

The Role of Immigrant Churches in the Ethnic Socialization of Korean American Youths

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This study explored the role of Korean immigrant churches as a social context for Korean American youths, with a specific focus on its role in ethnic socialization. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 23 Korean American young adults. The results show that such churches serve as a salient social context for Korean American youths in which day-to-day lives are deeply integrated. Specifically, they serve as a salient context for coethnic peer relationships and family interactions. Moreover, Korean immigrant churches play a salient role as an agent of enculturation for Korean American youths by engaging them in cultural socialization, constructing and transmitting immigrant discourse, and providing a coethnic community. Taken as whole, findings suggest a distinct and salient role of immigrant churches in the lives of Korean American youths and highlight the importance of studying the social context specific to the children of immigrants.

Keywords: enculturation, ethnic socialization, immigrant churches, immigrant youths, Korean American

A well-established body of literature suggests that ethnic identity can have an important influence on immigrant youths; increasing evidence suggests its implications for youths' positive adjustment, including academic achievement, psychological well-being, and the ability to cope with racism and discrimination (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umana-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). Many studies have looked at the role of immigrant youths' microsystems, including families and peers, in their ethnic socialization (Douglass & Umana-Taylor, 2015; Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001); however, less is known about the role of these youths' social contexts (see Umana-Taylor,

2004). Immigrant youths' processes of negotiating between heritage and mainstream culture is likely to be shaped by interactions with their surroundings (Marks, Godoy, & Garcia Coll, 2013). One of the important social contexts for immigrant youths is ethnic religious institutions, as they play a critical role in immigrant communities (Ecklund, 2006; Hirschman, 2004; Min, 2010).

An emerging body of research indicates that immigrant churches play an important role in the lives of Korean American immigrants (Chung, 1998; Min, 2010). The functions of immigrant churches often go beyond the religious, as they promote social, financial, and emotional support, facilitating new immigrants' adaptation to American society (Hirschman, 2004; Min, 2010). Importantly, immigrant churches play a critical role in preserving Korean American immigrants' ethnic culture and identity (Chong, 1998; Min,

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2010). However, much of the existing research is based on the present experiences of adult or young-adult populations. Adolescence is a period in which the development of ethnic identity becomes a critical part of identity development. As adolescents increasingly spend more time outside of the family context, the social environment becomes salient in their ethnic socialization. Evidence suggests a positive relationship between participation in ethnic churches and ethnic identification among ethnic minority youths (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Markstrom, 1999); however, a nuanced understanding of the underlying process is lacking. For example, what are different ways that youths' participation in immigrant churches affect their ethnic identification? What are youths' subjective experiences in these processes?

Given the importance of understanding the specific social contexts of the children of immigrants and evidence of the effects of youths' religious participation on ethnic identification, this study aimed to explore the role of immigrant churches in the lives of Korean American youths. Aside from space considerations that precluded the inclusion of all Asian American subgroups, there were several reasons for using Korean Americans as an example. Research has indicated a high level of religious heterogeneity among Asians Americans, suggesting more studies focusing on subgroups (Le, Tov, & Taylor, 2007). Among different immigrant groups, Korean Americans, the fifth largest Asian subgroup in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2013), represent one of the most religious groups, with about 75% of these individuals affiliated with Korean churches (Min, 2010); this suggests the important role of immigrant churches in Korean American youths' lives. This discovery study sought to learn about the role of Korean immigrant churches as a social context for Korean American youths, with a specific focus on their role in ethnic socialization.

The Role of Immigrant Churches in Immigrant Communities

A growing body of research indicates that religious institutions play an important role in immigrant communities in the United States. The functions of ethnic religious institutions often go beyond the religious, as they promote social, financial, and emotional support that are particularly salient to immigrants due to their lack of resources (Hirschman, 2004). For example, immigrant churches provide information about housing, social, and economic opportunities that facilitate new immigrants' adaptation to American society (Hirshman, 2004; Min, 2010). Churches offer language assistance and assist new immigrants with finding jobs and navigating the American bureaucracy (Bankston & Zhou, 2000). Moreover, immigrant churches allow members to build networks and relationships that transmit resources and information regarding education and business (Lew, 2007). One of the salient functions of immigrant churches is in preserving immigrants' ethnic culture and identity. For example, many immigrant churches offer ethnic language classes for children, celebrate ethnic holidays, and provide coethnic social networks and support (Ecklund, 2006; Min, 2010). Together, immigrant churches promote a sense of community that helps maintain cultural traditions and values while providing ethnic connections and a sense of belonging (Chong, 1998).

