

Japanese and American University Students' Perceptions Toward Japanese-American Identity

Gillian Ohta

California State University Monterey Bay

Abstract

We are Japanese-Americans. Born and raised in the United States, we have studied Japanese language and culture at an university and also have studied abroad in Japan. From our experiences, we wanted to find out in how Japanese and American university students see Japanese-Americans. Through our research, we wanted to study the opinions of Japanese and American university students towards Japanese-Americans as well as how their views are formed. We surveyed 30 Japanese university students and 32 American university students and found that American university students thought that Japanese-Americans are studious, well-mannered, and hardworking, while Japanese students only partially agreed that Japanese-Americans are hardworking. Also Japanese students felt that it is important for Japanese-Americans to maintain strong ties to both American and Japanese culture, however, American students did not feel that it was that important to maintain ties to either culture. On the other hand, both Japanese and American students thought that Japanese-Americans should be proud of both their American and Japanese cultures. Also, both groups of students thought that it is not important for Japanese-Americans to be fluent in either Japanese or English. Furthermore, both countries' students felt that Japanese-Americans should be able to freely identify how they please. Regarding how their views towards Japanese-Americans are shaped, both Japanese and American students felt that their views were shaped from the Japanese-Americans they either know personally or are acquainted with. However, Japanese students responded that their images of Japanese-Americans are also influenced by television and movies.

Introduction

Japanese have migrated to the United States since 1841 and have faced discrimination from the United States government even before World War II. For example, the gentlemen's agreement between the United States and Japan, however, many people do not know about this history. Therefore, I wonder how American university students' views of Japanese-Americans are shaped? Similarly, how do Japanese university students' shape their views of Japanese-Americans? Stemming from my curiosity, I decided to study what affects perceptions towards Japanese-Americans.

1. Significance of the Study

The reason behind this study was that as a Japanese-American I wanted to know the perception toward Japanese-Americans. Also when I studied abroad in Japan I was surprised

about how little Japanese university students knew about Japanese-Americans. Therefore I wanted to find out what views American and Japanese university students had towards Japanese-American identity, as well as how those views were shaped.

2. Research Questions

1. How do Japanese and American university students view Japanese-American identity?
2. What are the main factors that influence Japanese and American university students' image of Japanese-Americans?

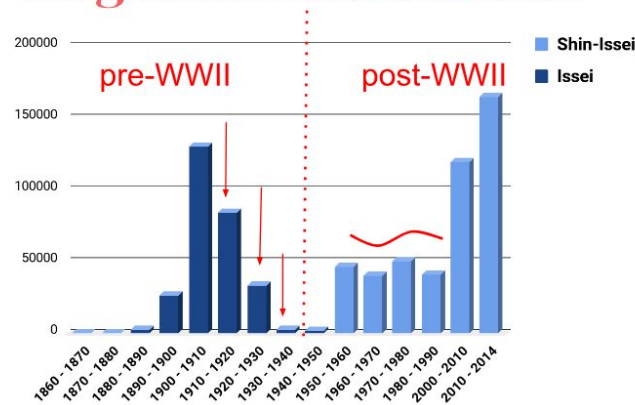
3. Research Background

3.1. Definition of Relevant Terms

Japanese-Americans who migrated from Japan to the United States are divided into groups generational groups such as Issei, Nissei, Shin-issei. Issei are Japanese-Americans who migrated to the United States before World War Two (Niiya, 2001; Tsuda, 2009). Shin-Issei are Japanese-Americans who migration to the United States after World War Two. Nissei are the children of the Issei (Niiya, 2001).

3.2. Numbers of Japanese Migrants into the U.S.

Figure 1: Numbers of Japanese Migrants into the U.S.



The statistics shown in Figure 1 from before World War II as well as after World War II show that immigration from Japan to the United States right before World War II and during World War II suddenly decreased. However, there was a steady influx of immigration to the United States after World War II (Spickard, 1996).

3.3. New Japanese-American Migrants

The Japanese census shows that from the year 2000 the number of Japanese migrants to the United States has suddenly risen (Japanese-Census, 2017).

3.4. Generational Differences

Those who migrated from Japan to the United States before World War II are called Issei, while those who migrated after World War II are called Shin-Issei. Due to the generational differences there is also experiential differences as well. For example, the Issei generation and their families have experienced internment while the Shin-Issei have not had that experience.

Also the current generations, such as Sansei and Yonsei, from the original Issei are more connected solely to American culture, however, Shin-Issei are connected to both Japanese and American culture. In terms of the type of work that brought Japanese migration to the United States for Issei has were mainly manual labor, or blue collared jobs, while Shin-Issei tend to migrate for more white collared jobs (Tsuda, 2015; Yamashiro, 2017).

