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A phenomenological study of Korean students' acculturation in middle schools in the USA

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The purpose of this phenomenological interview study was to describe how visiting Korean students experience social adjustment and acculturation when attending US middle schools. As a result of phenomenological analysis, the essences of Korean students' social adjustment included: (1) descriptions of power struggles; (2) misconceptions of cultural differences; (3) coping behaviors; and (4) academic achievement. In conclusion, the authors argue that families and educators should strive to create an alternative form of nationalism that calls forth mutual understandings and cooperation that respects cultural dualism and negotiation.

KEYWORDS *acculturation, Korean students, middle schools, social adjustment*

Introduction

Living and studying in an environment both as a newcomer and as a minority creates challenges and hardship to some immigrating students. International students suffer from various problems such as school adjustment including academic problems, bullying, cultural conflicts, financial problems, and racism (Akka, 1967; Ebbin and Blankenship, 1988; Heikinheimo and Shute, 1986; Leong and Sedlacek, 1989; Maha, 1994; Ojano Sheehan and Pearson, 1995; Parr, Bradley, and Bingi, 1992). While literature describes studies both on poor and outstanding adjustment of students from Asia and Africa, Europeans are often better acculturated to American culture than Asians, African and South Americans (Sodowsky and Plake, 1992). Chan (1991) explained that people of non-white origins bearing distinct physical differences have been perceived as perpetual foreigners who can never be completely absorbed in American society. Additionally, Yeh and Inose's (2003) study of international university students in the

USA indicated that social connectedness and greater social network satisfaction were related to successful acculturation especially among Asian, African and Latin American students. Likewise, Leung (2001) found that overseas university students' adaptation in Australia was increased through supportive social relationships whereas Zimmermann (1995) reported that the frequency of interactions with American students was the most important factor in international students' adjustment to American culture.

Sam (2001) described life satisfaction among international students in Norway, arguing that the students from Europe and North America were more satisfied than their African and Asian peers. The factors positively affecting the students' satisfaction included the number of friends, a degree of perceived discrimination and the lack of financial difficulties. In addition to the impact associated with the country of origin as reported by Sam (2001), Zheng et al. (2004) argued that the length of residence served as an indicator in the acculturation process among Chinese students in Australia.

Virta et al. (2004), in turn, described the positive influence of identity and cultural integration on good adaptation among Turkish adolescents living in Norway and Sweden, whereas the adolescents' marginalization and discrimination led to poor adaptation. 'The adaptation may also vary for the same ethnic group living in two neighboring countries, partly due to the differences in ethnic minority identity and perceived discrimination' (Virta et al., 2004: 22). Andriessen and Phalet's (2002) study of Turkish and Moroccan labor migrants, and Christian-Turkish refugees in the Netherlands, confirmed the findings from Virta's et al. (2004) study stating that the context dependency of the adaptive and maladaptive behavior was associated with acculturation attitudes.

In the USA it is estimated that, by the year 2050, no more than 50 percent of the population will be of Anglo ancestry. News that Texas is the fourth state in which non-Hispanic whites make up less than 50 percent of residents has renewed discussion about whether the term 'minority' has outlived its usefulness (Associated Press, 18 August 2005). From 1965 to 2000 Mexican immigrants (4,300,000 in total) are recorded to be the largest immigration group in the USA, followed by immigrants from the Philippines (1,400,000 in total) and Korea (760,000 in total) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000). Furthermore, numbers of students who come to the USA for study-related purposes have also increased in parallel to immigration. Foreign students are reported to be 514,723 in total where Korean students ranked fourth following China, Japan, and India, according to reports from the International Institute for Education (IIE) (Hanguerei Shinmoon, 31 July 2001). In addition, advances in technologies and inter-

national cooperation in the fields of industry and business have increased exchanges of human resources. This exchange of human resources has also contributed to the immigration of families that include school age children attending schools in local communities. As a result, an increasing number of visiting and immigrating Korean students are being educated in American middle schools as well as in American colleges or universities (Cho, 2003).

It can be also argued that Confucianism shapes acculturation and adaptation, and the ways in which Korean adolescents view the world and socialize with their peers in America and in other countries they are studying or visiting. It is evident that if one does not recognize the influence of Confucianism, Korean culture and its impact on teens' identities cannot be understood properly (Lee, 1986). While the acculturation and adjustment of Korean students immigrated to the USA have been studied (Lee, 2001; Lee, 2004; Kim, 1998), teenagers who make a short stay from one to two years have been less extensively researched. Thus, in this article we found it important to investigate the cultural influences that shape the social adjustment of Korean students who compose a significant proportion of contemporary new-comers in America. Additionally, we believe that our findings are applicable not only for Korean students studying in the USA but also for other international students outside the USA.

