Psychological Support for Children from Families of International Marriages

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ABSTRACT. This study has the objective to discover the family relationships and support that should exist within families of international marriages. I used the analytical method of extracting, for the purpose of presenting my cases, the portions from the responses of each of the subjects in the three interviews conducted on him/her, portions that applied to the two aspects of support to the children from international marriages -- (1) the family relationships within the international marriages, and (2) the support given to the children from international marriages. The results of my study brought to light that in such family relationships, the roles of parents and children had reversed. Furthermore, with respect to the ideal way of support, the children of international marriages found it difficult to discuss matters with their parents, suggesting the necessity for the supporters to take into consideration the worries and the reality that those children were unable to bear. Furthermore, with respect to the kind of support that should be provided, children from international marriages did not know whether the complications between their parents were those that occurred in ordinary families in Japan. From these circumstances, I perceived the significance in normalizing such situations of the children by having supporters provide them with the help in the form of psychological education.

KEY WORDS: Families of international marriages, Support, Family relationships, Psychological education

Introduction

The number of international marriages in the sixteen years between 1990 to 2006 has increased by approximately 1.7 times. Along with the increase in international marriages, all kinds of problems have been revealed which were not apparent in Japanese married couples. Sano (1998) makes the following inference: “Cross-cultural families, specifically being bi-cultural in nature, have a sense of values based on different languages and customs, so communication alone between members of such families must be difficult, not to mention how great daily pressure and stress could be. “Kuwayama (1995) indicates that in a family of international marriage, the couples do not speak the same native language, the husband and their family have no interest in the culture of the wife which causes pressure and stress, etc. Precisely because of this kind of families of international marriages that a great deal of problems have emerged. Murry et al. (2001) verifies that the parents' expectations of the roles to be played and the methods of socialization (the way how the individuals acquire the norm, the sense of values, the behavior patterns that were required of the members of the group to which they belonged),
stress and the awareness of discrimination, etc., influence the development of personality characteristics of the children of minority families. Based on these circumstances, it is supposed that the children of international marriages are influenced to some extent by the sense of values and the background of their parents' culture. Furthermore, given the fact that the “identity problem” has been indicated in the psychological maladjustment to an environment of foreign culture, the children of international marriages are also confronted with their “identity problem”. As the support for the families and the children who are dealing closely with such foreign culture, the counseling to deal with foreign cultures is considered. Moreover, with the number of children from international marriages on the increase in the educational setting, I believe that it is vital to examine what such support should be. As apparent from the above, researches have been done dealing with the marital relationship of international couples and researches dealing extensively with the support given to foreign cultures. However, not many studies have been conducted from the clinical and psychological perspectives on the concrete methods of support and family relationships for the children of international marriages.

Given this situation, this study has the objectives to examine the family relationships in international marriages, as perceived by their children, along with which, the examination of 3 cases, focusing on what is desired for the children of international marriages--the support, the counseling for varied cultures and the support in schools.

In this study, the word “children” is not limited for children who are under age, but as a common name for “children/offspring” of international marriages. Moreover, the word “half” is used in this study to define a child, one of whose parents is of foreign nationality.

Methods

Participants

One male and two female in their twenties residing in Japan. Each one has a parent who is a foreign national. These subjects were introduced to the author by a friend.

Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the participants. They were questioned chiefly on their family relationships, languages and cultures from the perspective of identity formation.

The interviews were conducted from August to December in year X. Three interviews were carried out on each subject, with each interview lasting from 50 minutes to 90 minutes. The interviews were separated by one month. With the consent of the subjects, all interviews were recorded on IC recorder.

At the beginning of the interviews, the subjects were asked to sign the consent form, after having received the explanations on the objectives of this study, its significance and the protection of privacy. Moreover, from the perspective of protecting the privacy of the individuals, the text of the recorded “word for word” responses of the subjects will not be
published in its entirety.

Analytical Plan

Due to the fact that the responses of the subjects were extremely revealing of their individuality and their peculiarities, being that the topic was on such minority matter as international marriages, I believe that it is appropriate that they be examined in the context of research cases. The objectives of this study are: 1) the family relationships within international marriages; 2) the support to the children from international marriages, so, as the analytical method of this study, I extracted the portions from the responses in the three interviews for each subject that applied to 1) and 2) and present them as “cases”, followed by their examination.

Case Presentation

The semi-structured interviews, conducted on three different occasions on each subject constituted a “case”. In presenting these cases, the responses of the subjects are given within “” , while the words of the author will be given within < >.

Case 1
Participant: A, a 26-year old male
Family structure : father (Japanese), mother (Honduran) younger sister and older brother.

