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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Changing Self-Identifications Through Trans-Contextual Migration Experiences? – A Case Study of Multiethnic and Multiracial Japanese in Japan and Beyond‡‡

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Abstract

This study argues that trans-contextual migration experiences can lead to various changes in self-identification among multiethnic and multiracial Japanese individuals. This case study examines in-depth interviews with six participants with roots in Japan, Thailand, and Germany through a narrative-based approach. The authors discusses the dynamic relationship between contextual and individual factors in influencing self-identification. Through thematic analysis of participant narratives, this exploratory case study identifies four recurring themes; migration can trigger significant changes in self-identification; migration can lead to unresolved mismatches between self-identification and societal categorisation; migration can result in the development of hybrid identifications that transcend rigid ethnic boundaries; and migration to a third cultural context can validate self-identifications in new ways. By examining themes that emerged from participant narratives, this case study illuminates the fluid and complex nature of multiethnic and multiracial self-identifications, particularly how racialisation processes intersect with ethnic identity formation across different national contexts. The study contributes to the growing scholarship on mixedness by emphasizing the importance of a biographical understanding of multiethnic and multiracial self-identifications through the lens of trans-contextual migration experiences.

Keywords: self-identification; trans-contextual migration; mixedness; multi-ethnic; multiracial Japanese; narrative-based approach

Introduction

In Japanese society, the sight of so-called '*hafu*' (Jap: ハーフ; lit. half) – referring to individuals with multiethnic and multiracial[1] Japanese parentage – has become more and more common, primarily

[1]The terminology surrounding mixed heritage reflects complex intersections of race and ethnicity that vary across national contexts. Following Osanami Törngren and Sato (2021), this study employs both 'multiethnic' and 'multiracial' to acknowledge that participants navigate both ethnic and racialised categorisations. While ethnicity often emphasises cultural, linguistic, and national affiliations, racialisation processes assign meaning to phenotypical characteristics and ancestral origins (Bashi Treitler, Vilna 2020). In the Japanese context, concepts of '*jinshu*' (race) and '*minzoku*' (ethnicity/people) have been historically influenced by Western racial ideologies while operating through distinct cultural logics (Kawai 2015; Baber 2023). This study recognises that participants experience both ethnic categorisation and racialisation processes, often simultaneously, as they navigate different national contexts.

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Table 1. List of interviewees

Name	Sex	Age	Father	Mother	Past places of living	Current Residence
Kenji	M	20	Japanese	Thai	Japan and Thailand	Japan
Fah	F	28	Japanese	Thai	Japan and Thailand	Thailand
Ken	M	19	Japanese	German	Japan and Germany	Germany
Karina	F	26	Japanese	German	Japan and Germany	Germany
Nina	F	23	German	Japanese	Japan and Germany	Germany
Kaori	F	25	American	Japanese	Japan and Thailand	Thailand

through increased representation in media and advertisements. According to the national census, 2 per cent of children born in Japan in 2022 had one Japanese and one non-Japanese parent (The Japanese Government 2022). While this number makes the multiethnic and multiracial Japanese population relatively small, it nonetheless signals Japan's increasing interdependence and interconnections with the outside world. On a larger scale, globalisation has increased the international mobility of individuals and contacts between people of different cultures, religions, ethnicities, and races, resulting in families and individuals with multiethnic and multiracial heritage becoming more prevalent in many societies.

Japan has long portrayed itself as a 'monoethnic' state without significant racial or ethnic minorities (Befu 2001; Lie 2001; Liu-Farrer 2020), though this narrative obscures the historical and ongoing racialisation of various groups, including the Burakumin, Ainu, Okinawans, and Zainichi Koreans and Chinese (Baber 2023; Park 2017). 'Japaneseness', the understanding of who is Japanese, is based on a strict us-them binary and conflates race, ethnicity, national origin, and culture (Sugimoto 1999). One is accepted as fully Japanese only if they possess a 'pure' Japanese bloodline, have a Japanese physical appearance and name, and speak and behave like Japanese (Sato 2021). The dichotomisation of belonging is most clearly visible in Japan, where many scholars have observed a strictly binary categorisation between Japanese and foreigners (Arudō 2015; Kamada 2009; Kashiwazaki 2009; Osanami Törngren and Sato 2021; Shimoji 2018). Nevertheless, processes of racialisation and the systematic othering of non-dominant groups have been obscured throughout modern Japanese history (Baber 2023), making it particularly difficult for individuals who are not perceived as phenotypically distinct to claim alternative identities while simultaneously constraining those with visible differences from accessing full acceptance as Japanese (Park 2017).

In Japan, multiethnic and multiracial individuals are generally defined as individuals born to a Japanese and a foreign parent. *Hāfu*, deriving from the English term 'half,' is the most common label to denote these individuals. For decades, Japanese TV shows and magazines have created the mainstream image of *hāfu* as individuals with European-heritage backgrounds, a racial background celebrated for the cosmopolitan image and benchmark of beauty in Japanese society (Iwabuchi 2014; Okamura 2017). This leads to a situation where, while multiracial individuals whose difference is marked by phenotype and name face difficulty in gaining acceptance of their Japanese identity, multiethnic individuals whose differences are invisible have constraints in claiming their mixed identity (Osanami Törngren and Sato 2021: 811).

Against this backdrop, the last decades have seen a large body of literature on mixedness emerging worldwide. Where theories and concepts from the United States have long dominated global discussion, many scholars have begun to emphasise the importance of contextuality (Childs 2018; King-O'Riain *et al.* 2014; Osanami Törngren *et al.* 2021), the need to shed light on the experiences of non-Western multiethnic individuals (Haritaworn 2009; Rocha 2018; Rondilla *et al.* 2017), as well as the importance of contrasting the experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals in two or more contexts (Gilliéron 2022; Osanami Törngren 2022).