Among Asian American immigrants, research suggests substantial variations in religious experiences. Unlike many Americans, who are affiliated with Christianity (70.6%, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2015), Asians are from a diverse range of religious backgrounds, including Buddhism, Hindu, Islam, and Christianity. These heterogeneous religious backgrounds represent diverse religious experiences among Asian subgroups in the United States. For example, Korean and Filipino immigrants tend to be more familiar with Christianity than other Asian immigrants due to the rapid growth of Christianity in their home countries (Zhai & Strokes, 2009). Moreover,

Korean, Filipino, and Indian immigrants tend to show higher religiosity than other Asian groups (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Min, 2010). Finally, there is evidence that immigrant churches may vary in terms of the resources they provide to immigrant communities. For example, Park (2012) found that low-income Korean Americans were more likely than low-income Chinese Americans to take SAT preparation classes and that religious affiliation and religious service attendance were positively associated with SAT preparation for Korean American college students but not for Chinese American college students. The author attributed this finding to resources provided by Korean churches and the churches' deep integration into the immigrant community.

The Role of Immigrant Churches in the Korean Immigrant Community

Korean Americans tend to be highly homogeneous in their religiosity—the vast majority of Korean immigrants are Protestant Christians (Min, 2010). Korean Americans as a group are highly religious. About 75% of Koreans in the United States are affiliated with Korean immigrant churches (Min, 2010), and about 77% of Korean church attendants attend religious services at least once a week, with 23% holding staff positions (e.g., minister, elder, or deacon; Hurh & Kim, 1990). Many Korean immigrants who follow different religions or have no previous church affiliation convert to Christianity because Korean churches provide assistance to new immigrants in adjusting to the new country. Korean churches, consistent with other immigrant churches, play multifaceted functions in the immigrant community. For example, Korean churches function as reception centers for new immigrants and provide resources and social networks for Korean immigrants (Ecklund, 2006). Korean churches also play a critical role in providing supplementary education, including tutoring services and college preparatory resources (e.g., Lew, 2007; Park, 2012; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Of note, Korean American young adults and adults

tend to attend ethnic churches even after they leave home for college (Abelmann, 2009; Park, 2011).

Consistent with other immigrant churches, Korean churches facilitate and maintain Korean language and cultural heritage. For example, many Korean language schools and other cultural programs are run by Korean churches (Min, 2010). Korean churches provide a coethnic community, in which church members gain a sense of belonging as well as support in navigating the mainstream American society. For example, a study of second generation Korean Americans (mostly young adults and adults; Chong, 1998) indicated that immigrant churches help church members cope with ethnic marginality and challenge the negative stereotypes imposed by the larger society, particularly through the churches' promotion of positive group identity and provision of a sense of belonging. Similarly, the results from other research on second-generation Korean American Christians (Kim, 2010; Park, 2011) suggest that these churches provide members with a sense of ethnic belonging and facilitate ethnic identification. Again, these studies examined adults or young adults' current experiences; less is known about church-related experiences during adolescence, a period in which the development of ethnic identity becomes salient. Korean American youths' experiences during adolescence might shape their later engagement with immigrant churches.

Asian American Adolescents' Religious Involvement and Ethnic Socialization

An established body of research on adolescents in the United States indicates that religion, often measured by church attendance, is likely to offer protection against risk behaviors while promoting positive development (Kang & Romo, 2011; King & Furrow, 2004; King & Roeser, 2009). Implications of religious involvement for Asian American youths might be different from those for majority American youths due to the religious heterogeneity of Asian immigrants (Le et al., 2007) and the

immigrant contexts that shape youth experiences. In general, evidence suggests that religion is important to Asian American youths. For example, in a longitudinal study (Lopez, Huynh, & Fuligni, 2011), adolescents from Asian American backgrounds reported higher levels of religious identity compared to their European counterparts. Interestingly, while religious affiliation significantly dropped among European American adolescents during high school, it remained relatively stable for Asian American adolescents, which might partially result from the higher levels of family cohesion and lower levels of youth autonomy in Asian immigrant families. However, evidence also indicates variation among Asian American youths in regards to religiosity. For example, in a study (Le et al., 2007) that examined the relation between religiousness and adolescent outcomes using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data, religiousness was shown to be a significant protective factor for depression among European American and African American adolescents but not among Asian Americans. The authors attributed this to the heterogeneity among Asian Americans' religiosity, suggesting the need for more nuanced analyses of subgroups within different ethnic groups.

Some studies have shed insight into factors underlying variations in Asian American youths' religious experiences, particularly among Korean American adolescents. First, youths' religious affiliations might affect their religious experiences. Research has shown that affiliation concordance is stronger for Protestants compared to Catholics and Buddhists (Zhai & Strokes, 2009). As noted above, the majority of Korean immigrants are Protestant Christians (Min, 2010), suggesting that youths and parents are more likely than non-Protestant Asian youths to share religious preferences with their parents. Second, youths' immigration status might shape their religious experiences. Research has suggested that youths from immigrant families tend to show higher levels of religious participation compared to nonimmigrant youths (Harker, 2001). Korean American households are likely to

consist of first-generation immigrant parents and their children (Pew Research Center, 2013). Third, parents' religiosity might affect their children's religious involvement. Korean immigrants' exceptionally active church participation is likely to lead to high levels of church involvement among their children. Park (2008) examined Korean American adolescents' religious identity development, finding that parents played a salient role and that youths' church participation was reinforced by their parents' religious participation. Indeed, Korean American adolescents' higher levels of attendance in religious services in comparison with Chinese Americans were explained by their parents' religiosity (Zhai & Strokes, 2009). Lastly, as noted above, churches' levels of involvement and integration in immigrant communities seem to vary (Park, 2012), and this might shape youths' religious experiences.

