Negotiating a Multicultural Identity in Monocultural South Korea: Stigma and the Pressure to Racially “Pass”

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the ways in which stigma affects the identity negotiation of multicultural youth residing in South Korea. Studies report that Koreans hold an unfavorable view of people from Southeast Asia and Japan. Accordingly, Korean-born multicultural children with a Southeast Asian or Japanese ethnic background inherit the stigma ascribed to their parents and must negotiate their ethnic identities amidst stigma and homogeneity. This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the ways in which participants feel pressure to racially “pass” or solely identify as ethnic Koreans because of the stigma affixed to their ethnic minority identity. Results show that though Southeast Asian-Koreans and Japanese-Koreans experience similar forms of stigmatization and discrimination, most of the Southeast Asian-Korean participants racially identify as Korean while Japanese-Koreans primarily adopt a multicultural identity. Possible reasons for the disparity in racial identification are provided as well as implications for future research.

Keywords: multicultural identity, stigma, ethnic pride, peer alienation, discrimination

“It is in the mind of the marginal man…that we can best study the processes of civilization and of progress.” - Robert Park (1928)

Introduction

As globalization advanced, various international migrants emerged and gained considerable attention (Yamanaka and Piper 2005; Soysal 2012). While previous studies examined the factors responsible for the flow of international migrants, subsequent studies went on to address the living conditions and daily experiences of immigrants (Kagan et al. 2011; Garner and Miller 2008). Though scholars equally stressed the cause of migration and increased need for entitlements, the second research tradition progressively grew salient, producing a rich set of research endeavors (Kim 2013).

Rapid globalization forced East Asian countries to address many issues regarding the incorporation of international migrants. In particular, South Korea—a major economic power in the region—accepted numerous immigrants as guest workers, marriage migrants, and refugees in an effort to accelerate its economic
development and remain a mid-power nation. Specifically, the number of marriage migrants entering Korea substantially increased, concurrently giving rise to the number of children born to multicultural families.

Korea’s influx of foreign migrant workers began in 1987 after a significant shortage in the domestic labor market. As the demand for cheap, unskilled labor increased, migrants flocked to Korea to fill 3-D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) positions shunned by South Korean citizens (Kim 2009, 4; Yoon et al. 2008, 325; Yoon 2010). Intermarriages in South Korea, another major form of migration, dates back to the Korean War when the government stationed 40,000 American soldiers each year to restrict the expansion of communism. From 1950 to 1964, approximately 6,000 Korean women married American soldiers and immigrated to the United States.

Furthermore, as diplomatic relations between Korea and China improved after the Cold War, Korean bachelors in rural areas married Chinese-Korean women. Subsequently, Japanese and Filippino women entered Korea with the intention to marry Korean men. At the dawn of the 21st century, international marriages were not only a common trend, but also more accessible with the introduction of marriage broker businesses. The proportion of intermarriages rose more than ten-fold since 1990, which accounted for nearly 14% of total marriages in 2005 (Kim 2009, 9).

A number of studies demonstrate that many migrant groups undergo stress when assimilating into the homogenous society of South Korea (Kim, M. J. 2010, 239; Kim, Y. H. 2010, 207; Shin 2006). In particular, Southeast Asians and Japanese migrants experience the brunt of this cultural collision (Seol et al. 2005; Cho 2005; Yoon 2010; Choi 2006). According to a 333-participant survey conducted by the Seoul Development Institute (SDI) on foreigners residing in Seoul, 25.9% of Southeast Asian immigrants reported that they encountered discrimination from Koreans—compared to 8.2% of foreigners from OECD nations (Kim 2011). The Korean community also stigmatized members of Japan for decades due to political and historical tension between the two nations. According to another survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013) on 39 nations, 77% of South Koreans reported holding an unfavorable opinion of Japan.

International migrants do not bear the burden of social stigma alone, but inadvertently transfer it to their Korean-born multicultural children. As a consequence of their dual ethnic identity, multicultural children with a Southeast Asian or Japanese parent often become victims of alienation, prejudice, and bullying at school (Cho 2011; Shim 2009; Seol et al. 2005). According to the 2012 nationwide survey on multicultural families conducted by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Affairs (MOGEF), 8.5% of multicultural children experience various forms of school violence: 66.5% reported being threatened or insulted with...
abusive language, 34.7% said they experienced group ostracization, 16.3% stated that they were hit or locked in a confined area by their peers, and 15.3% reported that their classmates stole their belongings.

While evidence of racial stigma and bullying against multicultural students in Korea remain pervasive, few studies consider the effects of such discrimination on their identity formation (Shim 2009, 28). Particularly, little is known about how discriminatory experiences shape the ways in which multicultural students in Korea negotiate their identity and ultimately racially identify. Do such discriminatory experiences problematize their identity construction and pressure students to solely adopt a Korean ethnicity? What factors operate in mediating between stigmatization and the ways in which multicultural youth negotiate and choose their ethnic identity?

We address these crucial questions by focusing on the experiences of eleven multicultural students with Southeast Asian and Japanese heritage (Kim, Y. H. 2010, 214; Yi 2001, 21; Pew Research Center 2013). More specifically, we examine how these multicultural youth negotiate their ethnic identity under severe stigmatization. Further, we reveal the disparity in racial identification among the participants as well as the associated social factors. Considering the context-based and complex nature of identity negotiation, we employ a qualitative case study approach to provide a thorough analysis of the idiosyncratic racial identity process.