However, few studies have explored how migration experiences influence multiethnic and multiracial individuals' identifications. While it is true that many, if not most, multiethnic and multiracial

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individuals spend their lives in a single country, many experience migration, having moved between the countries of their parents' origin, or from and to a third country for familial reasons or education/work. This paper introduces the concept of 'trans-contextual migration[2]' as a theoretical framework to analyse these complex migration experiences and their extensive impacts on changes in self-identification. By studying the narratives of multiethnic and multiracial Japanese who experienced migration, this paper addresses an important gap in the literature on mixedness studies, which have seldom considered how migration experiences can trigger profound changes among individuals with multiethnic and multiracial backgrounds.

Based on the interviewees' narratives, this paper suggests that a) migration experiences can lead to incisive changes in how the interviewees identified themselves; b) migration experiences can lead to difficulties in navigating the mismatch in one's self-identification; c) migration experiences can result in the acquisition of an alternative identification transcending the boundaries of ethnic categories; and d) migration to a third cultural context can have multiethnic and multiracial individuals' identifications validated in new ways. This echoes the characterisations of mixed identities as established by Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002) or Rocha (2016) but extends these frameworks by scrutinizing how changes in context impact the process of self-identification. It is also worth noting that changes in ethnic self-identification can occur due to a variety of factors, including parental or social influences, education, and legal status, among others. The authors would also like to emphasise that the narrative-based approach taken in this study allows for a more intimate and personal methodology that respects individual agency and storytelling while revealing nuances in ways that quantitative methods cannot capture.

Literature Review: Global Mixedness, Contextualities, and Migration

Scholars have been studying global similarities and differences in experiences and ideas of mixedness (Childs 2018; King-O' Riain *et al.* 2014; Osanami Törngren 2022; Osanami Törngren *et al.* 2021; Rocha 2018). Some studies have also shown that, regardless of localities, multiethnic and multiracial individuals can oscillate between identifying with the majority group and minority group and that this positionality leads to their experiences and identities often occupying spaces of being "either-or," "in-betweenness," "both-and," or "neither-nor"; furthermore, these experiences depend on both contextual and individual factors (Osanami Törngren *et al.* 2021).

One of the individual factors is the (in)visibility of mixedness through phenotype and name. Several scholars (Osanami Törngren 2018, 2020, 2022; Osanami Törngren and Sato 2021; Pilgrim 2021; Reddy 2019; Rodríguez-García *et al.* 2021; Sims 2016; Song and Aspinall 2012) have argued that others ascribe multiethnic and multiracial individuals' specific identities based on the visibility of mixedness, causing a mismatch that multiethnic and multiracial individuals may experience between self-identification and ascribed categorisation. Multiethnic and multiracial individuals with visibly distinct phenotypical markers, in particular, continue to be othered from the majority group, either as visibly mixed, or misread as part of a minority group (Fresnoza-Flot 2019; Gilliéron 2022). Different individual factors, including race, gender, religious affiliation, national origin, or socio-economic status, also create a hierarchy of mixedness, such as which mixing is more "desirable" and which is not (Childs 2018).

The discussion has also focused on contextual factors that cause global differences in multiethnic and multiracial individuals' experiences. For example, the criteria for being regarded as 'multiethnic', 'multiracial' or 'mixed' vary across societies. Studies based in the United States, where the scholarship has initially developed, regarded race as the criterion for being mixed, but studies outside this context have pointed out that other criteria—such as ethnicity or religion—can also be markers of

[2]The authors decided to use the term 'trans-contextual migration' to emphasise the contextuality of migration experiences. In this study, the term is mainly used to refer to migration experiences between two countries. At the same time, as presented below, the authors also acknowledges that 'trans-contextual migration' does not necessarily have to occur transnationally.

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mixedness (Morning 2000, 2014; Osanami Törngren *et al.* 2021; Rocha 2018; Song 2021). The terminologies of mixedness and the meanings attached to them are also different around the world. While some countries, such as Japan, have terminologies that denote multiethnic and multiracial identity (Osanami Törngren 2022; Osanami Törngren and Sato 2021), others, like Australia and Sweden, lack such terminologies officially, which affects multiethnic and multiracial individuals' experiences and identities (Fozdar 2022; Guy 2018; Osanami Törngren 2022).

While existing research has compared different contextualities, few studies have explored trans-contextual experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals. However, studying the trans-contextual experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals strongly resonates with key concepts in the study of transnationalism. The idea of individuals existing in and navigating multiple cultural contexts and across national borders aligns with the understanding of transmigrants as people who build social fields that link their country of origin and their country of settlement (Glick Schiller et al. 1992). One of the recent studies based on this understanding is by Chito Childs (2021), who elaborated this concept by studying New York City as a "translocational" space where American discourses on race and ethnicity collide with the high mobility of its native and foreign inhabitants. She argues that multiethnic and multiracial individuals' identity choices are influenced not only by one's social environment, but also by overseas family ties and discourses on ethnicity and race in respective localities. Fresnoza-Flot (2019: 141) similarly argued that multiethnic and multiracial children exist in "cross-border social spaces" and are enmeshed in multiple cultural contexts, thus requiring an approach that goes beyond singular localities. These studies resonate with Yeoh, Willis, and Fakhri's (2003) understanding that "multiple possibilities of combining 'here' and 'there' (…) astride boundaries and across ever-widening distances and spaces – is central to understandings of social life in a globalizing world". Understanding the experiences of mixed individuals in cross-border contexts is essential for gaining a comprehensive picture of their experiences and seems more timely than ever, given the increasing prevalence of transnational mobility in the human experience.

