of a mixed cultural heritage may have two nationalities until the age of 22, but they are still classified as Japanese, even though their background is bicultural. The cultural background of these citizens of Japan is thus largely hidden. Bicultural identity is defined by Benet-Martinez (2003, p.1) in her psychological model as someone who has to 'integrate their different cultural identities...alternate between different cultural behavioral scripts, and...maintain competing loyalties between different ethnic/cultural groups. The success to which the two cultures are integrated helps to dispel tension and aids adjustment in the mainstream culture.' McCarty (2010, p.1) discusses the case in Japan of an international marriage between a Japanese and non-Japanese parent and the process that takes place within the family to create a bicultural environment. 'Languages actually used with the child also carry cultural meanings. In the case of an international marriage in Japan, if the mother or main caregiver is from a foreign culture and willingly bonds with the infant in her native language, then the child can naturally absorb two different cultures. Japanese culture emanates from the Japanese parent, the community, and mass media in any case.' The main caregiver can be the mother or the father, so this is not actually a gender issue, merely the fact that the parent who spends the most time with the child, will be able to pass on their culture and language more easily. McCarty also says that a bicultural person can perceive situations through both Japanese and their other culture's eyes and therefore have a choice in what action they take in certain situations. The early years in a bicultural child's life are important in establishing a positive attitude towards the second language and culture, which then enables the individual to be confident about their background. However, the child's attitude towards both cultures is ever-changing across the years, and varies greatly according to their age, the place or country where they are living, how they are perceived by those around them, and how comfortable they feel in the world they have created for themselves. The narratives that are told by individuals with a rich tapestry of different cultural heritages, are shaped by social, cultural and historical conventions. According to Pavlenko (2011) language may indeed shape the story that is being told. Murphy-Shigematsu (2012, p.217) describes narratives of mixed American-Asian heritage individuals, and explains the need to ask the following question about the stories that result. 'Who are we, and are we embracing the complexity of our experiences? We know that none of us really inherits the best of both worlds. We receive the best and we receive the worst. We attempt to find connections with all of our parts. We struggle for balance, strive for wholeness, and search for meaning in what we've been given.' He sees identity as crossing borders rather

than being confined or excluded within one culture, system or nation. So identity is about finding a balance. In researching the identity of individuals, the present researchers needed to understand their own experience and knowledge. The researchers were also an integral part of the process and their reflexivity was important. 'A researcher's background and position will affect the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions' (Malterud, 2001, p.483-484). Thus the background of the researchers in the present study was relevant to the narratives that were collected, in that we both have children who have bicultural Japanese-Australian / British identities. Narratives or autobiographies were chosen specifically to foreground an individual making sense of their own experience as well as introducing the complexity of their individual and social relationships. Pavlenko (2001) notes that narratives 'are unique and rich sources of information....It is possible that only personal narratives provide a glimpse into areas so private that they are rarely - if ever breached.' The close-up view of the participants was unique and private in the narratives that were collected and as Norton (2013) also mentions, much of the work on identity does actually focus on small data sets. Narratives were chosen to reveal the identity of the participants, and to examine what shared experiences they may have had growing up for a period of time in Japan with two cultures, and two languages. Sometimes positive, sometimes negative, the stories show a rainbow of different colored themes that resonate in similar ways.

The research question was as follows:

Research question 1:

What common themes were discovered in the narratives of the eight individuals?

Participants

Four female and four male bilingual / bicultural working adults aged between 23 and 33 years of age, were asked to write a narrative reflecting their identity as seen in their lives, in English or Japanese. Seven of the participants were unmarried and one married, but all individuals had no children of their own as yet. Three participants were based in Japan, while five had chosen to live and work outside Japan. All participants had mothers who were native speakers of English, and their fathers were all Japanese nationals. Japanese was the language that all participants mainly used with their siblings. All the individuals had spent part of their childhood years being educated and raised in Japan, and are identified as adults in Japan as they are over the age of majority. A brief description of their background data is included in Appendix 1.

Method

The narratives were read closely and the themes that arose were highlighted and cross-referenced. A number of common themes were identified as a result.

Materials

Bilingual Japanese and English guidelines were given to all the participants for their narrative contribution (see Appendix 2). The main purpose of the data gathering was to have the participants create a narrative about their own lives now that they had reached adulthood. They were asked to write their story about what they felt had shaped them and their identities. They could choose to write about their job or the society in which they are living at present and suggestions were given in the guidelines to this effect.

Results

Five common themes were highlighted in the narratives of the eight individuals. These were:

1. appearance
2. proof of being Japanese
3. exclusion from the group or community
4. bridging cultures and
5. celebrations or adversities of the two cultures.

Discussion

The quotations from the individuals in this study are produced in their original form from the narratives without any amendments. Although the grammar or spelling may be more conversational in some cases, the original language is maintained to remain true to the voices of the participants themselves.

