

論 文

Raising children between cultures: a small-scale study of three intercultural families in Japan

崎 ミチ・アン

同志社女子大学・表象文化学部・英語英文学科・准教授

Michi Ann SAKI

Department of English, Faculty of Culture and Representation,
Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts, Associate professor

Abstract

The purpose of this small-scale study was to analyze the experiences of transcultural parenting to determine some of the current trends and challenges of parenting interculturally in Japan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three intercultural parents in Japan. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data and understand the meanings of the participants' experiences. The findings revealed that not only were participants' cultural backgrounds influential, but systemic and contextual factors also impacted the way parents raised their children. Discoveries also included common benefits and opportunities of intercultural parenting as a source of strength rather than a weakness. Findings have also identified that intercultural parents provide their children with a sense of belonging to a richer, evolving multicultural world both inside and outside Japan. The current study aimed to explore the experiences of intercultural parents from a strengths-based perspective. This study, therefore, focused on the transformations derived from intercultural parenting and proposes advice for intercultural couples, based on findings of a qualitative study of the experiences of intercultural parents in Japan. It is the hopes of the researcher that the narratives in this study will generate helpful advice for current and future intercultural couples and parents in Japan.

Keywords: ethnic diversity, intercultural/transcultural families, multicultural parenting, intercultural awareness, community support

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Introduction

Intercultural couples raising families in Japan

The impact of increased ethnic diversity in Japan has attracted considerable attention in the field of multicultural studies in Japan, with rapidly changing demographics, social structures and ideologies as a result of the growth of immigration in the country and worldwide. Immigration and its outcomes have also initiated a new trend towards an increase in intercultural marriages in Japan. In particular, the increase in the number of families with multicultural backgrounds in Japan has been the focus of much research in recent years. Raising children transculturally, which adds several new dimensions to the dynamics of parenting, can be challenging for multicultural families. Consequently, the intercultural parenting experience is emerging as an important issue in Japanese society.

Japan can be a challenging country for intercultural couples to raise their families. Despite the number of multicultural families steadily increasing in past years, statistically they are still quite low. Survey data from 2016 shows that approximately 2% of all births in Japan were to a family with one non-Japanese parent, roughly divided between foreign fathers and foreign mothers (E-stat, 2017, cited by Koide, Yoshida et al. 2019). Japan, has never been a truly homogeneous nation; the Ainu, the Okinawans, the Burakumin, the Chinese, the Koreans, and the Brazilian Nikkeijin, are just some examples of minority

groups that have a long history of existence in Japan (Kirsch, 2018). Though recent changes to Japanese immigration policy is resulting in a more ethnically diverse Japan, intercultural families are still far less visible than the mainstream homogeneous families in Japanese society. Silva, Campbell, and Wright (2012) mention that “because little is known about the everyday reality of intercultural couples and how they celebrate and cope with their differences, qualitative investigations are needed” (p. 867). Previous research (Kuramoto, Koide, Yoshida, and Ogawa, 2017) suggests that challenges exist for these diverse parents who are raising children in Japan. Some studies have examined the identity development of their children often focusing on combinations of couples those who lived in particular areas of Japan. Kuramoto, et al., (2017) analyzed data obtained from 158 respondents across Japan looking at the parents’ experiences raising multicultural children in Japan and their feelings regarding their children’s identities. They discovered that the experiences of these families were characterized by a continuing negotiation between society, children, and their parents. This small-scale study seeks to explore just a few of the trends and challenges experienced by three intercultural parents in a particular city in Japan. The author hopes that this research will provide parents, researchers and anyone supporting multicultural children and their families with an understanding of some of the issues experienced by intercultural parents who are raising their children in a country

that continues to largely maintain a homogeneous culture and strong conformist mindset.

Terms and definitions

Culture is defined as a unique set of customs, languages, religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours shared by a group of people and passed on from generation to generation (Sodowsky et al., 1991, Nakazawa, 2004). The term *intercultural* refers to the interactions between members of different cultures and encompasses the different notions of ethnic, interethnic, racial, interracial, religious, interfaith and national dynamics (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Crippen and Brew (2007) define *intercultural* as relating to bringing together or the meeting of two different cultural backgrounds into one relationship. The author would like to use these two researchers' definition of *intercultural*, and also of *bicultural* or *multicultural* when referring to their children in this article. The term *transcultural* represents the new family culture that is created when the cultures of two people from different backgrounds intersect to form a new culture (p.107). Intercultural couples can be defined as adults in a relationship from different cultural backgrounds, with differences in race, nationality, religion, ethnicity and language (Sullivan and Cottone, 2006). Intercultural parents may be referred to as two intercultural adults in a relationship who are raising children together (Perel, 2000).

