

BOOK REVIEW

***Invisible Work: Bilingualism, Language Choice and Childrearing in Intermarried Families.* By Okita Toshie. Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 2002. 274 pp.**

This recent work is distinctive in that it is not so much a “How To” manual as it is a “What Happens” story. As such, Okita’s contribution is insightful because it concerns itself not simply with the question of *how* to raise children bilingually, but rather the “complexities of childrearing dynamics” related to the processes involved (p. 1). Essentially, this work aims to ascertain how the parental values and aspirations of British father / Japanese mother couples residing in the U.K. merge. Okita tries to determine both the “structural and situational characteristics” influential in the process, and how they influence language decisions and practice (p. 39).

This review will firstly outline the theoretical framework and methodology employed in the study, then summarize the key findings. Finally, an evaluation of the book’s strengths, weaknesses, and overall contribution will be offered, together with perceived implications for further research.

Okita’s study is a convincing cross-disciplinary effort—drawing from the fields of family studies, ethnicity studies and bilingualism studies. The main theoretical influences are outlined below.

From family studies, Okita employs the life course approach, a choice that is obviously connected to her methodology. She is not so concerned with making broad generalizations about intermarried families; rather, she attempts to highlight the plethora of socio-historical, situational, and structural factors that account for variation amongst them. The life course approach helps to account for changes in these factors over time.

Okita also incorporates several feminist accounts of marriage and childrearing (e.g., Boulton, 1983; Backett, 1982; Morris: 1990) to develop her notion of “invisible work”. Of greatest significance is Devault’s (1987) depiction of the “invisible” nature of housework, a theme Okita extends by contending that the fathers in the study were largely oblivious to the difficulties and emotional stresses related to the “language work” of raising bicultural children.

The third main area of family studies that Okita draws from is intermarriage studies. Themes such as *alienation, isolation, culture conflict* and *marginality* are considered.

From ethnicity studies, Okita looks to situational ethnicity (e.g., Okamura, 1981; Wilson, 1984, 1987) as a means of explaining the way in which the women in her study negotiated the complexities of childrearing in a foreign land (pp. 19-21). She also incorporated *Nihonjinron* constructs of “Japanese-ness” in explaining stereotypical images of the women in her study. However, I felt she was also guilty of perpetuating such stereotypes—especially in her explanation of the “*gaijin*” fathers.

Finally, from the field of bilingualism studies, Okita draws primarily on the discipline of developmental psycholinguistics, referring to Dopke’s (1992) theory of instructional speech in relation to the acquisition of minority languages (p. 31).

This was a mixed-methods study comprised of two stages. The first was a survey of British-Japanese intermarried families living in the U.K. The second stage involved in-depth interviews with the mothers and fathers, as well as some of the children from twenty-eight such families. Both phases of the fieldwork will be briefly outlined below.

The first phase of Okita’s research was conducted in an attempt to identify the issues, patterns and decisions relating to language use in Japanese-British intermarried families, as well as to identify prospective informants for the in-depth interviews (p. 65). The rationale that Okita gave for this course

of research was that, whilst several previous studies had focused on short-term Japanese residents in the U.K. (e.g., businessmen and their families), very little empirical data concerning long-term residents existed.

The survey rested on five key hypotheses, paraphrased below.

- * The families would display a variety of language patterns.
- * The mothers made the initial “language decision”.
- * That decision was influenced by many social / personal factors.
- * Older mothers were usually different from younger mothers because of “socio-historical” factors.
- * The husband’s attitude greatly influenced the “degree of success”. (p. 68)

Whilst the results of the survey tended to confirm the first three hypotheses, the remaining two hypotheses proved problematic. Okita contends that it is the socio-historical factors—highlighted in the life course narratives—that account for such variation regarding the last two hypotheses.

As stated earlier, Okita used a life course (life history) approach derived from family studies in conducting interviews with the members of twenty-eight Japanese-British intermarried families living in the U.K. It should be emphasized that Okita took this approach so as to “see individuals in their wider social and historical context, as well as to appreciate the complexity and diversity of individual experiences...” This allows “differences and variations between families... [to] be appreciated rather than treated as marginal” (p.42).

The key findings from the interviews were synthesized into the following themes, each reported in a separate chapter: initial language decision (chapter 5); adaptations in language use (chapter 6); childrearing (chapter 7); going to school (chapter 8); and family relationships, identity, and ethnicity (chapter 9). The findings are summarized below.

Mothers were found to be primarily responsible for the initial language decision as well as its implementation. Okita categorizes the mothers into the following three simple groups based on their initial language decision (or lack of one).

