

Acculturation of Korean Immigrants in the U.S. and Educational Implications

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I . INTRODUCTION

The first Korean immigrants, consisting of some seven thousand farm workers and their families recruited to work in the sugarcane fields of Hawaii, arrived between 1903 and 1905. Since then, the number of Korean immigrants has enormously increased to approach the one and half million mark as of June 1988(Hankook Daily News, June 9, 1989).

Many recent Korean immigrants are reported to be well educated with records of college and higher education. However, due to language and

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cultural differences, coupled with their unfamiliarity with the use of social resources, many are forced to engage in low-paid, menial work, completely dislodged from the training and the level of education they had received. The preponderant aspiration of most of the new immigrants is a better education for their children.

The paper traces the acculturation of Korean immigrants in the U.S. and some educational implications for their children, purely based on a review of the literature and the writer's observations in terms of perspective of anthropological education during the 8-year-stay in America. First, there will be a general description about some factors which usually affect communication behaviors with relevance to the level of immigrants' acculturation. Second, an investigation into the level of Korean immigrants' acculturation will be done. Third and finally, some educational problems and recommendations will be suggested.

II. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND ACCULTURATION

As foreign immigrants move from one culture to another, behavioral modes and values in the old setting may prove maladaptive in the new. Many aspects of life are unfamiliar to them, and they are faced with a high degree of uncertainty probably highest at the initial stage and then gradually reduced as time passes. Sooner or later, immigrants come to understand better the norms and values, and to adopt salient reference groups of the host society. This phenomena is commonly called "acculturation".

Communication is a crucial factor in facilitating the acculturation of culturally alien settlers. It provides the fundamental means by which individuals develop insights into their new environment. Among many

forms of human communication, interpersonal communication is the most salient form in cultural learning process. In most cases, through the channel of intercultural communication, immigrants can learn and comprehend wider and more differentiated view of the host society. Thus, it does not seem to be wrong to say that the level of acculturation of any immigrants will depend on the amount of intercultural communication in which they engage. Among many factors that may directly or indirectly influence one's communication behaviors are: language competence, acculturation motivation to learn and participate in the host society, and accessibility to the interpersonal communication channel of the host society (Young Y. Kim, 1976).

The role of the host language in intercultural communication is self-evident since effective cross-cultural communication can take place only when language appropriate to a given society is at least minimally used and comprehended by the immigrant. There are a lot of experiences of immigrants in America which provide considerable support in this regard suggesting a positive correlation between the students' fluency in speaking and understanding English and their association with American neighbors (Han, 1986). Thus, it is true that the more competent an immigrant is in the host language, the greater will be his participation in interpersonal communication with members of the host society.

Secondly, it appears that the degree of an immigrant's acculturation motivation, that is, the degree of eagerness for an immigrant to learn and participate in the host society, will significantly influence his intercultural communication behaviors. One's acculturation motivation is viewed conceptually independent from his English competence. An immigrant who is fluent in English may or may not associate with Americans, depending upon his value orientation, his attitude toward the host society, personality factors such as gregariousness, receptivity to new elements of life, or interest in current affairs in general. Whatever the rea

son may be, different immigrants do show different levels of acculturation motivation, which will affect their interpersonal behaviors. Therefore, the greater an immigrant's acculturation motivation, the greater will be his participation in interpersonal communication with members of the host society.

The third factor which is proposed to influence one's intercultural communication behaviors is "accessibility" to host communication channels. The term "accessibility" means, in relation to interpersonal communication, interpersonal "interaction potential", i.e., the degree of opportunity for association with member of the host society provided in one's daily communication environment. For example, the writer had an experience to live with a friend, who was a Japanese third generation, for three years in the State of California. He was completely westernized, needless to say, and could communicate with other Japanese only in English. Nevertheless, he always felt the feeling of marginality among the white students in a certain meeting, he confessed to the writer. However, his behavior and pattern of thinking were exact copies of white students. The company with him greatly helped the writer grasp the outline of American culture and facilitated to make American friends easily. Consequently, the writer could have a greater chance to develop more or less meaningful relationships with Americans than a Korean who shared the room with other Korean. In fact, no matter how strongly motivated and fluent in English an immigrant is, he will find it difficult to form any meaningful relationship with Americans unless he is provided with some opportunity to approach or to be approached by Americans. Thus, it can be postulated that the greater an immigrant's interpersonal interaction potential, the greater will be his participation in interpersonal communication with members of the host society.

