

Extending the Theory of Intercultural Public Relations: Influence of Power in the Intersection of Cultural Identity, Social Capital and Social Control for Korean American professionals

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Abstract: Interviews with 17 Korean American professionals living in Korea revealed the relationship between their status, cultural identities, social capital, and conflicts that arise between their understanding of American and Korean social norms. The findings indicate that social capital for Korean Americans in Korea largely comprises of their English community in Korea and the Seoul Global Center; and that their access to social capital in the Korean society, in general, is limited. As result of limited availability and accessibility of social capital, with a sense of superiority, they maintained their American identity. In terms of social control, their lack of motivation to adopt and follow Korean social norms, as well as them being from the U.S., limited changes occurred in their cultural identity. Extending previous research on the Theory of Intercultural Public Relations, the public's power allows them to maintain their cultural identity, which in turn, effect their communication process. Implications of these findings, as well as suggestions for future study, are discussed.

Keywords: Diversity in public relations; Korean Americans in Korea; cultural identity; social capital; social control

1. Introduction

With more than 244 million people, or 3.3% of the world's population, living in a country other than where they were born, the immigration phenomenon is becoming more complex and layered [1]. In Korean society as well, recent influx of immigrants in large numbers has brought multiculturalism to the nation. While ethnically and/or racially diverse publics are now over 2 million (slightly less than 5% of the total population)¹ [2], much of public relations research have dis-regarded the issue of race and ethnicity. Despite the growth and the conflicts that arise as result of a sudden growth of culturally diverse publics, and presence of varying groups of immigrants, studies on culture in public relations in Korea have mostly centered on marriage migrant women and policies concerning them [3-5]. As Sha [6] calls for more inclusiveness regarding cultural diversity and critiques existing research on racially and ethnically diverse publics, the current study seeks to examine how this issue is being dealt with in Korea. By Examining Korean Americans living in Korean society today, this study explores ways in which culturally diverse publics communicate in relation to cultural identity, social capital and social control.

As the literature in the public relations discipline concerning ethnically diverse publics is limited [7] and studies on ethnically and racially diverse publics in Korea from public relations perspective is rare, the findings of the study contribute to practical and theoretical understanding of culturally diverse publics in a relatively racially/ethnically homogeneous nation. Implications of the study can bring more cultural sensitivity for more effective multicultural public relations.

¹ As of 2018, the exact number is 2,367,607 persons.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1 Korea Americans in Korea

Since the turn of the century, Korea has experienced significant out-migration and, as of today, in total, 7,184,842 Korean Diasporas are living in 181 countries [8]. The Korean diaspora refers to individuals of Korean-ethnic descent living in foreign countries outside of the Korean peninsula. The largest group of Koreans living abroad are in China, numbering 2,548,030, followed closely by 2,492,252 Korean Americans. [8]. Since 1980s, Korea has experienced Korean diaspora returning to the ancestral motherland in large and small numbers including but not limited to Korean Americans², also known as *jaemi gyopo*³ [9].

According to 2014 annual report, there are over 45,000 Korean Americans living in Korea. More than 4,000 Korean Americans have been coming to Korea every year over the last four years in search of work, their roots, and even marriage [10]. However, many Korean Americans are not accounted for because the number 45,000 only accounts for those who came with F-4 (Overseas Korean visas), therefore, those who come through other types of visas such as Spouse Visa, Student Visa or US government affiliates (e.g., US embassy, US military, Fulbright etc.), are not accounted for.⁴ Therefore, the actual number of ethnic Koreans with US citizenship could be much larger.⁵

As a technologically advanced nation, Korea has become more of an attractive site to work and build careers for young Korean Americans. Korean Americans have their advantages because they understand both Korean and American languages and cultures; therefore, their bilingual and bicultural backgrounds are to their advantage. However, while Korean Americans are a ‘desirable commodity’ because of their ability to speak English fluently and because of their unique ethnic and cultural background, they face discrimination [11-14]. For instance, studies show that they feel reverse discrimination while in Korea, especially in the job market because, despite their ability to speak English, Caucasians are preferred over them in *hakwons*.⁶ Caucasians are often paid more and given free housing whereas Korean Americans are treated like Koreans [15].

Moreover, with Korea being a Confucian society, it still maintains Confucian values; those who are young, unmarried, less experienced, and of low social position are regarded with less respect. Because Korean Americans grew up in America, they are unfamiliar with the social norm engrained in Confucian values, thus they feel their voices are not being heard in Korea [14, 15].