This article begins with a review of literature on marginalized groups, and the ethnic identity processes of multicultural individuals. We then provide an overview of the theoretical framework and research methodology employed in this study. Next, we present the main findings from our interviews with participants as well as maps of their perceived personal and social identity. Finally, we summarize the key findings and discuss future research directions for the study of multicultural identity and global citizenship education in South Korea.

Theoretical Debates: Stigma, Identity & Viable Strategies for Buffering Social Exclusion

If one were to flip back the pages of time, issues of race would bear grave resemblance to problems facing marginalized groups today. While the genetic distribution of color biologically bespeaks of little significance, the social meaning attributed to race profoundly influences social transactions between members. Human relations can be defined, with more or less accuracy, in terms of distance (Park 1926, 2). Park (1924, 340) maintains, “The terms ‘race consciousness’ and ‘class consciousness,’ with which most of us are familiar, describe a state of mind in which we become, often suddenly and unexpectedly conscious of the distances that separate, or seem to separate us, from classes and races whom we do not fully understand.” The distance that exists between individuals is not inherent, but rather created and perpetuated by the social meanings ascribed to race.

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1 The intermarriage between Chosonjok (ethnic Koreans from China) migrants and South Koreans as well as their children’s experiences remains a topic that is undeniably ripe for discussion; nevertheless, we do not address the situation of Chosonjok migrants and their children because their story seems to appear very similar to that of Southeast Asians.
Race is now construed by scholars as socially constructed according to social, economic, political, historical, and national frameworks (Marcus 2008 cited in Wilton et al. 2013, 42). According to Omi and Winant (1986, 13), “We mask the historical construction of racial categories, the shifting meaning of race, and the crucial role of politics and ideology in shaping race relations.” While contemporary social science literature rejects former biological notions of race (Omi and Winant 1986, 11), the prejudices that we possess—both conscious and those with which we are unaware—perpetuate the social distance extant among racial groups.

Stonequist (1937) was the first to refer to mixed-race people as being in a state of “identity purgatory”: existing on the margins of one or several worlds, but not fully included in any. According to Stonequist (1935, 3), the marginal individual is born from a bicultural or multicultural situation. While Maria Root (1990, 185) refutes the conception that mixed race individuals are inherently marginal, she does, however, assert that they begin life as “marginal individuals.” As a result of mixed-race people’s ambiguous ethnic identities and society’s proclivity to refuse them equal status, they are often viewed as fractioned people—fragmentally composed of a race, culture, or ethnicity (Root 1990, 186).

What Park (1928, 890) states of the Japanese in America seem true for the Southeast Asian-Korean in Korea: “he bears in his features a distinctive racial hallmark that he wears, so to speak, a racial uniform, which classifies him.” Unlike Chinese-Koreans or Japanese-Koreans, Southeast Asian-Koreans usually possess distinct physical features that cause them to stand out among their ethnic Korean peers. Research suggests that such physical distinctions may be a reason for the teasing and exclusion that Southeast Asian-Korean students face at school (Cho and Song 2011, 63; Cho 2007). Compared with the ancient society where stigma meant a physical curse, the notion of stigma, in the modern society, is applied to the disgrace itself (Goffman 1963, 1-2).

Durkheim (1982, 68-69) emphasizes the role of society in establishing and ensuring conformity to social norms by punishing those who deviate from the customs of the greater society. The majority group stigmatizes those who deviate from these established social or cultural norms consequently separating society into two groups: the “normals” and the “deviants” (Goffman 1963, 5). The social entity’s ability to act upon individuals with little to no regard for their will is perhaps one of the most interesting steps in the stigmatization process. Goffman furthers Durkheim’s discussion of stigma by studying it alongside the behavioral tendencies and feelings of individuals perceived by normals as socially discredited. He proposes that within the framework of the social structure exist the means for individuals to categorize persons and attribute to each member the behaviors and attitudes they feel are ordinary and natural (Goffman 1963, 2).

Goffman (1963, 4) delineates three forms of social stigma: (1) Overt or external physical deformities such as the inability to walk or see, scars, obesity, physical manifestations of a disease, or an eating disorder; (2) Deviations in personal traits, including mental illness, drug addiction, alcoholism, and criminal history; (3) “Tribal stigmas” are traits (e.g. pigmentation, facial features) of an ethnic group, nationality, or religion, which deviate from prevailing norms.
When individuals fear rejection from the public because of their stigma they may engage in a number of strategies to conceal or manage their “spoiled” or stigmatized identity; Goffman (1963, 42) refers to the successful concealment of one’s stigmatized identity as passing. He states that almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so because of the rewards and privileges affiliated with being considered “normal” (Goffman 1963, 74). However, passing is only feasible for those who are capable of hiding their stigma. When stigma is visible and impossible to conceal, the stigmatized individual engages in “covering.” Covering prevents one’s stigma from “looming large” and eases the tension associated with the stigmatized attribute (Goffman 1963, 102). Goffman (1963, 103) explains that the ethnic minority is more likely to engage in covering by taking on more assimilative traits.

The stigmatization of race and ethnicity erected walls between majority and minority members that still affect how members from both groups interact with each other today. The United States Supreme Court’s historic decision in 1967 to invalidate laws prohibiting interracial marriage resulted in a substantial increase of interracial relationships, concurrently giving rise to the number of children born to parents of different racial backgrounds (Root 2003, 111). Though laws concerning interracial marriages were abolished, research suggests that systemic racial injustices continue to govern social norms and attitudes regarding people of color. Consequently, these social norms significantly influence racially mixed individuals and present obstinate barriers to their racial identification process (Bratter 2007, 824). Nevertheless, while some Black Americans simply accepted these consequences, those with the right means and right pigmentation daringly challenged the rules concerning color and privilege. Many fair-skinned persons of White/Black descent revolutionized the way people perceived the color line by passing for White and inventing new identities in the course of their identity negotiation.