So far, it has been suggested that three factors(language competence, acculturation motivation, and channel accessibility) will contribute to a

significant, if not exhaustive, explanation for the differential communication involvement of immigrants with the host society.

Now, it comes to next question : How these factors have influenced on facilitating the acculturation of recent Korean immigrants? To answer the question, the necessity of investigating the real face of the acculturation of Korean immigrants appears.

III. ACCULTURATION OF KOREAN IMMIGRANTS

Stating the conclusion first, the acculturation of Korean immigrants would be defined by the term “adhesive” acculturation (Huh and Kim, 1984). The term “adhesive” means that certain aspects of the new culture and social relations with members of the host society are added on to the immigrants’ traditional culture and social networks, without replacing or modifying any significant part of the old.

In his Assimilation in American Life(1964), Gordon made the distinction between cultural assimilation and structural assimilation. According to Gordon, cultural assimilation refers to the change of immigrants’ cultural patterns to those of the host society, while structural assimilation refers to the large scale entrance into clubs and institutions of the host society on the primary group level (1964 : 71). Unlike cultural assimilation, structural assimilation thus requires acceptance of the immigrant group by the dominant group. Gordon also argues that while acculturation of racial and ethnic minorities has taken place to a considerable degree in the U.S., their structural assimilation has not been extensive. This has been true for all ethnic minorities including the Jewish Americans, but more so for non-white minorities (Gordon 1964 : 76).

What Gordon suggests is that acculturation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for structural assimilation. This holds true in Korean im-

migrants' case. For instance, one Korean professor, who received the Ph. D degree in Public Administration at a university in America and has been teaching students at an American university for 30 years, has become highly acculturated into the American way of life by virtue of his good command of English, conversion to Protestant churches and his high professional status, but not structurally assimilated into the mainstream of the American social structure due to his immutable ascribed status, that is, "non-white."

From the foregoing considerations, one may arrive at a conjecture that Korean immigrants in particular, and non-white immigrants in general, would be structurally segregated or ethnically contained from the larger society, regardless of their acculturation, socioeconomic status and length of stay in the U.S.

The immigrants' perception of such structural limitations would also limit their aspirations for social acceptance by the dominant group and, as a defense, the immigrants may feel they must maintain or even enhance their ethnic attachment for sustaining their sense of security, primary group satisfaction, social recognition and identity. In other words, the immigrants' strong and persisting ethnic attachment may largely be a function of involuntary factors such as ethnic segregation inherent in the American social structure, limited adaptive capacities of the immigrants and economic and ecological conditions of the host society at a particular time. For instance, according to Yu(1983), in high school and college textbook sections dealing with Asian history and culture, Korean is frequently omitted entirely.

When a section on Korean is included, the books tend to depict Korean in an outdated fashion and often in negative terms, such as poor, war-torn, divided, authoritarian, or corrupt. The American general public knows very little about Korea and generally holds negative images about the country and its people. The public understanding of the immigrants

and their community is similarly incorrect and inadequate. Due to such misunderstanding, tension is developing between the Korean community, other minorities, and white Americans.

In light of the above conjecture, the mode of Korea immigrants' acculturation would be generally additive or adhesive; that is, they would be assimilated both culturally and structurally, but to a limited extent (especially in structural dimension), and such assimilation would not replace or weaken any significant aspect of Korean traditional culture and social networks. If this is true, the Korean immigrants' adhesive mode of acculturation would be far from a zero-sum model of assimilation (Hurh and Kim, 1984), the term which has largely been synonymous with "Anglo-conformity" in the U.S. (Gordon, 1964). According to Gordon (1964 : 85), Anglo-conformity demands "the complete renunciation of the immigrant's ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group". Neither would adhesive acculturation fit another type of zero-sum model—ethnic separatism. Separatism is the exact opposite of assimilation, the process in which minority groups are voluntarily or involuntarily segregated from the dominant group's culture and society. The end product of this process is a complete ethnic containment or insulation (Hurh and Kim, 1984).

