

“I’m still lonely”

A Qualitative Study of Korean Adults who Arrived in the U.S. as Children and their Adjustment to U.S. Schools

Esther Son
Brandeis University

This exploratory qualitative study describes the experience of 10 Korean adults living in New York City who arrived in the US as children. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the participants’ difficulties with adjusting to a new school and cultural setting, coping strategies, and perceptions of identity during the acculturation process. The majority of the participants reported that they suffered psychological problems during their first year at a U.S. school. Participants who had immigrated without their family experienced more depression and anxiety when adapting to the new culture. Most participants had never used social work service to help address their issues. The results suggest that there is an urgent need to provide effective mental health intervention strategies for Korean students who immigrated to the U.S. without their family.

Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing groups in the United States, and more than one million (1,423,784) are Korean American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Because the majority of Korean Americans immigrated to the United States with their families after the Immigration Act of 1965 (Hurh, 1998), this community is mainly composed of first-generation immigrants and their children; most of these immigrants were born in Korea and educated in the United States, and their children are known as the “1.5 Korean American generation” (Hong & Min, 1999). For Koreans, one of the major reasons for immigrating to the United States was to pursue better education opportunities for their children (Hurh, 1998; Kim & Greene, 2003; Cho & Haslam, 2010).

Education is in a state of transition in Korea. The government has seen the need to change the system, and educational policy forms are under way. Meanwhile, many parents have acquired the means to seek educational opportunities for their children outside Korea. Despite the many ways that Korean education has served the lives of Korean citizens from a historical perspective, it seems that many people within Korea now feel that educational opportunities abroad provide greater possibilities for future success and financial security (Kim & Greene, 2003).

According to a 2012 report from Open Doors, the number of students

from the Republic of Korea is 72,295, ranked in third place of the 25 leading places of origin. In addition, in 2000 the Korean Ministry of Education began to allow elementary, middle, and high school students to study overseas. Consequently, over the past years there has been a dramatic increase in the interest of younger Korean students to take part in a variety of educational programs in the United States, such as ESL programs, summer camps, and private high school programs. This trend has led to concerns about the students who are living and studying without their family. These students face many stressors, such as difficulties in learning a new language, adjusting to a new environment and culture, and obtaining adequate support. Such difficulties can generate substantial stress and cause serious mental health problems, such as school or social maladjustment and depression.

Despite the rapid increase of Korean youth in U.S. schools and the recognition that they often have school and cultural adjustment issues (Kim, Brenner, Liang, & Asay, 2003; Yeh et al., 2005; Cho & Haslam, 2010), studies on their acculturation process and mental health issues are limited. This study seeks to describe the experience of Korean adults who arrived in the U.S. as children. Specifically, this study explores the difficulties that Korean youth face in adjusting to a new school environment and cultural setting, how they utilize coping patterns, and how they perceive their identity during the acculturation process.

Literature Review

Immigrating to a new culture can be a difficult and painful experience for many people. For some immigrant families, the immigration process itself can be stressful. Some families have to separate during immigration, with one family member coming to America first and leaving other family members behind. Eventually, this family member brings the rest of the family to America, but the period of separation can lead to stress surrounding reunification and fear of a repeat separation (Suarez-Orozco, & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Moreover, some students move to the new culture without their family, even as children or adolescents. For these students, the process of migration can be even more stressful than students who immigrate with their family.

People move to a new culture with ingrained values and roles from their culture of origin, both of which can conflict with the values of the new culture or environment on several levels, such as in the areas of interpersonal relationships, language, social mores and role expectations (Padilla, Wagatsuma, & Lindholm, 1985). Theorists have defined the process of adapting to a new culture as *acculturation* (Berry, 1980; Birman, 1994). Acculturation refers to the changes in values and behaviors that individuals make as they gradually adopt the cultural norms of the dominant society (Graves, 1967). Yeh et al. (2005) described that the process of acculturation has been closely associated with stressful life experiences, such as feeling a loss of control, feeling helpless, and having less self-confidence (Torbiorn, 1982); experiencing role conflicts (Naditch & Morissey, 1976); having verbal and nonverbal communication barriers (Dyal & Dyal, 1981); experiencing emotional difficulties due to their personality (Padilla et al., 1985); and encountering unfamiliar behavioral norms.

Previous research on acculturation has been based on the experiences of Adult immigrants (first generation) or U.S.-born Asian Americans (second generation), but few qualitative studies examined the adaptation experiences of the 1.5-generation immigrants (Kim et al., 2003; Yeh et al., 2005). For example, Kim et al.'s (2003) study, which examined the adaptation patterns of 1.5-generation, Asian American college students ($N = 10$). The authors used a consensual qualitative research method, and the results showed that the participants felt closest to friends of similar backgrounds and that they usually sought support from friends, family, and religious organizations. Also using a consensual qualitative method, Yeh et al. (2005) studied the process of cultural adjustment among thirteen 1.5-generation Korean immigrant youth, and the results indicated that the participants were expected to negotiate and shift their identities to meet differing expectations across various interpersonal contexts.

