

Hafu (ハーフ) Group Identity: Reification Not Liberation

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Abstract

This paper will argue that hafu is a social label that lacks a clear definition and forces an identity on individuals that may not be of their choosing. Though laudable attempts to ‘reclaim’ the label and ‘inform’ the public about hafu have been made by organizations of people identified or identifying as hafu, by considering the discourse of Nihonjinron and the concept of social-essentialism we can see that the ultimate result of such attempts is the reification of both the term itself and the assumptions about those within it.

Introduction

Originating from the English word “half”, the social label of “hafu” or “ha-fu”, denotes a person that is seen as being half-Japanese and half non-Japanese. Many of those who fall under this label have been subjected to various forms of discrimination over time and one only needs to view representations of hafu in the Japanese media today to see the ambivalence with which Japanese society as a whole seems to have for people identified or identifying as hafu (Saber, 2015; Shoji, 2013). Due to these experiences, several people who identify as hafu

have attempted to reclaim the term by profiling “hafus” and telling their stories through interviews and photography. Perhaps most prominent among these are The Hafu Project started by Marcia Yumi Lise and Natalie Maya Willer and Hafu2Hafu. The Hafu Project began as an exhibition of portrait photography alongside in-depth interviews of people with one Japanese parent and later inspired a documentary, (Hafu), by filmmakers Lara Perez Takagi and Megumi Nishikura who noticed “the lack of media attention on hafus and [felt] exhausted by the superficial adoration of hafu celebrities on television” (Hafu, 2020). Hafu2Hafu, started by Tetsuro Miyazaki, is perhaps the most recent incarnation of the desire to identify and document people with a Japanese parent. In addition to photographs and interviews seeking to inform the public in a similar way to the Hafu Project, Miyazaki highlights that “His ultimate question was another question: what would they want to ask each other” (Hafu2Hafu, 2020).

Ultimately, The Hafu Project, Hafu film, Hafu2Hafu and other smaller projects like them aim to educate the wider public to the realities of being hafu. Yet, the creation of such realities both requires, and results in, to a certain degree, the essentializing of the label and the members contained within. Reading about hafu, you quickly see a pattern in the way hafu are contextualized – a growing minority in a homogeneous nation, a minority that often experiences negative discrimination as much as it receives positive discrimination, and a group that is in limbo between two cultural homes. Though discussions often focus on the problems of being hafu, little attention is given to why the term exists and the wider discussion / beliefs that not only give it life, but popularize it to the extent that it eventually becomes an avowed identity by many of the people to who it is ascribed.

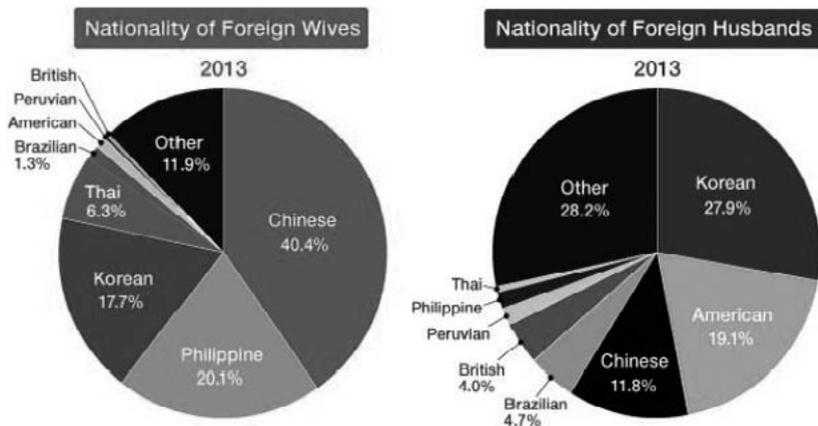
Though the goals of the Hafu Project and Hafu2Hafu may be viewed as laudable and an attempt at liberation, consideration of this alongside the wider discus-

sion on national identity in Japan, often termed *Nihonjinron*, and the concept of social-essentialism may suggest that, rather than liberating those who fall under the label, attempts to reduce discrimination by “occupying the label” may actually be counterproductive.

