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# Critical Adult Learning of Immigrant Workers: A Social Network Perspective

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Keywords: Immigrant workers, critical learning, social structures

**Abstract:** Why does one immigrant worker get involved in critical learning whereas another does not? This study attempted to answer the question by revealing how social ties of immigrant workers play a key role in mediating critical learning to a particular political attitude. The results of the study suggested that immigrant workers who showed a resistant political attitude, which is linked to the process of critical learning, tended to have more social ties and occupy more important socio-structural positions in their network than other peer workers.

## Introduction

Immigrant workers to Korea come mostly from less industrialized Asian countries. Many of them are “forced” to employment in 3-D jobs (difficult, dirty, and dangerous). With this type of work, the incidences of institutional discrimination through underpayment, human rights violations, and non-social security are very high. Because undocumented immigrant workers also have no legal right to formal education in Korea, it is nearly impossible for them to access formal education. To account for this, the informal learning of undocumented immigrant workers was included as a factor. In particular, this study focused on unveiling the critical learning process of immigrant workers embedded in their political attitude because a political attitude is the value system that evaluates the social conditions surrounding human beings (Lane, 1965).

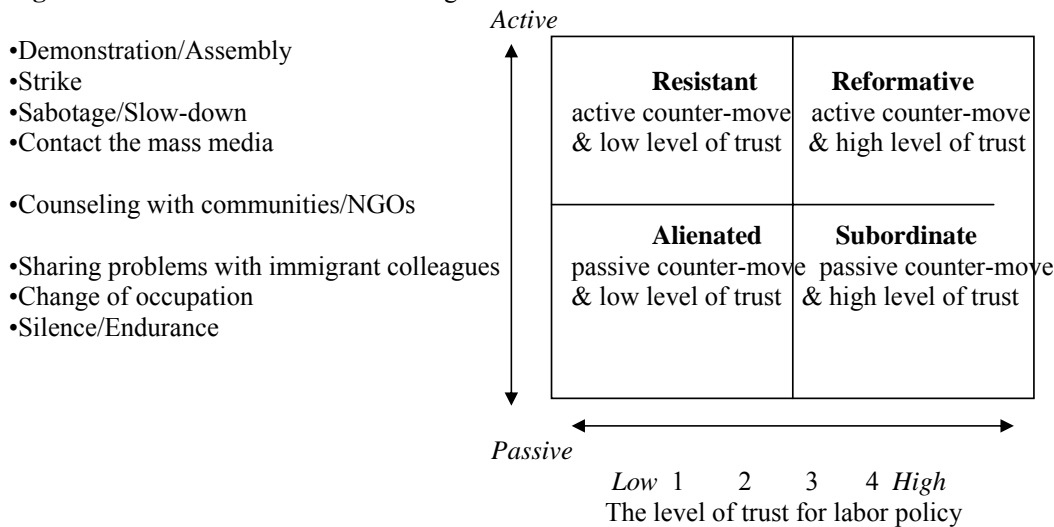
## Critical Theory and Critical Learning

Critical theory views criticality as relentless reflection of predominant socio-economic systems that systematically exclude certain groups through distorted power relations. Thus, criticality encompasses “any attempt to understand practices of criticism, interpretation, and historical understanding of social action” (Blackburn, 1996, p.89). Based on critical theory, I define critical learning as a process of constructing self-regulative relationships with given learning conditions using the roots of the conditions that formulate learning. In order to fully encompass criticality, the meaning of self-regulative relationships should be redefined as socially contextualized self-regulative relationships. Socially contextualized self-regulative relationships with learning conditions can be built by alerting outside influences such as capitalism, bureaucratic systems, technical rationality, and grand discourses. In this respect, critical learning is the process of reorganizing one’s epistemological frame as well as the process of reflecting one’s ontological position from one’s social contexts. As such, critical learning has its orientation to emancipation through reflective thinking.

### Critical Adult Learning, Political Attitudes, and Social Ties

Critical theory “is firmly grounded in a particular political analysis” since it aims to “provide people with knowledge and understandings intended to free them from oppression” (Brookfield, 2005, pp.23-25). In line with this characteristic of critical theory, critical adult learning can be characterized as individuals’ cognitive behaviors the purpose of which is to recognize the political geography of their social settings through the two tightly-interwoven tactics, reflective thinking and contextualized self-regulative learning. As such, “a critical theory of adult learning is inevitably also a theory of social and political learning” (Brookfield, 2005, p.31). In other words, critical adult learning is closely intertwined with an individuals’ attempts to seek social change and emancipation. These attempts can be identified by unveiling individuals’ political attitude because the attempts are enactments of individuals’ value systems that show how they evaluate the social conditions surrounding them (Lane, 1965). To identify political attitudes, this study suggested four types (subordinate, alienated, resistant, and reformative political attitude) that were categorized by the relationships between the level of trust that immigrant workers have in labour policies of the Korean government and the counter-movement of immigrant worker against institutionalised discrimination.