Despite the growth in their numbers, Korean Americans remain invisible and there is no “Korean American” community in Korea. Danico suggests this is because they have the ability to blend in with other Koreans [11]. Their invisible identity, because of the similarity in appearance with the native Koreans, only becomes known when they begin to speak. As a result of invisibility, their adaptation process in Korea, their struggles or problems, have remained largely unknown. Limited research can easily lead to misunderstanding or lack of understanding of such culturally diverse publics.

2.2 Public relations and cultural identity

Studies on cultural diversity in public relations scholarship has primarily been related to cultures in other countries or minority public relations practitioners [7, 18].⁷ In terms of the culture in other countries, culture has been treated as a variable related to “international aspects” of the public relations practice to see if public relations theories are applicable to global scenes [6] (p. 47). To this, Sha rightly called for research on racioethnic diversity within a nation [6]. Yet, studies on minority in public relations literature has mainly focused on gender and race in public relations industry [7, 16, 17].

However, racioethnic identity is important because “(it) significantly affects four of the five variables in the situational theory of publics: problem recognition, level of involvement, information processing, and

² Americans of Korean ethnic background. Most of them are either born in the U.S.A. or immigrated to America at a young age, therefore, they are more familiar with American culture and language.

³ *Jaemi* means living in America and *Gyopo* refers to Koreans living abroad.

⁴ As of Sept. 2018, there are 24,239 Americans living in Korea with Visa other than F-A; of this number, how many are of Korean descents are unknown [10].

⁵ Since there could also be Korean Americans born in the US with permanent resident status, the terms here is used more inclusively, that is, beyond national citizenship.

⁶ Afterschool classes.

⁷ However, this second point is beyond the scope of this paper.

information seeking” [18] (p. 389). As racioethnic identification, or cultural identity can be “a predictor of communication behavior” [18] (p. 389), it is an effective indicator when organizations seek to segment their publics.

The concept of racioethnic identification has at least two dimensions, that is, avowed identity, which is how we see ourselves, and ascribed identity, how others perceive us [18]. Hecht and colleagues further explicate the concept of identity by noting that avowed identity is internally defined whereas ascribed identity is externally imposed [19]. Since ascribed identity may be different from avowed identity, organizations should not “risk ascribing identities to their publics that those publics may not avow” themselves [20] (p. 386).

Studies on cultural identity as it relates to the segmentation of publics have increased in recent years [6, 18, 20-22]. yet, as to what antecedent factors that influence cultural identity has been under-examined.

Jang and Kim, in their examination of racio-ethnically diverse publics, namely, Korean Americans in America, found that Korean Americans shift their identities situationally and that the extent to which Korean Americans shift their cultural identities is contingent upon social control (their understanding of what is expected) and social capital (their knowledge and skills in cultural and language) [23]. In other words, to the extent that they know how to behave within the system and to the extent that they know what resources are available to them they can shift their cultural identities accordingly (p. 31). Ni and colleague’s study on cultural identities of immigrant professionals’ identity development in the US, showed similar findings, that is, Indian immigrants were also found to have fluid and multifaced identity, putting forward identity that was expected of them [24]. Though Vardeman-Winter and colleagues’ study on intersectionality suggests that different identities become salient in different situations, as to how other intersections of different factors influence identity of racioethnic minorities specifically needs further investigation [25]. In addition, Sison [26], responding to Sha and Fold’s [18] distinction on two dimensions of diversity, call for public relations scholars to move beyond primary dimensions (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation) and examine secondary dimensions of diversity (e.g., income, nationality, religion).

Therefore, building upon previous researches on cultural identity of ethnic-racial minorities in the Theory of Intercultural Public Relations [23, 24, 26, 27], and responding to call for examination of secondary dimension of diversity in relation to identity [18, 26], the current study examines ways in which nationality, in conjunction with social capital and social control, influences ascribed and avowed identity.