Acculturation and the influences of Confucianism

The formulation of cultural identities is a complex process that can be approached from multiple perspectives. The concepts of cultural maintenance and adaptation do not represent opposing forces that influence cultural identities; rather, they construct a bi-cultural position which can be labeled as acculturation. Furthermore, in this article we view the term 'biculturalism' as one form of acculturation that is similar to the integrated form of acculturation. Acculturation can be defined as a process of exchange that happens when two cultural groups are in contact with each other (see Graves, 1967). However, this process is traditionally viewed as mutual and democratic, ignoring the oppression and dominance inherent in the position of the dominant culture. In order to challenge the neutrality of this traditional acculturation model, Bourhis (2001), among others, preferred to use the interactive acculturation model (IAM) that is based on an assumption that the majority culture can engage in various acculturation orientations: intergrationism, assimilationism, segregationism, exclusionism and individualism.

Verkuyten and Thijs (2002) proposed that individuals strongly identify with their minority groups while, at the same time, accomplishing a cultural adaptation that enables them to effectively live in the host culture. However, Phinney (1990) argued that minority youth identify more strongly with their ethnic group than with majority group members. This is partially influenced by the notion that the receiving society is viewed as culturally open or closed, accepting or discriminating towards minority groups (Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002). Verkuyten and Thijs (2002) also stated that minority students, in this case in the Netherlands, are often more concerned with the maintenance of their individual cultural identities. Conversely, majority students preferred the binary position of a choice between maintaining the minority culture and adapting to the majority culture.

Barrette et al. (2004) indicated that French majority students, who endorsed integrationist and individualistic approaches to acculturation, expressed fewer biases against North African immigrants. Similarly, North African students who sustained the integrationist and individual forms of acculturation engaged in more contact with French majority students and reported more socialization within the mainstream culture. In other words, Barrette et al., (2004) suggested that the endorsement of integrationism and individualism is likely to produce positive and harmonious relational and acculturational outcomes, whereas the endorsement of segregationism/exclusionism and separatism might exacerbate conflicts between majority and minority groups.

However, acculturation is a complex and multidimensional process that can be shaped by, for example, various culturally dominant ideologies and ethnocentric influences. It is important to understand the geographic and historical background and view ideology as a complex and multidimensional process influencing Korean students' acculturation. Literature reveals that Koreans' ethnocentrism and nationalism are deeply rooted in their geo-historical background (Lee, 1997; Lee, 1998; Kim, 1997; Park, 2002). First, Korea is a peninsula whose only neighbor is China, thereby decreasing the possibilities and likelihood of interactions with people from other cultures. (The Korean peninsula has been divided into South and North Korea for more than a half century and the two countries have very different political systems. Additionally, communication exchange between them is strictly prohibited. Due to this political disposition we wish to emphasize that even though some of our statements may be applied to North Korea, our official position is to describe South Koreans' cultural values and heritage.)

Furthermore, Korea's population is racially homogenous, with rare exceptions, which increases Koreans' strong attachment to a single family

tree and to close family ties. Thus, Koreans identify with their own cultural group, rather than other ethnic groups.

Second, in order to contextually situate Korean students' cultural perceptions, understandings and possible stereotypes, it is important to consider not only Korea's geographical location but also its national history. From 1910 to 1945 Korea was colonized by the Japanese. During this period Koreans were forced to worship the Japanese emperor, to change their Korean names to Japanese, and to accept a distorted, rewritten Korean history (Kim, 1997). Ever since this colonial period, Korean national identity and patriotism have fiercely blossomed and influenced how Koreans perceive, understand, and consider different races and cultural equity.

Third, Confucianism is another factor in forming Koreans' ethnocentrism and nationalism. Confucianism has a strong vertical social structure and hierarchy in which morality, duty, obedience, filial piety and loyalty are the primary codes of conduct (Park, 1991). These values are emphasized in Korean families, which in turn shape teens' identity development and their sense of belonging. Furthermore, identities are constructed through societal memberships, and a prominent place in society could only be achieved through maintaining the family lineage through male heirs (Lee, 1984). Confucianism ancestor worship creates not only a sense of lineage but also a palpable sense of biological descent. Confucianism fosters 'We-ness' that is limited in blood lineage and immediate family (Park, 2002). Thus, Koreans have been raised to become aware of 'in-group' and 'out-group' identities. These beliefs become evident, for example, in the unfavorable ways in which Koreans approach mixed blood children and step-children.

