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Jeremy Grabiner

*Southern Adventist University*, [jeremyg@southern.edu](mailto:jeremyg@southern.edu)

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East vs. West: South Korean Student Acculturation

Jeremy Grabiner

Southern Adventist University

### Abstract

This paper is an ethnography that explores the acculturation of South Korean exchange students at Southern Adventist university through a triangulation of information from theory, interviews, and field observation. The paper relies on Young Yun Kim's theory of acculturation, which closely looks at the push and pull of one's home and host culture in the process of acculturation. In my ethnography, I observed approximately 60-100 South Korean students, ages 18-23, in different social settings such as church, social dining, and study. Full participant, participant observer, and full observer were the three methods of observation used in the various social settings. I found that the South Korean exchange students did indeed acculturate to local culture; however, those who stayed within their South Korean social group acculturated at slower pace than those who left the group.

Keywords: South South Korean, acculturation, deculturation, culture, touch, haptics, student, Young Yun Kim.

### **Introduction**

Acculturation is the process by which an individual acquires new practices from a new culture. Kim, a leader in acculturation, describes the theory as “intended primarily to explain the common adaptive experiences of individuals who are born and raised in one cultural or subcultural environment, and have relocated to a new and different one for an extended period” (p. 87). In this theory there is a discomfort that happens that individuals go through in their acculturation. It is using this discomfort as a framework for studying the South Korean exchange students, specifically observing at the non-verbal interactions of the students. The central theme of this paper is to observe how the discomfort felt by South Korean students experienced in the classroom, with formality, and personal space affects their acculturation in the American culture.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars have looked at this process of acculturation as they seek to discern what benefits individuals in their acculturation. One of the few areas studied deals with the effect that media has on acculturation. It has been researched that the “exposure to American mass media was positively and significantly related to the acceptance of American cultural values” (Moon & Park, 2007, p. 334). Because of the strength of American media, it led to the acculturation of the South Korean immigrants more than it led to biculturalism which “represents comfort and proficiency with both one's heritage culture and the culture of the country or region in which one has settled” (Schwartz & Unger, 2010, p. 26). It is important to recognize that this shift of cultural values because of media is not restricted to South Koreans living in the United States. Park (2011) found that American popular culture has been influential in creating youth subcultures in South

Korea. The creation of subcultures such as skateboarders, motor cyclers, and hip hop enthusiasts shows the power of American media on affecting culture. This influence by American media abroad can affect the speed of acculturation for the students who come to the US because they have already been exposed to some of the American culture.

Media was not the only aspect that affected acculturation. Merkin (2009) found that shame could many times cause a resistance to change among South Koreans, especially if the change would cause shame on their family. Shame is emphasized more heavily in the South Korean culture, in comparison to their U.S. counterparts.

The process of acculturation is also expected to be a process of discomfort. Yeh, Pei-Wen, Madan-Bahel, Hunter, Jung, Kim, Akitaya, & Sasaki (2005) found that immigrant youth experienced discomfort in many of their social settings (i.e., academics, peer relationships, and language). They also discovered that the more discomfort the youth felt in their social settings, the faster they desired to acculturate.

This discomfort in the acculturation process is normal and expected. Kim (2012) explains “This conflict is essentially between the need for acculturation and the resistance to deculturation, that is, the ‘push’ of the new culture and the ‘pull’ of the old”(p. 88). The desire to adapt and the stress caused by that desire cause an up and down cyclical roller coaster moving toward acculturation. Kim’s theory of acculturation and deculturation is a theory that is beneficial in researching the situation of South Korean immigrants. The two main terms presented by Kim are *acculturation* and *deculturation*. Acculturation is the process by which an individual acquires new practices from a new culture. This process happens at the cognitive level, which can affect a person’s view of emotions such as joy, fun,

or anger. What is significant about Kim's acculturation is that the process is not happenstance, rather it is a process that the individual controls significantly causing it to happen at a slower or faster pace. The second term, deculturation, refers to "un-learning" or destruction of the individual's previous cultural elements. This process causes discomfort as individuals must give up part of their own cultural values, to obtain the new culture.

Having seen the various studies and theories on South Korean acculturation, it is expected that there will be a cultural shift among the South Korean exchange students. Because they are in a different culture and are being exposed to various aspects of the culture, including media, there should be an acceptance and integration of American cultural values.