Since 1990s, many foreigner laborers and marriage migrant women entered Korea thereby introducing multiculturalism to what has long being mono-ethnic nation. Alongside of ethnically/racially diverse foreigners, many Korean diaspora from china, Japan and America also returned to homeland. However, due to definition of Korean diaspora in Korean Overseas Act⁸, as well as Korea’s economism, that is, tendency to use economic status as the standard in ranking a nation [28], social discrimination ensued. For instance, marriage migrant women from Southeast Asian countries married Korean men in rural area. Because most of them are of low socio-economic status and since marriage migrant women’s home country such as Cambodia and Vietnam are less economically advanced nation as Korea, Korean society view them to hold relatively low social status in Korea [9]. Therefore, in Korean society today, social status for foreigners are complicated by the economic status of their home nation.

Korean Americans, however, have received many advantages, namely, legally and socially, compared to Korean returnees from China and Japan. Legally, Korean Americans were at an advantage because they were considered overseas Koreans from the very beginning per definition stated by the Overseas Korean Act. Socially, Korean Americans are considered to have closer emotional proximity to the native Koreans than Korean diaspora from other nations. Because of economism, Koreans rank overseas Koreans hierarchically [28-30] and Korean Americans have been found to be positioned in the upper end of the race/ethnic hierarchy, where native Koreans feel in closer proximity toward them as compared to others [28, 31-33].

Gong [34] argues that ethnic minorities, whether first-generation immigrants or born in the country, negotiate their identification with their ethnic group and their identification with the mainstream culture of the society due to their minority status and often racial or cultural distinctness (as cited in [23] p. 8). Since ethnicity is not the possession of cultural characteristics that keep social groups distinct, but rather the social interaction

⁸ Because of the definition of Korean Overseas Act, descendants of those who migrated before Republic of Korea was founded, were discriminated against (for one, they were not allowed to apply for F-4 visa which allows descents to work and live in Korea). This was controversial because most descendants of Korean diaspora in China and Japan were excluded while Korean Americans were included. Therefore, after much demonstrations, the definition was changed. (For full discussion see [9]).

with other groups that makes differences visible and socially meaningful [35], as to how Korean Americans in Korea, whose ethnicity is the same as the natives yet with distinguished by different cultural and language background, interact, negotiate and make meaning of their identity would underscore how citizenship add layers to identity formation.

2.3 Social Capital

Social capital has been one of the most examined concepts in a number of research areas, including organizational and immigration population studies. According to Coleman [36], social capital is “seen as an aspect of a social structure that functions as a resource of the individual in a group” (as cited in [37] p. 106). In other words, social capital inheres in the structures of relations between persons and among persons [36] (p. 302). On the other hand, Putnam [38] has examined social capital within communities. He suggests that a cohesive community is characterized by trust and unitary local identity and is confined within certain geographical location. He argues that social capital is greatly influenced by these factors. Although his definitions have received much criticism for their narrowness, his proposition of trust as an important factor that influences the fluidity of social capital, which facilitates coordinated action, still stands [37].

Putnam [39] also proposed different types of social capital: bonding and bridging capital. Bonding capital occurs when individuals socialize with people like themselves and bridging occurs when individuals socialize with people unlike themselves. Putnam argues that in a diverse society, both are needed and that the fall of bonding capital would also lead to the decline of bridging capital, ultimately creating tensions among ethnic groups. Previous studies have shown differences in use of bonding and bridging capitals amongst ethnically diverse groups in Korea [40-44].

2.4 Social Control

Social control is another key concept that guides this study theoretically. The term is one of many theoretical concepts that suffer from the lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition in the field. Similar concepts include social surveillance, concrete control, unobtrusive control, and social norms and sanctions. One common thread that all these terms share, based on power in sociological theory, is the idea that control in social settings is “exercised not through direct, coercive means but rather through the discursive construction” of a corresponding culture that “maintains and reproduces the prevailing system of power relations” [45] (p. 6).

The literature on social control provides insight into people's values and attitudes towards the social norms and sanctions of the social group to which they belong. For example, Witten [46] examined how organizational members were socially controlled to conform to the organizational culture through member interactions. The concept has also been examined by studying how discipline and surveillance were institutionalized and normalized through the experiences of Japanese-Americans [47].

Research questions:

RQ1a: How do Korean-Americans in Korea describe their cultural identity?

RQ1b: What cultural identities did the participants avow and what influenced those avowed identities?

RQ2: How, if at all, do Korean-Americans in Korea identify and utilize the social capital provided by Korean society?

RQ3: How, if at all, do Korean-Americans in Korea perceive the influence of social control?

RQ4: How, if at all, do social capital and social control influence the cultural identity of Korean Americans living in Korea?