While there is a lack of research that provides a nuanced understanding of how immigrant churches affect Korean Americans' ethnic identification during adolescence, evidence suggests a link between adolescent's religious involvement and ethnic identification. For example, Bankston and Zhou (1995) found that Vietnamese American adolescents' participation in ethnic churches was positively linked to their ethnic identification. Among a number of variables (e.g., family characteristics, time of arrival in the United States, parental membership in ethnic organizations, and presence of grandparents in the household), ethnic church attendance was the most important variable that was significantly linked to all indicators of youths' ethnic identification (e.g., ethnic language use, ethnic self-identification, and ethnic friendship circles). However, such quantitative research does not provide insight into the underlying processes involved in this relationship or the youths' subjective experiences. Evidence indicates that the community of religious organizations plays an important factor in this process—by providing resources and playing a role as an agent of socialization. King and Furrow (2004), for example, found that social capital and the intergenerational network

embedded in the church community, including relationships with peers and nonparental adults who serve as socializing agents (rather than the religious practices by themselves), explained youths' increase in empathy and moral development. Other studies have highlighted the community-level resources of churches in promoting positive adolescent adjustment (Good & Willoughby, 2006; Smith, 2003). Taken together, this body of research suggests that immigrant churches are an important context for the socialization of youths through the available resources in the church community. For Korean American youths, immigrant churches might provide various assets through cultural, social, and religious resources; and youths' interactions with these churches might shape their ethnic identity formation. However, little is known about the role of these churches as social contexts for Korean American youths.

Overview of Present Study

This discovery study was aimed at understanding the role immigrant churches in Korean American youths' lives. Through in-depth interviews with Korean American young adults about their experiences with Korean churches during adolescence, this study aimed to describe the role of immigrant churches as a social context for Korean American youths and to explore how immigrant churches facilitate the process of ethnic socialization. Given the focus on subjective experiences and the lack of prior empirical studies, this study examined youth accounts of their experiences.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Interview data was drawn from a larger study that examined Korean American youths experiences and perceptions related to growing up in Korean immigrant households. The larger study consisted of 124 Korean American young adults (41 males, 83 females) who completed a

survey administered via paper and pencil or online¹. They were recruited from university classes, student organizations, churches, cultural events, and through snowball sampling. The survey included questions about demographics and a sense-of-indebtedness-to-parents scale that was developed by the author (Kang, 2010). Twenty-five participants (10 males and 15 females) were selected from 68 survey participants who agreed to be contacted for follow-up interviews. Potential participants were contacted via email or telephone based on their preferences. Given the focus of this study on participants' church-related experience, only 23 participants who reported having experience with Korean churches while growing up were selected for the analysis (see Table 1).

The analyses in the present study focused on qualitative data on participant experiences related to Korean immigrant churches. The participants were 23 Korean American young adults (9 males and 14 females) aged 18-25 years ($M = 21.6$): 20 who were born in the United States and 3 who had moved to the United States before age 6. Most ($n = 21$) were from two-parent households (1 had divorced parents) and reported that both parents worked full time while they were growing up; in 1 family, the mother did not work outside the home. Among the 45 working parents, 27 were small-business owners or in manufacturing occupations, 12 were in professional occupations (e.g., lawyer, nurse, and engineer), and 6 were in semiskilled service occupations (e.g., mail carrier and cab driver). Twenty-two respondents were in or had been in college. Twenty participants identified as Christian and 3 as agnostic or not religiously affiliated. All Christian participants had belonged to a Korean church growing up.

Interviews

The semistructured interview protocol was focused on obtaining participants' narrative accounts of their perceptions and experiences