Although research interest on the Korean American 1.5 generation is gradually increasing, the research is still limited. Moreover, little research has been conducted on students who came to the US as children to study without their family (Cho & Haslam, 2010). Understanding the process of migration and adaptation for Korean youth in U.S. schools is of particular interest for many reasons. Park (1999) observed that, as an emerging ethnic group in U.S. schools, Korean American students bring unique characteristics and experiences to the American classroom. Some recent changes in the Korean American student population make them more unique in terms of the educational adjustment they experience. One example of such change is that voluntary immigration from South Korea to America is increasing. Parents may separate themselves from their spouses or children, sacrificing their relationship to provide educational opportunities for their children. In addition, more and more Korean parents are sending their children abroad for school at a younger age, starting at even the early elementary grades (Kim & Greene, 2003). Park (1999) described that Korean parents regard education as the single most important factor in their children's future success. This is one of the major reasons Korean immigrants decide to come to America. According to Ogbu (1992), this group becomes a voluntary minority in American society in that they value education and "do not perceive learning the attitudes and behaviors required for school success as threatening their own culture, language, and identities" (p. 9). Consequently, Korean students in U.S. schools could be at risk for mental health problems, delinquency, and identity crises.

Research has also looked at the emotional, familial, and social problems of Korean Americans. For instance, Gim (2001) compared Korean American college students with Southeast Asian Americans, ranging in age from 17 to 30 years, and reported that more Korean American students had conflicts regarding family interactions, educational and career concerns, and dating and marriage issues than did Japanese, Chinese, or Filipino Americans. Moreover, Cho and Haslam (2010) found that Korean immigrant youth who were sojourning without both parents reported higher levels of life stress, distress, psychological symptoms, and suicidal ideation than Korean immigrant youth who immigrated with both parents, Korean students who remained in Korea, and American high school students in the US.

The purpose of this study was to document the unique and varied adaptation experiences of Korean Americans who immigrated as youth and to contextualize those experiences within a conceptual framework of experiences (e.g., acculturation). To accomplish this goal, the study investigated both the retrospective memories of Korean adults' immigration experiences (i.e., memories around the time of immigration) and their current experiences as adults (e.g., cultural identification).

Research Questions

1. What year did you come to the United States, and what was your age and grade level at that time?
2. What city (or town) and state did you live in when you arrived?
3. Did you come to the United States with your family or by yourself?
4. How about your pre-immigration experiences?
5. What was the reason to move to the United States?
6. How would you describe your first year in school?
How about your relationship with the teachers?
How about your relationship with your classmates?
How long did it take you to have a good command of English?
7. What things were difficult to adapt to in the United States?
8. Did you have anyone who you could consult about your personal difficulties? If so, who were they, what difficulties did you discuss?
9. How did you overcome your difficulties in adjusting to a new environment? Tell me about the events, people, and character traits that helped you adjust to school life in the United States.
10. What is your ethnic identity? What do you think about your identity in the United States?

Methods

Participants

Ten Korean adults who were living in the New York City area were the participants for this study. Four of the participants were male, and six were female. The mean age of the sample was 24 years, and the ages ranged from 19 to 32 years. The mean age at the time the participants immigrated to the United States was 13.5 years, with a range from 8 to 18 years. Seven of the participants came to the US as part of their parents' immigration process; hereafter, I refer to these participants as the family immigrants." Three of the participants immigrated by themselves as students; hereafter, I refer to these participants as "the student immigrants." All participants except two were college or graduate students at the time of the study. Five of the student participants were college students, and three were graduate students. Two of the participants worked—one was working at a fashion company and the other was working as a computer programmer at a university. Six participants came from intact families with married parents, three of participants came to the US without their family, and one

participant came with one parent. Table 1 shows specific information about the participants' schools and grade levels upon arriving to the US, as well as each participant's current school, major, and job.

Table 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE

CHARACTERISTIC	FREQUENCY
School and grade of first school in the US	
Elementary School (1-6th grade)	3
Middle School (7-9th grade)	4
High School (10-12th grade)	2
Language School	1
Current School	
Columbia University	3
Cooper Union	3
School of Visual Art (SVU)	2
Major and degree	
Advertising (Bachelor Program)	2
Art (Bachelor Program)	1
Bio-Medical Engineering (Doctoral Program)	1
Cognitive Psychology (Master Program)	1
Environmental Engineering (Bachelor Program)	1
Electric Engineering (Bachelor Program)	1
International Education (Master Program)	1
Job	
Computer programmer	1
Fashion designer	1

Measure

A semi-structured interview was used as the primary method of inquiry because this format can yield rich information about each participant's perspectives of his or her experiences when adjusting to life in the United States. The semi-structured nature of the interview protocol allowed for future exploratory probing and questioning when necessary (Patton, 2001). The interview consisted of 10 open-ended questions that explored participants' pre-immigration experiences and reasons for moving to the United States; their experiences adjusting to a new environment, especially the school environment; their perceptions of difficulties in adjusting to a new environment; who they turned to or what they did to cope with the difficulties and stresses; and their identity formation and tensions within Korean students in the U.S. school system. The interview questions were open-ended to allow participants the flexibility to best represent their experiences.