3. Methods

3.1 General discussion

Given the exploratory nature of the study in examining previously underexplored areas and also given the purpose of the research questions, the study employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are appropriate for researchers who are “intrigued with the complexity of social interactions as expressed in daily life and with the meanings participants themselves attribute to these interactions” [48] (p. 2). In the process of obtaining these complexities embedded in the participants' daily lives, the researchers are able

to gather “detailed descriptions of situations, events, people, interactions, and to observe behaviors” [49] (p. 22).

This study used in-depth interviewing methods. An in-depth interviewing method is appropriate as its goal is to obtain in-depth and open-ended narrative rather than trying to fit participants’ experiences into certain categories [50]. Therefore, although the interviewer may guide the conversation, the interviewer still “respects how the participant frames and structures the responses [51] (p. 82). Hence, the greatest advantage of the interviewing method is its ability to understand the participants’ experiences in greater depth and breadth.

3.2 Sample

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Seventeen interviews were conducted with individuals who were either born in America or immigrated to the US before they were 12 years of age. All of them identified their mother language as English and spoke English without an accent. The researcher recruited those who have lived in Korea for at least 1 consecutive year but most have lived in Korea for 3 consecutive years. The interviews were conducted between 2017-2018 and all the interviews were done at the participants’ preferred locations such as their workplace, café or restaurants.

The participants varied in terms of occupation, age, the reason for their stay in Korea, and visa status so that diverse perspectives could be gathered (Females 11, Age ranging from 25-48, 6 lawyers, 13 singles, all US citizens). By having participants who came from different backgrounds, multiple perspectives could emerge through discussions and in-depth interviews. Rubin and Rubin [52] stressed that when a researcher provides a “variety of perspectives” which offer “different vantage points” (p. 67), the study’s credibility increases as result.

On average, the in-depth interviews took about 90-180 minutes. The in-depth interviews were led by open-ended questions that were semi-structured. All the participants were asked to give consent to be audio-taped except two participants who preferred survey over in-person interview. The interviews were conducted in English and, once the interviews were audio-taped, the researcher began the transcribing process.

3.3 Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was employed to analyze the data for this study. A grounded theory approach, developed by Glaser and Strauss [53], seeks to explain and theorize about a phenomenon from the data. This approach takes a systematic and constant comparison approach to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. Corbin and Strauss [54, 55] and Glaser and Strauss [53] suggest open coding and axial coding processes for data collection and analyses processes. These coding processes enabled researchers to achieve a systematic and constant comparison approach during the data collection and analysis process. By identifying the topics or key terms that emerged consistently thought the data collection process, the emerging themes or patterns were identified.

4. Results

4.1 Research question 1

RQ1a: How do Korean-Americans in Korea describe their cultural identity?

RQ1b: What cultural identities did the participants ascribe and what influenced those ascribed identities?

4.1.1 Definitely becoming more Korean

Interviews revealed that most of the participants did not think of themselves as Koreans. When they were in the United States, they thought of themselves as Korean Americans or just as Americans. However, when they came to Korea, in the process of acclimating into the society, they found “Korean-ness” in themselves and they became more Korean, also finding more fondness towards Korean side of things. Many discussed how their current identity was related to where they started from in the first place. One of the participants, who grew up rejecting her Korean identity, discussed how she became more Korean as she came to understand the culture. Because she now understands the culture, she has a better understanding of Korean people and the ways in which they act and talk.

For some, them having become more Korean (more so then then used to be when they were in the US) after living in Korea for a while was also evident in the eyes of others as well. Several participants discussed how their friends, who live in America, had told them that they had changed when they returned to America for

short visits. Even though the participants themselves did not think that they had changed, their friends told them that they had. One participant heard that he had become more impatient or was drinking more than he used to in the past. Another discussed how her friends told her that she had become more “Fob-ish” (Fresh-off-the-boat) and that her English had worsened. Regardless of how others told the participants that they had changed, participants themselves discussed how they had become more open to communicating with other Koreans in America because their Korean had become more fluent.

4.1.2 Americanness or foreignness reaffirmed

Participants discussed how their American identity was reaffirmed when they lived in Korea. They discussed how their experiences while living as an alien in Korea had made their differences more salient. For instance, while acquiring F4 visas, applying for credit cards, making purchases online using American credit cards, and signing up to be a member and create an account on any website, they experienced difficulties and these experiences emphasized that they were different from native Koreans. One of the participants discussed how difficult it was to open a credit card. “I was rejected twice and at a third bank I visited, they were able to see my employer and finally offered to give me a credit card. Unless you have built up at least 6 months’ worth of credit, it’s a challenge to get a credit card here.” These experiences reaffirmed that they are foreigners in their motherland.