3.5. Assimilation (USA)

After World War II, Japanese-Americans emphasized becoming part of the American mainstream society. One of the ways they did so was by promoting academic success. This was also further supported by the fact that many Issei had a high school or college degree. Furthermore, as Japanese-Americans became more assimilated, they tended to not necessarily have high academic performance, however, they were more likely to go further in their education, such as getting doctorate degrees (Kitano, 1962; Masuda, 1970; Matoba-Adler, 1998). Also, despite prior to 1967 which interracial marriage was illegal, Japanese-Americans promoted marrying into White-American families in order to have “more American” children (Hall, 1997).

3.6. Stereotypes and Discrimination (USA)

After World War II, despite various hardships, Japanese-Americans showed academic achievements as well as financial success which led to the model minority which encompassed Asian Americans. The model minority is a preferred minority which there is an image that students are diligent, quiet, and clever among other things (Kitano, 1962; Niiya 2001; Shim, 1998). As a result of the model minority there is an unrealistic perception towards academic achievement, therefore students may not get the support that they need. In terms of their career there is a glass ceiling towards Japanese-Americans in which they cannot further themselves

(Niiya, 2001; Matoba-Adler, 1997).

When World War II broke out, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order which imprisoned 120,000 Japanese-Americans in internment camps (Niiya, 2001). Fred Korematsu is a famous Japanese-American who was arrested for protesting against the discrimination of executive order 9066 and his supreme court case. Korematsu ended up losing his supreme court case however, his courage to fight against discrimination has been noted in history (“Lifetime”, n.d.). In addition, the Japanese American Citizens League, also known as the JACL, is an organization of Japanese-Americans which aims to ally with and protect the civil liberties of all minority and marginalized groups . The JACL was influential in supporting the supreme court case, Loving VS. Virginia, which challenged the legality of interracial marriages. Previously it was illegal to marry interracially however the victory of this trial legalized it (JACL, 2017; U.S. National Archive & Record Administration, 2017).

In 1988 the American government signed a bill in which paid retributions of \$20,000 to the surviving Japanese-Americans who were interned during World War II. The JACL was also a strong advocate of this bill as well(JACL, 2017; U.S. National Archive & Record Administration, 2017).

3.7. Japanese-American Population (USA)

**Figure 2:
Japanese-American
Population**



Asian-Americans make up 5.7% of the the American population with Japanese-Americans being the sixth largest group within Asian-Americans (US Census, 2016). The most populous states of Japanese-Americans, as shown in Figure 2, are California, Hawaii, New York, and Washington (Yamashiro, 2017).

3.8. Migration and Assimilation (Japan)

Despite fluency in Japanese or understanding of Japanese culture, Japanese-Americans are more accepted into Japanese society than others of Japanese heritage, such as Japanese-Mexican, or Japanese-Brazilian. This is due to the fact that Japan considered Japanese-Americans “American-ness” as a beautiful aspect because Japanese have a positive image of America. Also many Japanese-American who go to Japan to live often go to either study abroad or to get white collared jobs such as teaching English (Tsuda, 2009; Yamashiro, 2017).

3.9. Stereotypes and Discrimination (Japan)

On the other hand, Japanese-Americans also face bullying while in Japanese society. The bullying often stems from their lack of fluency in the Japanese language and cultural understanding. Also there is a view that White-Americans are better English teachers (Yamashiro, 2017; Lie, 2001; Tsuda, 2009).

3.10. Japanese-American Population (Japan)

In the last 14 years, the percentage of Japanese-Americans residing in Japan has increased. In 2000, of the 44,856 Americans living in Japan 12.50% were Japanese-Americans, however, the number has increased to 15.04% of the 51,256 Americans in 2014 (Japanese Census, 2017).

3.11. The Image of Japanese-Americans

The image of Japanese-Americans within American society is that they are respectful, hardworking, and mono-ethnic, but the Japanese image of Japanese-Americans are that they are beautiful, bilingual, and mixed race (Yamashiro, 2017).

3.12. Culture Values and Characteristics

The Japanese and American societies have difference in culture values. Some words that describe the characteristics of Japanese cultural values are; duty, obligation, hierarchy, difference, and dependence. On the other hand, for American society some cultural values are; individualism, equality, rights and privileges, self-reliance, and self-assertion (Matoba-Adler, 1998). Furthermore, according to Matoba-Adler the Japanese cultural values and characteristics of gaman (patience), ganbare (do your best), and enryo (restraint) are often taught when raising Japanese-American children, which could be one of the influences to the model minority stereotype (1998). The characteristics of the gaman, ganbare, and enryo are aspects of self-discipline which promote strong work ethics, politeness, and compliance (Kendis, 1989; Matoba-Adler, 1998).

