

# One Approach to the Study of Identity: Listening to Nikkei Voices

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## アイデンティティ研究における一つのアプローチ：日系人の声

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### Abstract

It is very common for Nikkei (Japanese emigrants and their descendants) who live in Japan to say that they came to Japan in search of their roots. A number of them then stay on in Japan. This study is based on videotaped discussions of small groups of Nikkei who are long-term residents. The paper first discusses the topic of identity and self-concept, and then gives a rationale for the use of narrative analysis. After transcribing excerpts of the self-introductions of six Nikkei, ten of their narratives were analyzed using Labov's structural framework.

**Key words :** narrative, narrative analysis, Nikkei, identity, concept of self

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### 抄 録

日本で暮らす日系人（日本人移民とその子孫）が、来日した目的を聞かれて、自分のルーツ探しであった、と答えることは珍しくない。そうした日系人の多くは、帰国せずに日本に留まっている。この研究は、長期にわたり日本に住む日系人のいくつかのグループがおこなった議論（ビデオテープに収録）に基づいている。本稿では、はじめにアイデンティティと自己認識の問題を扱い、次にナレイティブ分析を使用することの合理性について述べる。その上で、6人の日系人がおこなった自己紹介の一部を記載した後、ラボフの構造的枠組みを使いながら10種のナレイティブ（語り）を分析する。

**キーワード：**ナレイティブ、ナレイティブ分析、日系人、アイデンティティ、自己認識

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## **Introduction**

Identity is complex, ephemeral and deeply personal. How is it possible to study it? This has been a problem as I have tried to write about Nikkei (Japanese emigrants and their descendants). Being a third-generation Japanese American myself, I have often been asked about my identity and my experiences living in Japan. Several years ago I started a study about Nikkei identity, and I began with interviews of some Japanese Americans living and working in Japan. However, the study failed to develop into a workable form for various reasons including time, geographical constraints and limited rather than rich data.

In 2004, I decided upon a different strategy. Instead of individual interviews I videotaped small groups of Nikkei talking about and sharing their experiences, and this time I was a full participant. This provided richer and much more natural data for a good study. While in the interviews, participants responded to specific questions, in the group there was no designated set of questions. Instead participants talked and asked each other questions as in a regular conversation or discussion. The participants (and thus the audience) was composed only of other Nikkei, which meant that many things did not have to be explained because other Nikkei “understood.” They either had had the same thoughts and experiences or could easily empathize and relate to each other.

The following is a preliminary investigation of the identity of Nikkei who are long-term residents of Japan. Excerpts of the videotaped discussions were transcribed, and narrative analysis was used in working with the resulting data. This paper begins with a general discussion of identity and self-concept, and then it gives a rationale for the use of narrative analysis for this study. Preliminary results of the narrative analysis are reported.

## **Identity and the Concept of Self**

Understanding identity and the concept of self is important in many areas of study: literature, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, education, intercultural studies, communication, gender studies, language learning and many others. It is only recently that the public's view of identity and the self has been catching up with notable changes in the researchers' views of identity and the self.

In general the popular idea corresponded to viewing identity and the self as entities, or as Polkinghorne (1991) expressed it, as substances. These entities could be objectified in order to examine them, and they were assigned to categories and given identifying adjectives. They could easily be named, such as affiliations in organizations or activities, major personality traits, ownership of material goods, and personal accomplishments (Baumeister, 1986). They were labels given to individuals either by themselves or by other people, e.g. Japanese American, blue collar worker, WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant),

*kikokushijo* (returnees), or *zainichi kankokujin*, (Korean residents in Japan). Individuals were both born with these qualities, yet some of them could be acquired. Thus, identity and the self-concept were no more than a collection of properties (see Polkinghorne, 1991).

Baumeister (1986), a psychology professor, has explained how changes in the social, political and cultural arenas have influenced shifts in the concepts of identity and the self. He claims that there have been three main developments. First, traditional and simple ways of defining the self (as given above) were no longer sufficient in the modern era. Second, there has been a cultural shift towards valuing individuality, and, third, identity and the self have become less about concrete labels and categories and more about abstract identifications. In trying to define the self, people had to consider their long-term goals, major affiliations and basic values. Identity and the self came to be linked with agency, purposes, and aspirations.