Additionally, Confucianism has played an important role for elitism that pursues excellence (Lee, 1999). Confucianism values academic achievement and it emphasizes scholarly attainment as a means of achieving higher social status. Thus, Korean parents often encourage their children to devote themselves to education and academic studies. Some parents even exhibit a strong desire to achieve their unrealized dreams through their children. Confucianism and rapid industrialization that encouraged competition and an ability orientation are also evident in Korea's competitive school environments, and when viewed from outside the confines of the Korean culture, might be considered elitist or self-centered. Some of the aforementioned cultural characteristics might have reinforced Korean societal attitudes and values that often measured human value in terms of economic and academic competence and ability. However, cultural nationalism, ethnocentrism and elitism have assisted the development of

Korea's competitive ability, as well as its rapid industrial and economic development.

In summary, until recently Confucianism has been a core ideology that cultivates Korean bureaucrats and leaders to follow its ethics and values (Lee, 1997; Lee, 1998). Confucian values and norms have influenced family communitarianism (Park, 2002), leadership and organizational culture (Hart, 1933), Korean's industrialization (Hart, 1933; Hofstede and Bond, 1988) and also Korean elitism (Lee, 1999). Additionally, many positive outcomes of Confucianism (such as rapid industrialization and economic growth) have been reported in the western literature (de Bary, 1996; Hart, 1993; Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Tu, 1996). However, during the last century Koreans' identity, values and nationalism have been challenged by various foreign and western influences (Lee, 1999). Korean culture has moved towards culturally sensitive, horizontally structured and fairly informal society. This has resulted in struggles among young Koreans who accept, adapt and implement western technology while trying to maintain their identity as Korean. As a result, most Koreans have experienced conflict and confusion between new western and traditional Confucian ideology. While cultural nationalism and elitism have worked positively in Korea's industrialization and economic development, they have had a negative influence on globalization efforts. For example, some extreme forms of ethnocentrism have influenced the ways in which Korean teens favor their own group, rather than any ethnically different, rival group, and they use Korean culture as a frame of reference for all cultural judgments and understandings (Levine and Campbell, 1972).

In order to understand different sub-cultures and minority students' adaptation processes, including feelings and experiences in US school settings, researchers and educators need to pay attention to students' own perceptions and voices that represent unique cultural characteristics and heritage related to their sub-culture. Therefore, we found it important to approach and closely study Korean middle school students' perceptions and experiences within the cultural context of the US school system. Based on our focus on 'life worlds' of Korean students and our interest in describing the essences of students' experiences related to the phenomenon of acculturation, we found it suitable to utilize a phenomenological theoretical perspective and to conduct a phenomenological analysis, which will be discussed in the following sections. Furthermore, the epistemological purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe Korean students' adjustment in US middle schools and, in particular, to focus on the experiences associated with their socialization. Our intention is to share Korean students' experiences that, in turn, would assist educators

to improve the school experiences of international students throughout the world. More specifically, this study was guided by the following research question: How do Korean students of middle school age perceive and experience acculturation and academic adjustment in US public schools?

Methods

Study participants and data collection

Nine Korean students – six girls and three boys between 11 and 13 years-old – participated in this study, which took place during the academic school year 2002/3. Prior to their arrival in the USA, study participants were enrolled in regular middle schools in South Korea. At the time of the study the nine students were registered in two different middle schools in southeastern USA for between nine and 21 months. Both middle schools enrolled about 980 students, of which between 42 and 47 percent were minority. Of the minority students, less than 5 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders. Only one of the schools had an ESOL program for students who were learning English as a second language. The beginning and intermediate level ESOL classes had about thirty students from Peru, Mexico and Brazil, as well as from Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan, among others. Our study participants were enrolled in the ESOL class from their arrival. Four of the students were placed at the beginning level and three at the intermediate level. The other middle school did not have ESOL and study participants took regular classes.

Students were recruited based on both criterion and snowball sampling (for sampling guidelines see e.g. LeCompte and Preissle, 1993). First, students were sampled using their parents' profession, obtained from the university's Korean Student Association's list of visiting scholars. After identifying several parents who were visiting scholars from Korea and had children attending middle school, snowball sampling was used in order to locate more students through conversations with other pupils who had been previously identified. During this process these parents recommended other potential participants, who were then contacted by the research team.