Although passing may appear as an antiquated social phenomenon, social norms and expectations regarding the racial identification of minority groups endure, influencing the mentality and attitudes of the general public. Research suggests that an individual’s racial and socio-economic background can influence how he or she chooses to racially identify (Townsend et al. 2012, 92). While mixed-race individuals may perceive their identity claims to be very private and personal, these claims are, in actuality, collective products that individuals negotiate with their social environment (Townsend et al. 2012, 95). For instance, mixed-race individuals may encounter forced choice dilemmas where they feel pressured to choose between their multiple racial identities (Sanchez 2010, 1659). Such forced choice dilemmas can cause people of mixed-race backgrounds to perceive their multiracial identity as devalued or unaccepted by the general public (Sanchez 2010, 1660).

In the context of Korea, multicultural children, especially those of a darker complexion, are stigmatized because of their ethnicity, physical features, and poor language ability (Cho and Song 2011, 63; Cho 2007; MOSPA 2006; Seol et al. 2005). Research shows that compared with all racial groups, multiracial people have a higher propensity to intensely engage in identity negotiation and are more likely to change their racial identification in accordance with their social context (Wilton et
al. 2013, 41). In addition, the stigma consciousness of multiracial individuals tends to heighten as they interact with their environment—particularly with dominant group members (Wilton et al. 2013, 44). When constructing their racial identity, mixed-race people must contend with both their personal feelings as well as the ways in which those in their social context perceive and categorize them (Wilton et al. 2013, 43). Though stigmatized individuals may not perceive any distinguishable differences between themselves and majority group members, normals brand them as different and set apart (Goffman, 1963, 108-09).

Research demonstrates that in the face of stigmatization or other forms of ethnic discrimination, foreign immigrants employ strategies such as passing or covering (Phinney et al. 2001, 494; Ferdman and Horenczyk 2000, 81; Rumbaut 1997, 925). Scholars also report the use of these strategies by children from multicultural families in Korea (Cho and Yoon 2011, 17). Since multicultural children in Korea tend to lose pride in their minority ethnic identity as they mature, students who look similar to their ethnic Koreans peers (e.g. Japanese-Korean students) often seek to hide their multiethnic identity by passing (Cho and Yoon 2011, 17). In other words, individuals belonging to two ethnic groups may seek to buffer themselves from the negative effects of racial identity threat by identifying more strongly with the racial group that is more adaptive in the social context; thus, the mixed-race individual may focus, in the moment, on the racial identity that he or she feels is more valued (Wilton et al. 2013, 43). Similarly, Korean born multicultural children may distance themselves from their minority ethnic identity because of the devaluation and stigmatization wherewith it is ascribed.

Nonetheless, it is also possible that multicultural children may refrain from engaging in either passing or covering in the course of their identity negotiation. Studies show that despite exposure to ethnic discrimination, certain multicultural individuals are likely to accept their identity as multicultural. This rather unusual response, research suggests, is attributable to such conditions as the nature of the relationships with family members, teachers, and peers as well as the individual’s social environment and race of parents (Hud-Aleem et al. 2008, 42-43; Kerwin et al. 1993, 228). Research also reveals that mixed raced individuals with higher social status are more likely to identify as multicultural rather than mixed-race members from low-status backgrounds (Townsend et. al. 2012, 92). The ability to freely express one’s self and exercise control over one’s identity may be more available to mixed-race people of higher status (Townsend et. al. 2012, 95). In sum, one’s proclivity to accept his or her multicultural identity is influenced by a number of factors that may arise or disappear at various stages in life. Relationships and environments that affirm rather than threaten multicultural individuals’ ethnic identity, as well as socio-economic status, play a significant role in helping mixed-raced members embrace their multicultural identity.

Data & Methods

Case Study Approach

Qualitative methodology continues to evolve as a well-respected and commonly used research tool by academics worldwide (Hatch 2002, 3-4; Berg 2007). Given
the context-based and complex nature of ethnic identity negotiation, we apply a qualitative case study approach to our research project. Guided by a micro-interpretive tradition in sociology, a case study approach aims to “systematically [gather] enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions” (Berg 2007, 283). Racial attitudes and behavior play a significant role in influencing the thought and behavior patterns of both ethnic Korean and multicultural students. Accordingly, this research design provides the proper lens to examine the intricate workings of the processes and consequences of identity negotiation among Korea’s multicultural youth. Moreover, a qualitative case study approach enables us to observe and assess the specific ways and extent to which the racial attitudes and behavior of ethnic Korean students affect the racial identity negotiation of their multicultural peers.