Some related phenomena to adhesive acculturation could be observed in several variables facilitating acculturation. One of the most important variables is language. To respond to questions, such as 1) Reflecting on your experience in America, how well do you think that you can express yourself in English? 2) How well can you read American newspapers and magazines? 3) How well do you write letters in English?, most Koreans are likely to rate their English ability as "about half" or less in all three dimensions (speaking, reading, and writing). Then, if they are asked the question, like "Do you read any American newspaper(s) or magazine(s) regularly?", only a few would say "yes". Most of Korean

immigrants subscribe to Korean newspapers. It is reported that half of Korean immigrants do not read American newspapers at all (Yu, 1983).

Anglicization of the Korean first name is one of the most conspicuous ways toward acculturation since it, along with the degree of immigrants' exposure to American—printed mass media, involves an immigrant's acculturation motivation. It would not have occurred or would not have become an issue if (s)he had not immigrated to America. It is certain that about half of immigrants approve of adopting American first names, while more than 90 percent of first generation keep their original first name in actual practice (Kim, 1976).

When asked the question of Korean immigrants' social networks of friends, which is associated with the channel accessibility, it is reported that nine—tenth of the Korean immigrants could be found to have Korean friends, whereas only one—third would have white friends (Hurh and Kim, 1984).

Also, only a very small proportion of Korean immigrants are found to participate in American voluntary associations once a week and another one—third attend less than one a month. Very few are found to hold a staff position or carry on official duty. In sharp contrast, a great majority of Korean immigrants are seen to participate in Korean voluntary associations which consist mainly of Koreans in the Korean language. The Korean ethnic church is the most popular association among Korean immigrants as a place for social fellowship as well as worship.

Through the foregoing observations, it becomes clear that all the three accultural dimensions (language competency, acculturation motivation, and channel accessibility) of Korean immigrants reveal a relatively low degree of Korean immigrants' acculturation. Also, it is shown that the immigrants' attachment to their native culture and society is generally strong. Structural assimilation of the immigrants is not accompanied by their disassociation from Korean social groups. As the immigrants are

more structurally assimilated into the American society, they expand the overall dimension of their intimate social relations, rather than replacing one dimension with another. This expanded dimension of their social life confirms the pattern of “adhesive” acculturation.

Now, let’s turn to the educational problems with which Korean immigrants are facing for their children within the pattern of “adhesive” acculturation.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR KOREAN IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

1. The Value and Importance of Education to Korean Immigrants

A number of researchers have noted that education is a major problem area to Korean immigrants. Kim(1977), for example, mentions that Korea language newspapers in Korean immigrant communities across the United States have frequently reported that educational problems are prevalent and require attention(p.15). A report by the Immigrant Service Center of the Commission on Manpower and Full Employment, State of Hawaii entitled, Korean Immigrants in Hawaii : A study of Their Status, 1971–1975, noted : “Surprisingly, education was ranked as the third most serious problem of the Korean of the Korean immigrant families” (Cited in Kim, 1983, p. 208).

There are several reasons why education is a major area of concern for Korean immigrants. First of all, Kim (1983) cited a study by Kim and Condon (1975):

Kim and Condon found that 35.5% of Korean male and 13.4% of Korean female respondents in Chicago gave “educational opportunity” as their primary reason for immigrating to the United States. (p.209)

This point was also reflected in Pitler's article (1977) entitled, "Chicago's Korean American Community." Pitler (1977) cited a Los Angeles Unified School District report:

Traditionally, education is held in high esteem by Asian cultures. In Asia, the educated person is and usually is given a position of status, and "Asian parents have been known to make considerable sacrifices to provide for their children's education and training." (p.3)

Thus, these show that education is held in high esteem and is one of the reasons why Koreans have immigrated to America.