Appearance was the first theme that was discussed in the narratives, because of the nature of Japan, a primarily homogeneous monolingual society where most Japanese people perceive themselves as having little racial diversity. Reiko (33) based in Japan, mentioned that 'I am bewildered when I get compliments of being very Japanese. As if my appearance deprives me of my ability to be Japanese.'

Naomi (33) who is now living in Australia also discussed appearance and how she felt less Australian due her Asian appearance - 'it does make me a little sad that to some, I will never be a real Australian.'

KT (27) who is based in Japan, but refers here to his visits to his other country, Australia, said 'Relating this back to being bicultural, when I am in Japan, no one ever sees me as Japanese. The best I get is, are you from Okinawa? When I'm in Australia, I look Asian. I am lost somewhere in the middle, never entirely on either side.' M (23) talks about her appearance and says that 'Ever since I was a little kid, I was aware that I looked different, more so in Japan than when I was in Australia. It brought the good and the bad, just like being taller or

shorter would have brought the same complications. It's a part of me now, a side of me that is a part of my identity.'

The second common theme that arose was that the storytellers thought that they continually had to prove their Japanese identity, despite having grown up in Japan, and having Japanese nationality. Other Japanese people outside their immediate family circle, questioned their right to own their Japanese heritage. This did not happen with their other nationality. Reiko (33) says 'And maybe, to be honest, a small part of me always has this urge to prove my Japanese-ness to other people. I sometimes catch myself carefully avoiding anything that make people assume that it's because of my cultural background when I am short of some knowledge or ability, or act in an inappropriate way. I'd rather be blamed being idle than being told, you are half so it's ok if you can't do it. That makes me angry.' Reiko (33) adds 'another reason was I wanted to prove that I was good as anybody else without relying on my English or mixed-cultural background. I thought that choosing to live in Japan and working in a domestic environment proved something.' When international sporting events take place in Japan, bicultural individuals are sometimes asked to take one side or the other to prove that they belong. KT (27) discussed the necessity to support both sides (Australia and Japan) when a football match is taking place and he is asked, 'which team are you siding on and the set response I give is, whichever side that's winning, but the team that I would probably support the most without any sort of reserve would consist of players who are both Australian and Japanese.'

Thirdly, exclusion from the community was seen in three of the narratives from the individuals who had chosen to base themselves in another country outside Japan. Marie (26) talks about 'the difficulties I faced as a child with respect to identity and belonging are still a small a part of me, but it does not dominate who I am today. Those difficult days helped me accept that I was different, as every child is, made me more open to people with different ideas, and sensitive to those who feel excluded.' Marie chose to see the adversities she had faced as part of her character strengths in her adult self. Tomo (26) noticed that 'there was always an invisible line between them (Japanese people) and myself', and thus chose to base himself in the U.S. away from curious eyes - 'another thing I never got used to was being looked at with curiosity all the time wherever I went.' When he moved to the U.S., Tomo did not feel the same judgements were made about his behavior nor did he feel different to the American friends that he made. He felt as though he was more of a part of the groups that he joined. He felt pressured in Japan and tried not to worry about his feelings of alienness but in

the end, he chose to leave Japan - 'So with all of that I learned to ignore a lot of things so that it would bother me less which now that I'm thinking back that was probably building up as some kind of stress in me'. His brother, Masa (23) also found due to bullying in the Japanese school system, that he felt excluded and left Japan for the U.S. even before finishing high school. He says that 'I had to go to American high school because I didn't have a place in Japanese high school.' He adds, 'I had a few incidents with the kids and teachers about my learning style and also about being a half', while attending school in Japan. Similar to his brother, Masa also has left Japan because of the lack of belonging - 'I went to school in Japan from kindergarten to my second year of high school. In all of those days and years, I only can count two or three good years. The majority of my school experiences were extremely harsh.' Even though Masa is now living in the U.S. on his own, he sees his negative experience in Japan as the catalyst that propelled him into a better life - 'It's tough living alone, as you have to do everything and sometimes gets lonely but it's also fun. I'm glad I could live in the U.S. Now I have a good life. As I look back, I want to say thank you to the teachers that made my life miserable because if they hadn't done such a good job, I'm sure I would still be in Japan, and be in a miserable environment trying to survive. So thank you to all.'