Study Participants
The study population consists of eleven multicultural children from Seoul, Gyeonggi Province and the Muju County of North Jeolla Province. We purposefully recruited Southeast Asian-Korean and Japanese-Korean students to investigate how these participants interact with their social world and approach their ethnic identity in relation to stigmatization and homogeneity. Furthermore, we recruited junior high and high school students because a sensitive subject such as ethnic identity demands a certain level of maturity and awareness from the participants. Based on Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages Model (1959), children from age 13 to 19 are in the “Fidelity” stage where they become newly concerned with how they appear to others. According to Erikson (1959), it is imperative that children develop a sense of self and personal identity at this stage. Success leads to an ability to maintain an authentic sense of self, while failure leads to confusion and a weak sense of self (Erikson, 1959). As Erikson’s model suggests, each participant seemed keenly aware of their selves in relation to their peers. The following table provides basic demographic information of each participant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Residential Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Filipino-Korean</td>
<td>High School 3rd Year</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Gyeonggi-do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ji-Min</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Japanese-Korean</td>
<td>High School 2nd Year</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se-Yi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Japanese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 3rd Year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ji-Yun</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Japanese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 3rd Year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gye-Won</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Vietnamese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 3rd Year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha-Rim</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Japanese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 1st Year</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Muju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Filipino-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 3rd Year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Gyeonggi-do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 3rd Year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Gyeonggi-do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-Hee</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Vietnamese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 2nd Year</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Gyeonggi-do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun-Myung</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Japanese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 3rd Year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-Ho</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Japanese-Korean</td>
<td>Junior High 1st Year</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Seoul</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alexander and Catherine’s parents are separated and they currently reside with their mothers. Ellie and Young-Hee are siblings.
Data Collection
Participant recruitment measures involved the employment of “purposive” sampling strategies, which are often used in qualitative research. Purposive sampling strategies are designed to enrich understandings of participants by permitting the researcher to select individuals, groups, or behaviors that provide the most insight into the research questions (Devers and Frankel, 2000). Purposive sampling strategies differ from probability sampling in that the target population does not necessarily have to be selected at random. This allowed us to recruit Southeast Asian-Korean and Japanese-Korean participants via non-random means (e.g. personal contacts). Participants were also recruited through “gatekeepers” (e.g. teachers, organizational officials, administrators) located at government institutions and local schools. The participants did not receive any monetary incentive for their participation, but willingly volunteered at the request of trusted gatekeepers. They seemed eager to share their experiences as multicultural students growing up in Korea and spoke liberally on the subject.

We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary research approach. All interviews were conducted in Korean, audio-recorded, and lasted for one to two hours. Prior to the interview stage, we contacted and reviewed the terms of the consent form with each participant’s parents. Once we received consent from at least one parent, we met with each student privately and began the first stage of the interview process. Each participant completed a brief demographic form before the question-and-answer portion of the interview. All participants created a pseudonym and are addressed by their alias in this article to ensure the protection of their identity.

The second stage of the interview process involved a qualitative method known as “mapping” which provides a safe and creative way for participants to express their self-perceived ethnic identity. We presented each participant with a prompt that asked them to draw how they viewed themselves ethnically and socially. They were provided with art supplies and allotted ample time to complete their drawings. Upon completion, the participants described their drawings and offered further explanations for any pictures or colors that contained symbolic meaning. Futch (2001) emphasizes the invaluableness of mapping as a methodology:

As a mediational method, mapping invites respondents to narrate and represent their varied relationships to place, people, and time; to visualize the tensions of agency and structure; to document shifts, contradictions, continuities and ruptures within self over time and space. (6-7)

Mapping opens the door to a sensitive topic and allows a moment of uninterrupted vulnerability for the participants. It also prepares the participants for the more personal and difficult questions that directly followed.

The third and final stage of the interview process consisted of an extended period of open-ended questions pertaining to each participant’s family relationships, school experience, peer relationships, personally perceived racial identification, and future plans. While we provided all participants with the same
primary questions, we used different probes to facilitate the collection of individual-specific detailed narratives. Upon completion of each interview, recordings and observations were immediately transcribed, thoroughly reviewed, and analyzed.

**Analysis Strategy**

In qualitative studies, data collection and analysis occur concurrently (Baxter 2008, 554). In order to thoroughly and comprehensively analyze the data resultant from the in-depth interviews and mapping method, we completed Hatch’s (2002, 153) rigorous nine-step typological analysis. Typological analysis begins with the division of the overall data into categories based on predetermined typologies (Hatch 2002, 152). After critically reviewing each participant’s transcript, we categorized and color coded the data according to the three themes dominant in the relevant literature and theoretical framework: racial stigmatization (blue), negotiation strategies (purple), and racial identification (red).

Next, we organized the data according to the respective category in a summary sheet created for each participant. Once we completed categorizing the data, we translated participants’ quotes from Korean to English and searched for patterns, relationships, or themes within typologies. Identified patterns were written as one-sentence generalizations and supported with excerpts from the data. The typological analysis method enabled us to efficiently and descriptively analyze the overall data in a way that made patterns, themes, and relationships within and across typologies easily identifiable. Similarly, we determined and assessed patterns across individual interviews without much difficulty, which facilitated the final portion of analysis for this study.

**Findings**

**Reports of Stigmatization**

Bearing the stigma of their immigrant mothers, many of the participants in this study said that they are often treated like foreigners in their own country and regarded by the general public as different from their ethnic Korean peers. A Japanese-Korean participant, Ha-Rin, explained: “When people call me a multicultural student I feel like they are saying, ‘She is different from the rest.’”

![Figure 1. Ha-Rin drew a divided circle that represents the separation of herself (left) from her peers (right). This illustration demonstrates her belief that she is socially perceived as different from ethnic Koreans because of her multicultural identity.](image)
Similarly, with respect to her ethnic identity Young-Hee stated:

I personally don’t think of myself as multicultural. If I think of myself like that I’ll start to feel like everyone’s watching me again. I just want to live like a normal Korean. I can speak Korean very well; I don’t know why people keep trying to look at me like I’m a foreigner. I just hate it.

Most participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the ways in which members of the Korean society perceive and treat those who are racially different. Alex and Catherine, two Southeast Asian-Koreans, discussed their perception of Koreans’ attitudes toward Southeast Asians. Catherine related the following:

The kids in my class bullied me after they found out that my mom is Filipino. There were other half-Filipinos in my class too. So… I don’t know… I guess when there are people who are different from Koreans, Koreans see them like this [places one hand beneath the other to indicate a place of inferiority].