As indicated earlier, secondly, Korean immigrants generally experience a serious problem of transforming their high educational achievement into favorable occupations in the labor market. As a result, they suffer relatively more from underutilization of educational resources than whites.

In order to survive this ordeal, Korean parents probably felt it was necessary to inculcate their children with some of the more authoritarian aspects of traditional cultural values such as filial piety, respect for parental authority, obedience and self-discipline. At the same time, they doubtlessly hoped for a better way of life for their children. Since very few other options existed, they very likely saw schooling as one of the only ways left for their children's upward mobility. This almost desperate faith in schooling was undoubtedly reinforced by the traditional veneration accorded to education in Korean societies. Consequently, education has been identified as a major concern for Korean immigrant families, causing some specific problems which hinder the academic adjustment and success of Korean immigrant students.

2. Educational Problems

The varying problems confronting Korean immigrant students in the United States would easily cover a wide spectrum of concerns including psychological, linguistic, sociological, mental and physical health, law, and so on. Collectively speaking, the problems could be narrowed into five areas; educational adjustment, mastering the English language, socialization problems, communication problems between Korean immigrant students and their parents in their family education, and juvenile delinquency.

Educational adjustment. It is typical to expect people to rely upon familiar cues and ways in reacting to new and different situations. Korean immigrants, however, find that their previous experiences in Korean may not be compatible in their new American educational environment. According to Choy (1979, pp. 44–45), Korean immigrant children usually take from six months to one year to adjust to the new educational environment. During this period, many suffer emotionally and physically because they can not speak English and are taunted by their English-speaking classmates. Most of the immigrant children remain silent during class and recess, feeling isolated and rejected by both teachers and peers.

Adjusting to a new school environment can cause the Korean immigrant student to become frustrated and depressed, and then can cause a loss of self-confidence. Kim (1983) suggests the cultural conflict between the culture of the American school and that of the immigrant child, and the child's inability to speak English as a medium of communi-

cation with school personnel and his peers as possible reasons for the adjustment problems.

Problem of mastering the English language. For immigrants, learning the English language presents quite a challenge. Korean immigrant students are no exception. Several studies have indicated this problem area. Providing an evidence, Yu (1977) cited a Department of Health, Education and Welfare study entitled, "Education Rough Draft... Korean Project";

Forty-eight percent of the Korean students in the area attending elementary and high schools indicated that English language as their major difficulty in school (note : In Koreatown, Los Angeles).
(p.125)

Probably the most articulate description of the problem of a mastering English is one provided by the Immigrant Services Center of the Commission on Manpower and Full Employment, State of Hawaii in its report entitled, Korean Immigrants in Hawaii : A Study of Their Status, 1971-1975 (Cited in Kim, 1989, p.221) :

The inability to communicate in the English language is the fundamental educational problem creating other problems of inhibiting remedial action. Most of the Korean students lack versatility in conversational English and are unable to keep up with their peers in classwork and studies. Those least skilled in the English language suffer from being misunderstood, confused, and from feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy. Frustration, a negative outlook, and avoidance of these circumstances cause many students to lose interest in education and the many students to lose interest in education and the social life revolving around school activities. Eventually, cutting class, dropping out from school, and violating school regulations occur.

To conclude, it is clear that the problem of mastering the English language presents quite an obstacle to the Korean immigrant students; not only does it affect their ability to understand class lectures and assignments, but also inhibits effective interpersonal communications with students of other ethnic groups, prevents meaningful socialization, and causes them to lose their self – confidence.