The next theme was bridging cultures, and this was sometimes referred to by the participants as being positive but at other times as a negative feature of their bicultural background. Naomi (33) was a national of two countries, Korea and Australia but grew up in Japan using mainly two languages, Japanese and English. She said that 'I was born with three cultures. While I think I've adjusted relatively well, I still think that it's still quite difficult for me to have a sense of belonging (in Australia)'. Joseph (25), Naomi's brother, who also lived and underwent education in Japan and Australia with English and Japanese as his dominant languages seems to have reached an acceptance of the differences in a positive way and says that 'by having a multi culture lifestyle when growing up and being able to have the understanding that there's always gonna be a difference in between cultures I've learned to never compare or judge between the two (cultures)'. KT (27) entitled his story *Middleman* because he sees his role in his job (interpreter/translator) and his bicultural identity as positioning him in the role of middleman. In his words, 'I find myself arbitrating contentions that arise from a language or cultural difference and I am lost somewhere in the middle, never entirely on either side.'

The fifth and final theme that was illuminated showed the celebrations or indeed the opposite of the coin, the adversities of the two cultures. Individuals with two cultures, can

benefit from double celebrations of traditions, a greater variety of foods, and Christmas followed by New Year, both of which are celebrated to a high degree in English-speaking countries and Japan respectively. Thus Reiko (33) referred to some rosy memories of her childhood when the traditions from both her cultures were enjoyed. 'At home, my family had our very own mixed-style way of life. Everyday meals (always handmade) were basically Japanese, and sometimes American or English or Mexican or whatever. We would do Christmas dinner inviting family friends, always my mother preparing a whole turkey with stuffing and an English style pudding. OK, I admit Christmas pudding is not all that popular, and I seemed to be the only one enjoying it, but still it gave a nice Christmasee feeling right? And a week later, we will be having Japanese style New Year's *Ozoni* and *Osechi* and we were off to see our family in Osaka.' However sometimes in the English-speaking country, rather than a celebration, having the two cultures and languages brings difficulties and problems with monolingual grandparents who have no idea about speaking anything but English. KT at age 9 recalled using Japanese to talk to his sister at a mealtime and his Australian grandmother getting angry. 'The lesson I learned then was that I need to be conscious of who is sitting at the table, what language they can speak, and to avoid speaking the language they cannot speak.' Language caused a barrier that made KT more sensitive to his surroundings but also made him feel outside the norm. It is not always a celebration.

The participants perceived themselves and their identity in different ways. Reiko (33) said positively that 'I consider myself culturally 100% Japanese+35% American and 5% English. I am 140%!' Naomi (33) despite feeling that she is not identified as being Australian by others in Australia, reveals that 'after almost 20 years in Australia, I identify myself as an Australian the most. I am however, proud of my international and bilingual upbringing.' M (23) based in Japan, and making her living as a graphic designer discusses her identity as an advantage. 'Having two nationalities has helped me have a different look of things, a broader sight, allowing me to be more creative in the eyes of my colleagues. I didn't know this until my boss told me, and I will now use this as my weapon.' She has realized that her two nationalities are a bonus - an ace that she can pull out of her sleeve to help her improve the opportunities that are available to her. 'I never used to like the fact I was different, but I can't do anything about it so I live with it. And I've got a dream of moving to Australia. My two nationalities let me go so many places, and I have so many chances ahead which gives me a bigger and stronger dream - to move to Australia in the future.' KT (27) explains that 'experiencing two codes at the same time means direct visibility of especially the

discrepancies between them, which tend to be more conspicuous than the similarities, and such access has in my case, lead me towards being more the critic not the poet, since I need to be mindful of two sets of rules.' He was very sensitive to the fact that he is balancing between the two cultures.

Conclusion

The research question asked, 'What common themes were discovered in the narratives of the eight individuals?' The common themes noted in this paper included appearance, proof of being Japanese, exclusion from the group or community, being a cultural bridge and celebrations or adversities within the two cultures. The project is still ongoing and we are trying to collect other personal narratives to broaden the information base. Each participant felt that having two languages gave them two different choices, and they were able to take advantage of their double cultural heritage either for their job in Japan, or to seek a life in another country. Three of the participants living in Japan felt that they belonged in Japan, while the remaining five had chosen to live and work in an English-speaking country and perhaps it may be easier for them to make a life in a country where they do not stand out or are not pointed out as being different, but this was not necessarily mentioned by the individuals themselves in their narratives, and is a suggestion by the present researchers. The participants felt a sense of belonging to both their cultures and were mindful of their role as a bridge between their two cultures but they sometimes appeared to be sensitive to the fact that while they belonged to both cultures, Japan was a place where they sometimes did not feel one hundred percent confident of their identity. It is very difficult to get people to tell their stories, but once they have, their position was mainly positive. Adults with a bilingual or bicultural background have many stories to tell, and these stories could be inspirational or educational for younger bilingual/bicultural children growing up now in Japan. The stories do not all have a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, but this adds depth to the concept of identity. The happy episodes within the stories could also empower the storytellers and give them hope.