1 For detailed method descriptions, refer to Kang & Larson (2014).

Table 1
Participant Pseudonyms and Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age in years	Sex	Country of Origin	Occupation	Religion
Ashley	21	Female	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Ben	21	Male	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
David	21	Male	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Ellen	22	Female	United States	Teacher	Christianity
Eric	19	Male	United States	Unemployed	Christianity
Erica	21	Female	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Esther	24	Female	Korea	Graduate school	Christianity
Eunice	23	Female	United States	Teacher	Christianity
Helen	22	Female	United States	Graduate student	Agnostic
Jamie	22	Female	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Jason	25	Male	Korea	Sushi chef	Christianity
Jean	22	Female	United States	Unemployed	Christianity
Jessica	18	Female	United States	Undergraduate student	None
Joanne	23	Female	United States	Graduate student	Christianity
Joshua	22	Male	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Kevin	21	Male	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Kim	21	Female	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Lisa	22	Female	United States	Unemployed	Christianity
Mary	22	Female	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Paul	21	Male	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Sam	20	Male	United States	Undergraduate student	Christianity
Susie	21	Female	Korea	Undergraduate student	Protestant
Tim	23	Male	United States	Graduate student	None

related to the immigrant family context growing up. The participants were asked to describe their family immigration histories, daily life ecologies, family experiences, and experiences related to navigating home and the larger society. While discussing daily life ecology or issues related to cultural navigation, most participants mentioned Korean churches spontaneously, which led to further probing on their church-related experiences and related perceptions. Probes included respondents' experiences with Korean churches growing up, including time spent in

church or in the church-related context, the activities in these contexts, and the perceived effects of their church-related experiences growing up. Consistent with grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the questions were broad and probed to obtain specificity through elaboration. Seventeen interviews were conducted in person, and 6 were conducted by telephone, ranging 1-2.5 hr ($M = 1.8$). Efforts were made to minimize potential discrepancies in the experiences in-person and phone interviews. The interviews were audio recorded

and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, the interviewer wrote a memo that included general impressions, observations, and possible interpretations.

Data Analysis

Analysis occurred in multiple iterative stages, following an inductive approach to identify emergent patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the first stage, interview transcripts were reviewed for a broad set of categories based largely around a priori topics of interest. The interviewer and three secondary coders (students trained by the interviewer) employed open coding and a constant comparative method, which is useful in generating theory by using explicit coding and analytic procedures, to break down the data analytically (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This involved labeling discrete ideas or events related to participant perceptions of the churches' role in their day-to-day lives while growing up. A codebook was developed that included the categories, their definitions, and examples to give structure and organization to the transcribed text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Some of the coding categories that emerged were influenced by sensitizing concepts (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998), drawn from the relevant literature (e.g., immigrant families, religion, and youth development). The data was then examined to compare similarities, differences, and recurring concepts and/or themes. Following the consensus process suggested by Hill et al. (Hill, Knox, Thomson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005), the interviewer and coders met regularly to compare codes, establish consensus, and refine definitions of the categories.

The second stage of analysis focused on sections of transcripts coded for specific categories relevant to the present analyses (e.g., churches' role in cultural socialization). Inductive thematic analysis procedures were used to identify emergent patterns within the data, based on the recurrence of keywords, sentences, and phrases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through constant comparative

analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the initial codes and interpretations were compared. Previously coded interviews were then recoded using the updated codes. For example, codes "providing language/cultural programs," "providing cultural resources," and "promoting culturally sanctioned behavior," were merged into one category and were assigned a new conceptual label: "engaging in cultural socialization."

After identifying emerging concepts and categories, axial and selective coding was conducted. The purpose of axial coding was to further refine conceptual properties related to the churches' role in ethnic socialization. Specifically, the interviewer and coders looked at the connections between identified categories (e.g., links between youth interactions with coethnic church communities and youths' identification with Korean culture and identity). These identified links involved different aspects of the participants' social contexts identified in the first research question. For example, links between interactions with coethnic peers and the participants' identification with Korean culture were identified, and follow-up questions probed for why, where, when, how, and with what consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Finally, the selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) involved integrating proposed relationships into a theory surrounding how Korean immigrant churches facilitate the process of ethnic identification among participants. In this step of the analysis, quotes that best represented the emergent constructs became prominent.

Three strategies were employed to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. First, bias was reduced by triangulation: by analyzing data separately, comparing findings, and discussing discrepancies until reaching consensus (Denzin, 1978). Second, the process of data analysis was thoroughly documented. Third, emerging interpretations of the data were discussed on a regular basis with other Korean Americans and scholars with expertise in adolescent development and immigrant youths and families.

Results

The Role of Korean Immigrant Churches as a Social Context for Korean American Youths (Research Goal 1)

A first important finding was that Korean immigrant churches serve as a salient social context in which Korean American youths' lives are deeply embedded. Three broad themes pertaining to the role of immigrant churches in Korean American youths' lives emerged across the sample: the context in which youths' day-to-day lives are embedded, the context for family interactions, and the context for coethnic peer networks.