Procedure

This study's procedures were approved by Rutgers University's Institutional

Review Board. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. Specifically, snowball or chain sampling was used. This approach helps the researcher locate key, information-rich informants or critical cases (Patton, 2001). Participants were recruited through a key informant, who is a Korean American and graduate student at Columbia University in the city of New York.

Ten Korean adults agreed to participate, and interviews were scheduled and conducted at the University library's group study room or at another location convenient for the participants, such as a coffee shop or restaurant. The participants were informed that the interview would be taped and that all data gathered from the interview would be kept strictly confidential. The individual interview lasted approximately 60 minutes for each participant.

Interviews were conducted in Korean and later translated into English by the interviewer, who is herself a native of Korea. Transcripts were produced from audiotapes from each interview. From the participants' responses to the interview questions, initial thematic domains were developed. For example, information pertaining to changes in identity, such as "has pride in Korean ethnicity" or "negotiates across cultures" was coded into the identity domain.

Data Analysis: Cross-Case Analysis

In the current study, the data from the in-depth interviews were analyzed to locate any themes in the responses across the participants within particular domains (cross-case analysis). At first, the data were analyzed through open and axial coding (Berg, 2001). The author read and carefully coded each transcript so that all possible themes and discourses in the data were identified. After the open coding stage, axial coding took place, where the open coding categories were grouped into related categories. In this stage, the connections between and among the categories were explored. For instance, the data in a domain about the reasons for moving to the US were divided into two categories: father's career opportunities (five cases) and better education and diverse opportunities (five cases). Interpretation of the data and the emergence of higher order themes and subthemes occurred at this point, as the meanings of the codings and categories were explored.

Reflexivity

I am a Korean woman and researcher in the United States, which gave me both an insider and an outsider perspective to understanding experiences shared by the Korean students in the US. This "in-between" status for the interviewer has been described by Park (2001) as an advantage in establishing meaningful conversation with participants. However, I do not have the same immigration status as seven of the participants in this study. In this way, my perspective may be different than theirs.

Findings

The data reflected participants' experiences during various periods of their lives in adapting to U.S. culture while simultaneously being engaged in their native

culture. An examination of the data led to the identification of six domains: pre-immigration experiences, reasons for moving, school adjustment, cultural adjustment difficulties, copying strategies, and identity and tension at school. See Table 2 for the categories and frequencies for each domain.

Pre-immigration Experiences: "I Was an Outgoing Person"

The interviewees shared memories of South Korea and their expectations prior to coming to the United States. The majority of the participants shared their experiences about how they were an outgoing person in Korea. Seven of the participants mentioned that their personality changed from outgoing in Korea to introverted and shy in the US. One male participant explained,

You don't know how much I was an outgoing person and had many friends in my school. I was always hanging out with my friends and was popular among my friends. However, after moving to this country... It was different. I didn't speak English well, so I couldn't converse with other classmates. I became shy and did not talk much in the classroom.

This sentiment was echoed by the other participants:

One year later, I had no difficulties in listening and reading skills, but my speaking didn't improve much. I lacked American friends and had limited opportunities to speak English. Therefore, I just listened to lectures in the class, and I didn't talk much in class.

This response touches on the difficulties that this participant continued to have with speaking English, even after a full year of living and studying in the country. For the students whose second language is English, speaking can be a tremendous obstacle to making friendships in U.S. schools. Moreover, their lack of self-confidence in speaking English seemed to affect their personality. Seven participants specifically referenced a shift toward a more introverted personality in the U.S.

Reasons for Moving: "Their Decision vs. My Decision"

Half of the participants reported that the reasons for moving to the US pertained to their father's career opportunities. The other half of the participants mentioned that they came here to obtain a better education and diverse study options and career opportunities. For the participants who came over as a dependent in their parents' immigration process, their main reasons for immigrating related to their father's business, whereas the participants who came over by themselves (in all cases on a student visa), their reason for coming was to obtain a better education. One of the female participants who came to the U.S. by herself stated,

I wanted to become an artist, so I was attending art school in South Korea. One day, I was very sick and tried to go home before finishing the class. However, my teacher said to me, "Where are you going? You should prepare your school landscape painting exhibition." At that time, I doubted that I could do my art work freely in South Korea. So, I decided to go to the US for my liberal arts work.