George Herbert Mead (1934/1974), a pioneer in the theoretical study of the self, pointed out the inherent social nature of the development of self. People build their selfhood through interaction with others. Erving Goffman (1959), another keen observer of social interaction and the self, raised our awareness of the multiplicity of roles that people perform in different situated contexts. Anthony Giddens (1991), yet another well-known figure in sociology, uses the concept of reflexivity and states that people are constantly examining and reformulating the self as they gain new information and experiences.

Thus, we see that identity and the self are no longer seen as quite so static. Identity is a self-defining process, and the notions of self and the selves of others are social constructions. As Baumeister (1986) pointed out, identity depends more and more on the “reification of abstractions” (p. 147). The self is elusive “because it is merely inferred from other experiences and is *somehow* stitched together across time” (p. 14). It is this more current view of identity that is being used in the study of Nikkei in Japan. Rather than asking Nikkei to define their identity, this research project hopes to capture the hidden, elusive aspects which will surface in their interaction with each other. The study is based on the belief that a) identity is complex, dynamic and constantly shifting. People create and recreate their identity repeatedly as they interact with others around them and as they reflect upon life and its experiences. (Elliott, 2001; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934/1974, etc.), and b) “The self is anchored in, and experienced in relation to, the day-to-day contexts of routine social life” (Elliott, 2001).

### **Narrative Analysis as the Research Tool**

For this study narrative analysis was used as it is the most appropriate approach for the study of identity and life histories. As Polkinghorne (1991) states, “The basic figuration

process that produces the human experience of one's own life and action and the lives and actions of others is the narrative" (p. 159). Schiffrin (1996) makes a strong case for the use of narrative inquiry in understanding identity constructions. Riessman (1993) writes, "Because the approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity" (p.5). Bamberg (1997) has written about six approaches to narrative development, and he has investigated how people construct their identities through narratives. Polkinghorne (1988) writing about psychotherapy and personal change writes: "...humans use narrative structure as a way to organize the events of their lives and to provide a scheme for their own self-identity..." (p. 178).

The well-known psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1986) has been very influential in raising awareness of the power and importance of narrative in our everyday lives and in scientific inquiry. He writes, "...human beings make sense of the world by telling stories about it—by using the narrative mode for construing reality" (p. 130). He argues that even at the stage of infancy, all human beings learn narrative. Even before babies can talk, through interaction with others around them, they already have some narrative tools. Humans naturally organize their experience narratively, and as they grow older their ability to produce, understand and utilize narratives grows and increases in complexity and sophistication.

However, narrative analysis has not been widely accepted when conducting research. Positivist research tends to dominate, where logic, hypothesis testing and verifiable evidence are important. Bruner (1986) contends that both this positivist approach (which he calls paradigmatic) and the narrative modes of thinking help us make order out of our experience. Both set up procedures to verify research findings; however, they argue about fundamentally different matters. The paradigmatic approach tries to convince us of universal truth, while narrative analysis tries to convince us of the lifelikeness of the stories (Bruner, 1986). The two different approaches to research differ in explanation and prediction. The paradigmatic mode tries to formulate a law based on a pattern of relationships, while the narrative approach does not depend on laws, but on the context of significant events (Polkinghorne, 1988). While the paradigmatic mode of research strives to make predictions, narrative inquiry, on the other hand, does not consider prediction to be an important aim.

The two approaches also differ with regard to where theory figures in during the course of the research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that for the paradigmatic mode, the researcher begins with a theory, while the narrative inquirer begins with experience as it is expressed in stories. They also point out a glaring difference in the role of people in the research. In the formalistic study people are usually not identified, and if they are, they are treated as exemplars of an idea, a theory or a social category.

Meanwhile, for the narrative researcher, “people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories. Even when narrative inquirers study institutional narratives, ...people are seen as composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43).

Of these two types of research approaches, the narrative mode was selected as being more appropriate for the current investigation. In order to learn about the identity of Nikkei residents of Japan, it is more likely to find meaningfulness from the personal narratives of the participants as they engage in a sharing of their experiences, both past and present. In this study we are interested in the individual’s stories about themselves. Individuals usually have a narrative of their lives which helps them make sense of their experiences and which provides a sense of direction (Polkinghorne, 1988).