Semi-structured interviews lasted one and a half hours, with a 10 to 15-minute intermission. Interview questions were designed to match the developmental stage of the children and they included questions such as 'How do you like your school life here in the US?', 'Can you tell me about experiences that make you happy or pleased at school?' and 'Can you tell me about your friends at school?' (see the Appendix for the complete interview guide).

Interviews were conducted in a university classroom in the participants' native language, Korean, and all were then transcribed. Later, relevant data chunks were translated into English in order for the research team to follow and participate in the various analysis phases. In addition, data excerpts used in the data representation were translated to English as necessary. Upon the completion of the transcription, the researcher submitted ambiguous statements to the participant for member checking and clarification (for more about member checking see e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1995).

Limitations of the study

Even though the individual interviews provided important and meaningful insights, the attitudes of these sixth and seventh grade students toward interviewing were not completely positive due to the overall resistance associated with their developmental phase. In addition, as members of the Korean culture, participating students had been disciplined not to express their opinions, complaints or feelings to outsiders, as is expected and encouraged during semi-structured interviews. In addition, English translation of the interviews might have distorted or changed some of the original meanings and culturally sensitive context of the teenagers' responses.

Lastly, this article only focused on teenagers' experiences because we felt that their cultural perspectives and individual narratives were not adequately captured in the existing literature. As a result, we did not interview parents, teachers, or the peers of Korean students, who would have provided alternative and possible differing perspectives on the acculturation process. Thus, the lack of informant triangulation can be seen as one possible limitation of the study.

Data analysis

Phenomenology guided both the theoretical foundations of this study and the chosen analysis method. In order to increase the methodological consistency of this phenomenological research, as well as to describe the essence of the Korean students' experienced adjustment, we utilized Moustakas' (1994) modification of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data. During the analysis we employed Moustakas' steps in the following way: (1) from the verbatim transcript, being considered with respect to its significance for a description of the experience, all relevant statements were recorded and each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement was listed; (2) the meaning units were related

and clustered into themes; (3) the meaning units and themes were synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience using verbatim examples; (4) a structural description was constructed; and (5) a textual-structural description of the meanings and essences of the participants' experience was constructed. All of the above steps were initially done at the individual level and then at the composite level (across interviews), which combined narratives from all our participants. The following individual example is taken from the interview of a 13 year-old girl who we named Youn (all names used in this article are fictional).

Youn's individual textual description Youn's first experiences in the USA included unfortunate incidents and conflicts with African-American students and with an African-American custodian in her school. For example, she had an argument about her personal belongings. 'Once he (an African-American boy) had my mechanical pencil. I said it was mine, but he insisted it was his.' Similarly, Youn was unpleasantly surprised and upset when an African-American custodian shouted at her while using the restroom. Youn stated: 'She shouted at Asians whenever we used bathroom, while she didn't say anything to other students.' Because of these incidents, Youn interpreted this behavior by African-Americans as discrimination and bullying and she concluded, 'The custodian lady seemed to look down upon me.'

Due to these interactions, Youn soon established a fixed negative impression of African-Americans. She stated: 'Most black kids who I know are bad. No one is good.' Youn continued by explaining that African-American students were bad because they bullied her. 'They called us Chen, Chen with teasing.' Youn reasoned as to why they looked down upon Asians. According to Youn, because African-Americans had been discriminated against by the white majority, they projected this resentment upon other minority populations that they perceived as small and weak. 'Being black is viewed as inferior by whites. At least African-Americans seemed to think so. They have been disdained by white people and they think they can't avoid it. Instead they look down upon Asians and they bully them. I guess they think they can beat Asians because there are only one or two Asians in a group.' Youn continued by describing how African Americans thought of themselves. 'They think they look big. They think that they are somebody special.'

However, when Youn was bullied by her peers or derided by the custodian, her actions revealed her desperation. She responded with her body language and her poor English, 'I was angry and stared at them and I threw dirt, too.' And 'I talked back to her [custodian] by saying 'Why do

you shout at me? I can use the bathrooms.” Even though Youn reacted strongly to the bullying and attempted to justify the bullies’ behavior, ultimately, she wanted to feel included and accepted.

She felt like she was always excluded and an outsider: ‘I was left alone in my PE class without familiar friends . . . we played in groups of two or three. I was left alone and was not selected to any group. . . .’ These feelings of exclusion became stronger in Youn’s school experiences and described her hurt feelings at the time. ‘I cried at home many times when it was time to begin the school.’