The immigration experience was quite different for the participants who came to the US because their parents decided to move. The responses from two participants show the negative reactions that were common to the family immigrants in this study:

I heard from my school teacher the fact that my family was planning to move to the US. It was a shock to me and I didn't want to leave my friends and country. I didn't want to go to America because I liked my friends at my school in South Korea. My parents knew what I thought and didn't talk to me about this.

My parents made the decision for me to come to the United States. I would never have done this on my own. Before coming to this country, I had anti-American feelings. I wasn't good at English, and I worried that American classmates would tease me and treat me as a fool.

These participants also reported that their negative reaction to immigrating to the US made them avoid accepting U.S. culture quickly, and they tried to maintain their native culture. One of the participants shared,

I hated having to take a new English name, and I persisted in sustaining my Korean name... In the homeroom class I didn't salute the American national flag. Instead, I drew the Korean national flag on my desk and saluted that flag. For me, to salute the American flag was like losing my Korean identity.

School Adjustment: "I Need Someone Who Can Understand Me"

Interviewers described their first-year school experience in the US. Six of the students attended public school, and the other four participants went to private school. All participants, except for one, attended an ESL class during their first 6 months or year at school. This domain had two categories: relationship with teachers and relationship with classmates. For the relationship with teachers, nine of the participants mentioned that they experienced some limitations with the support that their American teacher's tried to provide them. One of the participants explained,

When I went to school, my teacher introduced a second-generation Korean student to me. Maybe my teacher thought that he could help me because he was Korean American. However, he couldn't speak Korean, and I was not good at speaking English... We couldn't understand each other. So it was not helpful for me at all.

Half of the participants felt that American school teachers had more open minds and that the teachers encouraged them a lot more than teachers in Korea. Three of the participants reported that their ESL teacher was particularly supportive of them. One male student shared,

My classroom teachers were carefree with foreign students. However, my ESL teacher had a caring heart toward us (ESL class students). I always talked with my ESL teacher if I needed some help in school. Whenever I talked to her, she listened to me and counseled me... If I needed more help than she could give, she referred me to another person who could help me.

For the second category, relationship with classmates, eight of the participants reported feeling close to and comfortable with Korean or Asian friends. They felt that the friendships that they developed with their Korean or Asian friends were deeper and more personal because they felt more comfortable and better able to understand the culture and language. One male participant who immigrated to the U.S. when he was in the seventh grade explained,

I experienced difficulty in getting along with American classmates. I mean, not only my lack of English skills, but the problem of not feeling comfortable going to an American classmate's house. I had no sense of American etiquette, so it led me avoid visiting my American friend's house. Most of my best friends were 1.5 generation Korean American friends like me. I felt more comfortable with these friends.

Four participants reported having a close friendship with non-Korean or non-Asian friends. Participants who immigrated at a younger age had different patterns of establishing relationships with classmates. A female participant who immigrated when she was 8 years old mentioned,

I liked White American classmates, and I always got along with them during my middle school and high school period. At that time, I was so Americanized and these classmates thought of me as a White American. I felt more comfortable with White kids and did not get along with Korean friends. I always spoke in English, even though I could speak Korean. My parents and sister didn't like my attitude, but I didn't care. Even though I was an excellent student, I felt that I was not popular. Actually, I was a nerd. I really hated it. I wanted to be a popular person in my school, so I joined the popular group and got along with them... I wanted to be popular.

Difficulties with Cultural Adjustment: "I'm Still Lonely"

Participants also described difficulties in adapting to the United States during their first year. Nine of the participants experienced acculturative distress and showed affective responses, such as loneliness and depression. One female participant who came here without her family shared,

Although it was my decision to come and study here, living here without my family was so difficult and stressful. The first day, when I woke up in my dormitory, I realized what my decision meant, and I regretted that I had left my family. Every day I cried. It was too hard to follow what was happening in class. I was so depressed.

This sentiment was echoed by the other participants who came here without their family. Two responses are particularly illustrative.

I was afraid to go to the school cafeteria. I really hated to eat lunch alone. I had no friends to sit with. Whenever I took the school bus, I felt lonely because I didn't have any friend to talk to. In my country, students didn't move from class to class, and students remained in one classroom for one year. In Korea, it was not difficult to make friends. But high school in the U.S. was so different than in South Korea, and [this] made it harder to make new friends.

In the United States, I always feel lonely. I thought that I was adjusted to the feeling, but I'm still lonely.

One female participant experienced psychosomatic symptoms:

When I was in the fifth grade, in my school, there were no Koreans, and I was the only one. During the first semester I always wanted to throw up in class and used to go to the restroom to vomit. But I didn't know why. Now, I realized that the new school environment was so strange and unfamiliar to me and that vomiting was my negative reaction to that.

In addition to affective response or psychosomatic symptoms, the cultural adjustment also showed behavioral responses. One female participant, who is a 1.5-generation Korean American, reported about her classmates who came to the U.S. without family:

They hung out together, drank, smoked, and didn't study. Socializing with just Korean friends hindered them in improving their English. I didn't want to go along with them.