The display of the self comes about through the dialogic process and through conversation (Harré, 1987; Schiffrin, 1996; Taylor, 1991, etc.). This is, therefore, the reasoning behind the videotaping of small groups of Nikkei simply talking about their experiences. As participants hear other people’s stories, their perceptions can shift. Other people’s responses to their stories can influence their own talk. Because there were only other Nikkei in the group, the identity constructions of all members stayed focused on the aspects that participants felt could be labeled as “Nikkei.”

At the same time, we are also interested in the collective identity of Nikkei as a group. Culturally, people’s narratives provide a framework for shared beliefs and values. Their stories help shape their shared beliefs and help in the transmission of values (Polkinghorne, 1988). The narratives of Nikkei can shed light on the Japanese culture where the participants are both insiders and outsiders.

## **The Study of the Nikkei Group**

### ***Videotaping as Data***

In February 2004, I began to videotape North Americans of Japanese heritage who have lived in Japan from five to 30 years (one had visited Japan eight or nine times). They are all people whom I had known previously or who were introduced to the group by another participant or friend. All participants were willing to be videotaped, and they were all eager to hear each others’ stories. The data for this study come from a session on February 29, 2004. There were eight participants ranging in age from 28 to 68. Participants were born in California, Hawaii, Illinois, Massachusetts and Washington state. There were four females and four males. One male was single while all other members were married and had children. One male and one female were married to Caucasian Americans while the other five were married to Japanese nationals.

The videotaped session began with each person making a lengthy introduction with

the help of more probing questions by the others. There were no set guidelines about how long to speak or how many and what type of questions to ask. After everyone had spoken about themselves, people took turns talking about their early experiences in Japan, and the discussion moved generally towards making adjustments to Japanese society.

### ***Transcription Conventions***

Altogether there were approximately six hours of videotape from this session, and excerpts from the lengthy self-introductions were transcribed. The choice of how to represent the talk on paper already shows the researcher's bias and is part of the analysis. I included pauses, hesitations ("uh" and "um"), some intonation contours if they pertained to the meaning, discourse markers ("you know" and "like") some paralinguistic phenomena (such as inbreaths, sighs, gasps, laughs, etc.), and some gestures. Pause lengths were not calculated to the split second, but roughly with a comma indicating a brief pause of less than one second and a period corresponding to one second of silence. Words were underlined when speakers stressed a word, and capitalization was used when the volume increased. When a word or words were said softly, they were accompanied with this symbol °. When vowels were elongated, a colon was used (I'm ve:ry glad). When some phrases were reduced, an apostrophe was used (y'know). In an attempt to try to show the pace and rhythm of the talk, breath groups were aligned on one line of script. For example:

it's difficult

I mean

I do:n't think we'll ever be able to understand why

In this way it is hoped that the reader can get a better sense of how the speaker was actually speaking.

### ***Labov's Structural Narrative Analysis***

The next step was to select the type of narrative analysis to use. One of the challenges is that narrative analysis does not involve one methodology. There are many different approaches, and which one to use depends on the data and the researcher's purpose. Riessman (1993) presents and explains three different types of narrative analysis. One is based on the examination of plot and story, where close analysis of plot twists revealed participants'unconscious and unarticulated attitudes. Another method was the structural approach of Labov (1972, 1982), which is based on the belief that all fully formed narratives have the same basic components. A third method is the poetic structural approach of Gee (1985, 1986, 1991). Gee claims that stanzas are a universal unit used when people plan their speeches similar to the way that poetry is constructed. As Riessman

(1993) explains, “Stanzas are a series of lines on a single topic that have a parallel structure and sound as if they go together by tending to be said at the same rate and with little hesitation between lines” (p. 45). By aligning discourse in stanza-like lines, the researcher can gain insights into psychological or affective elements of the narrative.