A said, “Father was usually not home. Only the three of us, Mom, my younger sister and I, were home. Almost always, I was the one who had to go to the Ward Office to take care of things. When we needed a copy of the family register, I had to go to get it. I guess you can say that our home was propped up by only half the support that it needed. “ However, he wished that his mother could speak more Japanese, “You see, part of me couldn't help wishing that if she spoke and understood more Japanese, she could have read this and she could have done that and I didn't have to take care of things for her the way I did....

“ Regarding his feelings toward his mother, he said, “I dare say Mom was always somewhat nervous....” He also said that he could not tell whether his worries were caused by his mother's inability to speak Japanese or whether they were the worries shared by the parent and child in a regular Japanese household. Moreover, to the question-- <Have you ever consulted anyone on your worries?> he answered that he had consulted friends about them, but not for once a parent. “Even if I tried talking to Mom, she wouldn't understand for sure and what's more I don't expect her to understand. These worries of mine... She is a total foreigner.” Words such as these indicated how he felt as a “half”, knowing that there was no way that his worries could be understood by his foreign parent. On looking back, his greatest concern was to try to somehow surmount the difficulties with which he was confronted. A. added that even though he was Japanese, he looked foreign, so those around him made fun of him. In the beginning, he disliked being made fun of, but gradually he came to accept it as an amusement.

Case 2
Participant: B, a 24-year old female
Family structure: father (Japanese-Brazilian), mother (Peruvian), younger sister and older brother.

The environment of B’s family is quite different from that of other Japanese families in that both her parents can neither speak nor write Japanese. Therefore, B often took care of things in the place of her parents. Ever since her elementary school days, she has been somehow relying on herself, not on her parents. “When my parents received letters from school, they couldn’t read them, so I simply read them and took care of what was required, relying on my judgement.” “For example, before going swimming with our teacher, the consent form required the fixture of seal to indicate parental consent and to confirm the state of my body temperature. I took care of that myself. Kids around me were envious of me.” She added, that even now, she is taking care of matters at home and outside of home, matters which should be done by her parents--going to her younger sister's high school as her substitute guardian, taking her to the hospital and circulating the neighborhood bulletin board, etc. “My family considers me indispensable, you know. That is, as long as we are in Japan. You see, I've got to handle our lives in Japan, as well as to play skillfully the role of .... <the role of forming the connection with your mother?> “That's it. That's why I guess I am indispensable.” “Ever since I was quite young, it's been that way, so I'm exhausted. I've had to try so hard....” ” I guess I'm resigned to the fact that there is no way out of this situation for me because it's my fate. Besides, it's not that I had a choice in getting born into this situation... Before I realized it, it was so.” B said over and over again that she had no way out being a “half” for good, no matter how much she cried about it or laughed about it. Being aware of her situation, B concluded that there was no use talking about it to her parents, nor did she consulted other people about it. “I guess everything comes from my resignation that even if I tried speaking to them, they wouldn't understand.... When it comes to speaking Japanese, I wanted to convey not just the contents but also the nuances, but that was not possible with them. Probably because of that, I have never discussed matters with them. “<Is it faster to take care of things yourself?>

“Well, yes, it's kind of resigning to the fact that it was just that way.” Moreover, B stated that it might be better to have a specialist (school counselor) in elementary school and junior high school. “I think that kids like me could find the peace of mind needed, if they had someone who was concerned about them. Getting none at home, the school is the only other place to get such attention.” She felt that in elementary school, “it would be nice if the teacher could look after such kids and do so casually. I think there are kids who can't say they needed some attention, even though they wanted to get help.”

Case 3
Participant: C, a 23 year old female

Family structure: father (Japanese) and mother (half of Spanish and Filipino)

C’s father is “a stubborn father of the Showa
era” and he is the one who scolds C and her mother is the one who pacifies the situation. Her mother doesn’t understand the language (Japanese: a note from translator) sufficiently and C assists her in English. “It seems she suffers severe stress when she doesn’t understand what was spoken in Japanese” C said. Also C says that her mother is like her friend. “It has been 22 years since she lived here likewise it has been 22 years since I live here. That’s why we feel like we can hang in this country together. We are somewhere in an evenhanded position. Because I started from zero since I was born and she started from zero since she started learning Japanese. We can share hard times and joyful times” says C. To C, her mother is in an evenhanded position and her father is embedded in the Japanese culture. As a whole family “Racially mixed families are totally in a different position” says C. Her father is Japanese, her mother is a foreigner and herself is mixed breed. Apparently even when a problem occurs, each member overcomes it by himself most of the time rather than solving the problem among family members.