Moreover, seven of the participants experienced interpersonal problems because of their lack of language skills. One female participant reported,

Because I was not good at English at first, I felt that the other students could ignore me. So, it made it difficult for me to open my mind because other classmates spoke English so well. I became so sensitive and tense forming relationships with others.

For the majority of family-immigrant participants, the issue of their changed family role within their family was dominant in adjusting to the new culture. The majority of Korean students who came to the US without their families mentioned difficulties controlling themselves in a new environment without their parents' direct supervision. One male family-immigrant participant explained,

My parents owned a small business in the US, and we children helped them file their paperwork. My parents' English skills were not good, so my brother and I had to help them, even though we were young. It was really annoying to me. In addition to the work, I had to call and translate my parents' words into English because of their lack of English speaking... I didn't like the work, but I had to do it.

In the case of Korean students who came to study without family, the difficulties were somewhat different. One female participant shared,

More than the difficulties with the lack of English skills, the most difficult thing was to control myself and decide many things by myself without any help—um—there were many temptations such as alcohol, drug use, and sexual relationship with male friends. Many Korean students were suddenly exposed to many provocative things, and they needed to adjust to the lack of parental supervision. I also saw some classmates who were having sex in their classroom, music room, or dorm. They failed to control themselves, and they went on the wrong path. Sometimes, they failed to finish school.

Another female participant mentioned,

For me to manage my money, cleaning, and cooking was so difficult. Specifically, during the first year I spent a lot of money and couldn't manage [my daily responsibilities].

Coping: "My Friends and Church Members Were my Strong Supporter"

All the participants reported that they did not feel comfortable seeking help from a school counselor and described that their social support networks comprised families, friends, and religious organizations. Six of the participants mentioned that their close friends provided them with an important source of social support. These friends were like them and were in the same situation. They shared their feelings and thoughts. For example, one male participant shared that:

when I felt lonely and depressed, I used to meet my Korean friends whom I had met in the ESL class. Though they went to a different school than my school, they lived near my place. They gave me a lot of help emotionally, and now they have become my best friends.

Another strong social support for the participants was religious organizations or group support. Six of the participants reported that they got much help from the church leader, members, and the bible study group. One male participant who came here without his father mentioned,

I was the only man in my family because my father was in South Korea, and I lived here with my mom and sister. So I felt a tremendous responsibility, even though I was young. I had to help my mother, who didn't speak English well enough to deal with visa problems, apply for a social security number, and I even had to make an appointment with an attorney. Whenever I felt stress and needed help, there was our church pastor. He always listened to my difficulties and guided me. He was my mentor.

These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies that have indicated an unwillingness to use psychological services among East Asian Immigrants (Morrisey, 1997; Okazaki, 2000). In these studies, the authors stated that the unwillingness to use psychological services was related to cultural factors. For example, a lack of familiarity with the mental health system and culture-specific stigmas related to mental illness and help-seeking behaviors can represent potent barriers to using psychological services. In addition, culturally driven factors common to many East Asians, including a proclivity to seek informal help (e.g., family and friends), may result in decreased willingness to seek services and utilize treatment options.

Identity Formation and Tension within Korean Students in U.S. Schools: "They Are So Different from Us"

All participants had pride in their Korean ethnicity. The majority of the participants reported that cultural differences within Korean groups affected their identity. All participants described that there were three different kinds of Korean students: second generation (American born), 1.5 generation (Korean born and recent immigrants), and Korean students (who came here to study, nonimmigrant). These groups existed until college or university. One female participant explained,

When I was in middle school and high school, I was called "banana twinkie" by other Korean students. They teased me because I always got along with only White kids and spoke

in English. The Korean students always grouped together in the cafeteria, but I felt that they were different than me and didn't understand me.

Another female participant who came to the US to study without her family shared a similar experience:

We were called "fresh off the boat" in school by the second-generation Korean Americans. I did not like them. I thought that the kids were so childish and couldn't understand us because they lived with their families. Actually, we ignored each other by using language pronunciation. During my college years, the gap between second-generation students and Korean students was even bigger.

A male participant, who described himself as a 1.5-generation Korean American, mentioned,

I felt comfortable with friends like me (1.5-generation Korean American). Unlike Korean students who came to study here but were not immigrants, my friends were more similar to me and we understood each other better. But, after entering graduate school, I begin to get along with Korean students and I liked them. I think that the second-generation kids were so Americanized and also their culture was so different from ours. For us, Korean culture is still more comfortable, and we enjoy Korean soap dramas, movies, and songs very much.