Korean immigrant churches as a salient social context. Most of the participants who identified themselves as a Christian ($n = 20$) reported spending a substantial amount of time in church or in church-related contexts growing up. Most youths ($n = 18$) were involved in youth groups, which often met more than once per week. Moreover, most youths ($n = 19$) attended Korean programs offered by a Korean church. It was common for them to attend regular youth-group gatherings on Fridays and Sundays, Korean school on Saturdays, and seasonal church events throughout the year (e.g., youth retreats). Given that many of these events took place during the weekend, many of the youths' social events happened in the church context. One participant's account (Jamie) reflected a common experience among participants that illustrates how Korean churches are a salient part of social lives during adolescence: "There's a Friday youth group, then Saturday, usually youth group hangs out, and then Sunday I would see them at church...most of my social life happens around the church." Other youths shared similar experiences: "I was a lot involved in the church. We had a good youth group, and we spent a lot of time together" (Esther) and "I went to a lot of the VBS (Vacation Bible Studies), bible studies, and church hangouts and picnics and Sunday services, and Friday large group" (Paul).

Korean churches appeared to draw non-

Christian youths as well because they provided various community services, such as Korean school, after-school programs, and tutoring. Two of three participants who had no religion growing up reported that they had attended Korean church programs during adolescence. Tim, whose family never attended a church, reported going to an after-school program run by a Korean church, through which he became connected to religious services as well. He said, "It was natural for me to attend youth-group service after attending the after-school program on Friday. So I would stay there after the program because there were other kids, and sometimes they had some interesting stuff to do."

Korean immigrant churches as a context for family interactions. When asked to describe typical family time growing up, many participants ($n = 14$) reported that going to a church was a weekly family ritual when they were young. While some of these youths' fathers were not regular church attendants, they perceived Sunday trips to the church as a family activity. The significance of a regular family time spent around the church is even more pronounced given the limited time youths spent with their parents growing up. Most participants reported spending very limited time as a whole family. While a few youths, especially those whose parents had professional occupations, recalled having engaged in regular family activities growing up, the majority reported not having regular family time due to their parents' demanding work lives. Many participants' parents, particularly those who were entrepreneurs, worked long hours 6 days a week, leaving Sunday as the only day for family time. For example, Lisa said the following:

My parents were working like 14 hours a day. They worked 6 days a week, except Sundays. Also my parents were really tired during the week after work. So usually Sunday was the only time that we as a family spent some time as a whole.

Referring to her family's weekly ride to the

church growing up, she added, “It kind of made me feel like a family.” Similarly, Joshua said, “Every Sunday, my family were going to church all together, at least until I started to drive.” The accounts of Lisa and Joshua on family time around the church reflect a common experience among percipients across the sample. Some youths reported that their parents’ pressuring them to go to church led to some parent–child conflicts. For example, David said, “I much preferred to watch TV or doing something else. I remember fighting with mom every Sunday because she was nagging me to go to church.”

Immigrant churches also appear to provide a context in which youths and their parents’ lives overlap. Many of the participants’ parents were actively involved in the church, serving as a staff members or volunteers, including for activities that their children were involved. For example, Ashley, whose mom worked as a volunteer for her youth group said, “My whole family was really involved in the church. My mom coordinated once a month like youth group activities for us, and she would be there helping out...And she sometimes would ask my opinion about what she was planning.” Similar experiences were shared by other participants, who described the church as a primary context where they had interactions with their parents outside of the home: “My mom would sometimes check up on me while I’m in my youth-group activities since she’s there anyway” (Ellen); “I would see my parents in my youth-group activities since they would be volunteering” (Erica); and “My mom was always talking to my youth-group pastor” (Joshua). Moreover, many participants reported that their churches offered various events that brought family members together. For example, Jamie said the following:

My church had family events like family retreats or picnic or some other special events for families...I remember in one of these events [Korean Thanksgiving], we played this Korean traditional game, and your family would be on the same team. It was really fun.

Eunice added, “We had special events where adults and children participated. I was in a play and my dad was in the men’s choir. I really liked seeing my dad singing. He was really good.”

As illustrated by such youth accounts, Korean immigrant churches appear to be an integral part of youths and their families’ lives. Korean American youths’ day-to-day lives appear to be deeply integrated in the context of immigrant churches, with many of their social activities and family interactions taking place in the church context.

Korean immigrant churches as a context for coethnic peer networks. Many of the participants ($n = 17$) reported that their church was a primary source of contact with Korean American peers growing up. This was particularly true given that most of the participants lived in predominantly White neighborhoods during childhood or adolescence. Kevin’s comment that “at school, [my peers] were White, but, at church, Korean Americans” reflects a common experience among the participants in this study. Highlighting the role of his church in his Korean American peer network, Kim said, “I don’t think I would have made any Korean friends when I was young if my family didn’t go to a Korean church. Most of my and my parents’ Korean friends were through church.” Eric, who started attending a Korean church during his junior high school year, said, “Before that point, all my friends were Caucasians. I really didn’t have any Korean friends. And in junior high, I started making some Korean friends because I went to a Korean American church.”