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Appendix 1 - Background data of the participants

Alias	Age/Sex	Partner	Kids	Born	Countries	Language of partner
Marie	26/F	Yes	No	Japan	Japan/US	-
Reiko	33/F	No	No	Japan	Japan/US	-
Naomi	33/F	Yes	No	Japan	Grew up in Japan/Korea/Australia	English
M	23/F	Yes	No	Japan	Japan/Australia	Japanese
Masa	23/M	No	No	Japan	Japan/US	-
Tomo	26/M	No	No	Japan	Japan/US	-
Joseph	25/M	No	No	Japan	Grew up in Japan/Korea/Australia	-
KT	27/M	Yes	No	Japan	Japan/Australia	Japanese

Alias	Languages of Parents	Languages Between siblings	Job	Where based now	Happiness level	Satisfaction with life level
Marie	Mother-E Father-J	E 40% J 60%	Researcher	Japan	8	8
Reiko	Mother-E Father-J	100% J	Law Firm Admin.	Tokyo	6	7
Naomi	Mother-E Father-J	E 40% J 60%	Australian public servant	Canberra, Australia	7	9
M	Mother-E Father-J	J	Graphic designer	Osaka	7	8
Masa	Mother-E Father-J	J	Woodcraftsman	Seattle, US	7	9
Tomo	Mother-E Father-J	J	Trucking Owner Operator	Washington US	10	10
Joseph	Mother-E Father-J	E & J	Senior Consultant	Mumbai India	6	7
KT	Mother-E Father-J	J	Translator/Interpreter	Osaka	4	6

Alias	Religion	Education Pre-school	Education Primary	Education Secondary	Education Tertiary
Marie	?	J-local	J-local	Australia - 6 years	USA BA
Reiko	None	10 months UK and J respectively	J-local	J-local	Japan BA
Naomi	Catholic	J- local Catholic	J-local	J-local 1 year Australia 5 years	Australia BA
M	None	J-local 1 year Australia	J-local 5yrs/ 8 months Australia	J International 6 years	Japan BA
Masa	Christian	J- local	J-local	J-local 4 years US-2 years	N/A
Tomo	Christian	J-local	J-local	J-local	N/A
Joseph	Catholic	J-local	J-local 4years Australia 2 years	Australia 6 years	Australia BA
KT	None	J-local Internation-al school Osaka, 1yr	J-local 5 years Australia - 1 year	J International 5 yrs Australia 1 year	Japan BA

Appendix 2 - Bilingual Questionnaire given to the participants

What to do about your story / 物語のためにしてほしいこと

Please tell us a story about you as an adult now. It could be a story about what has shaped you and created your own identity. It could be a story about your family and how you relate to them as an adult. It could be a story about your job and the society in which you are living now.

今から大人としてのあなたについての物語を語ってください。あなたのアイデンティティを作ったものや、あなた自身を形成したものについての話でもかまいません。家族のことや、一人の大人としてどのように家族と関わっているかということでもいいでしょう。現在の仕事や暮らしている社会のことでもかまいません。

In addition we asked for some additional background information from the participants.

One word to describe you / あなたのことを一言で言うと

Age / 年齢

Country where you were born / 生まれた国

Your countries: Japan and ____ / あなたの国: 日本と__

Languages (spoken, written) used at home with spouse, parents, brothers, sisters. You can use percentages too to indicate a mixture of usage of languages too. / 配偶者、親、兄弟と使う言語は何ですか。複数の言語を何パーセントずつ使うか分けて記述しても構いません。

With Spouse / パートナーと

With Parents / 親と

With Brothers or Sisters / 兄弟姉妹と

Job / 職業

Where are you based for your job? (city, country) / 仕事の拠点にしている国、都市

Happiness level about job? (1 to 10, 1 being least happy) / 仕事についての幸福度(1-10、1が最も幸福ではない)

Happiness level about your life in general? (1 to 10, 1 being least happy) / 人生一般での幸福度(1-10、1が最も幸福ではない)

Countries where your parents were born / 両親の生まれた国

Countries where your grandparents were born / 祖父母の生まれた国

Religion(s) you were brought up in / 育った時の宗教

Educational background - Names of Schools / where / types / length of time / Languages used / 教育的背景、学校名、場所、種類、期間、使用言語

Partner if applicable - nationality, gender, age, languages spoken between you. Please write 'no partner' if you do not have one at present. / (該当すれば) パートナー: 国籍、性別、年齢、あなたとの間で使う言語。もし現在いなければ「いない」と記述してください。

Children if applicable - nationality, gender, age, languages spoken. Please write 'no children' if you have none at present. / (該当すれば) 子供: 国籍、性別、年齢、言語。もしいなければ「いない」と記述してください。

Interests now / 現在の興味

Interests when you were younger / 若かったころの興味

What you wanted to "be" when you were a child / 子供の頃なりたかったもの

Your passion / 熱中しているもの