The Term Hafu

Examination of the term “hafu” in discussions reveals the breadth of the term. The *Hafu2Hafu* project (*Hafu2Hafu*, 2020), which looks to raise awareness concerning hafu, for example, defines hafu simply as “people with one Japanese parent”, a definition shared by the Hafu Project (*Hafu Project*, 2020). In this regard, Hafu can be understood in cultural, racial and national terms in the same way that “Japanese” is understood in such ways. From an examination of media, we can see that race is perhaps the most salient of this trinity of meaning within the idea of hafu. This is easily viewed in the famous example of Ariana Miyamoto, who won the title of Miss Japan in 2015. For Miyamoto, who was raised almost exclusively in Japan alone with her Japanese mother, her status as hafu is exclusively based on racial aspects derived from her African-American father. As Miyamoto herself says “My appearance isn’t Asian...[but] I think I’m very much Japanese on the inside” (Saber, 2015). The cultural and national parts of the hafu definition have little applicability to Miyamoto as simply looking different takes precedence. Indeed, this racial aspect of hafu is viewed as been dominant in understandings of the term among the wider public (Murpey-Shigematsu, 2001). The primacy of the racial definition can also be seen in the dominance of people identified as hafu in the media. Famous celebrities (such as Becki and Joy) and stories of hafu in the media (such as Miyamoto or Priyanka Yoshikawa) typically focus on hafu that appear to be racially mixed or typically non-Asian looking.

Despite a popular fixation on the racial element of the definition, using the



(Nippon.com, 2015)

definition of having one Japanese parent means that most hafu are such by virtue of the nationality of a parent rather than their race. As shown in Figure 1 below, Koreans are the largest national group for foreign husbands in Japan, and Chinese are the largest group for foreign wives. With children possessing two East Asian parents, being hafu, in terms of numbers, would actually seem to mostly come from the nationality, rather than race, of the parent and the implicit assumption that this would result in some cultural difference being present in the child.

This assumption of cultural difference is problematic, firstly for that fact that it is indeed an assumption. Though people depicted in the Hafu Project and Hafu2Hafu eloquently describe being in cultural limbo between two nations, it does not mean that this applies to all within the category. For every person discussing a feeling of cultural displacement or not belonging, there may well be hundreds enjoying cultural fulfilment and a feeling of being of a place despite having a non-Japanese parent, something very much implied in the quote from Ariana Miyamoto above. Frequently referring to such feelings of cultural displacement and claiming them to be a consequence and characteristic of the

category, as with Hafu2Hafu, has the potential for one to apply a condition to people that fall under that umbrella even though it may not reflect their actual reality and, most importantly, is not of their choosing. Indeed, research suggests that many people who fall under the definition of hafu in Japan prefer to be identified as Japanese (Almonte-Acosta, 2008; Murphy-Shigematsu, 2011).

A second problem with the assumption of the cultural difference of hafu is that the idea of being pulled between two cultural polar opposites is not something that is exclusively a result of biology and having a parent of a particular nationality. Long term residents of Japan and children of non-Japanese parents living in Japan may also experience similar feelings. On a personal level, I have several Japanese acquaintances who have a profound integrative desire for a particular country or area overseas than has fostered in them a certain listlessness with life in Japanese society. Conversely, as mentioned above, children with a Japanese parent and non-Japanese parent may never experience such feelings, rendering the label of hafu as inapplicable to them. Additionally, all children who have more than one parent / guardian with whom they have considerable contact, will possibly experience some feeling of being between the two positions represented by these influences. For example, a child with one Muslim and one Christian parent, or one parent from a privileged upper class background and the other from an impoverished working class environment. The scope for the parents to have extremely different world views, experiences and fundamental beliefs is broad and not exclusively a consequence of the nation of birth of parents; all children are hafu in this sense. Yet whether or not one parent is Japanese, is suggested here to be primary above all other things.

Nihonjinron

To develop this point further, it is necessary to consider Nihonjinron. Nihonjinron (theories of the Japanese or Japaneseness) is described as the discursive mani-

festation of cultural nationalism (Befu, 2001) and a ‘self-orientalising’ discourse (Iwabuchi, 1994) in which concepts of nationality, race and culture are used interchangeably in its attempt to describe the Japanese (Sugimoto, 1999). It is an ongoing discussion that attempts to define who the Japanese are by highlighting characteristics that all Japanese are seen as possessing, and frequently offering explanations as to why they are in possession of them. The characteristics identified as being possessed by Japanese are those typically highlighted through comparisons with other national cultures. The national cultures most frequently used in *Nihonjinron* was those of Western countries (Bradley, 2013), such as the U.S. because, as Kubota (1999, p.298) points out “The notion of Japanese uniqueness often lacks legitimacy when Japan is compared to non-Western counterparts such as other Asian cultures” – a point that is certainly consistent with the dominance of the racial and cultural definitions of *hafu* mentioned above.