3.13. National Identity vs. Ethnic Identity

For Japanese-Americans they are faced with both their national identities as well as their ethnic identities. National identity provides a sense of belonging as well as an ethnocentric view of their national identity (Bolaffi, 2003; Theiss-Morse, 2009). On the other hand, the ethnic identity of Japanese-Americans often affects how they portray themselves particularly in regards to assimilation (Bolaffi, 2003; Masuda, 1970). The common stereotypes of the average American person is that they are; white, Christian, speak English, and are born in the United States (Theiss-Moore, 2009). On the other hand, the image of the Japanese person is that they are; homogenous, well mannered, harmonious, and respectful (Hendry, 2006).

3.17. Japanese-American Identity

There are 3 elements that influence Japanese-American identity. The first is appearance, the second is the generational gap, and third is their knowledge of the Japanese language and culture (Yamashiro, 2017). According to Sue and Sue, people who hold two cultures often face an identity crisis. This is caused by uncertainty of which culture they should belong to whether it be their national identity or their ethnic identity. Asian-American identity can be classified in three categories. The first is the traditionalist, they adhere to only their cultural values. The second is the marginal man who conforms to only western culture. The third is the Asian-American, they integrate both their cultural values and western culture (1971;1972).

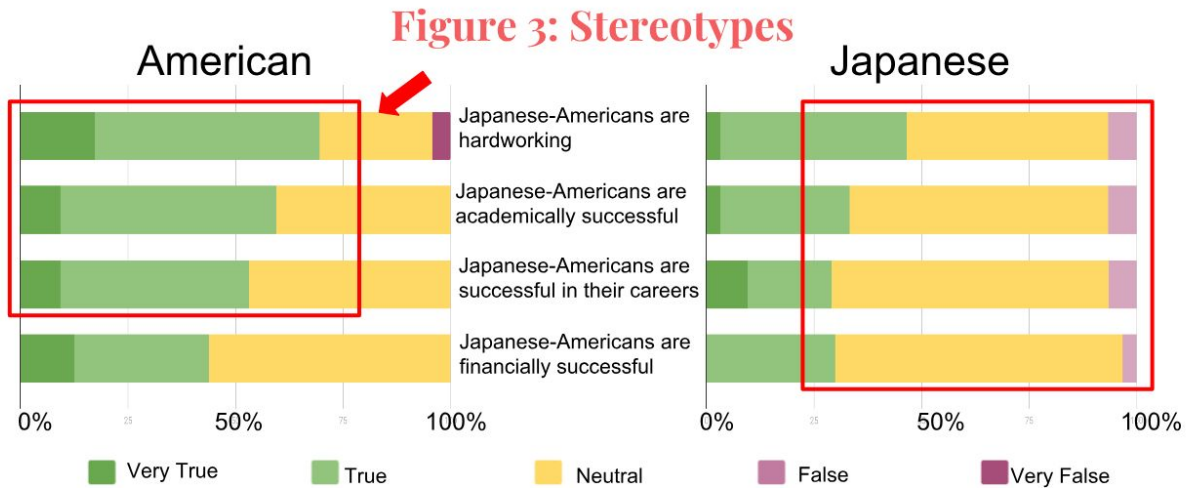
4. Research Methods

For our research method we surveyed 32 American students and 30 Japanese students using google forms, an online questionnaire. From the total of 62 respondents ten of them said that they were Japanese-American, and three people said that they were half Japanese.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Research Findings 1

Research question 1: how do Japanese and American university students view Japanese-American identity?



From Figure 3, you can see that more than half of American students agreed that Japanese-Americans are hardworking, academically successful, and successful in their careers, however, Japanese students mostly answered neither.