These distinctions within the same ethnic group (Korean) may be viewed as the ethnic component of social identity (Ethier & Deaux, 1990). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) explained this phenomenon as a structuring of ethnic identity among immigrant children in their book *Children of Immigration*. In particular, they argued that ethnicity is at once ascribed and achieved. Social theorist David Hayes-Bautista makes a distinction between "ethnic identification" and "ethnic identity." By ethnic identity he was referring to the internal process by which a person comes to feel like a member of a specific ethnic group. By ethnic identification he means the social process wherein ethnic membership is ascribed to an individual based on a perceived set of traits. There are two sources in the ascription of ethnic-group membership: those made by coethnics ("you are a member of *our* group") and those made by the majority group ("you are a member of *that* group"). One's personal ethnic identity, then, is largely shaped by socially constructed ethnic identification.

Participants also seemed to negotiate across—or find a way to deal simultaneously with—both Korean and American cultures, which can be divided into two subcategories. Five of the participants reported that they felt changes in thought about having one identity, and two of the participants mentioned that they felt caught between American and Korean cultural groups.

One male family-immigrant participant shared the changes in his thoughts about having one identity:

I always thought of myself as a Korean, and I felt that I had no identity crisis. But, last year, I read my diary that I wrote at ninth grade, I was surprised at myself. I found many Korean words difficult and hard to understand. My thoughts about U.S. culture and Korea changed—and I changed.

Table 2
 NUMBER OF CASES FOR CATEGORIES FOR CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS OF 10 CASES

DOMAIN	CATEGORY	FREQUENCY
Pre-immigration experiences	Change in personality before and after immigrating to the US	7
	No difference in personality	3
Reasons to move to the U.S.	Father's career opportunities	5
	Better education and diverse opportunities	5
School adjustment experiences	Relationship with teachers:	
	Felt limitation to help foreign students	9
	Open to the students	5
	ESL teacher was very supportive	3
	Relationship with classmates:	
	Felt close and comfortable with Korean/Asian friends	8
Cultural adjustment difficulties	Had close relationship with Non-Korean/Asian friends	4
	Felt very lonely and depressed	9
	Felt that lack of English proficiency and cultural differences caused interpersonal problems	7
	Had difficulty in making friends in the school	5
	Had not getting help from parents because of their busy life and lack of English proficiency	4
	Taking adult role as a child because of parents' lack of English proficiency	4
	Had difficult in manage my life without family	4
Coping	Does not feel comfortable seeking help from a school counselor or school social worker	10
	Utilize social support networks:	
	Friendship	6
	Religious support (Korean church)	6
	Family members	5
	School teacher's support	3
	Private tutor	2
	Volunteer group's support	1
Identity and tension within Korean students	Has pride in Korean ethnicity	10
	Cultural difference within Korean groups impact identity	9
	Negotiates across cultures:	
	Feels changes in thought about having one identity	5
	Feels caught between American and Korean cultural groups	2

Another female participant also shared her experiences:

There were two sides to me: my Korean identity and my newfound place in this American society. It took some time for me to realize that I don't need to sacrifice one in order to keep the other. In fact, each side would support the void left by the other in order to bring together my whole identity... Knowing this, I want to serve as a bridge that, by my presence, can

bring the best of the two worlds in this society together.

One female Korean American mentioned that she felt caught between American and Korean cultural groups:

The most difficult thing to adjusting to in this country was the thought that there was no one like me. I had two cultures inside me. My family and my friends in school only know one side of me.

The findings show that seven of the participants are still struggling to find themselves. Through this experience, they have tried to negotiate two cultures rather than identifying with just one. They are learning and adjusting to a new culture while retaining their culture of origin.

Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) suggested a conceptual framework of structuring their identity of immigrant children. The framework consists of three different styles of adaptation and identity formation: ethnic flight, adversarial, and transcultural. The children who have an ethnic-flight style of adaptation most strongly identify with the mainstream culture. Thus, they tend to cultivate links with the majority group, while consciously (and unconsciously) distancing themselves from their coethnic peers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some children of immigrants develop an adversarial stance toward the mainstream culture. Therefore, they actively resist the norms, values, and expectations of the dominant group. In the middle are the vast majority of individuals, who struggle to actively forge links between their ethnic group and the majority population. Through a process of transculturation, these individuals endeavor to create hybrid identities and form a culture that transforms the “old” ethnic culture and the “new” majority culture in creative ways. The majority of the participants in the present study seem to crafting a bicultural identity by fusing aspects of both cultures—the parents’ traditions and the new culture—in a process of transculturation that blends two systems that are at once their own and foreign to them.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the adjustment experiences of Korean adults who came to the US as children. There were two groups of participants: those who immigrated along with their family and those who came by themselves to study in the US. The results of the present study indicated that the participants were often faced with cultural adjustment difficulties.

In the pre-immigration-experience domain, the majority of the participants’ described a change in their personality. The participants reported that their personality became more introverted and shy because of their lack of language skills and knowledge about American culture. These findings are consistent with the results of a previous study (Kim et al., 2003), which revealed that the 1.5-generation Asian Americans who participated in their study had a feeling that their lack of English proficiency caused problems, including shyness and loneliness.