Youn’s individual structural description The descriptive structure of Youn’s social adjustment focused on the overall conflict between cultural differences and her self-image as a proficient English speaker. Left alone in a strange place, with communication and language difficulties, Youn felt threatened, nervous and overly sensitive. Having no prior experience with cultures different from her own, Youn described her non-familiarity with US culture. There was ‘no appearance that was similar’.

In the beginning, without understanding why other minority students bullied her, what others talked about, or even who she was, Youn found the teasing and bullying behaviors deeply hurtful and upsetting. She described how she could neither express herself sufficiently, nor demonstrate who she was. She felt helpless and vulnerable. Even after identifying the bullying minority students and deciding upon a rationale for their bullying, she still found the discrimination unfair and hurtful. In addition, she believed that what prohibited her from joining peer groups and feeling accepted was, in part, attributable to her Eastern physical appearance, and to her different dress and speech.

Results

Essence of acculturation of Korean students

As a final step toward extracting universal meaning and the essence of our participants’ social adjustment in school, composite textual and structural descriptions produced for each student were integrated and synthesized. This textual-structural synthesis will be described next. Briefly, the essence of social adjustment for the Korean students can be summarized in a temporal sequence. At the beginning of their stay in the USA, Korean adolescents experienced power struggles and discrimination from other minority students, as well as some discrimination from the school staff. Later on, Korean students reasoned as to why the power struggles happened and

some participants tried to solve their struggles by using physical power, violence and verbal aggression, including a prejudiced perception toward other minority groups. However, when the Korean students' English improved they gained recognition as disciplined, academic achievers that increased their status among their peers. These changes increased their sense of belonging, self-respect and further self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). The major elements of the essence of the Korean students' experiences will now be discussed in more detail and data examples from the entire data set will be used.

Power struggles and bullying At the beginning of their stay in the USA all nine participants were bullied by other minority students. They were called names such as Chinese or Chan, exacerbated by a strange, disdainful gesture. In addition, the Korean students' lack of English proficiency led to further name calling and even to asserting their right to possess our participants' personal belongings. This bullying, as well as conflicts with other minority students, took place in playgrounds, cafeterias, and in classrooms:

. . . black kids made me feel like a fool. Umthey looked down upon us calling me and my friends, Chan, Chan with teasing voice and finger pointing. They shouted in the hallways and in the cafeteria. 'Hey, you, Chan. You speak English?'. (Seung)

Furthermore, Korean students felt they were discriminated against and discouraged by their teachers and staff. For example, they felt that some teachers treated them unfairly, describing occasions in which other students would not have been blamed or accused when engaged in the same behaviors. This feeling of discrimination from the respected authority figures (for example, teachers) decreased students' positive perceptions of US culture and the school system:

My ESOL teacher scolded us, Korean students of making noise. Other students were not blamed when they spoke their native language. My teacher prohibited us speaking Korean in the class. It was unfair. (Ji)

The students found different ways to cope with bullying. Some discussed telling their teachers about it. But since the racial name-calling and contempt were often covert, teachers had difficulty in controlling it. Bullies retaliated out of the teachers' sight. Thus, Korean students experienced a repetitious cycle of being bullied, talking to a teacher about the bullying, being blamed for the bullying, and then suffering retaliation from the

bully. However, students' stories lacked descriptions of systematic interventions to prevent racial name calling and bullying at the schools. All six girls attempted to ignore the derogatory words and pretend they did not hear them:

Since I had many bullying experiences, I ignored it, tried not to pay attention to it. I left bullying as it was. I really didn't know what to do with it. We grouped together and avoided facing them [bullies]. (Youn)

Additionally, other students provided examples of physical attacks that were aimed at punishing the bullies for the derogatory name calling while, at the same time, carefully avoiding the teacher's attention, in order to prevent possible punishment:

Because one student made a fool of me, I asked him not to do it by pushing his back with my fist lightly. Then he fainted to cry. My teacher was angry with me. She didn't judge who was at fault. I was punished and I had to repeat 100 times 'I apologized and I would not fight' . . . it was not my fault and the punishment was unfair. I was so upset. (Hyun)

However, most of the students' coping strategies did not resolve the essential conflict of bullying and the accompanying discrimination. Korean students did not attempt to negotiate the conflicts nor understand their peers from other cultures, possibly because: (1) once participants were recognized as academic achievers they did not experience as much bullying as they did before; (2) once they gained English proficiency their self image improved and they were less likely to pay attention to bullying behavior and discrimination; and (3) because participants had not spent much time in foreign cultures, they had difficulty developing a deeper understanding of cultures different from their own.