4.1.3 Disadvantages

Interviews revealed that Korean Americans are sometimes treated unfairly when looking for jobs, especially in the education sector. For instance, one of the participants discussed how his spouse, a Korean American who used to teach at a very successful public school in the US, had difficulty finding a job in Korea because of her ethnicity. While the school that finally hired her provided housing or a housing allowance to foreign teachers, she wasn’t offered the same opportunity because of her ethnic background. In such a way, there were some instances where they were taken advantage of or discriminated against because they were of Korean descent.

There were other instances where they were at a disadvantage. Because, while some had lived in Korea more than others and had a good command of the language, their accent, and way of doing things still, unknowingly, gave away their differences. Also, if all of their bosses/employers/colleagues knew that they were *gyopo*, they were treated somewhat differently than Korean colleagues. Some of the participants mentioned that because many *gyopo* do not stay in Korea for a long time or merely because they are ‘foreigners,’ they are not generally evaluated for promotions. One participant said that the cause and effect relationship was unclear. They said, “I’m not sure if we are not considered for promotion because of the thinking that Korean Americans will leave in a couple of years or if we leave after a short time because we don’t get promoted.” In such a way, interviewees discussed how some people emphasized the differences rather than similarities in situations where they could be taken advantage of, regardless of how they want to be treated.

4.1.4 Advantages

On the other hand, there were advantages that participants enjoyed because of their background. For instance, because they are *gyopo*, they were not expected to attend every *hoe-sig* (company dinner), or to pour drinks for their bosses or to pay for certain things. Their colleagues did not expect them to behave in these ways. A few discussed how, despite their knowing how things worked at their company, they still sometimes pretended to not know, so that they could get away with certain things. Since their Korean coworkers did not know how many cultural cues the participants understood, this “pretending to not know” came in handy when they wanted to get away with certain things. Thus, those who were more familiar with Korean cultural cues were able to use more suitable expressions (verbal and nonverbal) that were more appropriate, depending on the context and the people they were with. However, whether they would use their knowledge on cultural cues depended on their personal goals and interests.

Other advantages the participants found, living in Korea as a Korean American, were in their careers. Some participants discussed how they were given more opportunities in their field. For instance, one participant who was a lawyer discussed how she was hired as an in-house legal counsel for a major Korean company, which is a difficult position for a new lawyer to attain in America. Others also discussed how their experiences in major Korean companies would give them a more competitive edge when they returned to America. Even

for those who had a great deal of experience in the US, Korea was perceived to be a good place to branch out with their businesses.

4.1.5 The Sense of superiority

Participants discussed how they came to have a sense of superiority living in Korea; that coming from another country has given them a sense of superiority. Especially those who arrived when there were few foreigners in Korea, and they were treated well. One of the participants discussed that she felt special because everyone treated her as if she really was special. Similar stories were told by those who have been in Korea since 2008 or so when there weren't many Korean Americans. One participant stated that "Back then, Koreans thought Korean Americans lived this lavish lifestyle. Even though I had a very normal lifestyle people thought nothing about me was average." Korean American expats in Korea may have a sense of superiority because they understand their assets are a valuable commodity in Korea; even more so when there weren't many Korean Americans in Korea. With more foreigners living in Korea things have changed, but participants discussed how they have received many benefits because of their language skills and cultural background.

For some participants, there was a sense of superiority because of their language skill, educational level, and their understanding and experience of different cultures. Most of the participants had attended what is known as an Ivy League school in America and were working at reputable Korean or American companies in Korea. While the participants were hesitant to say that they had a sense of superiority, they discussed how they perceived themselves to have had more experiences than most native Koreans. One participant said she hadn't yet met anyone in Korea who made her think, "I wish I could have had that person's experience." As such, because their educational level, socio-economic level, and areas of expertise were relatively high, no participant discussed wanting to change who they were or trying harder to fit into the Korean culture.

4.2 Research question 2

RQ2: How, if at all, do Korean-Americans in Korea identify and utilize the social capital provided by Korean society?