Some youths reported that they were able to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with their Korean American church friends during adolescence because of similarities in terms of their cultural and religious experiences. Esther’s account illustrates these youths’ experiences with church friends as opposed to school friends:

I was closer to my church friends. I felt more close to them because it was on like a different level, too. We talked about our

spiritual lives, and we went on different retreats together, and I think we understood conflict with their parents and just “being Korean,” you know, and this culture. So I feel like there was more depth in that with those friends, and we were able to understand each other more. I couldn’t relate as much with my Caucasian friends. It felt very shallow, you know? We would talk about school and different people at our schools and go to football games together and do that kind of stuff, but we didn’t really talk about, I guess it’s the spiritual element, you know?

Esther’s experiences were shared by other youths, who described their churches as important sources for coethnic peers and close friendships. Like Esther, many participants compared their relationships with Korean church friends to their relationships with non-Korean friends, usually in the school context, to highlight the significance of their friendships with church friends.

The participants described how their Korean American church peers served as cultural reference groups, especially in regard to their family experiences. For example, Mary described how her church friends helped her make sense of her own experiences with her parents:

When I was younger, like elementary and middle school and high school, my friends at school were always Caucasian, but then my friends at church were Korean. Because their parents raised them, and our parents are Korean, they all like had similar personalities, very conservative and basing emotion on respect...so we could relate with each other. When we had problems with our parents, we could talk about it with each other.

As Mary’s account illustrates, youth interactions with Korean church friends appears to help them interpret their parents’ parenting behavior through a cultural lens. Other

participants described similar experiences of their church friends serving as confidants and cultural reference groups. Sam, who grew up in predominantly White neighborhoods and attended schools where most students were Caucasian, recalled his experience growing up:

I always knew that our family was different from my [school] friends’ families. But I think my Korean friends that I had from church, whenever I would talk to them about these issues, they could understand because we all had Korean parents.

Similarly, Ben said, “If I told my Caucasian friends that my mom freaks out about sleepovers, they don’t understand. My church friends just get it.”

As illustrated above, to many participants, Korean immigrant churches appear to provide an important social context and peer networks with other Korean American youths, through which they can share immigrant family-related challenges and make sense of perceived cultural differences.

Korean Immigrant Churches as an Agent of Ethnic Socialization (Research Goal 2)

The second objective was to explore how immigrant churches facilitate the process of ethnic socialization among Korean American youths. The findings from this study suggest that Korean churches play a salient role as agents of enculturation for Korean American youths. Three themes emerged regarding how Korean churches facilitate youth ethnic socialization: engaging in cultural socialization, constructing and transmitting immigrant discourse, and providing a coethnic community.

Korean immigrant church engagement in cultural socialization. The participants described Korean immigrant churches as providing an important context for cultural socialization. For example, Korean churches played a salient role in transmitting cultural heritage and language to the participants by providing Korean language or

cultural programs. All participants who attended Korean programs growing up ($n = 19$) reported that these programs were run by Korean churches. These programs taught Korean cultural heritage and language and engaged youths in various cultural activities by offering different types of classes. For example, Jamie said, "We would take different classes, like Korean writing, reading, and I also took Taekwondo class." Other participants talked about classes where they engaged in cultural extracurricular activities such as traditional Korean dance and cultural arts and craft activities. The participants reported learning Korean cultural values and norms through Korean programs, as the curricula of these programs often included classes designed to promote Korean identity through teaching Korean history, culture, and cultural etiquette in social and family interactions (e.g., respect for elders and filial piety). For example, David said: "Some classes taught us about Korean culture, and I remember this teacher talking about things like *Hyo* [filial piety]." Jessica said, "They told us how we should show respect for elders and parents, not talking back like American kids."

The participants also described the religious contexts of their churches as arenas for cultural socialization. Specifically, they described how the religious leaders integrated religious and cultural messages to encourage culturally sanctioned behaviors and values. Eunice, for example, recalled her pastor using scriptures to emphasize a child's obligations to their parents, including obedience and respect for their parents:

In one of the sermons, my pastor was referring to this scripture, Ephesians, where it says, "Children, obey your parents"...like how obeying parents pleases God. And sometimes my parents would refer back to that sermon or that scripture when I talked back to them.

Interestingly, the same scripture used by Eunice was cited by three other participants as they were talking about a child's responsibilities to their parents. Other participants described similar experiences of church leaders integrating

messages to promote cultural values in religious messages. Jamie said the following:

I remember my pastor told us how our family is a place on Earth that God has given us so that we can be trained to be a good Christians, more mature Christians, you know...So when I have conflicts with my parents, I should not just react out of anger but pray and really try to act the way that God wants us to act. Like, their authority as parents is from God, and I should respect my parents' authority.