Where the previously presented studies have focused on trans-contextual experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals in a single space, other studies have explored the intersection of multiethnic and multiracial identity and migration. Kazuyo Suzuki (2011) interviewed a pair of multiethnic Japanese-Indonesian siblings who moved from Japan to Indonesia at 16 and 14, respectively. Suzuki analysed the impact of the move on both siblings' identity formation process and found that, besides the social environments at the country of departure and the destination, the acquisition of the Indonesian language as well as the age at which the individuals moved into the new context played significant roles in structuring both siblings' identity choices. Similarly, Tamaki Watarai (2014) examined how multiracial Japanese-Brazilian women experience racialisation and identity formation in the process of moving from Brazil to Japan and becoming *'hāfu'* (mixed) models.

These studies indicate that migration experiences can be related to the self-identification of multiethnic and multiracial individuals and underline the importance and necessity of looking at the experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals through a trans-contextual lens. This approach echoes the understanding of transnationalism as a "type of consciousness" (Vertovec 1999) where individuals maintain multiple attachments and identities that link them simultaneously to more than one nation. With Fresnoza-Flot's (2019) approach to seeing multiethnic and multiracial individuals as "enmeshed in multiple cultural contexts," a more holistic picture of their self-identification emerges, considering both individual and contextual factors in shaping them. This paper contributes to this growing body of research by exploring the lived experiences of six multiethnic and multiracial Japanese with migration experiences who, at the time of the interviews, resided in Japan, Thailand, and Germany. By focusing on their narratives, the study aims to illuminate how their migration experiences shape their complex self-identifications across different environments.

Understanding multiethnic and multiracial identity formation requires acknowledging how racialisation processes operate across different national contexts. Bashi Treitler, Vilna (2020) demonstrates that race and ethnicity are interconnected constructs that transform through social

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and political processes, with "ethnic projects" often serving to reconfigure racial boundaries. In the Asian context, Chou and Feagin (2008) reveal how model minority myths and racialisation processes shape identity negotiations for individuals of Asian heritage, particularly in transnational contexts.

Recent scholarship on Japan specifically challenges notions of ethnic homogeneity by examining racialisation processes within Japanese society. Baber (2023) argues that class and race function as "antinomic poles of a permanent dialectic," revealing how racialisation, racism, and resistance operate within supposedly homogeneous contexts. Similarly, Park (2017) demonstrates how immigration control and xenophobia in Japan rely on racialised constructions of belonging that extend beyond phenotypical markers to include cultural and linguistic expectations.

Methodology: Narratives Approach

As a conceptual basis, the authors chose to focus on 'narratives' emerging from interviewees' accounts of their experiences. Narratives provide a deeper understanding of how storytellers interpret and experience the world (Riessman 2005), allowing the multiethnic and multiracial individuals' changing self-identifications to be studied without oversimplification or quantification. Götsch and Palmberger (2022) emphasise that ethnographic narratives are by their nature co-created, reflecting perspectives of both tellers and listeners, shaped by context, audience, and cultural norms. Narratives provide coherence to otherwise chaotic events, linking past, present, and future while bridging private and public spheres.

Following Fraser's (2004) approach to narrative analysis, this multiple case study compares and contrasts participant narratives to identify recurring themes across individual experiences. Rather than seeking generalisable patterns, this exploratory study aims to illuminate the complexity and diversity of identity negotiations through detailed case analysis. The small sample size of six participants enables intensive examination of individual narratives while acknowledging the limitations of exploratory thematic analysis in making broader claims about population-level phenomena. Acknowledging this difficulty, the authors chose to label the commonalities in the narrative data as 'common themes'. These themes emerged as a result of the narrative inquiries, as it was anticipated that an open conversation would yield more informative answers than pre-determined questions (Foxall *et al.* 2021).

The first author's background as a multiracial Japanese-German residing in Thailand has shaped the direction of this study and provided the impetus to explore whether Japanese-Thai multiethnic individuals' experiences differ from those of multiracial individuals with phenotypical characteristics associated with European ancestry. The contexts chosen for this study – Japan, Germany, and Thailand- correspond with the author's own heritage, and Thailand was the country of his residence before beginning the research. The first author understands that his experiences of being multiethnic and multiracial Japanese and having migrated several times greatly influence the practical aspects of this study. However, this connection between personal experiences of mixedness and those of other multiethnic and multiracial Japanese individuals contributed substantially to the advancement of interviews. Following Paragg's (2014) autobiographic study on multiethnic researcher positionality, which analyzes the complex relationship between researcher and research participants in a setting where both parties share multiethnic and multiracial traits, the author interpreted the interviewees' narratives through his own experiences. This allowed more profound insight into the stories of multiethnic and multiracial Japanese and their migration experiences while highlighting the importance of subjectivity and co-creation in this research process.