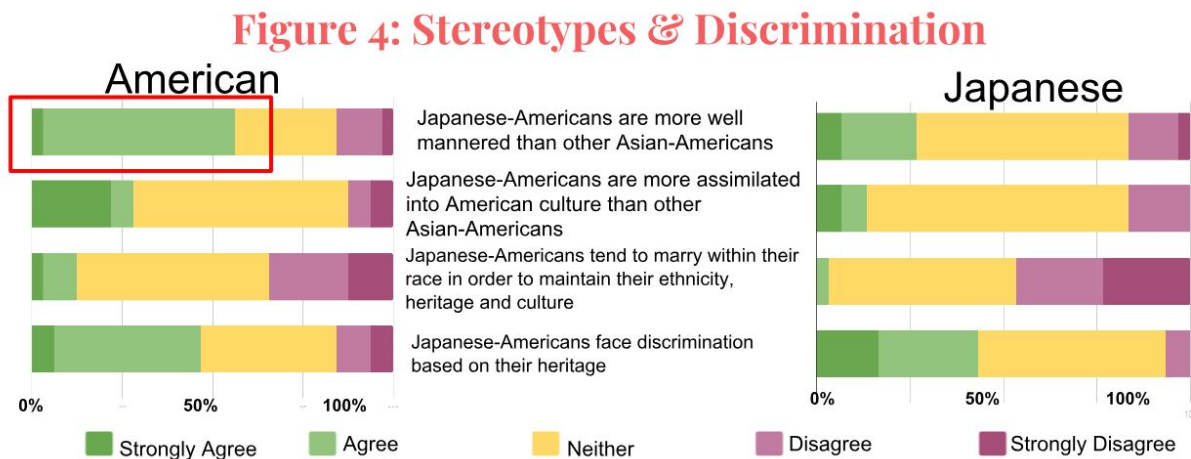
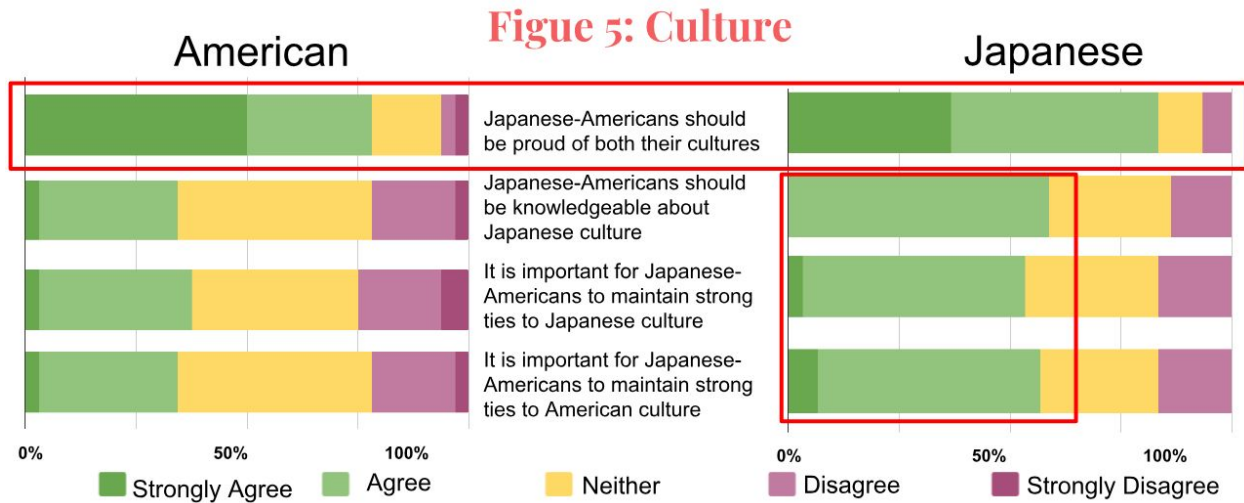
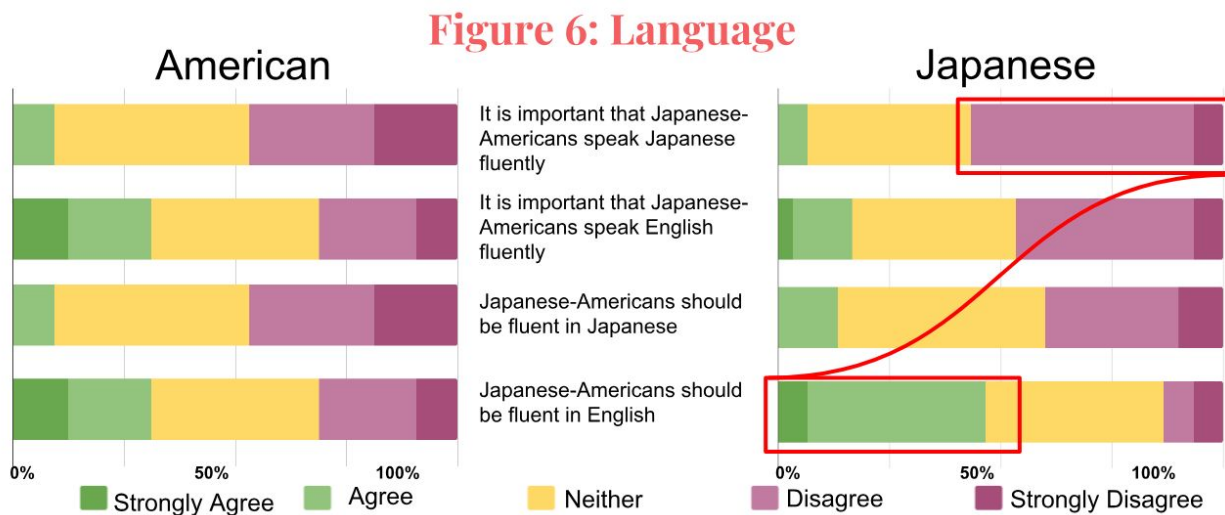


Figure 4 shows that American students believed that Japanese-Americans are more polite than other Asian-Americans but Japanese students did not hold the same views.