Raising children interculturally

Many parents face some challenges

in their parenting practices, but for intercultural parents, they need to address additional challenges as a result of cultural conflicts over parenting (Bratawidjaja, 2007; Crippen, 2008; Singla, 2015). Sources of conflict include the parents' norms, values, and their own ideas of the cultural and racial identity of their children, as well as their and social and family attitudes towards children (Bhugra and de Silva,; Killian,; Mc Fadden and Moore, 2001).

Although conflicts occur in all relationships, the challenges are exacerbated for intercultural couples because of cultural differences and societal assumptions regarding intercultural relationships (McFadden, 2001; Moffitt, 2012). Common concerns in intercultural relationships involve: values, gender, religion, childrearing, money, sexuality, social class and language (Frame, 2004). Other factors that can impact on the success or failure of the intercultural relationship depend significantly on the internal and external environment of the couples, including ethnic, social, political and economic conditions.

Other challenges for intercultural couples are described as social attitudes towards intercultural partnerships, ranging from encouragement and acceptance, to hostility and intolerance (Bhugra, 2017). Studies on the social attitudes of intercultural couples cover issues such as: non-acceptance from families and problems of adjustment in communities and communication barriers (McFadden and Moore, 2001).

Negotiating cultural differences in the family

When an intercultural family residing in Japan has one Japanese parent and one non-Japanese parent, negotiating cultural differences with regards to child-rearing can be complex (Koide et al., 2019). For many multicultural families, negotiating their inner most cultural differences becomes even more challenging in a society that values blending in and conformity. All couples enter marriages with different life experiences, but multicultural couples have additional factors they must deal with. Coping with cultural and linguistic differences can add nuanced issues that run deep into the inner fabric of one's identity. As both parents adapt to each other's culture to some degree, biculturalism may be achieved. Biculturalism aides in one's understanding when interacting with people from different cultural contexts, but it sometimes leads to inner stress when trying to meet the expectations of one culture over the other (Koide et al, 2017). Intercultural couples are often faced with the challenge as to how they can blend their cultural backgrounds in raising their child, and which societal values and knowledge they should draw on in socializing their child (Nitta, 1992). A study of nine partnerships between Japanese and non-Japanese couples by Yamamoto (2010) found that culture influenced child-raising practices in the areas of discipline, fostering dependence vs. independence, and division of labor within the home. As the husband and

wife become parents, they create a new family identity from two clearly different cultural backgrounds. Each person's unique perspective is shaped from a multitude of factors on both the macro and micro levels which leads to variance in perceptions (Luke & Luke, 1998; Koide et al. 2019)

Methodology

Interview questions

This study aimed to to examine the trends and challenges of transcultural parenting by conducting interviews with intercultural parents. The following four questions were asked to the participants:

1. What ways are you currently raising your children interculturally in Japan? (*For example, speaking only your mother tongue to your child, speaking two languages at home, raising your children in both cultures at home, introducing your culture's food, music, etc. to your child*).
2. What things (*such as your current living environment, your current circumstances, your present living situation, your local community, your child's local school community, your family or spouse, etc*) make it difficult for you to raise your children the way that you want to interculturally?
3. What types of support networks do you have around you to help you raise your children interculturally? (*for example, relatives, friends, local community, local international centers, etc*)

4. What types of things (*such as public services, support groups, parent networks, etc.*) would help you feel more supported and empowered to raise your children more interculturally in Japan?

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an open framework allowing for a more focused conversation that encouraged two-way communication. The interviewer sent the three interview questions before the scheduled interview as well as a consent letter outlining and the purpose and procedure of the interview, as well as explaining the expectations and rights of the interview participants. The interviewer asked the questions to the participants while expanding on relevant themes as they arose. Some of the topics covered were language practices in the home, children's

education, support from friends and family, children's identity and support groups in their community. Parents also talked about the challenges and concerns faced by the parents raising their children in Japan and within the particular city where they lived. This type of qualitative research method was employed to uncover rich, descriptive data of the personal experiences of parents. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Japanese and English, depending on the respondents' preferences and lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes.

Participants

Three parents from a range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds participated in the study. Table 1 provides a demographic profile of the participants, summarized as follows: age of parents ranged between 35 to 50 years;

Table 1 Demographic profile of interview participants

Participant's Name	Age	Nationality	Language spoken	Total number of years living in Japan	Nationality of partner	Number of children	Ages of children
Jeff	35	American	English, Japanese	5 years	Japanese	2	6 and 2
Ami	30	Japanese	English, Japanese	10 years ¹⁾ (in Canada)	Canadian ²⁾	1	6
Lucas	48	Brazilian	Portuguese, Japanese, English	4 years ³⁾	Japanese	2	7 and 11

- 1) Ami lived in Canada for 10 years before returning to Japan to give birth to her child and raise her family.
- 2) Though Ami and her husband are separated, the father meets with his child twice a month.
- 3) Lucas lived in Japan for 3 years fifteen years ago, and decided just recently to return to Japan for work and to raise his family.

married between 2 and 12 years; had between 1-2 children aged between 2 years and 13 years old; education ranging from nursery to junior high school level and self-identified cultural and ethnic backgrounds including Japanese, Canadian, South American and North American.