4.2.1 Strong English community

Most of the participants connected more with the English community than they did with Korean communities. Here, the English community consists of a community where those whose first language is English; therefore, the community was found to include expats in Korea as well as other foreigners currently living in Korea. One participant discussed how she doesn't know that many people in the community, but she gave an example of how strong the community is, despite its loose ties. "I met this person years ago and we became Facebook friends. When I posted news about my pregnancy, he sent me a book on child rearing." The English community remains loose yet very welcoming and open because everyone is in the same boat; lacking resources and information. Interviewees discussed how, because they don't know many people in Korea, the desire to help each other out is strong. Therefore, many Korean Americans remain keenly connected to the English community.

4.2.2 Small Bonding capital

Interviewees discussed how the people they fall back on or rely on the most are their English-speaking close friends, who are also living in Korea. As the participants have many questions and are in need of assistance, especially during the initial stage of settlement, they rely on their English-speaking Korean American friends who have been here longer, or who have gone through a similar situation, to be their most resourceful and informative assets. Because many decided to come to Korea in the first place because they already had a few close friends doing well in Korea, most of them had small yet tight knit friends' network.

Interviews revealed that participants tend to be close to Korean Americans who work in the same industry. This is because, over the years, as more Korean Americans have come to Korea, the Korean American population in all sectors naturally grew. Hence, there were Korean American lawyer association chapters in Korea and Asian broadcasting association chapters in Korea as well. Therefore, over the years, the participants have come to know more Korean Americans in their fields and have come to be close friends with them. However, these associations were more of a larger community to which they felt a sense of belonging; while

those they relied on the most were their close friends from college or those whom they knew already from America, who also happened to be in Korea.

4.2.3 Seoul Global Center

The Seoul Global Center was established for the purpose of helping foreigners settle in Korea and was also founded to be one of the organizations participants have come to depend upon. Some have received assistance with their taxes, immigration, mental health counseling, housing, language courses and legal advice from the center. Not only did participants receive help from the Center when they first arrived in Korea, some who had been here for almost 10 years were still knocking on their door when they need help. One participant who was interested in starting her own business took a ‘business start-up course’ that was offered at the center. This is because often participants are familiar with the facility, the types of resources that are offered there and because they do not know any other resource centers in Korean communities that are English speaking.

4.2.4 Limited Korean Social Capital

The interviews revealed that only those people who were married to native Koreans had access to other types of resources. For instance, one of the participants whose in-laws were in Korea asked for advice or help from his in-laws. As his mother-in-law had many friends, many of whom had access to the resources he needed, he was able to receive help. However, it was different for a Korean American woman who was married to native Korean. The Korean American woman found her English-speaking Korean American friends to be more resourceful and helpful when compared to her Korean-in-laws. The level of comfort and emotional connection she had with her friends was much stronger when compared to her relationship with her in-laws. She attributed this to cultural differences, saying how, despite her in-laws being very westernized and open compared to other Koreans, she believes there is a wall between her and her in-laws because of the cultural barriers.

Other interviewees also discussed how, despite their Korean getting better, most of their social circles remain English speaking circles. When asked why this is, one participant replied, “I should try harder to get out of my comfort zone but at the end of the day I want what is familiar, so I hang out with friends who speak English and watch TV news that’s in English.” Others mentioned that it’s not just the language. “Some of my Korean friends speak English well, but I find myself thinking too much about what to say or how to react in certain situations...because they think differently and they have different values.” For these reasons, participants discussed how they end up resorting to what is the most comfortable for them.

4.3 Research question 3 & 4

RQ3: How, if at all, do Korean-Americans perceive the influence of social control?

RQ4: How, if at all, do social capital and social control influence the cultural identity of Korean Americans living in Korea?

4.3.1 Choosing not to follow Korean culture

Participants discussed internal conflict when it comes to adapting to Korean ways of doing things at work. For most of the participants, the most difficult challenge in Korea was the hierarchical structure. One participant described how “a decision that would normally take a 5-minute conversation in the US became a week-long deal that worked its way up the chain,” and how everything needs to be prepared in writing and checked with the boss before proceeding to the next step. While participants were familiar with the hierarchical structure of Korean culture in general, how it played out in a work environment was a new and learning experience.