In terms of the reasons immigrating to the United States, two major rea-

sons surfaced in the responses: the first was father's career opportunities, and the other was for better education and diverse opportunities. The family immigrants immigrated for the former reason. Thus, some of the participants expressed that they did not want to immigrate and lose their native Korean identity. For the participants who came here without their family, the major reason for immigrating was to obtain better education and employment opportunities. These results are consistent with studies that have described South Korean students' immigration process as an educational transition (Ogbu, 1992; Hurh, 1998; Kim & Greene, 2003).

In the domain of school adjustment, information about the relationships with teachers, and classmates were described. The majority of the student participants perceived limitations in the support they received from their American teacher, and they mentioned that they needed a teacher who had more knowledge of other cultures and empathy for their situation. For the relationship with classmates, most participants felt that they had close relationships and were comfortable with making Korean or Asian friends because of their similar culture and language. This result was consistent with the previous studies (Kim et al., 2003; Yeh et al., 2005).

Regarding the domain of cultural adjustment, the interviews with several participants revealed that they had experienced acculturative distress and affective responses, loneliness, and depression. This finding supports previous studies that have shown that moving to a new culture can have detrimental effects on one's mental health (Lynch, 1992; Smart & Smart, 1995; Sodowsky & Lai, 1997; Cho & Haslam, 2010). The authors of these studies argued that, because immigrant youths may be unable to relate to peers or adapt to new role relations, mental health concerns such as alienation, withdrawal, lethargy, aggression, anxiety, and low self-esteem are prone to arise as they adjust to a new cultural setting. Moreover, the present finding showed that psychosomatic, behavioral problems were related to acculturative distress. Additionally, participants who came to the US without their family expressed stronger acculturative distress and affective responses, such as loneliness and depression, than did the participants who immigrated with their family.

Furthermore, for the family immigrant group (i.e., 1.5-generation group), the majority of the participants reported that they had served as a cultural broker to other family members by being an English translator or an educator of U.S. cultural norms. This was a stressful experience for the participants. These findings are consistent with the previous research, which has shown that immigrant families tend to turn to their children for help because they are more proficient in English (Padilla, 1994; Kim et al., 2003). For the student immigrant group, the majority of the participants mentioned that the most difficult thing to deal with in the new environment was managing daily responsibilities and controlling urges to engage in maladaptive behaviors.

The majority of the participants stated that they did not feel comfortable asking help from a school counselor or school social worker to cope with their difficulties. Most of them turned to their friends, families, or religion for support. These findings are consistent with the results of previous studies, which have shown that Korean immigrant youth had negative attitudes toward seeking help

from a school counselor (Kim et al., 2003; Yeh et al., 2005).

The findings in the domain of identity formation and tension with students in U.S. schools showed that, even among fellow Korean friends, there is a difference in terms of level of acculturation. For the participants in this study, acculturation, ethnic identity, and peer group formation were interconnected. There are three groups of Koreans in U.S. schools: second-generation Koreans (i.e., those who were born in the US but have immigrant parents), 1.5-generation Koreans (i.e., those who were born abroad and have immigrant parents), and Korean students (those who were born abroad and who immigrate without their parents). In this study, an interesting finding was that some of the incidences of prejudice and mistreatment were caused by members of the same ethnic background. Differences in language skills and cultural backgrounds became the bases for identifying with a group. Consequently, this process of categorization and identification led to individuals having relationships with members within their group while maintaining distance and drawing comparisons with members of other groups. This finding is also consistent with Kim et al.'s (2003) study, which provided evidence of prejudice within the same ethnic group.

Limitations

This study had a few important limitations. First, the results cannot be generalized due to the small sample size. Specifically, the findings of this study were based on the reported experiences of 10 Korean adult participants. Furthermore, few categories that emerged from the data analysis were representative of all 10 cases, which suggested that some of the results may not even describe the whole sample. Second, the participants were selected through a purposeful sampling method, and only those who agreed to an interview were included in the study. Thus, self-selection of the participants was an issue. Third, eight of the participants were college or graduate students, and two participants had a bachelor's or master's degree. Therefore, the results might differ in samples with lower levels of education. Finally, most of the participants were attending private college in New York City, and the experiences of Korean immigrant students in public schools might be different.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should include a large sample size with Korean family and student immigrants. With the increase in Korean youth who are immigrating to the US to study, more research is needed on their adaptation to new school and cultural environments. Researchers should recruit Korean students from different regions, educational institutions, and socioeconomic statuses. In this study, most participants were attending or had graduated from private universities in New York City. Students who attend private universities may have a different average socioeconomic status than students who attend public or community college. Additionally, students who grow up in a town or city where many Korean families reside might have different experiences from students who are not surrounded by their culture. Therefore, students' support mechanisms and out-

comes might vary by where they live or attend school; large, diverse samples and nuanced analyses can account for these and other potential variations.