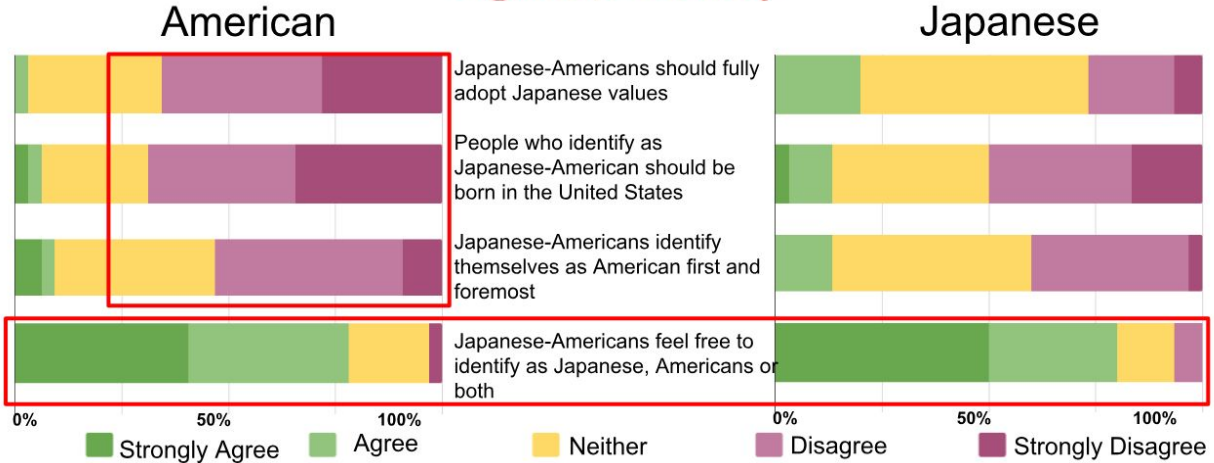
We wondered about the perceptions surrounding Japanese-American knowledge and connection to both countries cultures. As seen from Figure 5, both American and Japanese university students felt that Japanese-Americans should be proud of both of their cultures. Also Japanese students thought that Japanese-Americans should be knowledgeable in both countries culture as well as maintain strong ties as well.



Both countries students thought that it was not important for Japanese-Americans to be fluent in either Japanese or English. However, more Japanese students than American students

thought that Japanese-Americans should be able to speak English fluently (Figure 6).

Figure 7: Identity



In regards of the identity that Japanese-Americans are perceived they should have, more than half of American students responded that it is not important for Japanese-Americans to identify only as American. Both Japanese and American students felt that it was very important that Japanese-Americans should feel free to identify however they please. Also they thought that it was not important for people who identify as Japanese-American to be born in the United States (Figure 7).

Figure 8: Word cloud



As can be seen from the Figure 8 word cloud American university students wrote words like “diverse”, “kind”, and “hardworking”. For the Japanese university students they responded with “I do not know”, “World War II”, and “Hawaii”. From this we can understand that Japanese students do not know much about Japanese-Americans.

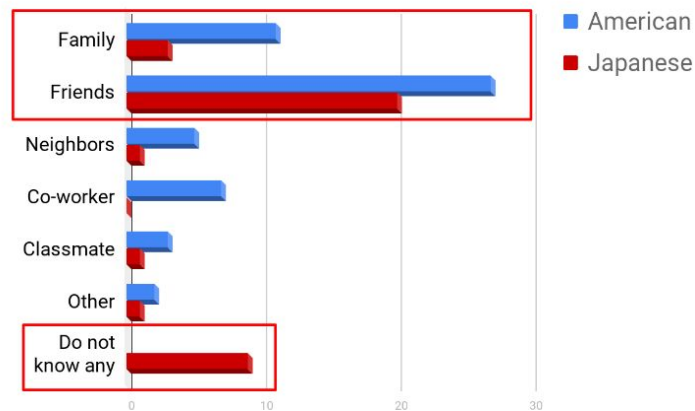
5.2. Summary of Findings 1

From our research we found that both American and Japanese university students thought that Japanese-Americans should be proud of both their cultures. Also they thought that Japanese-Americans should be able to be able to freely choose how they identify. Additionally, Japanese university students thought that Japanese-Americans should be knowledgeable and maintain strong ties to Japanese and American culture, but American university students did not think it was that important. Also the perspectives brought up in the word cloud were interesting. American university students tended to have a positive image of Japanese-Americans. However, Japanese university students did not know much about about Japanese-Americans other than things related to World War II.

