Yumiko wa gō ni ireba gō ni shitagae: A case study of Okinawan-Japanese Canadian bicultural identity integration, third culture, and affect valuation theory as a personal reflective essay

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Sally Xie's Psychology 391 course, *Social Cognition*. The assignment asked students to write a case study of a cultural phenomenon or event using theories from social cognition research to align, challenge, or explain a personal narrative. The paper uses APA citation style.

This case study explores the social cognition theories of bicultural identity integration, third culture, and affect valuation. An overview of the history of Okinawa and the Ryukyuan Islands briefly covers the cultural consequences of Japanese annexation, American occupation, and forced assimilation into modern-day Japanese culture. Following the personal narrative of the author's mother, Yumiko, these theories are integrated to investigate her individual experience of emigrating to Canada from a collectivist culture with a complex history. Additionally, the influence of individualistic culture on her cultural identity and self-expression is explored. Further, theory critiques and possibilities in future research are discussed.

The juxtaposition of collectivist and individualistic cultures and their interactions are an ongoing area of exploration in social cognition research. Thus, investigating both general and specific aspects of these interactions allows us to glean more

information to build upon the existing body of knowledge. To this end, North American and East Asian cultures are often compared, such as collectivist Japanese culture and individualistic Canadian culture. "Gō ni ireba gō ni shitagae (when you enter the village, follow the village)" is a Japanese proverb that is an equivalent to "when in Rome, do as the Romans do". This is the core mindset that my mother, Yumiko, has held as an Okinawan-Japanese person who emigrated to Canada in 1980. She attributes her willingness to embrace the experience as an opportunity for her success in building a life in Canada (Y. Nakahara, personal communication, November 28, 2025). She also feels that a person's individual character influences how much ease or struggle they may encounter when adapting to a new culture. Despite language barriers and cultural differences, my mother has thrived in Canada. In this current work, I will explore my mother, Yumiko's emigration experience from Okinawa, Japan to Canada with *bicultural identity integration* ([BII]; Hanek, 2017, p.453), *third culture*, (Hanek, 2017, p.454), and *affect valuation theory* ([AVT]; Huynh et al., 2018), as well as integration and critique of these theories. Additionally, I will discuss how this case study contributes to existing research by incorporating the complexities of cultural identities to humanize this area of research. Finally, I will explain the personal impact it has had on me, and on broader implications.

Personal Case

Present-day Okinawa is the Southernmost prefecture of Japan, consisting of the Ryukyu Islands, which has a complicated history from when it was known as the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1429. The Ryukyu Islands have been a part of tributary systems with both China and Japan while under unofficial rule of Japan since 1609. This was followed by being officially annexed by Japan in 1872, then forced under United States military government rule in 1945. Governing power was reverted back to Japanese rule in 1972, with an ongoing U.S. military presence that continues to present day (Norimatsu & McCormack, 2025). This history is significant as Yumiko was born in Okinawa under U.S. occupation. She recalls that in her childhood, the common currency was the U.S. dollar, and that she particularly enjoyed American snacks like sugar cookies and Blue Seal ice cream (Y. Nakahara, personal communication, November 28, 2025). In considering the U.S. military occupation during her formative years, my mother nonetheless describes her cultural identity as being primarily Japanese, followed by Okinawan, likely due to Okinawa's forced assimilation to Japanese culture. Despite this, Okinawan cultural influence has persisted within my mother's cultural identity,

resulting in a self-described 70% Japanese, 30% Okinawan allotment of her cultural identity prior to emigrating to Canada.

Furthermore, Yumiko's life in Canada has had both opportunities and challenges. At first, my mother found the English language and North American mannerisms to be intimidating. She was also relatively isolated as it took time to create a social support network. However, with each encounter her confidence increased. Eventually my mother realized that people are people, no matter the country or language being spoken. Thus, once she believed herself to be on equal footing to everyone else, she was able to assert herself even while making mistakes. From this, Yumiko found herself observing the surprisingly individualistic tendencies of the Canadians around her. Embodying "Gō ni ireba gō ni shitagae," my mother embraced Canadian acculturation and states her present-day cultural identity as 10% Okinawan, 40% Japanese, and 50% Canadian (Y. Nakahara, personal communication, December 1, 2025).