Interestingly, participants also discussed how entering the system meant losing power. One of the participants talked about how she became *Eul*⁹ when she behaved according to the Korean way of doing things. Although she was able to gain a greater sense of belonging and intimacy with Korean colleagues, which was what she had always wanted, the change in the power structure of the relationship caused her to act American at work. Keeping their American style at work was a mechanism they had come to use deliberately in order to survive, receive respect, and protect themselves. Participants discussed how it was a way to thrive and become

⁹ *Gab* and *Eul* are originally legal terms generally used in drawing contracts but they are now used to describe any relationship where there is power gap such as boss and subordinate, adult and child. *Gab* is used to refer to those in power and *Eul* is referred to those who are in lesser power.

more successful in what they did best because they realized once they became part of the system, they could not do what they wanted to do.

One of the reasons they had chosen not to follow the Korean culture was because some felt that they were treated as second class Americans in Korea. Despite their areas of expertise and professionalism, fluent English skills and degrees from well-known Ivy League schools in the US, their ethnicity functioned as a disadvantage because they were first identified as *gyopo* in Korea. Many discussed how their Korean coworkers or Korean clients asked if they were *gyopo* when they first met. Some participants discussed how they would receive more respect if they had a 'foreign face;' therefore, one of the participants, whose business partner is an American, puts on the 'foreign face' when doing business with Korean clients in order to gain leverage.

While most participants discussed intentionally choosing American ways of doing things, others discussed how they had chosen to do things the American way because it simply is too difficult not to. For example, one interviewee explained, "As you know, I'm really talkative and I simply just can't suppress my feelings and be silenced. I just can't." In other words, because their American style of communication is so linked to who they are as a person, they cannot go so far as to reject who they truly are in order to put on another identity. That simply isn't who they are, nor are they comfortable acting in that way. Therefore, even if that meant not having a 'sense of belonging' at work or not having intimacy with Korean colleagues, they chose to keep their way of doing things, in order to be who they are.

5. Discussion

5.1 Purposefully putting forth American identity

In line with previous research, current study findings also suggest that social capital and social control do influence the cultural identity of Korean Americans. Specifically, findings suggest that social capital for Korean Americans in Korea is strong, loosely tied (bridging capital) to the English community and the Seoul Global Center and strongly tied to small friends' network (bonding capital). Because the English community remains open and welcoming to anyone whose native language is English, they are able to find what they need within the network.

Moreover, because Korean Americans plan to eventually return to America, their ties to other Korean Americans in Korea or foreigners in Korea only strengthened over time. As Korean Americans or foreigners living in Korea understand each other's' experiences more, they are able to relate and help each other more than native Koreans would. Such comradery, as well as the general characteristics of the English community, makes the community loosely tied yet accessible to many English speakers living in Korea. As result, the participants' social capital remained limited yet very functional. In comparison, Korean Americans in Korea were found to have weak ties with native Koreans and Korean communities, thereby having lack of access to Korean society.

In terms of social control, findings revealed that interviewees had gained a good understanding of what was expected of the Korean Society over time. Their understanding of what was expected were found to have influence on their identity and communication behaviors. Specifically, findings show that during the initial period of settlement their ethnic background and understanding of Korean language and culture worked to their advantage, particularly because familiarity with the language and culture saved time in adjusting to their new environment. Also, during the initial period of settlement, because they wanted to learn the Korean culture and language as quickly as possible, they put more effort into adapting to the culture.

However, over time, their background was found to work to their disadvantageous. Participants found that in Korean society, the system and people took advantage of them because they were *gyopo*; sometimes treated the same as native Koreans yet treated as foreigners at other times. Their ability to speak the language and understanding of the cultural norm placed them in the system; hence, they began to experience more social pressure to conform and become more like Koreans.

Therefore, to gain leverage, the participants were found to advance their American identity. More specifically, the participants were found to make their cross-cultural background, knowledge of Western culture, English fluency, and career-related experiences from America more salient, in order to stress their differences, especially in the work setting. Because Korean cultural expectations meant putting aside their American way of doing things and withholding their identity, participants learned to deliberately put forward their American-ness in order to protect themselves and do what they needed to do, even if it meant not being able to build close relationships with Korean colleagues and become fully integrated into the society.

This action was possible because of economism in Korean society. Studies on Korean diaspora from Russia or China show that though they are also returned descendants of Korean diaspora, withholding same ethnic background, they are discriminated against because of the citizenship and social status in Korea [40, 42, 56, 57].