This exploratory case study examines the experiences of multiethnic and multiracial Japanese individuals who have undergone trans-contextual migration, employing a multiple case study design to enable deep engagement with individual narratives. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with six multiethnic and multiracial Japanese individuals conducted between 2021 and 2023. Participants for the study were selected based on two criteria: first, the interviewees must be

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multiethnic and multiracial Japanese individuals, and second, they must have experienced trans-contextual migration. Questions that the interviewees were asked as part of the semi-structured interviews included inquiries about their personal histories and how they self-identified at a specific point in their biographical timeline. Primarily, though, the majority of the interview time was structured in a way to allow for an open exploration of their experiences by using open-ended questions. The small sample size was determined by both practical constraints (limitations due to the COVID-19 pandemic) and methodological considerations, allowing for a more detailed analysis of individual narratives rather than quantitative synthesis. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, while social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) were also utilised to contact potential participants. The interviews were conducted in either Thai, Japanese, or both languages, depending on the interviewees' preferences. The first author is fluent in both languages. All the participants' names have been changed for privacy reasons.[3] Table 1 below shows a list of the interviewees:

Multiethnic and Multiracial Narratives of Self-identification through Trans-Contextual Migration Experiences

Being and becoming Thai or Japanese

Kenji: *"I realised my Thainess in Japan"*

Migration experiences can result in a complete change in self-identification for multiethnic and multiracial individuals. Kenji was born to a Japanese father and a Thai mother in Japan and was sent to live with his relatives in Southern Thailand at a young age. After completing elementary school, his mother brought him back to Japan. In Southern Thailand, he remembers instances where his light complexion led to bullying by his peers, who had significantly darker skin. Since only a few foreigners were in the region, he stood out, but he also used his uniqueness to his advantage and became popular in school. However, after moving back to Japan, his differences vanished, and he blended in with his surroundings, which profoundly impacted him since he disliked being ordinary and always wanted to stand out among his peers: "When I came to Japan, I had the opposite feeling, I don't know, when I looked at other people, I thought, "Oh, they're all *just* Japanese, but I'm Thai."

His story illustrates how, in Japan, his multiethnic identity was invalidated since his mixedness was invisible, but in Thailand, it was recognised due to the visibility of mixedness. The visibility of mixedness resulted from racialised treatment due to his phenotypical markers being perceived as different in the local Thai environment. In Japan, then, he was misidentified as Japanese, obscuring his self-identification as being mixed. It also shows how the fact that he was visible as a multiethnic person was not necessarily unwanted or negative but was the most important marker of distinction (Song 2020). It demonstrates how the visibility and invisibility of mixedness can influence how others categorise multiethnic individuals and how their self-identification (Japanese or mixed) is either validated or invalidated (Osanami Törngren and Sato 2021). It also shows how the visibility and invisibility of mixedness can change through the trans-contextual migration of multiethnic individuals. Kenji initially struggled with communication in Japanese, but he found solace in befriending other Western and multiethnic students at his school, which motivated him to learn English rather than Japanese. Here, it can be seen that the raciolinguistic expectations of him to speak Japanese (Tsai *et al.* 2024) further invalidated his self-identification as Japanese, prompting him to find an alternative self-identification. Unable to take advantage of his mixedness in Japan, he discovered a new

[3] A proxy name has been chosen for each interviewee based on the name they used throughout the interview. Some interviewees had a first name in two languages but preferred to use only one of them in daily interactions. Therefore, if a Japanese first name was used, the first author assigned an equivalent proxy name in Japanese. For Thai names, as in the case of Fah, it is very common to use a nickname in daily interactions, not the legal first name. This nickname can be derived from the legal name, but can also be based on other factors. As Fah used her Thai nickname in the interview, the first author assigned an equivalent name that is a commonly used nickname in Thailand.

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approach to connecting with his environment. By surrounding himself with other foreign and multiethnic students, Kenji established a 'place' where he felt comfortable. He realised his 'differences' from other Japanese students in Japan, confirming his self-identification as Thai even though he saw himself as more Japanese in Thailand.

Fah: *"A normal Thai child"*

Fah also underwent a drastic change in self-identification due to her trans-contextual moving experience; unlike Kenji, she adapted her self-identification to the majority population in both Japan and Thailand. Fah was born to a Japanese father and a Thai mother in Japan and lived there since she was in 3rd grade. When her parents separated, she was sent to live with her relatives in rural Northern Thailand. She remembers how, in Japan, she did not stand out among her peers or encounter any discrimination due to her multiethnic identity. Fah attributes this to her physical similarities to other children and the fact that she spoke Japanese exclusively with both her parents. Moving to Thailand caused a significant disruption in her early life. She was suddenly placed in an entirely Thai environment, where she initially struggled with the language. Nevertheless, she quickly adapted to life in Thailand and recalls not having encountered significant instances of exclusion during her time in school. "It's like my life has completely changed. Before, I used to only speak Japanese, but then I only spoke Thai. At first, when my mother called, we would talk in Japanese. But gradually, I started using Thai to communicate with my mother. I would use Japanese very little. I didn't listen, speak, read, or write anything about Japanese at all." This flexibility and tolerance she experienced in Thailand can be partly explained by the strong emphasis on cultural factors that define who is considered Thai and who is not[4]. Fah did not perceive people recognizing her Japanese name as foreign in Thailand as inherently negative or challenging her Thai identity. This treatment by others allowed her to feel like a "normal Thai child," and she identifies as Thai.

Despite both participants being of Japanese and Thai descent, their self-identifications significantly differ. Kenji identified himself as more Japanese in Thailand, but moving to Japan led him to identify as more Thai. Because while his physical appearance initially led him to feel "different" in Thailand, which he then used to his advantage to stand out in Thailand, in Japan, his multiethnic identity became invisible. He struggled to fit in with others in his environment. Fah identified herself as Japanese in Japan and Thai in Thailand because her physical appearance allowed her to identify as such in Japan. At the same time, cultural and behavioural aspects did so in Thailand. Fah's experiences also underscore Tsai *et al.*'s (2024) argument that language practices may influence perceptions of one's racial/ethnic identity, especially with individuals who have a racially ambiguous appearance. Their stories show that changes in self-identification may sometimes be drastic, with changes in how others perceive multiethnic individuals, changes in ethnic/racial schemas, and changes in the people with whom they interact as a result of migration being of great importance.