Moreover, Okinawa has many Indigenous languages which have largely become endangered due to Japanese language assimilation (Hammine, 2021). Though they are labelled as Japanese dialects, this designation is a misnomer as the Indigenous Okinawan languages are mutually unintelligible to Japanese, as well as to each other. Labelling these Indigenous languages as dialects works to diminish and erase their existence and support assimilation to Japanese culture (Hammine, 2021). The Indigenous language specific to my mother's home island, Ishigaki-Jima, is *Yaeyama hōgen* (Miyara, 1995). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared Yaeyama hōgen to be "severely endangered" (*Language Vitality and Endangerment - UNESCO Digital Library*, n.d.) alongside the other Ryukyuan languages. Had my mother learned Yaeyama hōgen in childhood, she would have considered herself 50% Okinawan, and 50% Japanese. However, Japanese assimilation removed Yaeyama hōgen from the school curriculum, prioritizing Japanese and English language learning instead. Furthermore, among the Indigenous Okinawan population, identifying with their Indigenous language spans from pride or exclusivity to shame and self-depreciation. One case study involving *Miyara Yaeyaman* (a variety of Yaeyama hōgen from Miyara village, Ishigaki-Jima) identifies these as negative factors against revitalization of the language. Simply learning and speaking these Indigenous languages influences one's personal identity. However, the social connotations that surround the Indigenous languages heavily impacts identity as well.

Theoretical Interpretation and Synthesis

Bicultural Identity Integration refers to how a person might view their two cultural identities (Hanek, 2017, p. 453). This is described by a spectrum of distance and a spectrum of conflict that runs parallel to each other. The spectrum of conflict ranges from *clashing* to *harmony*, and the spectrum of distance ranges from *compartmentalization* to *blendedness*. The BII model proposes that the distance and conflict spectrums can be mutually reinforcing. Meaning that an individual may compartmentalize (distance spectrum) their two cultural identities, which would bring them to the clash side of the conflict spectrum. Conversely, an individual could blend (distance spectrum) their two cultural identities, landing them on the harmony end of the conflict spectrum (Hanek, 2017). My mother does not find it necessary to compartmentalize her Okinawan, Japanese, or Canadian identities from each other and enjoys the fluidity of any amalgamation of her cultural identities in her daily life. Based on this description, my mother is on the blendedness and harmony end of the BII spectrum.

Furthermore, third culture is what results when two cultural identities become blended. Typically, this involves an individual's heritage culture, and their new culture. Instead of alternating from one identity to the other, by blending the two identities, an individual not only maintains their connection to both cultures but allows for a dynamic third culture to emerge (Hanek, 2017, p. 454). In the case of my mother, Yumiko, her arrival in Canada resulted in her developing a third culture. My mother embraced the emergence of this third culture identity, reflecting a harmonious and blended BII. Another notable development that echoes third culture refers to the endangerment of Ryukyuan Indigenous languages due to Japanese cultural assimilation. Current day attempts to revitalize the Ryukyuan languages among the dominant Japanese language have led to linguistical changes. Specifically with *Uchinaayamatoguchi*, the blended usage of Ryukyuan and Japanese that is seemingly spreading throughout the Ryukyuan Islands (Heinrich et al, 2009).

Moreover, affect Valuation Theory (Huynh et al., 2018) explains that people have *ideal affect*; the desired way to feel often based on cultural norms and expectations, and *actual affect;* how an individual actually feels. This theory explains that aspects of culture influence ideal affect more than actual affect, and aspects of temperament influence actual affect more than ideal affect. Additionally, it is ideal affect that has more influence over people's daily decisions and behaviour. We understand that collectivist cultures like Japan value the greater good over individual accomplishments, whereas individualistic cultures like Canada value

individual freedom over collective support. My mother, Yumiko's experiences align with this description, noting that there is much more ease in expressing herself in Canada compared to Japan (Y. Nakahara, personal communication, December 1, 2025). Research supports that Japanese norms have an expectation of less open expression of emotions (Safdar et al., 2009), whereas North American norms allow for more open expression.

The synthesis of BII, third culture, and AVT, could further explain interactions of cultural identities, sense of self, and individual differences. My mother's experience of BII over 45 years of her life provides a substantial case displaying development of third culture. This may also contribute to changes she has made regarding what she allows herself to in terms of expressing actual affect. Further, in considering sense of self and individual differences, Yumiko describes that her actual affect did not change when emigrating from Japan to Canada. She felt that she needed to subdue her actual affect to meet the interpersonal expectations while living in Japan, whereas she felt free to express her actual affect in Canada. Conversely, her ideal affect has changed since emigrating to Canada, allowing her to freely express more of her actual affect which aligns with her genuine self, and with Canada's norms and expectations (Y. Nakahara, personal communication, December 1, 2025). My mother also commented on how she feels that some things depend on the individual. She credits her personal outlook of seeing challenges as opportunities as a contributing factor of her ability to adapt to Canadian culture. It is worth noting that her actual affect and desire to be able to express her feelings more freely, could also have had a part in facilitating her BII in Canada.