A belief at the very core of *Nihonjinron* is that Japanese is an ethnic-national identity and that the Japanese represent a unique and homogeneous group culturally and, as often is the case, racially. From this assumption spring a multitude of notions of “the Japanese” and “we Japanese” that assume an unchanging Japaneseness that is in stark contrast to other peoples. The uniqueness, collectivism and interconnectedness of Japanese culture, nationality and ethnicity are assumptions that rest at the heart of *Nihonjinron* (Ishihara & Morita, 1989; Lebra, 1976; Nakane, 1970; Pritchard, 1995; Van Wolferen, 1989). Though a discussion on national identity is ongoing in all countries to some degree, *Nihonjinron* has been called a “national sport” (Sugimoto, 1999, p.81) as thousands of texts discussing the uniqueness of Japanese have been written, with many selling millions of copies (Befu & Manabe, 1991). This has led to the claim that “it would be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which *Nihonjinron* beliefs are held in Japan.” (Goodman, 1990, p.59), a view supported by research attempting to quantify such belief (Bradley, 2013).

When considering the label of hafu, we can see that it is a reflection of fundamental beliefs found within the discourse of Nihonjinron, namely that a Japanese ethno-national culture dominates or supersedes other layers or parts of one's cultural identity, and that this national culture is especially unique when compared to other national cultures, perhaps to the point of being irreconcilable or incompatible. By defining Japanese and Japaneseness in terms that intertwine the ethnic, national and cultural dimensions, anyone who lacks (or is seen as lacking) one of these is pushed to the periphery. This should be worrying to those such as the Hafu Project and Hafu2Hafu because the very label they use as an attempt at liberation, awareness raising, or defining an identity, is one that mirrors a discourse that arbitrarily divides society and pushes people to the margins.

Social-essentialism

Continued use of the label of hafu, regardless of the context, is not only problematic because of its connection to Nihonjinron, it is problematic because it reifies and legitimizes the term, and embeds it in common use and understandings of people; it becomes a socially-essentialized group label. Social essentialism “entails the belief that certain social categories (e.g., gender, race) mark fundamentally distinct kinds of people” (Rhodes et al., 2012, p.13526). Social-essentialism results in attributing specific characteristics to all members within a particular group or category, attributing these specific characteristics to the category itself thus naturalizing and reifying what has been socially constructed, and ultimately creates a collective which is presumed to be a homogenous block (Frankenberg, 1993; No et al., 2008; Phillips, 2010; Pedwell, 2010; Tador et al., 2013). In this regard, social-essentialism creates a homogeneous group from “heterogeneous people whose values, interests, ways of life, and moral and political commitments are internally and plural and divergent” (Narayan, 1998, cited in Pedwell, 2010, p.5). This process has led many to identify social-essentialism as the conceptual foundation upon which stereotyping and discrimi-

nation develop and occur (Gutierrez, 2002; Holliday, 2013; Tador et al., 201).

Social essentialism is present in all contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Pedwell, 2010) though research suggests that the categories and groups that are essentialized differ depending on the particular situation within the context. For example, research suggests that children in politically conservative rural communities in the U.S. were more likely to essentialize racial categories than children in more liberal urban environments. Likewise, children in Israel were found to be more likely to essentialize religious categories and children in upper-caste Indian society were more likely to essentialize class than their lower-class counterparts. Although social-essentialism itself may not create the arbitrary divisions within the social world, it does constitute a belief that the categories that emerge and which divide people in a particular society are accurate and exist in reality. However, Spivak (1988) suggested that labels can be essentialized deliberately for a specific purpose. This process, termed strategic essentialism, typically sees people identify under a certain label and then stereotype themselves and the label in order to stake a political claim that ensures the continued existence of the label. Historically this has tended to occur among certain minority groups that feel a particular way of life is under threat from larger encroaching cultural forces. The term of hafu would appear to be both a label initially constructed and essentialized as a consequence of the pervasive nature of Nihonjinron, and later one reified and strategically essentialized by groups such as the Hafu Project and Hafu2Hafu.