Realizing the Invalidation of Japanese Self-identification through Migration

Karina: *"I am not accepted as Japanese"*

Migration experiences can also cause a mismatch when multiethnic and multiracial individuals experience rejection of their identification claim in a heritage society. Karina, who has a Japanese

[4]This emphasis on cultural factors can be best seen in the example of how the Thai government views multiethnic and multiracial individuals. Nowadays, it actively targets mixed Thais born or grown up overseas through awarding Thai citizenship and supporting cultural initiatives like 'homecoming' activities, which aim at introducing Thai culture, history, and society to children of Thai origin or of mixed parentage. This corresponds to the view overseas Thai migrants have of their mixed children as "in the process of becoming Thai" (Fresnoza-Flot 2019). This implies a general willingness to accept mixed individuals as being Thai on a cultural basis, though this does not exempt them from various forms of othering (ibid.).

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father and a German mother and who has experienced living both in Germany and Japan, thinks she was treated as an outsider in both countries. Karina was born and raised in Japan until the age of six and grew up in Germany from age six onwards. She then moved back to Japan, where she took a gap year during her university studies. Karina recalls her initial move to Germany when she was six years old as traumatic, but her move back to Japan occurred on her initiative. Growing up in Germany, she experienced occasional instances of being treated as an outsider due to her coming from Japan, with other children at school making fun of her using ethnic stereotypes or pointing out differences in physical features. Nevertheless, she gradually immersed herself in her German environment, aided by her father's refusal to speak in Japanese to her. The comparatively diverse nature of contemporary German society allows people with diverse ethnic backgrounds to be categorised as German to some extent. However, after reconnecting with her Japanese relatives while in high school, her interest in the Japanese language and culture reawakened, leading her to move to Japan: "I really felt that I carry a Japanese part in me and that I want to live it out."

After moving to Japan as an adult, Karina became aware of how people treated her differently. Despite constantly receiving compliments for her looks and Japanese speaking abilities, she sensed a constant underlying suggestion that she was a foreigner. People would often switch to English when she was speaking in Japanese. She gradually started questioning whether compliments on her looks and Japanese language abilities were sincere or offered because she was a foreigner, which frustrated her: "[…] there were repeated phases of 'why do people talk to me in English though I am Japanese, why do people tell me I can use chopsticks well when I am doing that since I was born, why do people tell me that I speak Japanese well when I just greet them'[…]." "[…] I know people didn't mean it in a bad way, but in that moment, it wasn't a compliment anymore […] or I was thinking about how to tell them nicely how I am feeling without completely losing it." (Interviewer or the first author: "*Did you want to be perceived as being Japanese?*") "Yes, because I felt that way and saw myself that way (*as being Japanese*)."

While migration and intermarriage have been more widespread in Germany over the past few decades, Japan remains comparatively conservative. Multiracial individuals like Karina, especially those with phenotypic characteristics associated with European ancestry, are often automatically categorised as foreigners, as the contemporary conception of 'Japaneseness', which regards racial purity as a constitutive element, does not allow them to be seen as Japanese. At the same time, the fact that Karina had to re-learn Japanese after her father stopped speaking to her in Japanese led to racial questioning and exclusion (Tsai *et al.* 2024). Being treated as a foreigner caused frustration and confusion, and sensitised Karina to the issue of identity and mixedness. These feelings endured even after she eventually returned to Germany. The frustrating mismatch between wanting to be seen as Japanese and being identified as a foreigner left her with unresolved questions about her self-identification.

Cultivating Self-identification beyond 'Either/or' through Migration

Nina: *"I am who I am"*

Migration has caused some individuals to identify with one culture strongly. Still, for others, it has led to the cultivation of a multiracial or liminal identity detached from a binary of 'either-or.' Nina, who has a German father and a Japanese mother, grew up in Germany between two culturally distinctive environments. On one side, she experienced instances of othering by her German peers based on ethnic stereotypes or when she brought Japanese lunchboxes to her German school. On the other side, she also attended a Japanese Saturday school (*hoshūkō*) where her mixedness did not stand out among her multiethnic and multiracial Japanese peers but made her aware of her distinctiveness whenever she encountered 'fully Japanese' children of expat workers who attended the

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regular Japanese international school. "[jokingly) I hated the *zennichi*[5] children so much. I still hate them with all my heart."

Nina often tried to fit in with her German peers because of the othering experiences she faced, though in Japanese school, she retained a strong sense of 'Japaneseness': "In the German school, I think I wanted to be German. I didn't like to be told that I am different […] I think I really didn't like to be treated like I am different." When she temporarily moved to Tokyo after finishing high school for two internships, she found a different environment from what she was used to. After experiencing a conservative, male-dominated workplace at her first internship, she found an open-minded, cosmopolitan environment at the second company, where she was not seen as particularly Japanese or German. She recounts how her co-workers valued her mixedness, and she felt comfortable for the entirety of her stay. Also, outside of work, people did not see her as different; foreigners and multiethnic/multiracial people were a common sight in urban Tokyo, and they saw her as "Nina" rather than Japanese or German. She describes how she took this mindset back to Germany and how this experience helped her resolve the "tug of war" between her Japanese and German sides, and how she now sees herself as "herself," not "either-or": "The tug of war between Germany and Japan in me calmed down a bit because I got many experiences. […] (*I felt like*) it doesn't matter which side, I am me."