In Alex’s eyes, the relationship between Koreans and migrant workers today is reminiscent of the relationship between slaves and slave-owning aristocrats of the Choson dynasty era. When discussing the negative perceptions surrounding multicultural families and children, he shared strong frustrations concerning the culture of some international marriages. In his opinion, the mail-order bride boom colored Koreans’ perception of multicultural families. Such marriage negotiations, he claims, cause Koreans to view the multicultural population, at large, unfavorably.

As a result of the negative perceptions and stereotypes ascribed to multicultural families, many participants reported feelings of ambivalence or dislike toward the title, “multicultural student.” Ellie explained:

If someone were to call me multicultural I think I would feel a little uneasy. A lot of foreigners have come here and if they say that they are Chinese, Koreans will kill them. So, people must be thinking that foreigners are bad. I guess that’s why the first thing people think of when they hear the word “multicultural” is “the child of a foreigner.”

Alex maintains that calling Korean-born multicultural children, “multicultural,” could presumably be a form of discrimination and faults Koreans’ skewed perceptions as the cause. He asserts, “Multicultural children are native-born Korean nationals and yet they are treated as the social underdogs of the Korean society.” Taken together, the perceptions of majority members seem to play a significant role in the participants’ attitudes toward their own ethnic identity. Social perceptions seem to generate negative attention that estranges participants from their peers and even selves at times. When participants reject the label, “multicultural student,” it appears as if they are rejecting not so much the title, but the stigma with which it is affixed.

Furthermore, with the exception of two participants, each participant reported encounters with both subtle and direct forms of bullying and discrimination. The bullying primarily occurred in elementary school and now
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occurs in less frequent and covert fashion. Participants often expressed a range of different emotions when discussing their peer relationships. Many of them reported feelings of frustration, bewilderment, hurt, and powerlessness. Sun-Myung related his experience with bullying:

Since my mother is Japanese, naturally, there were several issues that came up like Dokdo and "comfort women." Kids in my elementary school bullied me because of that. At those times I asked myself, "Why is my mother [Japanese]...why was I born Japanese?"

In fourth grade, Se-Yi’s peers initially thought it was interesting that she had a Japanese mother, but as time passed, they began teasing her because of her Japanese ethnicity. They questioned the authenticity of her Korean ethnicity and told her that she was not a “real” Korean. She reported that all of her friends disowned her and that she suffered severe ostracization. She described this period as the most traumatic point in her life. When asked how she responded to the verbal bullying of her peers, Se-Yi stated that all she could do was cry. As she relived these moments during the interview, her face progressively darkened and she struggled to keep eye contact. Similarly, another Japanese-Korean participant, Ji-Yun, reported that she experienced and continues to encounter severe forms of verbal bullying from her classmates. When asked how she responds to the bullying, Ji-Yun commented, “In the beginning, I really hated it when they said mean things about Japan. I just cried. But I’ll be bullied if I cry now. I don’t have one friend who likes Japan.” She further explained, “Some classmates told me that I’m not Korean or Japanese...that I am somewhere in the middle.”

In comparison, Ji-Min, another Japanese-Korean participant, reported a different experience regarding her encounters with Korean peers. Ji-Min studied with a diverse group of multicultural children when she was in elementary school. Yet, she reported that unlike her Mongolian-Korean and Filipino-Korean multicultural counterparts, she was not initially a victim of ostracization and bullying. While the other multicultural students bore on their bodies the physical trace of deviance from the norm, she resembled a typical Korean girl and felt momentarily safe from the threat of exclusion.

In addition, unlike the majority of participants, Ellie reported that she never experienced teasing or bullying from her peers. When asked why, she replied, “Maybe if I really looked like a Southeast Asian then I might have had a hard time, too. But now I look more like my father...like a Korean person. So I’m okay.” Likewise, Alex shared that his school life is generally comfortable, but also suggests that this may be due to his physical appearance. He stated that multicultural students with physical features dissimilar from Koreans seem to undergo more difficulties. Based on these participants’ reports, multicultural students with the absence of discernible physical characteristics could be less likely to encounter bullying and exclusion from peers.

As Durkheim and Goffman insightfully adduce, there will always be members from any given society that will suffer the fate of stigmatization because their role as “outsiders” ensures the survivability, unity, and conformity of in-group
members. Most of the participants in this study reported feeling discriminated against by members of the larger society, which led most students to reject or demonstrate ambivalence toward the label, “multicultural student.”

Identity Negotiation Strategies
An ethnic minority usually employs racial passing strategies when he or she desires to be perceived as a member of the majority racial or ethnic group. Seven participants in this study reported feeling pressure to racially pass as a result of the discrimination and bullying they faced at school. While some participants merely considered the notion of passing, others actually attempted to pass as ethnic Koreans. Sun-Myung and Alex described specific instances where they attempted to racially pass but were unsuccessful. Sun-Myung described his experience thusly:

There have been times when I’ve wanted to hide my multicultural identity. Because of the risk of being teased and also because I hated my mother being insulted right in front of my face. Although there were times when I tried to hide my Japanese ethnicity, ultimately it was revealed. When I was promoted to the next grade I wouldn’t tell anyone, but eventually my friend would say to the other students, “This guy’s Japanese.”