5.3. Research Findings 2

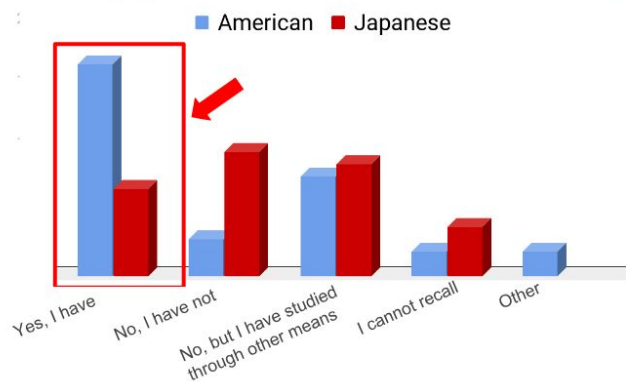
Research question 2: What are the main factors that influence Japanese and American university students’ image of Japanese-Americans.

Figure 9: If you know any Japanese-Americans, what is your relationship with them?



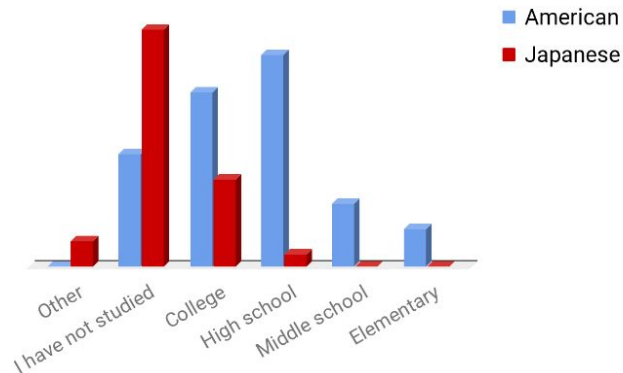
When asked the question of “if you know any Japanese-American, what is your relationship with them?”, American university students respond that they knew Japanese-Americans, however, Japanese university students said that they did not know any Japanese-Americans. In other words, Japanese students do not often have the chance to meet Japanese-Americans (Figure 9).

Figure 10: Have you attended a class that included learning about Japanese-American history, issues, or



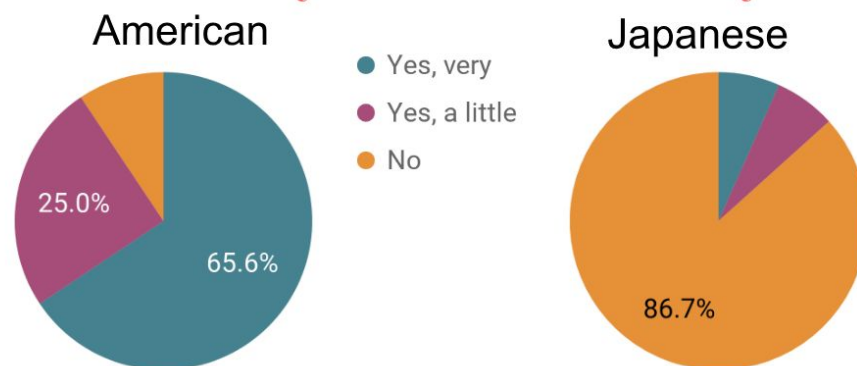
Next we found that many American students have take class which talk about the history, issues, or identity of Japanese-Americans while Japanese students responded that they have not take class about Japanese-Americans (Figure 10).

Figure 11: If you have taken a class that included learning about Japanese-Americans, when did you take it?



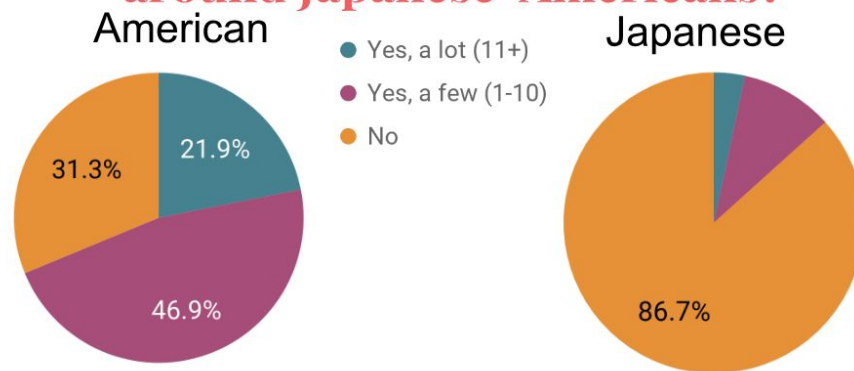
Also we found that many Americans have taken classes about Japanese-Americans in high school or college but we also found that Japanese students have not had the chance to take classes related to Japanese-Americans (Figure 11).