Construction and transmission of immigrant discourse. One of the ways that immigrant churches appear to facilitate the process of ethnic socialization is by constructing and transmitting immigrant discourse that provides meaning and purpose to the immigrant experience, particularly for individuals of first-generation Korean immigrants. The participants described how their churches played a role in communicating immigrant narratives of parental sacrifice and hardship. This happened in different church contexts, including church services and informal interactions with church leaders and adult church members. For example, Mary, after describing her deep appreciation for her parents' sacrifice made to provide her a better life, said the following:

There was the spiritual aspects like [church] leaders, mentors, pastors giving advice. The pastors would be the ones that would tell me about my parents' sacrifice, or would tell me and the kids in general, how much your parents do for you in sermons or just in general when we were talking about deep issues. This was more in late in junior high or high school I guess? But then that's like I heard it then, but it didn't really register. It didn't really sink in until I went to college. Then I remembered those things, and that made me to think more about that. And then it clicked. That really made sense to me.

Mary's account illustrates how Korean churches can play a role in constructing immigrant discourse and transmitting it to Korean American youths. While these messages did not have a significant impact during her adolescence, Mary's early exposure contributed to her later identification with the immigrant discourse of parental sacrifice and hardship. Similarly, Ben recalled his pastor's messages about the adversities endured by youths' parents and other Korean immigrants, comparing immigrant parents' sacrifice to Christ's sacrifice: "[My pastor] was making comparisons, like how our parents' sacrifices are like Christ's sacrifice. They both tried to give us a better life, and they paid the price for that." Interestingly, two other participants used similar Christian narratives of Christ's sacrifice in describing their parents' sacrifices and hardship as immigrants.

Provision of a coethnic community. Korean churches appear to serve as a context for ethnic socialization by providing coethnic communities that allow Korean American youths to interact with similar peers and adults, learn Korean cultural norms, and enact their Korean identity. For example, some participants described that they learned Korean cultural etiquette and norms by interacting with nonparental Korean adults at church. Kevin said, "On Sunday, we would see other Korean adults. We all knew that we had to bow and say *an-nyung-ha-sae-yo* [Korean greeting in a polite way]." Jean said, "The ways kids and grown-ups interact in the church are very different from how my [Caucasian] friends and their families are...I think I learned a lot about being Korean and how to act like a Korean in my church." Some participants noted that adult church members occasionally transmitted specific messages about cultural expectations for youth, such as children's obligations to their parents or the importance of success. Eunice recalled her interactions with adult church members: "I would sometimes see Korean adults at home because they were having a small group bible study in my place... Sometimes they would tell us how my parents work so hard, and I should study hard and be successful."

Mary, after reporting that most of her parents' friends were attending the same church, said the following:

I feel that some of my idea of what it means to be a Korean was influenced by other Korean adults, like my parents' friends...I remember them telling me things like how we Koreans are different from Americans in that families are the priorities and children take care of their parents and don't abandon them like some Americans do.

Moreover, the immigrant church community appeared to provide a context that allowed and encouraged youths to enact their Korean identity. The participants noted having experienced a cultural divide between their homes and the larger society growing up. To many, church was the most culturally salient context growing up, where they interacted with other Korean American peers and adults, communicated in Korean, learned Korean cultural norms, and were immersed in Korean culture, all of which facilitated the enactment of their Korean identities. Ben, whose social circle in school and neighborhood was primarily White, described how the church context helped him feel connected to his Korean identity: "I felt like I was more Korean when I was at church, hanging out with other Korean kids, seeing all these Koreans, speaking Korean." Kevin echoed, "I acted differently when I'm in the church than when I was in school. I guess I acted more Korean." Recalling back her childhood and adolescence, Lisa summarized the role of her church in terms of her navigating two cultures: "I think my church was where I sort of learned about Korean culture, and practiced being Korean, you know? Church was like a little Korea within the U.S. When I go to school, that's America; church is like you're in Korea."

Discussion

This study sought to highlight the importance

of studying social contexts specific to the children of immigrants (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Marks et al., 2013). The goals of this study were to describe the role of Korean immigrant churches as social contexts for Korean American youth during adolescence and to explore the role of churches in the ethnic socialization of Korean American youth. Regarding the first research question, the findings from this study suggest a distinct and salient role of immigrant churches as a social context for youths. First, Korean churches appear to serve as a salient social context in which Korean American youths spend a substantial amount of time. Most of the participants who reported having a Christian affiliation attended church during adolescence more than once a week, with their social lives being deeply embedded in the church context. Less than 40% of American adolescents attend church weekly, with significantly fewer attending church more than once a week (Wallace, Forman, Caldwell, & Willis, 2003); moreover, adolescents' religious participation significantly declines across the high school years (Lopez et al., 2011). This finding suggests that Korean American youths' significantly higher levels of church involvement (compared to typical American adolescents) are embedded in their day-to-day lives.

Second, the findings from this study suggest that immigrant churches serve as an important context for family interactions for Korean American youths during adolescence. This is a meaningful finding given the limited time that these youths tend to spend with their family due to their parents' busy and challenging work lives as immigrants. Moreover, for Korean immigrant parents who might not be actively involved in English-speaking contexts, such as schools or extracurricular activities, immigrant churches might allow them to be more involved with their children outside of the family context. Bronfenbrenner (1979) postulated that multiple links and cohesion of goals among different settings of microsystems facilitate better adjustment in children. Moreover, cultural congruence of youths' family and social contexts is likely to better facilitate ethnic socialization.