Alex attempted to hide his multicultural identity in elementary school when he was asked to provide his parents’ names for the school newsletter. Worried that his peers would see his mother’s distinct Filipino name and tease him as a result, he decided to write his father’s Korean name instead. However, his schoolteacher intervened and told him that he should also include his mother’s name since his father lived abroad. As he reflected on that time, he stated: “I wanted to write the simple three-character name for my mother that all my classmates were writing for their parents.”

While Young-Hee had never attempted to pass, she admitted having reservations about revealing her ethnic identity to her peers:

Uh, when my friend just comes straight out and asks me, “Are you multicultural?” I hesitate to answer if I think the person will react badly. I mean…if a person that I am meeting for the first time asks me and I say, “Yes”—I think to myself, “How will this person look at me? At those times I kinda hesitate. Yeah, being multicultural is kind of like that.

Similarly, after the hurtful events that took place in the fourth grade, Se-Yi confessed that it was difficult for her to embrace her Japanese ethnic identity. Se-Yi sought to conceal her Japanese ethnic identity until her first year of junior high school because she feared becoming a victim of teasing and ostracization again. She did not openly share her Japanese-Korean racial identity until she witnessed the positive reaction of teachers and peers upon learning her mother’s ethnicity. She reported that it was only at that point that she felt safe to no longer hide her multicultural identity.

Furthermore, unlike the other participants, Ji-Yun described instances where
she employed both racial passing and covering strategies. She diverts attention from her stigmatized racial identity by joining her peers when they insult Japan:

My friends appear to like me on a superficial level, but their behavior towards me changes once they find out that my mom is Japanese. Even when Korea is not doing anything Japan picks a fight first. That's why I join my friends whenever they talk about Japan. You're not supposed to say bad things about your mom's country. But if I don't… I am afraid I'll be bullied. I feel sorry towards my mom, but I do it anyway…

Ji-Yun reported that she feels like concealing her Japanese ethnic identity every time she sits through a history class on the Japanese colonization of Korea. She stated that she would most likely hide her Japanese ethnic identity when she enters high school because she fears being alienated from her peers again.

Conversely, four participants in this study reported no incidents of racial passing or experiencing any societal or internal pressure to pass. Jun-Ho and Ji-Min, two Japanese-Koreans, racially identify as “multicultural” and regard both their Korean and Japanese ethnic identities very positively. With respect to his ethnic identity, Jun-Ho comments, “I am proud to be multicultural. Although I don't really know a foreign language, I am getting to learn culture together with my mom. For that reason, being multicultural seems good.”

In the third grade, Ji-Min’s classmates discovered that her mother was Japanese and subsequently ostracized her. Unlike her multicultural peers who, she claims, became timid after being teased, Ji-Min says she recovered quickly and grew more assertive. Aside from the alienation Ji-Min faced in third grade, she shared
many positive memories about her multicultural upbringing and displays a strong sense of pride in Japanese culture and her Japanese language ability.

The other two participants who reported no history of racial passing are Ellie, a Vietnamese-Korean, and Catherine, a Filipino-Korean. Ellie presents probably one of the most interesting cases in this study. She identifies solely as Korean and demonstrates strong ambivalence toward her multicultural ethnic identity as well as prejudice toward other multicultural students. Regarding her relationship with her peers, she stated:

I’ve never felt different from my Korean friends. If anything, I feel more like that toward the other multicultural students. I guess…I just feel estranged from them. Like there is a little wall between them and me. I mean…I just don’t think I can understand culture. Things like Chinese kids eating bugs. That’s why the other kids look at them like that. That’s why they look at them in a bad way.

Yet, while Ellie remains reluctant to embrace her multicultural identity, she reported that she has never passed nor has any intention to do so in the future. She asserts, “No, I’ve never wanted to hide the truth about my multicultural identity. I just tell people, ‘My mom is Vietnamese.’ She’s my mom…why would I deny that I’m half-Vietnamese? I like her. I like my mom.” She continued:
I don't have a fear of people teasing me because my mom is Vietnamese. If I tell people that I am Vietnamese and they joke around saying “Vietnam, Vietnam,” I don’t think my feelings would get hurt now. I mean…there are so many Vietnamese and Chinese people living in Korean society today. What’s the big deal?

Ellie displays a strong loyalty to her Vietnamese mother despite the distance she exhibits toward her own multicultural ethnicity.

The other participant, Catherine, presents an uncommon case as well. Catherine was born and raised in Korea until the age of nine. When she was in the third grade, her mother sent her and her younger sister away to live in the Philippines for seven years because of several domestic violence incidents. Catherine related witnessing her Korean grandmother assault her younger sister:

My grandmother always drank alcohol. When she drank and came to our house I was okay, but she used to hit my sister all the time. She said she did it because my sister was born in the Philippines.

She continues, “I prefer my Filipino ethnicity because I am a little embarrassed to call myself Korean.” On the subject of racial passing, she remarked:

I have never been embarrassed of my mom being Filipina. Not even when I was bullied because of it. I am proud of my Filipino heritage. In the Philippines, it doesn't matter if you have money; it doesn't matter how hard your life is—you just get together and eat with your family. These kinds of things are common there. No matter how hard it is, as long as we are together…it’s all right.

Catherine’s unique experience and pride in her Filipino heritage seem to preclude any consideration of concealing her Filipino ethnicity. With the exception of these four students, reports of passing or the temptation to pass remained high in this study population. Participants cited the fear of being judged, teased, bullied, and socially excluded as common reasons for attempting to pass. Nevertheless, incidents of passing appear context-based and mainly occurred when participants felt threatened. Some participants ceased employing passing strategies once another party revealed their ethnic identity or once they felt safe to voluntarily disclose their multicultural background.