Misconceptions and misunderstanding toward other minorities

Misconceptions and prejudices against other minorities were pervasive in the Korean students' interview responses. Our participants believed that Koreans should not be compared to other nationalities – rather, Koreans should be respected as their own cultural group with unique characteristics. For example, when called Chan or Chinese, Korean students felt humiliated because they thought Chinese students were not comparable to themselves. Furthermore, all of the participants expressed anger for not being recognized as Korean or for not being called by his or her name:

I have my name. I am not Chinese, I am Korean. They giggled and laughed at me. They don't know who I am. They don't want to know. I don't want to be compared with Chinese . . . (Youn)

In addition, Korean students themselves carried subjective and vague assumptions about other cultures. They often tended to over-generalize the cultural characteristics of other groups. For example, financial status was one source of the misconceptions that influenced Korean students' judgment toward their peers. Five Korean students thought that their peers from other countries or cultures were pitiful and miserable because they were poor:

I wanted to play with a Russian friend at my place, but I can't. He lives far from my place. His family does not have a car. His parents could not give him a ride. (Ji)

Additionally, when other foreign students had shown good social adjustment and easy adaptation to the USA, our participants doubted the other foreign students' nature of adjustment and socialization with its culture. Thus, feelings of superficial superiority were pervasive in our participants' perspectives toward other minorities, which in turn, influenced their sincere understandings of the unique characteristics of other cultures. These feelings of superiority had an effect on the Korean students' capability to recognize their peers' strengths and good characteristics, which contributed to their misunderstandings and increased their feelings of isolation.

Desire for belonging A strong desire for belonging, as well as a fear of being left out by the prevailing ethnic group, formed the essence of the Korean students' experiences. Two girls taking physical education classes and two girls participating in science classes shared the same feelings of isolation and eagerness to be involved. For example, during the physical education class Korean students were chosen last during grouping and partnering activities. These events made students feel unwanted and humiliated, causing them to avoid such events altogether:

During the games like basket ball or volley ball, fellow students chose a captain who performed the grouping. All students were not chosen until at the end. I was left to be chosen the last. I was unhappy and humiliated. At the beginning of the semester, I hated to go to school. I felt defeated. I was a captain and the popular athlete in my country. (Youn)

Besides being chosen in group activities, the Korean girls expressed eagerness and desire to join a group of popular girls in the school. Our participants were influenced by the popular girls' clothing and make-up. Korean girls who used to wear uniforms at school in Korea thought that the style of dress was a criterion for joining the popular group and that their malignment was due to their dissimilar fashions and appearance:

There are outsiders and those who are popular. Popular girls think highly of themselves. Their clothes are very luxurious and they are loud. They are popular among boys. I would like to join them but the Asians are not accepted. (Youn)

Concerns about social exclusion were particularly consequential for those participants who had enjoyed recognition as academic and social leaders among their teachers and friends in Korea.

Self-identity as an academic achiever with appropriate language acquisition

English fluency was the most important tool when attempting to cope with the bullying, as well as for improving social relations and increasing the Korean students' feelings of belonging. As all nine participants learned English and spoke more fluently, bullying decreased and the students were capable of establishing friendships with Americans and other minorities. Friends assisted Korean students with their adjustment in general and in understanding class activities and home assignments in particular:

One time a black boy was irritating me and made me upset. I couldn't explain him that he bothered and irritated me because I could not speak English. My American friend, Kate, understood me a little bit. She told him to stop. He didn't listen to her and kept on bullying me. I bursted into tears and everybody in the class was wondered why. (Chang)

After becoming more fluent in English, over half of the participants established friendships that included activities such as visiting each other's homes, going to movies, and shopping during the weekends. These close friendships were usually established between study participants and the other students with whom they had the most contact during classroom activities, for example, with those peers who were seated next to the Korean students.

In addition, as their proficiency with the English language improved, Korean students were recognized for their academic performances and praised by their teachers and peers. Coincidentally, their reformed identities as academic achievers and the accompanying increase in self-confidence

assisted students in compensating for feelings of exclusion and helped them to overcome the negative consequences of the bullying and discrimination.

Discussion

When synthesizing and analyzing the essence of Korean students' adjustment, it became apparent that students' self-image and their perceptions of others strongly influenced their acculturation processes. De Anda (1984) described six factors that influence biculturation: (1) overlap between two cultures regarding norms, values and beliefs; (2) the availability of cultural translators and models; (3) the amount of cultural feedback regarding normative behavior; (4) the problem solving skills of minority individuals; (5) degree of bilingualism; and (6) differences in physical appearance. Next, we analyze De Anda's factors in the light of our data and our knowledge about Confucianism.