Third, the findings from this study suggest that Korean churches serve as a salient context for friendships and co-ethnic peer networks. Prior research has shown that religious youth experience higher levels of positive social interaction, trust, and shared values with their religious friends compared to their less religious peers (King & Furrow, 2004). The participants in the present study reported that they were able to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with their church friends compared to their non-church friends during adolescence. Moreover, coethnic peers in Korean churches during adolescence appeared to serve as confidantes and cultural reference groups, which seemed to help them find comfort and normalize their family experiences that differed from those of their majority American peers. Research has shown that coethnic peers are important for youths from immigrant backgrounds to explore and work on issues of ethnic identity (Awokoya, 2012; Phinney et al., 2001). Although a meaningful and deeper understanding of and empathy toward parents through cultural and immigrant lens might not develop until later in life (Kang & Larson, 2014), coethnic church friends during adolescence appear to serve an important function as youths navigate the cultural challenges related to their family life.

Regarding the second research question, and consistent with existing research findings (Chong, 1998; Kim, 2010; Park, 2011), the results from the present study support the idea that immigrant churches help to preserve immigrant ethnic cultures and identities among first- and second-generation Korean Americans. The findings from the present study support prior findings and illuminate the enculturation process experienced by Korean American youths during adolescence. The findings reveal how Korean churches facilitate the ethnic socialization of Korean American youths during adolescence. First, Korean churches appear to engage in cultural socialization by providing cultural programs and promoting culturally sanctioned behavior and values. One of the distinct ways these churches appear to engage in this process is through integrating cultural messages in

religious contexts. This illustrates how the specific immigrant and cultural context might influence religious organizations, thus shaping the religious experiences of their members. Second, the findings suggest that Korean churches participate in constructing and transmitting immigrant narratives. Previous research has shown that Korean American young adults express their sense of indebtedness toward their parents, in which they express their awareness of parental hardships and sacrifices and desire to repay their parents for these perceptions (Kang & Larson, 2014). The findings from the present study suggest that Korean churches play a role in exposing Korean American youths to these immigrant narratives at an early age, which seems to contribute to the later internalization of related perceptions, particularly during early adulthood (Kang & Raffaelli, 2016). Lastly, immigrant churches appear to facilitate the ethnic socialization of Korean American youths by providing a coethnic community, through which youths learn Korean language and cultural norms, interact with coethnic peers and adults, and enact their Korean identity. This finding provides support for research that has shown a positive relationship between ethnic identity and religious involvement among ethnic minority adolescents (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Markstrom, 1999); further, the results from the present study illuminate the underlying processes involved in this relationship.

Regarding the enculturation process, the participants noted that the church context allowed for interactions with Korean American youths and adult church members who acted as agents of cultural socialization. In other words, the churches provided the youths with social capital—coethnic social networks within the church. This finding is consistent with prior research findings indicating that the social capital of religious organizations, such as providing positive social networks, plays an important role in the positive effects of religious involvement among adolescents (King & Furrow, 2004; Good & Willoughby, 2006).

The findings from the present study must be

interpreted with caution because of certain study limitations. First, the sample might not be fully representative of Korean American youths. The participants in this study were either Christians or were involved with Korean immigrant churches. This is appropriate given the study aim to explore the role of such churches in Korean American youths' lives and the fact that most Korean immigrant families (75%; Min, 2010) are affiliated with Korean churches; however, studying the experiences of those who have never been involved in church contexts could provide a more nuanced understanding of the role of immigrant churches. For example, comparative research would be helpful for understanding how experiences related to cultural socialization might differ across Korean American youths that vary in their church involvement. Moreover, most of the participants were enrolled in or had graduated from 4-year colleges. This reflects current rates of college enrollment among Asian American youths (92.2%; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009), but the experiences of youths who have never attended college might differ. Second, the study was based on retrospective interviews. While the study's focus was on youths' subjective experiences and interpretations, interviews with adolescents would be useful to obtain a more complete understanding of youth experiences. Finally, the interviews were the only source of data. It would be beneficial to employ various methods, including surveys and observations, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of Korean American youth experiences.

Despite these limitations, the findings from the present study contribute to an emerging body of research about religion in youth development among immigrant youths and their families. The findings contribute to an empirical understanding of how social contexts salient to immigrant communities such as immigrant churches might shape the experiences of children of immigrants as they strive to balance between the old (i.e., heritage culture) and the new (i.e., mainstream American culture). Accounting for ecological contexts unique to the children of immigrants to understand their competencies and challenges

is imperative, not only for advancing research and theory-building, but for designing and implementing effective interventions for immigrant youths and their families.

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