### **Methods**

The findings for this ethnography were retrieved through observation over the course of two semesters. The total hours spent researching was 30 hours. The students being studied were from a small private university found in Southeastern United States. Observations were mainly conducted at a nearby South Korean Protestant church, the university library, and various classes. In each of the settings I adapted a different method of observation. In every setting my participants were South Korean college students ranging, approximately, from the age of 18-23. I wrote down my observations in the format of observation, meaning, and then my reaction. This means that when I observed an interaction that I found to be related to my thesis, would write down the interaction, what I thought it meant, and my reaction.

During my role as participant observer and a full participant, I had a contact at the church that was the only individual aware of my research. Because I was mainly studying the non-verbal communication, I did not want to taint the interactions of the students by their awareness of my observation. During my full observer in the library and classrooms, there was no individual aware of me conducting my research. However, because of the heavy emphasis on pure observation, it is possible that some findings were a result of my inference not and not a conscious decision by the individuals.

I also found it essential to conduct interviews for my ethnography because it allows “us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2001, p.341). The importance of the interviews is to understand the experience of the individuals being studied, so I decided to interview five South Korean exchange students, who had not previously been to the US until their time of academic study. I interviewed five students that was provided a fair representation of genders (three female and two male). I would meet with the subjects individually in either SAU’s student center or library. The interviews were set up as a means for the individual to tell their story, and a variety of questions were used to help guide the conversation. I would record the interview, with the consent of the student, to be able to reference their words at a later time.

## **Results**

Overall, I found that despite the discomfort experienced from being in a new culture. The students did not acculturate at as fast as a speed as was expected. Many of the students continued to hold onto their cultural values, despite its contrast to the culture they were in.

### **I. Classroom Interaction**

The first theme that was developed dealt with the classroom interaction between students and the teacher. In my interviews, the students mentioned that the classroom experience was vastly different in South Korea than they experienced in the US. In South Korea, it was described to me, that the teacher presents the needed information and the students accept the information with little to no dialogue between the teacher and students. However, in the US, the students found a contrast to this system. There is often dialogue, even argument, between the students and their teacher. One of the students said, “ I could not believe that students could express their own opinion to the teacher and the teacher would actually listen” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 4, 2014). Most of the students discussed that they experienced discomfort in adjusting to this type of classroom experience.

This contrast in systems can be explained by Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions for South Korea. Hofstede (n.d.) explains that South Korea has a high power distance, which means South Koreans understand and accept a strict hierarchal order. In the US there is a low power distance, which means that individuals do not recognize a significant difference between them and those above them. This low power distance provides an informal relationship between superiors that is not found in the South Korean Culture.

In several classes that I took, I had a few South Korean classmates. During the class I would observe how much interaction there was between the students and the teacher. I found that rarely did the students vocally participate during class. One student only spoke once the entire semester, when called upon by the professor. Even in a class where vocal participation was part of the student’s grade, the exchange students would not speak up and participate. This contrasted with theory that discomfort would push individuals to



acculturating at a faster speed. Despite the discomfort of a lower class grade, the students would not break their way of classroom interaction.

## **II. Formality and Respect**

The second major theme that was observed was the formality and respect in the interactions between individuals in South Korean culture and the US culture, Specifically, dealing with the interaction between individuals and his or her older counterpart. For the interviewees, it was a shock that in the US people would call older individuals by his or her first name. What was even more surprising was that the person did not seem to be bothered by it. Remembering a similar situation, Sharon Jeon said, "I was like, uhh, is that even appropriate? Do they feel offended? But they didn't seem like it" (personal communication, April 7, 2014). This posed a direct contrast to how interactions happen in South Korea, where someone must address an older person with respect. "In Korea, we just always respect, even if they are two years older than you, you respect like sharp respect. It is kind of a very different culture" (Anonymous, personal communication, April 2, 2014).

An example of this interaction at the church was observed when the sermon ended and people were leaving the Sanctuary. As tradition in most churches, the pastor, who was an elderly South Korean man, was at the door to greet everyone. As usual, most people, including myself, shook his hand on the way out. However, I saw that many of the South Korean students would bow to him instead of shaking his hand. The bowing was a sign of respect for him due to his age. The students were still holding on to the South Korean value of what was appropriate physical interaction with their elders.