Analysis

The narratives in this study demonstrated that intercultural couples succeeded in their relationships and parenting roles as a result of both individual and joint characteristics. Based on their responses from the interviews, the following themes emerged: the importance of having a “plan” to negotiate between which cultures to place priority on inside and outside the home; creating a family language policy; preparedness for minority feelings in helping children to cope with future feelings of “being different”; the importance of moral support from friends, family and the Japanese community. It should be noted that pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy of the interview participants.

Having a “plan”: creating a family language policy

According to the participants, all intercultural couples already had or were starting to make a plan, interpreted by some sort of ‘constitution’, or a ‘set standard’ in deciding how they were to raise their children transculturally. Couples discussed and agreed on how they are going to negotiate and manage their cultural differences in terms of their relationship and parenting approaches

and practices. Lucas (Brazilian) and his wife (Japanese) developed an educational plan to make sure that their children were to be accepted in Japanese society, while at the same time to be well equipped with the tools needed to succeed as global citizens their futures. Both of their children speak Portuguese, Japanese and English, as well as taking lessons in the French and German outside of school. As Lucas explained:

Because especially my wife, she thinks that our kids will not be 100% Japanese. If they tried so, maybe they can get a little frustrated in the future, especially when they are teenagers or adults. Then, she thought that by having some great differentiation from the Japanese kids and adults in language skills, it would be very good. They would be in a very good position to be accepted by the Japanese society and by the Japanese companies that like people having foreign language skills to work in Japan. (Lucas)

Jeff (American) and his wife (Japanese) talked about their policy of speaking English at home and Japanese outside of the home and express his contentment by seeing the advantages of this type of family policy:

We are raising our children, I guess, bilingually. At home, I mean, they speak only to me in only English. Also, my wife is Japanese, but at home, she also speaks about 90% English to them. To me, 100% English

and to them, also mostly English at home. They get, I think, enough Japanese by going to (daycare) or when they see either grandparents or their friends outside of our household. Outside, it's all Japanese, and inside it's almost all English, including like what's on the TV or what music we listen to, it's mostly English....like recently, we just came back from America, so of course, that was all English for my son. He had no problem to talk to my family in America.....I guess (I was) happily surprised about (it) because usually it's just me or just my wife he's talking to....

Support

All three parents talked about receiving support (or lack of) from friends, family and outside sources such as grassroots organizations and government-affiliated support agencies. Receiving sufficient support from family members is well reflected in Jeff's narrative when he responds to the question about the support his family receives from his in-laws in raising their children multiculturally.

Well, I think both sets of our parents are very helpful...think all four of our parents never had a passport or never left their home country, but they are very supportive of our relationship and supporting our children together....I think it helps that we agree (about how we raise our children interculturally). (Jeff)

However is Ami's narrative, she talks about needing more cooperation from her ex-partner in order to raise their daughter bilingually:

(Her father) is supposed to do it but he doesn't do it. I think he is trying to, but I don't see that he has tried so much. I suggested a lot of things like for learning English in Japan, one has to have extra education, so going to a private school, international school. I need support from my ex-husband to give her that extra education. I told him before many times, but then he doesn't really understand, I don't know why. That's kind of the difficulty that I am having to give her that environment...(Ami)

Crippen & Brew (2007) argue that intercultural couples have a higher probability than same-culture couples to encounter differences in parenting beliefs and practices, based on their respective cultural backgrounds, values and worldview. (p.111). Situations such as Ami's is not uncommon, where one parent does not receive sufficient childrearing support from the other due to conflicting beliefs and values. Ami's case further proves the need for parents of transcultural families to continue negotiating and reconciling conflicts in different beliefs and practices towards their styles of parenting.

Awareness of multicultural families

Participants talked about the issue of overall awareness of multicultural families in Japan and the lack of

awareness in their own communities. Jeff talks about his concerns when his children enter a Japanese public elementary school and what he sees as the current mindset of mainstream Japanese:

Right now, (the) hoikuen teachers themselves, and I guess most of the parents too are very open-minded, and there are a few other foreign kids or other kids who have a foreign parent, but I am worried about like once he goes to elementary school, I think this Japanese school culture is a lot different from where I grew up. I think, for example, when I was doing teacher training in America, we were trained to accommodate some immigrant parents and do our best to adjust our style for them, but I think in Japan, I mean I am not sure because I haven't started yet, but from what I have heard from other people, I think there is a really big expectation that you have to assimilate and you have to conform and it's your duty. I understand that. I think a parent should bear some responsibility to take care of the situation where the children are in, but I also think that in this globalized society, teacher training needs to also start to involve supporting parents that aren't from here.