The lack of overlap between cultural norms, values and beliefs between US and Korean teenagers made the Korean teenagers' acculturation process more complex and difficult. Furthermore, the Korean students' acculturation was complicated by collectivist norms linked with Confucianism (see also Dee and Henkin, 1999). According to Rigby (1996) family experiences and the socio-cultural environment are influential factors forming children's values and expectations. In terms of this study, our participants' parents held PhD degrees from the USA or from Korea, which influenced the ways in which their children were immersed in elitism and the conservative spirit of Confucianism. All of our participants' parents were in a position of power and had significant influence on the education of a second generation of Koreans, the college students they were teaching, as well as on their own children.

We believe that the parents' attitudes and the students' family environments influenced their beliefs and values regarding other minorities and that, indeed, the parents might have served as unsuccessful cultural translators as well as negative examples of acculturation. For example, as illustrated at the beginning of this article (see Park, 2002), the parents' attitudes toward other ethnicities can be explained by ethnocentrism and elitism. In our data, the principle of extreme ethnocentrism has been influenced by a lack of culturally sensitive experiences due, in part, to the geographical characteristics of Korea, as well as to the patriotism fueled by the Japanese colonization in the early 1900s. Therefore, it seemed plausible that when study participants were bullied and discriminated against,

children, parents and other role models responded with extreme exclusion and patriotism, associating and interacting with only Korean students. Moreover, the elitism that arose from Confucianism, as well as Korea's rapid industrialization, with its attendant promotion of extreme competition, could provide other possible explanations for the students' and parents' exclusivity and reasons for pursuing academic excellence. Immersed and raised in Confucianism, which equates academic discipline with social success, Korean parents encouraged their children to compete with their peers and to make friends only with peers who shared their high social and economic status.

Discrimination and bullying were examples of the cultural feedback that Koreans received from majority and other minorities regarding normative behavior. Dennis (1981) indicated that the ignorance of minority students, who could serve as role models and translators for other minority students, is not only senseless but also dangerous. Similarly, avoiding positive and active ways of understanding each other prohibited study participants from establishing mutual understanding, as well as from exposing and dismantling the misunderstandings, prejudices and discrimination. In our data discrimination and bullying were associated with racial name calling, which is neither local nor unique, but has been reported and studied all around the world (Bhatti, 1999; Olweus, 1993; Pikas, 1989; Slee and Rigby, 1994). For example, students in England suffered from racial name calling at primary and middle schools (Bhatti, 1999) and researchers in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India reported that children suffered from being called derogatory words such as 'Paki', 'curry', 'wog' (Bhatti, 1999). Similarly, examples of discrimination have been reported in many places in the USA (Batsche and Knoff, 1994; Coloroso, 2003; Espelage and Swearer, 2004; Garrett, 2003).

It is argued that discrimination and bullying originates from insufficient language skill, differences in physical appearance, and from a lack of mutual understanding and respect (Bennet, 1999). Miller (2000) reported that migrant students in Australia who cannot represent themselves and enact socially recognized and accepted ways face social consequences due to being marked as Chinese speaking. The lack of opportunities to meet, improve one's language skills, to communicate and work together across various differences, contributes to a superficial and partial understanding. Partial understanding may lead to prejudice, miscommunication, and exercising power over other people. As illustrated in Miller's (2000) study, majority students' unwillingness to engage in dialogue and discussion with minority students can be interpreted as one way to represent the social order within the school. However, the social order based on

racial dominance can be disturbed or partially overcome by academic achievement due to respect and an emphasis on high academic performance at schools. As a result, high achieving students might experience less discrimination and bullying in school contexts.

Moreover, it can be argued that discrimination is attached to language use (see Riggins, 1997). Consequently, when immigrants' language proficiency increases, their discrimination might decrease. However, racial prejudice can also be viewed as a part of dominant discourse and talk or as a learned attitude from parents, rather than as a result of direct or indirect experiences at school or from perceptions presented in the media. In addition, prejudice can be caused by misunderstanding or from faulty information due to a lack of mutual and shared experience (Ehrlich, 1973). Prejudice and the talk and discourse that creates it, in turn enables discrimination, prompting individuals with prejudice to exclude others as members of the group or institution, or to prohibit other individuals from participating (Ponteratto and Pedersen, 1993).