For the Nikkei narratives Labov’s model was the most appropriate, since complete narratives were embedded in the long self-introductions of the Nikkei participants. According to Riessman (1993) in this approach the researcher examines the sequence of stories of interviewees and attempts to uncover thematic and linguistic patterns. The researcher must a) identify narrative segments, b) reduce stories to their core, c) look carefully at word choice, structure, and clauses, and d) examine the sequence of action. “Importantly, the emphasis is on language—how people say what they do and who they are—and the narrative structures they employ to construct experiences by telling about it” (p. 40).

For the Nikkei study, then, excerpts of the participants’ lengthy self-introductions were selected, and structural elements were examined. According to Labov, (1972) fully formed narratives have six functional properties: 1) the abstract (a summary of the substance of the narrative), 2) the orientation (the time, place, situation, and participants), 3) the complicating action(s) (the sequence of events), 4) the evaluation (the significance and meaning of the action, the attitude of the narrator), 5) the resolution (what finally happened), and 6) the coda (this returns the perspective to the present).

The transcribed excerpts were placed on the left side of the page, and the core narrative with the six properties identified on the right. The core story stayed as closely as possible to the speaker’s actual words. Thus, the reader can see how the narratives were constructed and can at any point locate the exact wording used in the original transcription on the left. One example is given on the following page.

### ***Analysis of the Narratives***

From the transcriptions, ten narratives from six speakers were aligned as in the example above. In the complicating action section all narratives brought up a problem related to their identity as a Nikkei. Four talked about coming to Japan. F said, “Suddenly I looked like everybody else but I was inside different. Really different. I couldn’t hide that I was different. I couldn’t speak Japanese very well. I did everything wrong. Everything I did was wrong. All my assumptions were so different than the Japanese. T said, “When I came to Japan I found out it (my idea of a Japanese family) was very different... there were some traditions in Japan uh that were very different from uh what I had experienced back in Hawaii but yet in Hawaii it was very different from what I had experienced back in Japan. So I was kind of y’know like in a limbo.... The question is ‘What is a real

[1]	Speaker K self-introduction	Labov's framework
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 30 31 32 33 34	uh..I think um when I think well why are we here today? I think you know it's part of a long journey for me personally uh I grew up in a very ethnic Japanese-American community but once I left home and I went to a small school in Ohio I think <u>that</u> was the beginning of the journey to really fi-try to find out who I am once I left th- what seemed well what was natural this is where I am from but being in uh situations in communities where I was unique then I think I am always looking for a wall or y'know where do I fit in here. do I? or what do I have to do to fit in so I think y'know that was the reason again very similar to you (pointing to S) I couldn't speak Japanese so that brought me to Japan y'know I wasn't I didn't intend to stay but I met a nice young man and had a family my kids are growing up my youngest is about ready to leave the house so um I think again uh my time in Japan that uh really I haven't had this kind of opportunity	<b>Abstract</b> Why we are here today? it's part of a long journey for me personally <b>Orientation</b> I grew up in a very ethnic Japanese-American community <b>Complicating action</b> but once I left home and I went to a small school in Ohio it was the beginning of the journey to try to find out who I am I left what was natural (to me) and went to communities where I was unique <b>Evaluation</b> Where do I fit in here? Do I fit in? What do I have to do to fit in? <b>Resolution</b> I think that was the reason similar to others in the group I couldn't speak Japanese so that brought me to Japan I didn't intend to stay but I met a nice young man and had a family my kids are growing up the youngest is about ready to leave the house <b>Coda</b> I'm thinking about my time in Japan I haven't had this kind of opportunity (to be with other <i>Nikkei</i> )

Japanese?"

D said after having traveled to many different countries, "I think Japan is especially difficult to penetrate because if I were living in Europe, France, Germany, Amsterdam, I think it's a lot easier to fit in. But I think there are some cultural barriers here that are really unique to Japan." M grew up bilingually in the U.S. and always considered herself Japanese and not Japanese American. On coming to Japan, however, "I said, 'Nooo—I'm not really Japanese either.'" Coming to Japan for all four participants made them think about themselves and their identities.

Three narratives dealt with a complicating action occurring after being in Japan. M talked about "the problems I had with my identity living in Japan but not fitting in." After S moved to a smaller town in Japan, "I realized that I was an outsider even though everyone looked the same and I think that's when I kind of felt 'Did I make a mistake?' because I



couldn't speak Japanese. My Japanese was textbook Japanese from college." F said that after a year of living in Japan, "I thought, 'Ohhh, I haven't learned anything yet, much less Japanese (language)."