Jeff goes on to express his feelings of isolation but also the support he feels from fellow parents who are raising intercultural families:

I mean, I have friends who are English, also English teachers who are maybe like from America or from Britain and they have a Japanese spouse, whether they are a husband or a wife. We also have friends. One of my wife's best friends, she is Japanese, but her mom is from California. She grew up in a similar situation as our kids. She knows what it's like to grow up as half Japanese and seen as half Japanese, even though you lived in Japan your whole life. She also has a daughter with her husband who is from Hawaii, so they are also an international family. I think it helps to have friends who you already have something in common with.

All participants emphasized the importance of local support groups in their community, from being friends with neighboring intercultural families to grassroots support organisations and government-affiliated international exchange agencies. Ami talks about the kind of support she receives from friends, family, a local grassroots organization and a parents' group on social media:

My family and friend network....and mostly, (a grassroots support group for multicultural families) have been really helpful....I think the Facebook group, the Kansai Kids network helps a lot. I think around last year when I was looking for a new house or apartment, I posted in the group asking if there is any public elementary school where there are many multicultural kids, diverse kids in the public school, and

then the people were really posting and they told me like this school really has five kids in one grade and then another local school in the city even has a Japanese language class. I was also surprised. I hadn't heard of it until that time. (Ami)

Discussion

This study demonstrated that the experiences of intercultural parents. While some experienced little to no difficulty in their current situations, others experienced additional challenges based on their personal circumstances and environments. In an effort to minimize conflicts in their parental roles, intercultural parents developed expertise in cultural negotiations, thus characterizing their experiences from a strengths-based perspective, rather than on the basis of stereotyped deficit assumptions. The coping strategies they had developed from their actual experiences of parenting were offered as advice for current and future intercultural couples and parents. The advice was organized by the researcher according to a systems approach, into advice pertaining to the individual, couple/parent and child's spheres.

Implications for future research

This study revealed only some of the rich experiences of intercultural couples that may contribute to insights about the current issues of transcultural families and ideas for future research. Although the descriptions of intercultural parenting experiences offered in this study cannot be generalized due to the very small

sample size, practitioners and researchers may find it useful to evaluate whether the findings on intercultural parenting practices may be applied in other contexts where intercultural parents seek help regarding their parenting dilemmas.

Some emergent findings in this study suggest perspectives on intercultural parenting that invite further exploration: power dynamics; internal and external contexts; support from local organizations; and benefits and opportunities of intercultural parenting.

Conclusion

This present study revealed that intercultural parenting was influenced by the interplay of internal and external contexts. For example, the internal context related to the perceptions of individual, couple, child, family and ethnic identity. The external context related to outside factors such as attitudes of the children's school, extended family members and local community. This study revealed that the internal and external domains of family dynamics can often be the source of stressors that impact negatively on couples and parenting. It is, therefore, crucial for schools, city governmental offices, and the local community to be aware of the internal and external context and sources in their relationships and communication with these families.

It is important that educators (boards of education, school senior leadership and teachers) prefectural and municipal government agencies and the local mainstream Japanese community are aware that the pressing concerns by

intercultural couples are closely related to the assurance of such issues as safety, health, education and socialization processes. Therefore the provision of services and interventions should address contextual needs as a whole, as opposed to only the intercultural aspects. Both the Japanese and non-Japanese community need to be aware of their own biases and prior assumptions about intercultural relationships, parenting and ethnically diverse families, and instead promote notions of adaptability, flexibility, tolerance, appreciation, acceptance and open-mindedness; and emphasize the strengths and benefits of interculturality.

Most importantly, the findings of this study showed that intercultural parents and children enjoyed many benefits and opportunities, rather than only challenges, in managing issues and relationships that arose. When addressing challenges presented to them by intercultural couple or parents, counsellors and therapists can rely on these benefits and opportunities as sources of strength in the relationship, in order to encourage, enrich and empower their clients.

Japan is an increasingly multicultural society with very limited research on the experience of intercultural parenting. This phenomenon needs to be further researched in both the Japanese and worldwide contexts. The findings in this study can be utilised as a platform by researchers to increase their understanding of intercultural relationships and intercultural parenting in particular. This study may also serve as a helpful resource for schools who are wishing to encourage a multicultural mindset among

their student population, as well as both government/non-governmental affiliated support organizations in order to help them understand the issues faced by intercultural families and to develop services and programs to support them.

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