Self-Identification Variation within and between Groups
Southeast Asian-Korean and Japanese-Korean students encountered similar forms of stigmatization, social exclusion, resentment towards their mothers, and bullying from their ethnic Korean peers. Also, participants from both groups employed passing and/or covering strategies as a buffer against racial discrimination. Yet, the ways in which Southeast Asian-Koreans and Japanese-Koreans regard their ethnicity and, ultimately, racially identify are disparate. Results are presented in the table below:
Table 2. Self-Perceived Racial Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Identity: Southeast Asian-Korean</th>
<th>Identity Negotiation Strategy</th>
<th>Racial Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Passing</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gye-Won</td>
<td>Passing</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-Hee</td>
<td>Passing Considered</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ji-Min</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Multicultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se-Yi</td>
<td>Passing</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha-Rin</td>
<td>Passing Considered</td>
<td>Multicultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun-Myung</td>
<td>Passing</td>
<td>Multicultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun-Ho</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Multicultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ji-Yun</td>
<td>Passing &amp; Covering</td>
<td>In the middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though negative social stimuli provoked most participants to conceal their minority ethnic identity on several occasions, most Japanese-Korean participants (four out of six) eventually took pride in their Japanese ethnicity and racially identified as multicultural. Conversely, the majority of Southeast Asian-Korean participants report becoming increasingly ambiguous toward their multicultural identity and racially identify as Korean (four out of five). Southeast Asian-Korean participants claim that they racially identify as Korean as a matter of logic—not a result of fear or shame of their minority ethnicity. They reason that they perceive themselves as Korean because they were born in Korea, possess the phenotypic characteristics of Koreans, and fluently speak the Korean language.

Our findings regarding the variations between Japanese-Korean and Southeast Asian children are consistent with those from the 2012 the national survey on multicultural families (MOGEF 2013). While 47.7% of Japanese-Korean children report having pride in their multicultural ethnicity, results on ethnic pride for Southeast Asian-Koreans are considerably lower with only 8.7% of Cambodian-Korean and 22.8% of Vietnamese Korean children professing ethnic pride. What accounts for the disparity in racial identification between the two groups? While several contributing factors may exist, we provide two tenable explanations.

First, the difference in the nature of stigma between the two groups may affect how participants racially identify. While Japanese-Korean students are stigmatized as a result of historical tension, Southeast Asian-Koreans are stigmatized because their mother is foreign and from a socio-economically inferior nation. The stigma of socio-economic inferiority may have a greater influence on racial identification than the stigma of historical animosity between nations. The socio-economic divide between Japanese and Southeast Asians is visibly notable and may influence how children of Japanese and Southeast Asian parents racially identify. Moreover, the push factors for Korean immigration among the two marriage immigrant populations remain different as well. While studies report that Southeast Asian women immigrate to Korea for purposes of economic relief and upward mobility (Lim 2009; The Economist SEOUL 2011), research suggests that the rapid surge of Japanese women marriage immigrants is a consequence of the Korean Wave and Japanese women’s increased interest in Korean men (Han, Yujong 2011; Yi, Chonghui 2012).

Secondly, several Japanese-Korean participants reported that affirmations
from peers and teachers regarding their minority ethnic identity helped them to overcome feelings of insecurity. Sun-Myung began to take pride in his Japanese-Korean ethnicity in his second year of junior high school after his peers lauded his ability to engage in conversation with Japanese natives. Ji-Min's pride in her Japanese-Korean ethnicity also gradually evolved in relation to her peers' admiration of her Japanese language ability and academic performance in Japanese class. Thus, the shift in peers' attitudes toward the Japanese-Korean students seemed to provide or initiate a shift in the students' attitudes toward their own ethnic identity. Southeast Asian-Koreans, however, never reported receiving affirmations from their peers and teachers concerning their Southeast Asian ethnicity. On the contrary, Southeast Asian-Korean participants consistently reported that they believe ethnic Koreans view Southeast Asians as poor and inferior. Hence, the lack of affirmation regarding their minority ethnic identity may be a significant factor in their decision to solely adopt a Korean national and ethnic identity.

In regards to within group variation, Catherine, Se-Yi, and Ji-Yun provide examples of the racial identification disparity that exist among the Southeast Asian-Korean and Japanese-Korean participants respectively. Catherine and her family's encounter with severe physical and verbal abuse from Korean relatives strongly influenced her decision to solely identify as Filipino. Her strong ties with her Filipino community in and outside of Korea also seem to solidify her Filipino ethnic identity. Catherine's extended stay in the Philippines, naturally, could play a significant role in the way that she chooses to ethnically identify. While living in the Philippines, Catherine found a place of belonging and acceptance among her peers that was absent during her early years in Korea. She stated that she feels judged by ethnic Koreans, including Korean relatives, because they view Southeast Asians as subordinate. Such judgments continue to widen the divide between Catherine and her Korean ethnicity.

Likewise, Se-Yi racially identifies differently from the other members in the Japanese-Korean group. Although she maintains a closer relationship with her Japanese mother and has a strained relationship with her Korean father, who she describes as ill-tempered, she identifies as Korean. She offers similar reasons as Southeast Asian-Korean participants for her racial identification, such as being born in Korea, possessing phenotypic features of a Korean person, and speaking Korean fluently. She states that her life in Korea is the only life she has ever known. Se-Yi experienced severe bullying and ostracization in elementary school because of her Japanese-Korean ethnicity, but does not list this among the reasons for her racial identification. Additionally, Ji-Yun, another Japanese-Korean participant, states that she neither views herself as Korean or Japanese, but somewhere “in the middle.” She encounters bullying and alienation as a result of her Japanese-Korean identity and struggles to gain acceptance from her peers in school. Consequently, Ji-Yun employs both passing and covering strategies and identifies as Korean only as a means of avoiding bullying and ridicule.