1. *Japanese Users*: These mothers were influenced primarily by communicative satisfaction (the desire to speak *to* the child) and old hearth ties with Japan. They “thought about language use in relational terms, and not simply which language might be advantageous to the child” (p. 105).
2. *English Speakers*: Mothers in this group wanted to “avoid Japan”, preferring to orientate themselves towards British social networks and avoid the “language work”. Some of these mothers also envisaged detrimental effects which might arise from raising a child bilingually (pp. 105-106).
3. *Non-Decision Makers*: Members of this group often lacked information on bilingual childrearing strategies or found that the initial turmoil of caring for a newborn child made the whole choice overwhelming. Others were confused by conflicting advice offered by relatives (p. 106).

Fathers generally were of the opinion that learning Japanese would come “naturally” and tended to base the decision on “their child’s interest (and sometimes that of their wife)” (p.106).

Using the life course approach, Okita divided the child rearing process into four stages: 0-2, 3-4, 4-6, and 9-11 years. Generally, most families tended to use more English as time elapsed. There were two main reasons for this:

1. the initial reason for language choice (communicative needs & old hearth ties) decreased, and,
2. factors such as parental values, immediate social context, situational context, and socio-historical context created pressure for greater English use (pp. 132-133).

Some mothers came to think that “creating a social network to support Japanese language use was manipulative and artificial” (p. 133). Also, in the case of some couples, “a perception gap was maintained by a communication gap, as couples were still trying to maintain communication between themselves” (p. 133). Mothers also began to worry about their children’s delayed English development and the negative effect this would have once the child entered formal schooling.

Okita points out the strong link between childrearing and language use, and adopts a feminist position to detail the “division of labour regarding childrearing”. She argues that the inequalities regarding this division are often exacerbated because they are “structurally related to intermarriage” (p. 138). The fact that the women in this study were living in a foreign country, for example, limited their employment opportunities and reinforced this traditional division of labor.

Okita identifies a tendency for many of the women to become “pro-activist” mothers (with child-first childrearing policies involving “the-earlier-the-better-approach”) who diligently collect information to assist in the process of minority language acquisition. This approach often caused a great deal of stress for the mothers, something which the fathers remained for the most part unaware of. This was due to the division of labor in the family and the view held by most of the fathers that language acquisition would just happen “naturally”.

Raising a child bilingually became even more complicated once the child entered formal schooling. External influences on the families’ daily lives had a great impact. Obviously, English language development became a greater priority because it was “the basis for future formal learning, for social interaction, and for the child’s confidence in general” (p. 189). Time pressures made it difficult to devote the necessary time to Japanese study. Fathers tended to become more vocal of their opinions as the children entered school.

As the children became more independent, the relationship between the parents obviously changed. Whilst this is also true for monocultural families, Okita believes the changes are amplified in intermarried couples (p. 217). She generally paints a rather pessimistic view, one in which couples grow further and further apart. She argues that as the “language project” nears completion, many of the mothers become involved in “finding a place”—a new focus from which to center their lives—and that this “new place” often has little to do with their husbands.

Perhaps the greatest irony found by Okita is that the cases in which the husbands had offered the greatest support and sacrifice for the “language project” tended also to be the cases in which the husband became the most isolated (p. 217).

Okita also found that the initial language choice actually had little bearing on the ethnic identity formation of the child. In fact, several English-speaking children were drawn to Japan during their gap or post university years, electing to marry and reside there.

In addition, Okita describes the situational identity of the women in the study and the socio-historical factors that influenced it.

Several of Okita’s findings may not come as a surprise to readers of this work. However, in order to avoid “so what?” responses, Okita cites Finch’s (1985) distinction between “illumination” and “recognition” (p. 219). Stated simply, this involves affording due recognition to the issues “illuminated”

by the study: We all knew that raising a child bilingually requires some effort, but were we aware of just *how much* effort it requires, and by *whom*?

Using the life course approach, Okita clearly showed how “language choice and use are embedded in interpersonal relationships which are gendered, and influenced by socio-historical, structural and situational factors, which come together in different ways in different periods” (p. 221). She found variation amongst the language patterns of the families, but there was a general shift towards a greater use of English as children got older. She also identified differences between the older and younger mothers—something that may be related to social and situational shifts over time.

Okita’s central argument is that bilingual childrearing is a labor-intensive task, that the task is related to an inequitable division of labor that means it primarily lay with the mothers (not the fathers) in the study, and that the fathers were largely unaware of this “invisible work” because they themselves viewed second language acquisition as “natural”. This is, in essence, the “recognition” that should come from the findings which were “illuminated” by Okita’s study.