Furthermore, the representation of the Other is shaped by others' representations of us (see Miller, 2000). Bennett (1999) pointed out that prejudice among oppressed groups develops in response to their condition in society, in an attempt to recover a sense of dignity. Bennett's argument supports the findings of this study, which indicate the discriminatory attitudes among various minority groups. Minorities may hold racial prejudices and may act upon them by discriminating against not only whites, but also other minorities. In describing their experiences with discrimination, the study participants also exposed their non-explicit discrimination against other minority peers. This discrimination might be explained by the following perspectives: (1) behavioral learning theory based on experiences the students had in school (Allport, 1979); and (2) the principles of extreme ethnocentrism and elitism promoted indirectly by the family environment. For example, behavioral learning theory explains that students' behavior or perceptions toward others can be learned from a stimulus received from the environment (Bandura, 1969; Becker, 1975; Skinner, 1953, 1978). As the Korean students experienced aversive discrimination, they simultaneously shaped their own undesirable and resentful response toward others.

In summary, the lack of understanding about diverse communication modes, values, and perceptions among culturally different families and between students and teachers leads to cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. In order to avoid these misunderstandings and conflicts, Allport (1979) argued for the theory of successful multicultural integration. In his model Allport emphasized four factors: sufficient intimate contact,

shared equal status, inter-group cooperation for a common goal, and institutional support. In terms of this article it was possible that formal and superficial contact deepened bullying behavior, discrimination and prejudice that the participants experienced. Similarly, Allport suggested that students' contacts and interactions should be sufficiently intimate so that they could create mutual understandings among groups through inter-group cooperation and by pursuing a common goal. In addition, deeper interaction among students requires acknowledgement of equal status among various groups and institutional support in the form of encouraging a cooperative environment, systematic supervision, and professional development.

Recommendations for future research

To solve already existing acculturation and discrimination problems, we need to study further how students can learn to cooperate and respect each other through a culturally responsive curriculum and school activities. For example, in order for such a curriculum to be successful, the role of teachers should be examined in the future to determine the nature and level of sensitivity and instructional approach. As models for positive attitudes toward all students and mutual respect for all backgrounds, teachers ideally communicate and promote an understanding of each individual's unique characteristics and cultural differences. Teachers need to demonstrate their acceptance of cultural values of the minority groups in the classroom (Rubie et al., 2004). In this light it would be valuable to investigate how teachers can utilize the unique educational traditions of Eastern countries such as China, India, Japan and Korea in order to increase cultural understandings and to promote the historical and contextual elements of each culture. Additionally, Corson (1993) called for future studies that would investigate how to better serve the needs of minority children (for example, Maori) by increasing their sense of belonging, feelings of family and closeness so that each student received individual care and attention. In addition, the uniqueness and variety of individual differences should be highlighted in future studies, which in turn would promote children's self-consciousness and pride, resulting in cultural pluralism and harmony instead of cultural assimilation or cultural suppression.

Finally, in this contemporary global world, parents need to learn how to live together and respect others, recognizing and celebrating cultural differences, and abolishing egocentric views of others. When parents and teachers raise children in the spirit of acceptance and respect toward people from diverse backgrounds, children will develop stronger sense of social engagement and responsibility toward their friends. Different cultures

need to be viewed as interactive entities because cultural practices are (re)confirmed in everyday life (Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002). Parents, families and educators should strive to create a new kind of nationalism in our global community, one that would call forth a culture of mutual understanding and cooperation that respects each individual's cultural values and expectations, encouraging a wider perspective of culturally responsive possibilities, thereby enhancing successful leadership in every society. We have to reduce cultural separatism and alienation and move toward negotiation and cultural congruence because we are all a part of the continuing construction of cultural meanings that, in turn, shape the acculturation processes and responsibilities associated with the construction of our cultural realities.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. General questions:

Tell me when did you come to US and what school and grade you are in.

How do you like your school life here in US? Why?

How did you like your school in Korea? Why?

Can you tell me about experiences that make you happy or pleased at school
(both in US and in Korea)

Can you tell me about experiences that have been difficult to handle or that
make you unhappy at school (both in US and in Korea)

2. Questions on the academic domain:

How do your teachers teach the classes and subjects in US?

How do you feel about your homework in US? (e.g., exciting or boring)

How long does it take for you to finish your homework?

How do you participate in the classroom activities in US? (e.g., raise hands,
participate in the group work)

Can you tell me about your friends at school? (e.g., Korean, American, and
others, what do you do with them, how often do you play with them?)

What do you do when you need help or have a problem at school in US?

What kinds of problems you need help with and who will help you?