Ken: *"I am the way I grew up"*

Ken was born to a Japanese father and a German mother, and he grew up in a suburban environment in Japan before moving to Germany for one year in elementary school following the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. He then moved back to Japan before returning to Germany during senior high school. Ken told the first author how he "became German" and how he could live out his German side upon moving to Germany for the first time. However, after moving back to Japan, he could not fit in with Japanese society. He felt that in Japan, he could not be himself due to the societal pressure towards conformity and discipline, and, thus, subsequently took a rebellious stance, emphasizing his 'Germanness' wherever he could. Moving to Germany for the second time, he experienced culture shock. He became more aware of his Japanese side and needed time to adjust to the new environment. Upon realizing that he was "not completely German," he now sees himself as "himself," not particularly Japanese or German: "I am the way I grew up."

Resolving the Mismatch between Self- and Ascribed Identification in a Third Country

Kaori: *"I am a foreigner, and people see me as a foreigner"*

One of the participants experienced moving from her country of heritage to a third country where she initially had no connection. Kaori, with Japanese and white American parentage, shared with the interviewer how their migration to Thailand resolved a mismatch between her self-identification and the ascribed categorisation she experienced before her move. Kaori moved from Japan to Thailand after completing her undergraduate studies, having spent a previous exchange year there. She also recalls being treated specially in Japan for being multiracial: "I will probably never be seen as Japanese-Japanese." Being categorised as the "other" was solely based on her appearance, at times leading to severe bullying, at times to adoration or even envy. Particularly in elementary school, she experienced extensive bullying based on her distinctiveness, which turned over into jealousy or sometimes admiration in middle high school, coinciding with the rise of multiethnic and multiracial celebrities and talents at the time. She feels happy and comfortable in Thailand because she is seen as a foreigner and identifies as one. Kaori also feels proud of being Japanese and introduces herself as such to connect with cultural similarities between Japan and Thailand.

[5]Students who went to the *Zennnichikō*, the regular Japanese school following the Japanese government curriculum. Mostly 'fully Japanese' children from expat families attend this school on weekdays, as preparation for a seamless reintegration into the Japanese school system after returning to Japan

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She no longer feels burdened by the "stupid American"[6] stereotype and is relieved to be seen as Japanese.

Discussion

Looking at the narratives that emerged throughout the interviews, it became clear that both contextual and individual factors (Osanami Törngren *et al*. 2021) contribute to the change in self-identification experienced by multiethnic and multiracial individuals due to migration. Four common themes emerged from the narratives of the interviewees: a) migration experiences can lead to incisive changes in how the interviewees identified themselves; b) migration experiences can lead to difficulties in navigating the mismatch in one's self-identification; c) migration experiences can result in the acquisition of an alternative self-identification transcending the boundaries of ethnic categories; and d) migration to a third cultural context can have multiethnic and multiracial individuals' self-identifications validated in new ways. At the same time, the complex interplay between contextual and individual factors could be thoroughly observed.

Contextual factors refer to changes in national ethnic/racial schemata in different countries, which can influence how people from outside categorise multiethnic and multiracial individuals. Individual factors include the visibility or invisibility of mixedness, language abilities, and the age at which the individual experienced migration. For instance, when multiethnic and multiracial individuals move to another heritage country at an early age, they may more easily develop identification with the other heritage culture. Visibility of mixedness also impacts self-identification; when multiethnic and multiracial individuals' mixedness is visible, their self-identification as a member of the majority population is often invalidated, while when multiethnic and multiracial individuals' mixedness is invisible, their self-identification as multiethnic or multiracial may be invalidated (Osanami Törngren 2018, 2020, 2022; Osanami Törngren and Sato 2021; Pilgrim 2021; Reddy 2019; Rodríguez-García *et al*. 2021; Sims 2016; Song and Aspinall 2012). Language abilities and raciolinguistic ideologies also play a pivotal role in this equation, as migration experiences can put individuals into new cultural environments that expect them to speak/not speak the local language based on their expectations of language practices (Tsai *et al*. 2024).

The first common theme, that migration experiences can lead to incisive changes in how the interviewees identified themselves, can be seen in the cases of Kenji and Fah, whose migration experiences led to drastic changes in how they identified themselves. Kenji grew up in an environment where he could use his 'Japaneseness' to validate his own identity despite his experiences of being othered. As argued by Fresnoza-Flot (2019) earlier, multiethnic and multiracial individuals may be othered based on phenotypical differences and lacking Thai language skills and cultural knowledge (Fresnoza-Flot 2019). Still, the less racialised and more culturally pronounced boundaries of 'Thainess' allow for more wiggle room to express one's Thai- or foreign-ness. Kenji was, therefore, able to assert his 'Japaneseness' within the boundaries of 'being Thai,' despite being othered as visibly distinct from his peers. This multi-layered self-identification became defunct once he moved to Japan. The strong binary nature of Japanese narratives on belonging pushed him to 'be Japanese,' at least phenotypically, leaving little space to assert another self-identification (Sato 2024). His mixedness was 'invisibilised,' as argued earlier. Nonetheless, in contrast to these contextual factors, he found his own 'safe space' within his school environment, connecting with others with more complex self-identifications (e.g., foreign or other multiethnic and multiracial individuals). For Fah, the interplay of contextual factors and the age at which she experienced migration can be seen clearly. She moved to Thailand at a young age and rapidly immersed herself in the environment to the point where she saw herself as a 'normal Thai' just like her peers. As Kazuyo

[6]Kaori used this term to refer to her perception of stereotypes directed towards American and other Western tourists or expats in Thailand who live in Thailand without speaking the local language or caring about local customs. She felt that such a view existed in her Thai environment at the time she was living there.