However, different from previous studies, not all Korean Americans in Korea were found to have that leverage. For instance, previous studies indicated that those who are young, less experienced were found to feel as if their voices are not being heard in Korea [14, 15]. Such findings suggest power derives not only from nationality but also other factors such as class and age.

5.2 Theoretical implications

As previous studies suggest, not only Korean society and Koreans put Korean diaspora from the West on the upper end of ethnic/racial hierarchy, they themselves also consider to be in that position. Such a finding suggests that while Korean Americans in Korea are minority in number, in terms of power, they are not in minority status. Despite their full understanding of what is expected (that is, social control; expected to conform to the system) due to very functional (though limited) social capital, they were allowed to reject conformity, thereby assimilating to the mainstream culture. All the more, their relatively high social status (them being from the US) allowed them to maintain their cultural identity, that is, avowed identity as an American or Korean American. Findings also show that their profession, professional with relatively high income than average Koreans, not to mention degrees from well-known universities in the US, placed them in a relatively high “social class”, therefore, further finding no reason to conform and negotiate their identity. Therefore, as suggested by Sha and Ford [18] as well as Sison [26], factors such as class, nationality, age were important dimensions of diversity and they were found to have influence on identity.

In these ways, findings extend previous studies on the Theory of Intercultural Public Relations. Specifically, citizenship allows culturally diverse publics to hold on to their avowed identities and it does not necessitate shifting of identities situationally as seen from ethnically/racially diverse publics who have marginalized status [23, 24]. Also, for them to use the citizenship card well, culturally diverse publics need to have good understanding of social norm (social control) and enough access and availability of social capital. Since Korean Americans were able to have sense of belonging because of the English community and enjoy both bonding and bridging capital in Korea, they didn't feel the need to change themselves to fit in or conform to the mainstream society. Therefore, current study found that social capital, social control, citizenship and class (which here could be addressed as power) have influence on identity formation, however, whether power is antecedent factor of identity needs further examination, perhaps using quantitative methods.

Power in public relations literature has mostly been discussed in relation to public relations practitioners in organizations and scholars have suggested that practitioners should be part of or have access to dominant coalition because they have the decision-making power [58]. The underlying assumption is that once the practitioners have access to this group, they would have influence over the decision makers, whom can then make right decisions in solving organizational problem and become more socially responsible [59, 60]. However, public relations scholarship needs to move forward and examine power amongst publics, not just of activist groups whose demands organizations cannot afford to neglect to maintain good reputation but also publics with different types of power with whom organization can have synergy effect with when working together. But more research is needed to understand how organizations can cooperate with publics with power and how power dynamic between organization and public would influence communication processes depending on issue and context.

All in all, findings suggest that situationally shifting identities for minority publics is used as a defense mechanism and that those with power are less likely to use situationally shifting identities. In the current study, those who are in power lacked motivation to conform and changed their cultural identity, therefore, their static and one-dimensional identity influenced their communication processes. While interviewees discussed such strategy was to ‘defend themselves’ yet their communication behavior and influence on cultural identity was stigmatically different from those who were not in power position [23, 24].

6. Conclusion

There are more than 2 million immigrants living in Korea and the country is slowly becoming a multicultural nation. Yet, despite the continuous growth in this population, studies on communication behaviors

of ethnically/racially diverse publics in public relations scholarship is largely disregarded. Since cultural identity is a strong indicator of communication behavior, as to how different groups of publics identify themselves is important in understanding them.

The current study is not without limitations. As the Korean Americans generally network within the English community, recruiting participants was a challenge. Even more so because the participants were professionals, mostly in their 30s and 40s. Even when they wanted to participate, it was difficult to find the time to conduct the interviews. Therefore, while some interviewees suggested that power dynamic differs when in conjunction with gender, the current study could not confirm because of the recruitment issue. Future studies need to investigate to see if there is a clear difference between gender. Also, whether Korean Americans would also put forward their Americanness in settings other than work and social needs further examination. Moreover, future studies can use larger sample to gather quantitative data to gauge at how Korean Americans make meaning of their identity and how that is different from other ethnically or racially diverse publics. Future studies need to use more interdisciplinary approach to understand how race, ethnicity, and identity influence the society in terms of the economy, culture, and technology.

With more than 244 million people living in a country other than where they were born, public relations scholarship needs to pay more attention to intercultural public relations within a nation. By examining the issue of race/ethnicity in relations to segmentation of public with a more sophisticated lens, organization can better predict communication behaviors of culturally diverse publics.

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