Figure 12: Were you raised in ethnically diverse community?



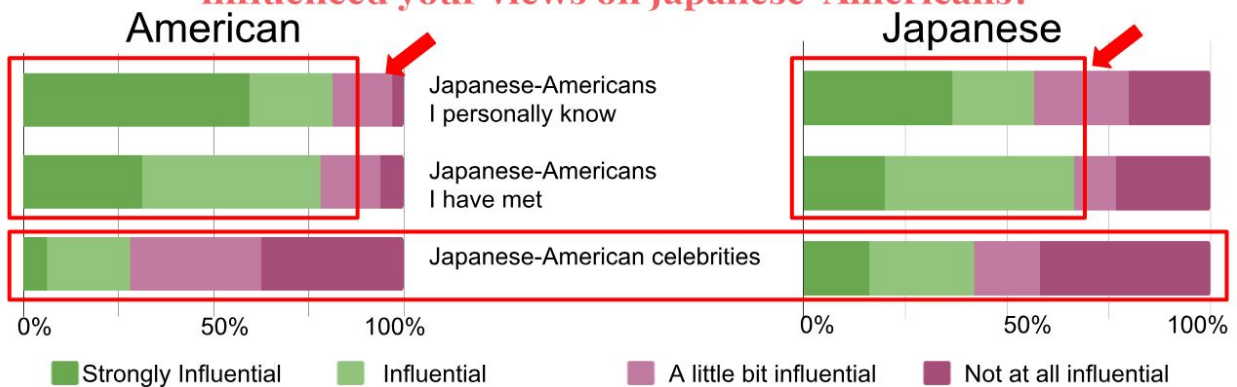
Also unlike American students, a majority of Japanese students responded that they were not raised in an ethnically diverse community (Figure 12).

Figure 13: Were you raised around Japanese-Americans?

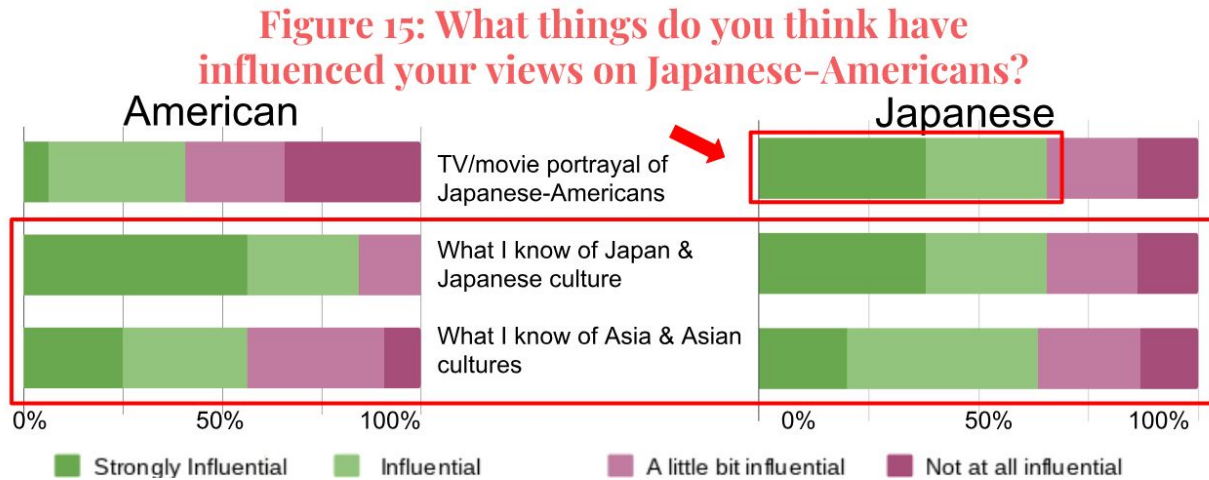


Furthermore, most Japanese students also answered that they were not raised with Japanese-American in their community, while almost 70% of American students said that they were raised around Japanese-Americans in their community (figure 13).

Figure 14: What things do you think have influenced your views on Japanese-Americans?