Okita identified conflict on a number of levels. There was the internal conflict the mothers faced concerning their initial language decision, conflict involving the marginalization of their husbands and the conflict involving balancing the many (often conflicting) demands of various family members (p. 225). Finally, the mothers were where the so-called “buck stopped”: They were ultimately the ones who would be blamed if the “language project” failed.

This is interesting social research on a previously understudied section of British society—Japanese-British intermarried families. The eclectic approach of the study was successful on two fronts: 1) it helped move family studies out of the “mainstream” by conducting research on an “ethnically diverse group” (p. 231); and 2) it was a sound example of the results that “cross-fertilization” between the fields of family studies, ethnicity studies and bilingualism studies can yield (p. 34).

Okita’s initial research questions concerning the structural and situational influences of language decision and practice were well thought-out, corresponding neatly with her mixed-methods approach. The researcher skillfully uses life-course narratives to illustrate variation amongst families as well as changes over time. In this sense, she was able to “move beyond a static understanding of parental values, childrearing, and language choice and use” by enunciating the “socio-historical and other contextual dimensions which may change over time” (p. 220).

Perhaps the most significant of Okita’s contributions to the current knowledge base is as follows. Whereas the importance of parents and parental values is generally accepted in studies of childrearing in ethnically diverse families, it is Okita’s emphasis on the gendered nature of childrearing and language use that provides fresh insight (p. 232).

Okita also shows that “‘language as a source of ethnic identity’ is a simplistic conception”. Rather, “ethnic identity is likely to be shaped during the process of language use and acquisition”, not by the language *per se* (p. 232).

Despite these many strengths, this work is not without weaknesses. Okita insists that that she was anxious to “avoid a crude cultural/cultural conflict approach” (p. 221), yet in some ways, I feel that is exactly the approach she has taken. She insists that her twenty-eight families were representative of Japanese-British intermarried families living in the U.K. (p. 227), yet she paints a homogeneous picture of the husbands as being insensitive and ignorant of Japanese cultural norms and practices—essentially monolingual and ethnocentric. She does mention that some of the fathers had some

Japanese language skills and had lived in Japan for some years, but does so in an almost dismissive fashion. I felt that this is one aspect of the socio-historical, situational and contextual variables that merited a much deeper analysis than Okita afforded.

Perhaps Okita's own bias as a Japanese intermarried mother living in the U.K. influenced this tendency, as her explanations often read like an "us-them" explanation—for the benefit of the "*gaijin*" reader. That reader could be forgiven for sensing a "victim mentality" running through the book.

To be fair, however, it must be said that the book was attempting to highlight the gendered nature of childrearing in intermarried families, as well as the inequitable labor distribution associated with the processes involved. A feminist take on the issues, therefore, worked well. However, in my opinion, a more balanced and objective handling of the perspectives of all family members (especially the fathers) is what was lacking.

Finally, Okita correctly stated in the introduction to the study that language decision and use was just "one prism" from which to view the dynamics of intermarried families, and that that was to be the limited focus of her study. I felt, however, that in places she spoke of language in terms quite divorced from the wider context of "culture". Of course, bilingualism is just one component of biculturalism, but I wonder if it is in fact possible to speak of bilingualism in terms so devoid of the "cultural component".

In a concluding section dealing with the "generalisability" of her findings (pp. 227-229), Okita maintains that her study is both representative of Japanese mother / British father intermarried families in the U.K., as well as of significance to other minority mother / British father families. This insistence highlights Okita's belief that gender is just as significant a factor as ethnicity itself—perhaps even more significant. She therefore holds that the implications are of less significance for Japanese father / British mother intermarried families in the U.K.

Surprisingly, Okita does not even discuss how applicable her findings might be in the reverse setting—i.e., a minority father / Japanese mother residing in Japan. This is precisely the context in which I would like to conduct research.

There is an interesting paradox in play here. Children of intermarried families in Japan, by and large, are "expected" to be bilingual. It is considered *atarimae* (only natural) that such children speak (presumably) English (the *only* foreign language)! This general expectation is not dissimilar to the fathers' attitudes described in Okita's study—that language acquisition was "natural". On the other hand, there is also a social assumption in Japan that fathers primarily perform the role of "provider" in the family, remaining for the most part peripheral to the practicalities of childrearing.

Given these two contradictory positions, what is the role of the father in an intermarried family with a minority father and Japanese mother residing in Japan? How do fathers negotiate the gendered nature of childrearing in the Japanese context, while also fulfilling their "duty" to "make" their children bilingual, "international" and "cosmopolitan"?

It is in seeking answers to these questions that I intend to build on Okita's work.

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