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(2011) has argued, the age at which migration occurs plays a significant role in this case. Moving at a young age, where Fah's identity formation process was more sensitive to contextual factors, certainly played a significant role in her ability to adapt to her new environment. At the same time, the cultural nature of Thai identity, with a common language, common religion, and shared allegiance to the monarchy, is held up as the constitutive pillars of 'Thainess', as argued by Keyes (2008) and Thongchai (1994), allowed for Fah to 'become Thai.' Both Kenji and Fah's cases can be used to illustrate the complex interplay between contextual and individual factors in connection to changing self-identification.

For Karina and Ken, who both bear Japanese and German heritage, the interplay of contextual factors and age also illuminates their narratives. Both initially moved from Japan to Germany at a young age and recall 'becoming German' over time. Looking more closely at their experiences in Germany, the analysis reveals a different logic behind the narrative of belonging in Germany. Here, national identity was historically perceived as being based on common German ancestry (O'Donnell *et al.* 2005), similar to Japan. Even in the present, Germany still considers itself a monoracial state in which 'whiteness' serves as a key ingredient to defining 'Germanness', with a general reluctance to consider non-white individuals as fully German (Kim 2021). German society generally places these individuals into an ethno-religious hierarchy, which subordinates not only first but also second-generation immigrants who are discriminated against based on ethnic and religious stereotypes (Çelik 2015). Compared to Thailand, more explicit integrationist discourses play a significant role in mapping out minority positionalities. In this hierarchy, some groups of migrants are considered more 'integrated' than others, based on cultural similarities and ethnic stereotypes (Kim 2021). For multiethnic and multiracial individuals, this means that some might experience more othering than others, depending on the degree to which they are seen as well-integrated into German society. Karina and Ken moved to Germany, and while occasional othering occurred, they were gradually integrated into their everyday German environment that 'made them more German,' thus allowing for the 'acquisition' of a German self-identification. Migrating back to Japan made both subject to the more explicitly racialised and ethnicised discourse of 'Japaneseness'. Both Karina and Ken similarly described how they experienced intense othering in Japan due to the visibility of their mixedness. Still, their move back to Germany resulted in two very different impacts on their self-identification. All four cases also highlight that changing national narratives of belonging due to trans-contextual moves significantly influenced the interviewees' self-identification.

The second common theme was that migration experiences are not necessarily definitive and can lead to failure to resolve the mismatch in one's self-identification. Karina's case highlights this in particular. Her enmeshment in multiple cultural contexts (Fresnoza-Flot 2019) and the invalidation of her self-identification as being Japanese in Japan left her questioning herself even after moving back to Germany. Her case also shows that migration experiences do not lead to definitive changes in self-identification, nor is the self-identification of multiethnic and multiracial individuals necessarily a timed process with a clear end. For some, as in Karina's case, the question of where to belong and how to see oneself in a different context might remain unresolved, demonstrating the non-causality of the migration-identification relationship. This is especially important to remember, as many multiethnic and multiracial individuals not only migrate once in their lives but may encounter multiple instances of migration. With time and different contextualities, one's process of acquiring a particular self-identification might be validated or altered to a different degree. Most interviewees' cases here show how they migrated between different cultural contexts more than one time, and this might also be the case for the larger general population of multiethnic and multiracial individuals in other environments. Thus, one should be careful in establishing a causal relationship between migration experiences and self-identification changes, as the case of Karina shows that self-identification struggles might remain unresolved for the time being or – potentially forever.

The third common theme was that migration experiences can result in acquiring an alternative self-identification, transcending the boundaries of ethnic categories, as seen in Ken's and Nina's cases.

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Oikawa and Yoshida (2007: 644) also call this the "Unique Me" identification, and it is also closely tied to Rockquemore's (1998: 201) "Transcendent Identity." Both narratives showcase the acquisition of an alternative self-identification by positioning oneself as not bound to a single cultural context. Ken described himself as being "I am the way I grew up," finding a resolution in his self-identification resulting from his biographical process of being enmeshed in both the German and Japanese cultural contexts. After several migration experiences between the countries and going through several phases of different self-identifications, he ultimately was able to settle for a self-identification that included being neither German nor Japanese but simply being 'himself.' This partially correlates with the findings by Osanami Törngren and Sato (2021: 815), where they found that some multiethnic and multiracial Japanese interviewees described themselves "without any reference to their racial and ethnic background, and instead, self-identify as a human being" as a way to resist identity categories. Similarly, a study by Erica Chito Childs *et al.* (2021) found that their interviewees created conceptualisations of themselves that were not limited to their cultural backgrounds but evolved into hybrid identities. While these studies showcase how some multiethnic and multiracial individuals prefer to identify themselves with alternative terminologies, they still do so in a somewhat linear conceptualisation of ethnic self-identifications, where hybridity and acts of resistance against categorisation are seen as part of their ethnic identity. They fail to explain, though, how individuals like Ken do ultimately not describe themselves within the framework of ethnic self-identifications but instead use a biographical conceptualisation of their identity. This paper suggests that changing self-identifications does not necessarily have to happen within the constraints of ethnic identity. Still, that self-identification can be somewhat fluid, transcending the boundaries of ethnic categories themselves. Similar to Ken, Nina also described how she saw herself as being "herself," not "either-or," and how her experiences in Japan solved the "tug of war" between her Japanese and German sides. Thus, she found a self-identification that overcame her identity struggle between her two heritages. This also supports the argument that ethnic self-identifications might ultimately not be the most significant way for multiethnic and multiracial individuals to identify themselves.