On another Sabbath, when there was a non South Korean speaker, I waited to observe how the students would interact with him. It was fascinating to see that most people shook his hand. Since he didn't come from the same cultural background they seemed to acculturate to the American way of shaking hands.

### **III. Personal Space**

The third area that my research dealt with dealt with personal space. As the leader in personal space Edward T. Hall (1966) discusses, the use of personal space in one's public and personal life is a difficult task. The importance of personal space in individual's experience, prompted me to emphasize this in my research and observation. During my interviews, there were two aspects that were brought out in regards to this theme. The first was that it was very different concept of personal space between individuals, specifically between the same genders. When the students arrived, they found that the size of one's personal bubble, within the same gender, was much larger in the US than they experienced in South Korea. This difference proved to be a hindrance for some students in their attempt to acculturate and assimilate in the culture. "When I was trying to make friends, they would be uncomfortable because they had their own space and I wasn't respecting that, because I didn't have knowledge of the different culture in making friends" (M. Kim, personal communication, April 7, 2014).

The second issue was a contrast to this because it dealt with the personal space in regards to the opposite gender. David Chang mentioned that it was extremely awkward for him to receive or give a hug to the opposite gender. He said that it took him time to get used to the fact that there was to be more physical interaction between genders (personal communication, March 23, 2013). Another student mentioned that it was hard to try to

maintain their comfortable personal boundaries, without appearing to be rude to their counterparts.

My observation of this theme took place during my first observation at the church. This wasn't the first time I had been there, but I was still a little uneasy because this time I would be observing for the first time. As I embarked on my 10-minute drive to the church, I mulled over how I was going to observe and if anything interesting was going to occur. I arrived at the church around 9:25 and found that the parking lot was fairly empty because it was spring break. I walked into the church and two greeters, a boy and a girl, both South Korean, greeted me. Then I walked to the room where Sabbath School was held. There weren't many people present due to the fact that most had left for spring break. When I entered there were a few people around the piano practicing some music, and others sparsely seated in the room. I sat down on a cold metal chair, towards the back on the right side of the room because it was less populated. I sat there awkwardly in silence, alone, anxiously waiting for something to observe, like a hunter waits for his prey.

Someone I know finally came up to me and said hello and welcomed me to the church. I continued to sit in silence unsure of what would be note worthy, and why Sabbath School hasn't started yet. Then something interesting happened. A young man entered the room, South Korean American from what I heard of his accent, and went over to the small group congregated by the piano to greet them. The whole group seemed excited to see him. He went to greet one girl, a South Korean as well, with a hug, but she returned it with a painfully awkward one-armed side hug. I cringed at the uncomfortable situation that just took place. At first, I interpreted the meaning of this interaction to be a mismatch in levels

of comfort in the friendship. My reaction was one of slight pity for the guy for receiving such an awkward hug.

However, my pity for him was short lived, as I become caught up in the activities of Sabbath School and then church. Sabbath School was conducted in the same way it would be at almost any Adventist Church, and there was nothing particularly interesting in my observation that stood out. However, during church service a comment made about welcoming back the young man previously mentioned, since he had been gone for a year. I immediately reflected back to the earlier interaction. The young man must have been a friend whom the girl had not seen for a while. This absence would make it almost expected for her to give him a full hug. Her refusal to do so puzzled me. Then my memory was jolted to an interview that I had conducted. As was earlier mentioned, it was said that in South Korea physical interaction between sexes was not common, and how for some of the interviewees when they came to North America, hugging was uncomfortable. From this insight, I realized that the meaning of the interaction was actually a clash of cultural norms.

What I witnessed was, what I inferred to be, two different expectations due to slight cultural differences. The man, who was South Korean American, expected it to be normal for him to hug the girl, especially after such a long absence. The girl, who was not South Korean American, felt uncomfortable with the idea of hugging, but tried to conform because of the different culture. From this scenario I observed that this could be a demonstration of the stress-adaption-growth dynamic from the acculturation and deculturation theory. The girl was feeling the “push” of the new culture to acculturate by giving the man a hug. At the same time, the “pull” of her traditional culture was causing her to want to resist the physical interaction. These push pull factors were causing stress on

her interaction. However, I was not able to interview these two students, and as result the actual meaning of the interaction was inference from the interaction.