“I know that each member has an obstacle which they want to overcome for sure”. As a result, C has been trying to overcome problems without consulting her family. She says although she could overcome as many issues as possible by herself, she still wanted to have a professional (school counselor) who would understand her situation as a racially mixed person when she was in elementary and middle school. What she strongly wanted in a counselor was that s/he would understand that she was bearing what she couldn't talk to her parents rather than understanding logical things. “After all, I think I want to feel secure like you are okay as you are. It’s not unnatural that I get annoyed here.” Ms. C herself didn't have an opportunity to consult anybody. As a result, she was repeatedly hospitalized and released several times for unknown reasons and she often went to the public health center. “You should provide a place where people feel safe. Especially if we don’t feel relieved when we go home. Like I feel I have a sea of worries” she said.

**Discussions**

**Family Relationship**

Apparently as A, B, and C have been supporting their foreign mother culturally and linguistically since they were children, it is difficult for children from international marriages to play a role as a child. As Carter and McGoldrick (1980) says “During the childcare period, as the secondary change which is essential to the family, first by adding a child to the couple system leads to a new boundary and role. Especially it is important to devise ways of functioning both the couple and parent systems. Second, to obtain parental roles--- father’s role for husband and mother’s role for wife is expected. Third, including mother’s role or grandparent’s role, to reconstitute the relationship with their parents is expected”, they mention the family process about the family relationship development during the childcare period from three different perspectives. From these perspectives, it seems
to be crucial for both parents to obtain their parental roles and set a boundary between parents and children for the children’s development. In context therapy, the concept of parent-child relationship reverse phenomenon is named “surrogate parental role”. “Surrogate parental role” is the relationship that parents give and children receive is reversed from a young age and children try to comfort themselves and care for their parents as if the parent-child relationship were reversed” (Nakagama, 2010). We suppose that the family environment is prone to the “surrogate parental role” in international marriages. Especially as the culture and language are different between husband and wife, it’s difficult to adjust the gap and additionally father is busy at work or mother doesn't have enough vitality to live in Japan thus it’s difficult for her to play a role of mother and their children end up with taking the role of “surrogate parental role”. And as the roles of parent and child are not distinctive, the boundary between parents and children is likely to become ambiguous.

Support

From this case, it has become clear that they have overcome the difficulties by themselves without being able to consult their parents from a young age. They have taken measures in order to overcome the difficulties by such as converting to laughter, thinking it’s their destiny, or expressing in the way they dress. Supporters need to think of support and understand that children from international marriages are prone to have difficulties consulting their parents, as a result they have replaced things they couldn’t’ carry with other things when counselors were involved with them in school or counseling settings. Moreover Kurihara (2004) says “In cross cultural counseling, it’s necessary to further consideration to give or receive messages and unless they don’t understand the client’s culture or habit, it’s difficult to build trust and solve problems with them”. Like B and C mentioned, they feel relieved if supporters are under a similar situation or clients can share their culture so we need to consider the clients’ culture carefully when providing counseling. And depending on circumstances, as Inoue (1998) suggests, psychological education should promote awareness, knowledge and skills in cross-cultural settings as a part of essential support in multi-cultural counseling, it would appear to be meaningful to provide support for them including this view of psychological education. Furthermore it should be effective when we give messages by normalizing (as a quantitative problem at normal condition) (Hasegawa, 1987). Like cases 1 and 3, children of international marriages have doubts on whether the conflicts among their parents occur also among Japanese families, or whether the reason why their problems and struggles arise is because they are racially mixed or if even people in a similar situation have similar problems. Supporters can give them a sense of security by normalizing their questions in psychological education.
SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE

Additionally, like Okado (1989) says “The foundation for emotional development of school-age children exists within the family relationship. The more calm and warm the family relationship is, the more stable the children become. Adversely, if there are fights constantly in the family and the family relationship is not working out, the children’s emotions become unstable. Basically the family is structurally stable, open communication is taken place, and the absorptive capacity of the family is strong; these are the necessary conditions for emotional development”, he describes the importance of the family support for school-age children. When we support children from international marriages, we need to see the big picture of the family. Namely we might need to not only see the family dynamics of international marriages but provide support to the father and mother now and then.

Morikawa (2009) says “Children from international marriages were typically born and raised in Japan so they don’t have linguistic problems thus they can be ignored”. Like Case 2, there are children who can’t say “Help!” therefore teachers’ care and to place counselors who have developed expertise in cross-cultural counseling in schools should be considered.

Conclusions

In this study, we discussed the family relationship from international marriages and support. As a result, we discovered that the role of parent-child relationship is reversed and the conflict and family dynamics are revealed due to international marriage families, we obtained suggestions for the whole family and children that can lead to support. In terms of support, we found their needs of cross-cultural counseling and normalization in educational settings and the importance of knowing how necessary it is to understand the clients’ cultural background.

In addition, from the perspective that cultural differences within international marriages exist, we could characterize the family relationship. However, we couldn't view the whole perspective based on ethnic cultural background at this time. Therefore further discussion will be required in future research.
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