Lastly, the fourth common theme, that migration to a third cultural context can validate multiethnic and multiracial individuals' self-identifications in new ways, can be made with both Nina's and especially Kaori's cases. For Nina, this happened within the same country; while living in Japan, she 'moved' from a rather conservative Japanese environment to a more open-minded, cosmopolitan environment where her co-workers valued her attributes of being multiethnic and multiracial, and where she was not identified as being either German or Japanese. At the same time, the multicultural environment of Tokyo also gave her the feeling that she did not have to justify her multiethnic and multiracial heritage, which in turn helped her to solve the identity struggle she had experienced previously, as mentioned previously. While in Nina's case, it was not a trans-contextual migration experience between her two heritage countries that initially contributed to the change in her self-identification, her case highlights how trans-contextual movements within national boundaries can also be incisive to developing a particular self-identification. A similar observation was made by Tanu (2018), who studied Japanese-Indonesian multiethnic youth who attended multiple schooling systems outside of Japan. Her study showed that socio-historical contexts were not always determined by national boundaries alone.

In contrast, Kaori's case highlights how trans-contextual moves to a third country unrelated to their parental heritage can also lead to changes in multiethnic and multiracial individuals' self-identifications. Having a Japanese and European-heritage multiracial background and growing up in Japan, she has experienced a mismatch between their self-identification as Japanese and others' ascription of her as non-Japanese. Moving from Japan to another Asian country allowed her to confirm her 'Japaneseness' and 'Asianness', which had previously not been acknowledged in Japan. Kaori told the first author how happy and comfortable she felt there because her self-identification as a foreigner matched how people around her saw her. She was also able to connect to her new environment by embracing her 'Japaneseness' and finding cultural similarities between Japan and Thailand. These

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findings diverge in part from traditional 'third culture kids' literature that mainly focuses on individuals who "(…) had grown up deeply interacting with two or more cultural worlds during childhood" (Pollock and Van Reken 2009). Kaori's case shows how significantly the migration to a third cultural context, even after reaching adulthood, can contribute to the changes in multiethnic and multiracial individuals' self-identifications.

The narratives reveal how racialisation processes operate differently across national contexts, supporting Bashi Treitler, Vilna (2020) argument that racial and ethnic boundaries are continuously transformed through social interaction. Participants like Kenji and Karina experienced varying degrees of racialisation based not only on phenotypical visibility but also on linguistic competence and cultural performance, reflecting what Chou and Feagin (2008) identify as the complex intersection of racial categorisation and cultural expectations in Asian contexts.

These findings demonstrate that trans-contextual migration exposes participants to different racialisation regimes, where the same individual may be read as racially marked in one context while being ethnically othered in another. This supports Baber's (2023) analysis of how racialisation operates within ostensibly homogeneous societies like Japan, where cultural and phenotypical markers intersect in complex ways to determine belonging.

Conclusion

This study looked at whether and how trans-contextual moving experiences lead to changes in self-identification for multiethnic and multiracial Japanese. The findings challenge simplistic, binary understandings of ethnic identity, demonstrating that multiethnic and multiracial individuals' self-identifications are far more fluid and complex than traditional frameworks have previously suggested. Through thematic analysis of six cases, four recurring themes emerged from participant narratives: trans-contextual migration can trigger incisive changes in self-identification, create unresolved identity tensions, enable the development of self-identifications that transcend ethnic categories, and lead to identity validation through exposure to new cultural contexts. Most importantly, the study stresses the significance of trans-contextual migration experiences for multiethnic and multiracial Japanese in forming a self-identification. While contextual factors such as national narratives of belonging and cultural boundaries significantly influence self-identification, the cases of Fah, Kenji, Ken, Karina, Nina, and Kaori highlight the intricacies of navigating these complex realms. This case study contributes to scholarship on mixedness and transnationalism by demonstrating how self-identification emerges through dynamic negotiations with racialisation processes across different national contexts. Rather than representing fixed outcomes, identity formations reflect ongoing responses to varying regimes of ethnic and racial categorisation that participants encounter through trans-contextual migration. Additionally, the study highlights the shortcomings of employing strict categorisations based on ethnicity or national narratives to comprehend the experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals and instead emphasises the importance of gaining a biographical understanding of multiethnic and multiracial self-identifications.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study does not claim to establish a causal relationship between migration experience and changes in ethnic self-identification. However, by isolating trans-contextual migration experiences from these other factors, this study aims to make a new contribution to the growing body of research on mixedness by going beyond studying multiethnic and multiracial individuals in a singular context. Instead, it proposes the exploration of the complexities that multiethnic and multiracial individuals experience in their trans-contextual entanglements based on their accounts. This research also recognises its limitations due to a) the small sample of interviewees and b) the focus on national narratives of belonging in framing the experiences of multiethnic and multiracial Japanese. For instance,

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experiences of multiethnic and multiracial individuals bearing ethnic minority roots (e.g., Ainu or Ryukyuans in Japan, Frisians or Sorbs in Germany, or Akha, Shan, and Malay communities in Thailand) could not be adequately considered. However, their experiences might differ from those of non-minority individuals. Also, this research recognises that changing self-identifications due to trans-contextual migration experiences are not a phenomenon limited to multiethnic and multiracial individuals alone; for example, Zainichi-Koreans in Japan (Chung 2010) or second-generation Turks in Germany (Çelik 2015) often go through similar experiences.

Future research should continue to explore these complex negotiations surrounding the self-identifications of individuals with culturally diverse backgrounds, mainly focusing on the role of individual agency, the impact of trans-contextual migration, and the ways multiethnic and multiracial individuals construct meaningful self-narratives across different cultural contexts. Of particular value would be research into the intersection of mixedness, trans-contextual migration, and gender, as gendered expectations across various cultural contexts likely shape self-identifications in ways this current study could not fully address. By centring the real experiences of individuals with culturally diverse backgrounds, we can develop a deeper, more empathetic understanding of changing self-identifications in an ever-evolving, globalizing landscape.

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