Furthermore, in this study, the majority of the participants reported that they suffered psychological factors such as shyness and loneliness during their first year at a U.S. school. The participants who immigrated without their family experienced more depression and loneliness when adapting to a new culture than those who immigrated with family. Therefore, future studies should further explore the mental health of the Korean students without family to identify the best ways to support them.

References

- Berg, B. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*, pp.238-267. Boston; London: Allyn and Bacon.
- Berry, J. W. (1980) 'Acculturation as Varieties of Adaptation' in A.M. Padilla (ed.) *Acculturation: Theory, Models, and Some New Findings*, pp.60-76. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Birman, D. (1994). Acculturation and human diversity in a multicultural society. In E.J, Trickett, R.J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspective on people in contexts* (pp. 261-284). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cho, Y. B. & Haslam, N. (2010). Suicidal Ideation and Distress Among Immigrant Adolescents: The Role of Acculturation, Life Stress, and Social Support. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *39*, 370-379.
- Dyal, J. A., & Dyal, R. Y. (1981). Acculturation, stress, and coping. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *5*, 301-328.
- Ethier, K. A. & Deaux, K. (1990). Hispanics in ivy: Assessing identity and perceived threat. *Sex Roles* *22*, 427-440.
- Gim Chung, R. H. (2001). Gender, ethnicity, and acculturation in intergenerational conflict of Asian American college students. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *7*, 376-386.
- Graves, T. D. (1967). Psychological acculturation in a tri-ethnic community. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, *23*, 337-350.
- Hong, J., & Min, P. G. (1999). Ethnic attachment among second generation Korean adolescents. *Amerasia Journal*, *25*, 165-178.
- Hurh, W. M. (1998). *The Korean Americans*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Kim, B. S. K., & Abreu, J. M. (2001). Acculturation measurement: Theory, current instruments, and future directions, In J.G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L.A. Suzuki, & C.M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (2nd ed., pp. 394-424). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, B. S. K., Brenner, B. R., Liang, C. T. H., & Asay, P. A. (2003). A qualitative study of adaptation experiences of 1.5 generation Asian Americans. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *9*, 156-170.
- Kim, Y. M., & Greene, W. L. (2003). Educational transitions: Korean families with children in American schools. In C. C. Park, A. L. Goodwin, & S. J. Lee Chi (Eds.), *Asian-American identities, families and schooling* (pp. 105-131). Information Age Publishing.
- Lynch, E. W. (1992). From culture shock to cultural learning. In E. W. Lynch & M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence: A guide for working with young children and their families* (pp. 19-34). Baltimore: Paul H. Brooke.
- Morrissey, M. (1997). The invisible minority: Counseling Asian American. *Counseling Today October*, 21-22.
- Naditch, M. P., & Morissey, R. F. (1976). Role stress, personality, and psychopathology in a group of immigrant adolescents. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, *85*, 113-118.
- Ogbu, J. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher*, *21*, 5-14.
- Okazaki, S. (2000). Treatment delay among Asian-American patients with severe mental illness. *Am J Orthopsychiatry* *70*, 56-84.
- Open Doors Report. (2012). Fast Facts Open Doors 2012. Retrieved from [http:// www. opendoors.iienetwork.org](http://www.opendoors.iienetwork.org)
- Padilla, A. M., Wagatsuma, Y., & Lindholm, K. J. (1985). Acculturation and personality as predictors of stress in Japanese and Japanese Americans. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *125*, 295-

305.

- Park, C. C. (1999). Schooling for Korean-American students: A sociocultural perspective. In C. C. Park & M. M. Chi (Eds.), *Asian-American education: Prospective and challenges* (pp. 47-70). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Park, G. (2001). Multiple dimensions of ethnic person: Listening to Korean American college students. In C. C. Park, A. L. Goodwin, & S.J. Lee (Eds.), *Research on the education of Asian and Pacific Americans* (pp. 205-223). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Patton, M. Q. (2001). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Smart, J. F., & Smart, D. W. (1995). Acculturative stress of Hispanics: Loss and challenge. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 73, 390-396.
- Sodowsky, G. R., & Lai, E. W. M. (1997). Asian immigrant variables and structural models of cross-cultural distress. In A. Booth (Ed.), *International migration and family change: The experience of U.S. immigrants* (pp. 211-237). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Suarez-Orozco, C. & Suarez-Orozco, M. (2002). *Children of immigration*. Harvard University Press.
- Torbiorn, I. (1982). *Living abroad: Personal adjustment and personnel policy in the overseas setting*. New York: Wiley.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). 2010 Census Briefs: The Asian Population: 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/2010census/news/press-kits/summary-file-1.html#>
- Yeh, C. J., Ma, P., Madan-Bahel, A., Hunter, C. D., Jung, S., Kim, A. B., Akitaya, K., & Sasaki, K. (2005). The Cultural Negotiations of Korean Immigrant Youth. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 83, 172-182.