

Identity Formation of Mixed-Race Children in Japan

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Abstract : This study investigates the identity formation of mixed-race children in Japan. From the latter half of the 1980s to the mid-2000s, Japan experienced an 'intermarriage boom,' which was soon followed by a fairly significant number of children born to these unions. These children are now coming of age. Among mixed-race children, some embraced both cultural traditions, while others chose a monocultural path despite exposure to two cultural traditions as they grew up. What factors are involved in shaping the identity of mixed-race children? How does identity formation actually occur in these children? This study addresses these questions through an interview survey of 139 cross-cultural families since 1999, including 23 Pakistani-Japanese families, 20 Turkish-Japanese families, 26 families comprising other international Muslim husbands and Japanese wives, 33 Filipino-Japanese families, and 37 Brazilian-Japanese families. The results of this two-decade-long study reveal that in cases where one cannot tell at first glance that children are mixed race, there is a tendency for them to hide their mixed background due to fear of bullying at school, as well as for their parents to encourage them to do this. To pass as a Japanese is one strategy for avoiding discrimination and prejudice, and it can provide a measure of ethnic security or a way of coping with social intolerance. Certainly, among my informants, there are some children who were bullied or teased at school, and as a result, they stopped attending or transferred to other schools. But the mixed-race experience is not always a negative thing in Japan. There is clearly a double standard involved in that mixed-race children of a Caucasian parent are more readily accepted by society than those of a non-Caucasian parent. The perceived social status of mixed-race individuals is usually understood in relation to the hierarchical positionings of monoracial groups. Mixed-race children could be guaranteed the right to enjoy the benefit of maintaining and developing an identity as a Japanese, in addition to one more identity. We need to encourage a new awareness of the children as agents for a transition from a monocultural system to a multicultural system in Japanese society.

Keywords : identity formation, intermarriage, mixed race, multicultural children

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