Critical Reflection

Furthermore, by synthesizing BII, third culture, and AVT together we arrive at a multifaceted explanation of my mother's emigration experience. However, this could be further explored in terms of social identity complexity by integrating *cultural mosaic metatheory* ([CMM]; Chao & Moon, 2005). The CMM framework includes three categories: demographic, geographic, and associative, which allows for more nuanced research at the individual and group level. Future research could include expanding from this case study to a group qualitative analysis of Okinawan diaspora in Canada. There are other Okinawan diaspora around the world, including Brazil, U.S.A., Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Guam, Mexico, and the Philippines (Ueunten, 2015), which may be included in future studies. Moreover, extending the qualitative research longitudinally to the effects

on second-generation children of immigrants for a multi-generational case study. Additionally, comparing assimilation or enculturation in each generation may uncover helpful insights between the generations, which could also build on social identity complexity.

Moreover, this case study of my mother, Yumiko, alters the understanding of my own cultural identity. I grew up identifying as Japanese Canadian, with an affinity for Okinawa, as that is where my parents are from. I only had a vague understanding that Okinawa was "different" from the rest of Japan. As it was not explicitly taught to me, I have only recently come to understand how Japan annexed Okinawa and forced the Indigenous Ryukyuans to assimilate to Japanese language and culture. Redefining my cultural identity as Okinawan-Japanese Canadian feels awkward, indulgent, defiant, and necessary. Distinguishing that my ancestors were Indigenous to the Ryukyu Islands, with their own distinct culture and languages, feels like a form of resistance against a colonial mindset. In gaining a better understanding that my parents grew up in Okinawa under U.S. colonial rule, I notice there is often a degree of nonchalance in my parents when we happen to discuss it. I continue to be inspired to reclaim my heritage as a descendant of Indigenous Ryukyuans and maintain a connection to Okinawan culture. Furthermore, I have noticed a trend on social media that many Ryukyuan descendants, both in Japan, and the global diaspora, are working to reconnect with their heritage as well. Sharing this case study with this greater community would align with the current efforts to reconnect to Okinawan culture.

Additionally, this brings conflicting thoughts to know that I have, and still do, identify culturally as that of my ancestors' oppressors. I experience grief for not having better access to Yaeyama hōgen, along with a sense of urgency due to it being considered severely endangered (Norimatsu & McCormack, 2025). Moreover, this gives me a more nuanced perspective on other aspects of my cultural identity, such as being an uninvited settler on Turtle Island, where I continue to be inspired to honour and support local Indigenous Peoples. Within this complexity, I believe I follow in the example of my mother by embracing these different perspectives as multi-facets of my cultural identity, as opposed to compartmentalizing them. By leaning into cultural identity blendedness and thus, a reduction of personal conflict, my hope is to continue to gain knowledge that will help me connect with my Okinawan heritage.

Furthermore, regarding broader implications of case studies for social-cognitive research, the qualitative data outcomes from case studies can be valuable in balancing quantitative research with more personal context. Measurable data is

paramount for research; however, qualitative case studies can provide support that humanizes the data. For example, having a conversation with my mother about her cultural identities and associated languages, I was able to ask follow-up questions inspired by her answers. In this way, I learned that in addition to the fact that she identified as 30% Okinawan, 70% Japanese before she left Japan, if she had been taught Yaeyama hōgen, that ratio would have changed to 50% Okinawan, 50% Japanese. Had I administered research questions by questionnaire, I would have missed that insight, since I would not have had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions in the moment. This may have further implications such as the prominent role that language has in the development of cultural identity.

To conclude, the complexity of Yumiko's cultural identity can be explained by bicultural identity integration (Hanek, 2017, p.453), third culture (Hanek, 2017, p.454), and affect valuation theory (Huynh et al., 2018). Additionally, the current work can be enhanced and extended in research by possibly applying cultural mosaic metatheory (Chao & Moon, 2005) to account for other differences within demographic, geographic, and associative categories. This may expand to include the global diaspora and the attempts to revitalize the endangered Indigenous Ryukyuan languages. Doing so may further explain contributing factors to a multifaceted cultural identity such as my mother's. Furthermore, I described the personal impact this case study has had on me, and the impact it could have on the greater Okinawan diaspora. I discussed broader implications for social cognition research by conducting case studies such as this. Specifically, by providing support that would bring a humanizing aspect to quantitative data, case studies can bring valuable insight that might otherwise be missed.

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