As you can see from Figure 14, both American and Japanese university students said that their image of Japanese-Americans has been influenced by Japanese-American that they know personally or have met. On the other hand, both countries students said that Japanese-American celebrities were of little to no influence on their image of Japanese-Americans.



In addition, both American and Japanese university students said that their views of Japanese-Americans has been influenced by their knowledge of Japanese and Asian cultures. However, only Japanese students said that television and movies have had an influence on their views (Figure 15)

5.4. Summary of Research Findings 2

The students from both America and Japan said that their views of Japanese-Americans were most influenced by Japanese-Americans that they know, as well as what that they about Japanese and Asian cultures. In America, there is more opportunities to learn about Japanese-American issues and history. However, Japanese do not have the same chances to learn about Japanese-American history. Therefore, Japanese students knowledge and image is also influence from media (such as television dramas and movies).

6. Conclusion

American students do not seem to have prejudice against Japanese-Americans. Also they seem to have a lot of knowledge about stereotypes and discrimination issues against Japanese-Americans. That is because American students have learned about Japanese-American history at school and are familiar with the issues surrounding them. In other words, America has

recognized that it is a multi-cultural society as well as educates about cross-cultural understanding. However, Japanese students had some understanding of Japanese-American history but they do not have many opportunities to be able to meet with Japanese-Americans. Therefore, Japanese students focus on the Issei Japanese-American experience. It would be the best if the Japanese government gave more opportunities for Japanese students to understand about multiculturalism, by incorporating it into their education.

7. Limitations of Study & Future Studies

Lastly, a majority of American student who responded to this survey were from California, where there is a large population of Japanese-Americans. Therefore, there may be a potential bias so the results of the this survey cannot be generalized. For future studies, we would like to expand our studies from just the identity of Japanese-Americans to the identity of others of Japanese descendants such as Japanese-Mexicans or Japanese-Korean.

Bibliography

- Bolaffi G., Et al. (2003). *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity & Culture*. (Ed.). London, England: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Goodman, R., Et al. (2003). *Global Japan: the experience of Japan's new immigrant and overseas communities*. London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Hall, R.E. (1997). *Eurogamy among Asian-Americans: a note on Western assimilation*. *The Social Science Journal*, 34(3), 403+ Retrieved from go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=csumb_main&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA19909460&it=r&asid=6824b0493a346495013bc76be57dee86.
- History.com Staff. (2009). Japanese Internment Camps. Retrieved April 03, 2018. From <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/japanese-american-relocation>
- Hendry, J. (2006). *Understanding Japanese Society*. London: RoutledgeCurzon
- Kitano, H.L.. (1962). Changing Achievement Patterns of the Japanese in the United States. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 58, 257-264.
- Kuroki, M. (2013). 日系アメリカ人のアイデンティティー変容—エスニシティ、ジェンダー、国家を超えて—人間文化研究. 36, 79-95.
- Lie J. (2001). *Multicultural Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Matoba Adler, S. (1998). *Mothering, Education and Ethnicity: The Transformation of Japanese American Culture*. Ng, F. (Ed.). New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Niiya, B. (Ed.). (2001). *Encyclopedia of Japanese American History: An A-to-Z Reference from 1868 to the Present*. New York, NY: Facts on File, Inc.
- Okamoto, D. (2014). *Redefining Race: Asian American Panethnicity and Shifting Ethnic Boundaries*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Sellers, R.. (1998). Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity: A Reconceptualization of African American Racial Identity. *Personality & Social Psychology*, 2(1), 18-22.
- Sellers, R.. (2013). The Multidimensional Model of Black Identity (MBBI). Measurement Instrument Database for the Social Science. Retrieved from www.midss.ie
- Shim, D. (1998). From yellow peril through model minority to renewed yellow peril. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 22(4), 385+ Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A21171155&v=2.1&u=csumb_main&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w
- Theiss-Morse, E. (2009). *Who Counts as an American?: the Boundaries of National Identity*. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Togami, C., & Hansen, A. (1993). *The Public Historian*, 15(1), 114-117. Doi: 10.2307/3378055
- Tsuda, T. (2003). *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press
- Tsuda, T. (2009). *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Tsuda, T. (2015). Recovering heritage and homeland: ethnic revival among fourth-generation Japanese Americans. *Sociological Inquiry* 84(4), 600-627 Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soin.12095/full>
- Tsukuda, Y. (2017). 日本の大衆メディアにおける日系人の表象. 成城法学. 教養論集, 27, 69-85. Retrieved from <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/naid/40007361796>

Yamashiro J.H. (2017). *Redefining Japaneseness: Japanese Americans in the Ancestral Homeland*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.