Generic Language

The belief in the label not only comes from the presence and strength of discussion within a particular society, it also comes from the form of the language used. Rhodes et al. (2012), found that parents and children that heard generic language about a group (such as “Japanese are polite”) were more likely to express

essentialist beliefs, such as assuming that all members would share certain traits. Additionally, those subjected to generic language were more likely to produce generic language themselves and were more likely to have a negative evaluation of the group being described. When non-generic language was used (such as “This Japanese person is polite”), the reverse was true (Rhodes et al., 2012).

The heavy use of generic language in *Nihonjinron* and the repeated use of terms such as “The Japanese” or “We Japanese” as seen in texts by authors such as De Mente (1961), Doi (1986) and Lebra (1976) is replicated to some degree in discussions of hafu. Indeed, the very question at the heart of the Hafu film, “What does it mean to be hafu?” (Hafu, 2020) or Hafu2Hafu’s goal of trying to “present a complete image of being hafu” (Hafu2Hafu, 2020) contain the implicit assumption that hafu is a real group with shared experiences and characteristics. This language and the assumptions contained within it reaches wider audiences through the media that report on the activities of such groups and results in headlines such as “The whole story on being 'hafu'” (Krieger, 2010) or “The hafu experience” (James, 2014). This repeated use of language that suggests the reality of the label would, according to the concept of social-essentialism, lead people to see it as truth and lay the foundation for the stereotyping of those within the label.

Conclusion

Before discussing this further, I would like to highlight that I wish in no way to minimize the feelings of people in the Hafu Project or Hafu2Hafu. The difficulties experienced by many people are real and the feelings of cultural limbo and discrimination described by individuals interviewed in the Hafu Project or Hafu2Hafu certainly resonate strongly with me in many ways. This is indeed my point. The issues that arise in the interviews in the Hafu Project and Hafu2Hafu are those felt by people who occupy a space where divergent ways of life or

cultural realities meet and have manifest consequences. Yet, having a parent of a different nationality does not automatically place a person at such a point nor does having parents of the same nationality exclude a person from the possibility of being there. Despite this, the unquestioning acceptance of a label born of the assumptions within a cultural-nationalistic discussion does both of these. It also guarantees the very things that well-intention projects such as the Hafu Project and Hafu2Hafu set out to combat – that people with one Japanese parent are misunderstood and stereotyped.

I have, throughout this paper, attempted to avoid the generic use of hafu. Whether one parent is French, South American, a brain surgeon, working class or plays rugby should only be relevant when it is found to be relevant, and relevance in one situation does not necessarily mean similarity with another. Enthusiastically adopting the label of hafu, even with laudable goals of liberation and understanding in mind, will inevitably lead to the label becoming real in many people's minds and increase the likelihood of people who fall under the label as being thought of and explained in such terms rather than as individuals. All of this is not to say that having a Japanese parent is not of great influence in the lives of many people, it can be profound and defining for many. But, then, so too do many other factors. Yet, these are factors that do not mirror the culturally-nationalist discourse in Japanese society and, therefore, have not been assigned a label. The absence of the label results in people not being, or being less likely to be stereotyped and pigeonholed. Having one non-Japanese parent should be like these and not attach a label to people that inevitably encourages the stereotyping of those given it. Doing so, as with the case of hafu, gives an ascribed identity to many when, ideally, identity should be avowed in that it is emergent and self-selected/defined due to the idiosyncrasies of one's own existence.

The continued use of hafu in Nihonjinron discussion, either explicitly or

implicitly, and by well-meaning groups guarantees that the label will always be discussed apart from, or to the side of Japanese identity and perpetuate the idea that children with one non-Japanese parent possess some fundamental difference to those with two. Rather than operate within such a framework as these groups do, it would be beneficial to breakdown the term. A child that was born and raised exclusively in France should not be placed within a label alongside a child that was born and raised in Japan simply because they both happen to have one Japanese parent. Not only does this make all manner of assumptions regarding, culture and race, as mentioned earlier when discussing Nihonjinron, it is also damaging to the goal of developing a more inclusive and multicultural idea of Japan and Japanese as it lumps together children whose only known connection is that they both have a parent who holds a Japanese passport. Such a label will perpetuate the idea that children in Japan with one Japanese parent are foreign and guarantee that they continued to be assigned an alternative space for discussion outside of the boundaries of Japanese identity; an alternative space under the label of “hafu”.

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