During my observation, I was also able to observe the use of personal space within the same gender. At the church, during Sabbath School, we would sit in a circle and discuss the Bible study for the week. I observed that seating would naturally segregate, with the majority of the girls sitting together and in close proximity. On one particular field observation, I attended the church with a male peer of mine. During our discussion group, there were two female students sitting close to each other and holding hands. This physical interaction continued throughout most of the 40-minute discussion. After our Bible study, my peer approached me asked if the two girls present were lesbians. Through my interviews and research I figured that it was simply the use of a smaller personal space, however, I wanted to ensure that I was correct in this assumption. I asked my contact at the church, who was aware of my observation, if the two girls were indeed lesbians or simply comfortable with a minimized personal bubble. He told me that they were definitely not, and that this was very normal to be comfortable with physical interactions within genders. While in the US culture, the size of one's personal bubble is not as pronounced between females, it is very rare to see heterosexual females in public holding hands with her female friends. I expected the behavior of the South Korean students to be limited to the church because there were mainly South Koreans present, and as a result, it was an environment that felt closest to South Korea. However, a few weeks later, I was in the small store on campus, and I observed another pair of South Korean girls holding hands as they walked into the store. I knew they were both heterosexual because I was friends with one of the individuals. This interaction was interesting to research, because I had previously

expected that the discomfort of the social stigma around holding hands, would prevent the students from doing that in public or outside of the South Korean environment. However, these students were still holding true to their values, and were not trying to acculturate to the local culture.

### **Discussion**

The research conducted showed that amongst the South Korean students, discomfort did not cause a significant acceleration in acculturation. While students did show slight adaptation in their behavior, shaking the American speakers hand rather than bowing, overall they were hesitant to fully reject their cultural values. The research does provide certain benefits for the interaction with South Korean students.

In analyzing the difference in social hierarchy, the research can provide benefit to university professors. In many university classes, in-class participation is a significant portion of the students overall grade. Having this as a requirement negatively affects the students who come from a different system of learning. Professors who are aware of this the fact should institute various methods of obtaining these points outside of simple dialogue. This can provide the opportunity to be able to excel at the highest level and not be penalized for their cultural difference.

Similarly, understanding the formality and respect required in the interaction with elders could help ease the interaction between student and adults. I have met numerous adults who wish to be called on a first name basis in attempts to make me more comfortable around them. However, this provides the opposite reaction to the South Korean students, who feel discomfort at this reduction of formality. Understanding this

formality can help students be more comfortable in social interactions if the formality is not reduced, but sustained.

When looking at the concept of physical space, the research provides benefits to improving the peer-to-peer interactions. In regards to opposite genders, American counterparts should be aware of the difference in proximity between genders. Being aware of this concept, will allow students to interact without violating the individuals personal space, and as a result ruining the relationship. The research also provides benefits to those of the same gender as they try to establish friendships. As was discussed in an interview, one student found her intrusion of personal space to have a negative affect on her establishing of friendships. However, an understanding of the different definitions of physical space amongst cultural groups could be beneficial for both parties.

### **Limitations**

In conducting my research, I found there to be two main limitations to the study. The first, and probably the most significant, was that the individuals that were Seventh-day Adventist Christians. This is significant because a majority of my observation hinged on the physical interaction of the South Korean students. The Seventh-day Adventist religion has traditionally been less approving of excessive physical touch between genders. While the religion does not mandate, or suggest, the denial of any physical contact between genders, when an individual combines this traditional religious approach with their traditional South Korean views it can cause the acculturation to happen at an even slower pace. This is why I think that that the student's religion might have been a cause for slower acculturation, not simply the tie to their culture.

The second limitation is where the observations took place. While I observed in three different settings to provide my research with a broad perspective, I believe that more observation in a social setting would have been beneficial to the research. While observation was conducted in a library, this setting is still slightly formalized. However, I was unable to observe the individuals in more informal settings to see how they interacted in a less stressful environment.

### **Conclusion**

With only minimal research being conducted in regards to the acculturation South Korean exchange students, this study aimed at exploring the experience of South Koreans as the studied in the United States. The paper explored whether discomfort in three areas would increase the speed of acculturation for these students. It was discovered that despite discomfort being experienced, the students held true to their cultural values and did not rapidly acculturate to the American culture.



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