In sum, the degree to which students are connected to their mother's country of origin provides some explanation for the within-group variation we noted when discussing their racial identification. In fact, the nature of dyadic ethnic
ties between migrants and family members in their country of origin received a great deal of attention in literature on international migration; studies reveal that this could potentially influence how migrants settle in new environments and form their ethnic identity (Gurak and Caces 1992).

**Discussion & Conclusion**

In an attempt to explicate how children bearing social stigmata negotiate their identity, we analyzed findings from five Southeast Asian-Korean and six Japanese-Korean students residing in South Korea. Consistent with previous studies and survey results on multicultural children, participants from this study population encountered a number of personal and social challenges as a result of their multicultural identity (Cho and Yoon 2011, 16-17; MOGEF 2012; Wilton et al. 2013, 42). Members from both groups described bullying, social exclusion, and negative perceptions from the general public as grave impediments to embracing their multiethnic identity. Consequently, the majority of multicultural students in our study attempted to conceal or divert attention from their stigmatized identity by employing identity negotiation strategies such as passing and/or covering. Moreover, we found that many multicultural children refrain from identifying themselves as multicultural because of the stigma affixed to the label.

Yet, the ways that the participants responded to ethnic challenges differed along ethnic lines as well as various social conditions. First, we found that a significant group variation exists between Southeast Asian-Korean and Japanese-Korean students when negotiating and adopting their ethnic identity. Considerably affected by the lower socio-economic status of their migrant mothers, Southeast Asian-Korean participants were more likely to self-identify as Korean compared to their Japanese-Korean counterparts. Secondly, we also noted some extent of within-group variation related to the degree of affirmation participants received from peers and teachers. Drawing on acceptance from peers and teachers, several Japanese-Korean participants were able to buffer the negative consequences of stigmatization and maintain their multicultural identity. Also, the strength of the connection between multicultural students and their mother’s country of origin seemed to influence the way they perceive their ethnic identity as evidenced by Catherine’s case. Nonetheless, further research needs to be conducted to investigate other reasons for the varying ethnic identities of multicultural children growing up in Korea (e.g., personality traits, academic performance).

While research (Cho and Song 2011, 63; Cho 2007) identifies Korean-born multicultural students with distinct physical features as easier targets for bullying, social exclusion and aggressive identity negotiation, this study remains inconclusive on that subject. Although two students in the study population reported feeling less threatened because they “didn’t look like a foreigner,” the remaining participants did not share similar responses during their interviews. Moreover, all of the participants in this study bear strong physical resemblance to ethnic Koreans. Therefore, a distinction as to whether certain members encountered severer forms of bullying as a result of their physicality could not be determined.

Furthermore, the adoption of a Korean ethnic identity may be related to a
strong sense of national identity. When asked why they racially identify as Korean, most of the participants explained, “Because I was born in Korea” as a primary reason. The influence of national identity on the acceptance of a multicultural identity could provide great insight into how multicultural children conceive the term “racial identity” or identity in general. Also, most of the participants who identify as Korean, report that their parents also racially regard them as Korean. Thus, research regarding immigrant parents’ perception of their child’s racial identity as well as their own racial identity (upon naturalization) should be conducted to observe possible correlations. Lastly, since identity negotiation is an ongoing process, conducting longitudinal studies may prove helpful in assessing changes in the way multicultural individuals racially identify at different stages in their lives as well as the causal factors that facilitate this process.

This investigative study provides a stepping-stone for future research endeavors concerning the identity negotiation of multicultural children in South Korea. As social perceptions remain a common factor in how the majority of participants in this study perceived their multicultural identity, more research in this area should be explored. Participants’ (particularly Japanese-Koreans) positive change in attitude toward their ethnic identity seems to occur simultaneously with perceived high regard of their minority ethnicity from those in their immediate social context. Participants also expressed feeling safe to disclose their multicultural identity when they detected low risks of racial identity threat. The specific mechanisms that assisted the shift from negative to positive perception as well as the conditions necessary to reproduce such attitudes in other multicultural children should be thoroughly examined.

South Korea underwent a dramatic shift in its educational emphasis. A system that once advanced nationalistic and/or monocultural values now champions multiculturalism and global citizenship education (Moon 2010; Moon and Koo 2011). Moon and Koo (2011), for example, discovered these new emphases in their analysis of social studies and ethics textbooks in South Korean primary and secondary schools. They found that while national citizenship themes weakened, themes of global citizenship, including multicultural and human rights education, dramatically strengthened. Yet, there is little evidence suggesting that these changes in the national curricula penetrate classrooms and lead to less prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes in Korean students. On the contrary, our research illustrates that stigmatization and discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity remain pervasive in Korean schools. Consequently, multicultural children navigating life in the homogenous society of South Korea often feel pressured to conceal or reject their minority ethnic identity. Additionally, as demonstrated by our findings, teachers’ attitudes often become a salient contributor for the adjustment or maladjustment of multicultural children. Teachers’ discriminatory treatment of multicultural children is continually reported and such negative attitudes abate reluctantly even with the strengthening emphases on multiculturalism and human rights in textbooks (Kim, S. K. and Kim, L. 2012, 248; Hong 2010, 388). Further studies, we argue, need to investigate the sources of decoupling between what Korean students are taught and what they actually learn in the classroom.
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Stigma and the Pressure to Racially “Pass”


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