Socialization problems. To adjust to the American environment and to harmonize within society requires the ability to relate with people. For Korean immigrants, however, this is a very serious problem. Societal roles and expectations, cultures and customs, and mannerisms are quite different between what the Korea immigrant student was taught in Korea and from what is found in the United States. Kim (1983) has written the following regarding the socialization problem :

Educational implications for American schools with Korean immigrant children are quit obvious. If there are many Korean immigrant children in an American school, they would form a very exclusive clique, and its membership may be open only to Koreans. Members of the clique may find it extremely difficult to develop friendship with children who are not Korean. If there is only one Korean immigrant child in the entire school, it may take months before he or she feels comfortable enough to seek friendship with children of other ethnic and racial groups.(p.223)

Thus, it is very likely that such exclusive cliques could hinder the adjustment of the student by reinforcing Korean values and ways as opposed to learning what is “American.”

On the effects of a multi – ethnic educational program upon the selection of best friends, Johnson et al. (1976) found that Filipino and Chinese immi-

grant students showed significant increases in the number of best friends from other groups; however, Korean immigrant students did not. They also noted that the Korean students depended heavily upon their own language, whereas Chinese and Filipino immigrant students did not (Cited in Kim, 1983, p. 223–224).

Communication problems between Korean immigrant students and their parents. Every family usually experiences problems between parents and children regardless of ethnicity and cultural background. At times, communications between the “older” and the “younger” generations conflict, causing stress and discord within the family.

The Korean immigrant family likewise experiences “family” problems, but to a more complex degree for there are the difficulties of acculturation and adjusting to a new society. There are many Korean parents who have lived in America for several years, who do not speak English, and have difficulty communicating with their own children who have forgotten or have no chance to learn their native tongue.

Moreover, parental roles and children’s behaviors are questioned, and values, attitudes, and lifestyles clash between what was expected in the old country versus what they find in America.

In other cases, most Korean parents put heavy expectations on their children in their educational and academic performance. These high expectations may put a Korean child of any school age in conflict with his parents. Because Korean parents often make great sacrifices to give their children the best education possible, children who fail to meet the standards set by parents may indeed feel guilty when they fail to measure up.

Juvenile delinquency. In Korean immigrant communities across America, juvenile delinquency is a major problem. For instance, it has been reported that the dropouts had formed their own Korean gangs in Los Angeles, and a number of Korean immigrant students had joined Chinatown street gangs and then quit school (Choy, 1979).

Today many immigrant youths are involved in criminal acts, such as gang fights, stealing, and even murder. Hence, juvenile delinquency becomes a serious problem affecting the Korean immigrant community.

At this moment, some of the recommendations for solving the educational problems above should be suggested.

3. Recommendations

For the immigrant students to adjust to a new educational environment is very difficult to overcome. There are no easy answers to this problem. Preserving their cultural heritage may be one of the ways for the better adjustment into a new social environment. Immigrant student's heritage, self-esteem and cultural pride should be preserved lest (s)he should become a marginal person in American society, and at the same time the student's formal schooling should help him/her to succeed in the dominant culture.

The problem of mastering the English language would be partially overcome with ESL Program and bilingual-bicultural education. Moreover, a need to adapt the services of the social agencies themselves, Department of Education and Department of Social Services & Housing to become more sensitive to the cultural differences of immigrant groups should be indicated.

Finally, the development of the community program, such as “cultural ceremony,” or “youth camp”, and the various moral and religious education in church for the immigrants will be necessary in order to drive them into the right way.

V. CONCLUSION

In summary, we have observed some factors (language competence, acculturation motivation, and communication channel accessibility) which facilitate the level of acculturation. Also, in view of the above factors, we investigated the reality of the acculturation of Korean immigrants in the U.S. and found that all the above three factors influence on the acculturation of Korean immigrants in somewhat hindering ways, characterizing it to be “adhesive”. Next, we have noticed that within the pattern of “adhesive” acculturation, Korean immigrant communities are facing some educational problems, such as educational adjustment problem, the problem of mastering the English language, communication problems between parents and their children, and juvenile delinquency problem. For the recommendations, the need to preserve one’s own culture and develop the policy—level program by social agencies to help the immigrant students succeed in the dominant culture was indicated. Furthermore, the strengthened ESL or bilingual program was suggested to facilitate the immigrants’ communication channels with the host society. Finally, some programs for youth were considered for solving the problem of juvenile delinquency.

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