The other three narratives dealt with a complicating action that happened before coming to Japan in their home country. M felt she "was different from my other Japanese American friends" because she spoke Japanese. M said, "Y'know I'd call my parents up to say I'm going to be late but I'd have to say it in Japanese... and I always found that embarrassing... I always thought, 'Oh yeah, I'm not really Japanese American.'" K talked about leaving home to go to a Midwestern college, "I left what seemed what was natural. This is where I am from. But being in uh situations in communities where I was unique then I think I am [was] always looking for a wall [to hide behind] or y'know where do I fit in here? Do I? Or what do I have to do to fit in?" In another of her narratives, K talked about her family having to decide if she should go to the birthday party of an African American friend, where it was clear that no other non-African Americans were invited. Her relatives wondered if it would be safe or not. In the end, she did not go. She asked, "Where do I fit in in the black-white issue? Where do I fit in?"

In the orientation or the evaluation stage the following was heard: F said, "at a young age... I really thought a lot about being different (in the US) and it was a struggle." S said, "I guess it was through my children that I knew that I was really different because I (was) trying to hide my Americanness." Speaker D said, "I find myself either blessed or cursed being Japanese American." And S asked, "Where do I fit in in this y'know in this universe?"

Recurring themes in all the narratives were: 1) being different, 2) not fitting in, 3) having difficulty, 4) having to think about "Who am I?" and 5) thinking of or wanting to hide the fact of being different. With all these challenges why did they (and why do they) continue to stay in Japan? Mostly in the resolution section, the following phrases appeared: "I didn't intend to stay but I met a nice young man and had a family." "I guess it was pride that I thought I had to be in Japan [to] kind of make it work. And then I had children..." "I'm pretty happy now knowing that I don't have to fit in. I can just be happy with who I am." "So that's why I stayed longer because it was a challenge." "I fell in love with Japan and the culture. I'm staying here because there are so many things to learn." "And then I realized that there's the Japanese culture and the whole Japanese experience. It's not something that you learn in a short time. It really takes a lot of investment of time and energy." Perhaps one participant expressed one possible view of the Japanese Americans' sense of themselves. "And we being Japanese Americans have to try to overcome these cultural barriers."

## Discussion

Labov's structural framework proved to be useful in delineating recurring themes in the ten narratives. The idea to place the actual discourse on the left side and the core narratives on the right yet keeping the words as close to the speaker's as possible was especially useful. It made it fairly easy to work with the data. In the future, if a different type of narrative analysis is used on the same data (e.g., Gee's poetic structural approach), it will not be difficult to begin again using the actual discourse on the lefthand side.

Deciding which discourse units fit in which of the six structural categories was not always clear. As is common in everyday interaction, people do not always follow a set order in their stories. They may go back or forward in time as they remember some points which they had forgotten earlier, or as they try to clarify a part of a story or try to make a point. Human speech does not always fit into neat categories. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) remind us that the narrative is complex and that the analysis is being done on multiple levels. People, too, are complex and it is important to remember that "people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others" (p. 4).

## Concluding Remarks

The ten narratives reported here have only touched the surface, and in the overall scheme represent only a tiny fraction of the multitude of stories which have yet to be transcribed. Since the first videotaping there have also been six more videotapings with six more Nikkei participating. For this preliminary analysis, Labov's framework worked reasonably well as an organizing framework. In the future, however, when the transcription moves on to conversations involving multiple speakers, this structural framework may not be sufficient.

The Nikkei narrative is one that has not been heard even amongst themselves. The Nikkei in Japan occupy a unique space. They are sometimes insiders and sometimes outsiders. At times, though, they can even be insiders and outsiders simultaneously. The expectations that other people have about them and the expectations that they hold about themselves are prone to unexpected shifts. It is not uncommon that those who live near the borders of two major cultures are compelled to make explicit what for others remain tacit. It is hoped that studies such as this can contribute towards helping the Nikkei articulate the issues and to encourage them to make their voices heard.

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