**Figure 1.** The Political Attitude of Immigrant Workers<sup>2</sup>



The horizontal axis is based on a Likert-type scale, with 1 indicating “not much” and 4 indicating “very much.” The way of counter-move against institutionalized discrimination in the vertical axis ranges from “silence/endurance” (the most passive way of reaction) to “demonstration/assembly” (the most active way of reaction). Then, the political attitudes of workers were determined by the point of intersection. For example, if one immigrant worker gave a score of “1” and chose “strike” as a way of counter-move, then his or her political attitude would be the “resistant” attitude because the point of intersection is located on the section of the resistant political attitude. That is, those immigrant workers who responded to institutionalized

<sup>2</sup> In developing this framework, this study transformed Yamada’s political alienation model (1990). He suggested four types of political alienation by combining political estrangement and political distrust: alienated, apolitical, anti-establishment, and allegiant.

discrimination actively, with a low level of trust for immigrant labor policy belonged to the resistant political attitude. In this way, the responses of immigrant workers were applied in Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>

In developing this framework, it was hypothesized that those who engaged in more critical learning would show more active responses to institutionalized discrimination, with the low levels of trust for immigrant labor policy because of the characteristics of critical learning explained earlier. Thus, immigrant workers who represented the “resistant political attitude” were logically regarded as critical adult learners.

In analyzing my data, I noted the role of social ties as mediators that link learning with political attitudes. I adopted this focus with the belief that since learning does not occur in social vacuum, social ties were expected to significantly affect how adult learning occurs and is transformed into critical learning. Indeed, we intuitively know that people learn by communicating and interacting with others. This means that social ties contribute to unmasking how the complex web of immigrant workers’ interactions interplayed with their critical thinking in forming a particular political attitude within the context of family, workplace, and community.

### **Research Designs**

A case study approach was used as the main research method since it was hoped that I would capture both perceptions and behaviors of immigrant workers. It was conducted over a period of six months in 2002 in a non-governmental organization (NGO) for immigrant workers in a peri-urban area of Seoul, Korea. This small-scale case study involved 50 immigrant workers from eight Asian countries, and employed observations, two surveys and 14 interviews to collect data about faith, perception, value systems, social ties, and symbolic interactions among immigrant workers. In addition, to analyze quantitative data collected by surveys, I used an SPSS program and social network analysis software (UCINET 6).

### **Results and Discussions**

Based on the results of the survey, 39 immigrant workers showed the alienated political attitude while nine represented the resistant political attitude and only two workers showed the subordinate political attitude. The main reason most workers presented the alienated political attitude was that they are concerned that they will be deported by the Korean government if they engage in certain active ways of resistance such as strike or demonstration against institutionalised discrimination.

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<sup>3</sup> In the original survey, the level of trust was measured on Likert-type scale. However, since there was no response that indicates “don’t know,” the data were rearranged into Likert-type scale by taking out the “don’t know” scale in the process of analysis.

**Table 1:** Social Ties by Different Political Attitudes<sup>4</sup>

Groups by Political Attitudes	Numbers of Immigrant Workers	Number of Directed Ties		Normalized 'Betweenness' Centrality
		M	SD	M
Alienated (group 1)	39	1.20	2.33	0.12
Resistant (group 2)	9	5.55	5.59	1.67
Subordinate (group 3)	2	1.00	0.00	0.21

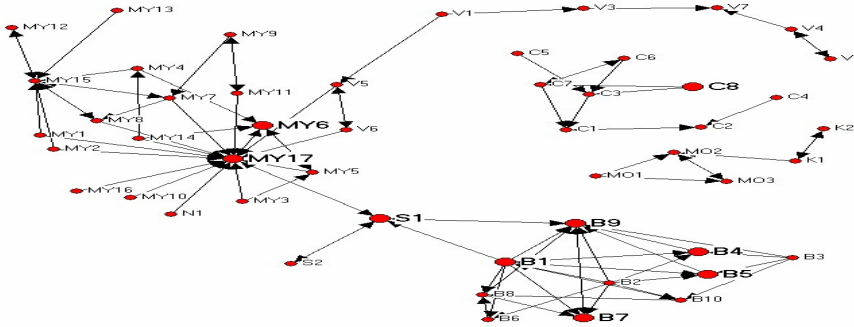
*Note.*  $n = 50$ ,  $M = \text{Mean}$ ,  $SD = \text{Standard Deviation}$

More interestingly, the immigrant workers who showed the resistant political attitude (group 1) have the highest means in terms of social network indicators (number of directed ties and betweenness centrality), compared to the other two groups. Specifically, the number of directed ties refers to the number of social ties connected among workers, regardless of the direction of the ties, which shows the dynamics of information exchange among the immigrant workers. Betweenness centrality measures the extent to which a particular immigrant worker lies “between” the other immigrant workers in this network. Due to this characteristic of betweenness centrality, it indicates the most popular or important person of the network (Scott, 1991). As such, this study identified those individuals who mediate information flows in their social network by using betweenness centrality. In brief, Table 1 demonstrates that resistance-oriented immigrant workers in their political attitude had more social ties (Mean 5.55) and occupied more important socio-structural positions (Mean of Betweenness Centrality 1.67) in their network than the other peer groups.

In particular, this phenomenon is evidently illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the relationships between social ties and political attitudes. In Figure 2, nine workers who had the resistant political attitude are differently marked by size (e.g., B1, B4, B5, B7, B9, C8, MY 6, MY 17, and S1). Seven out of the nine workers had more social ties and occupied more important social positions than other workers. In addition, those workers who represented the resistant political attitude protested against vulgar capitalism and “Repressive State Apparatus” (Althusser, 1969) not through their scientific languages such as “class” and “capitalism,” but through the re-interpretation of their cultural and religious symbols.

<sup>4</sup> To acquire the data to the indicators, the immigrant workers were asked to “who are the people in this NGO provided information or advice if you had a problem or were faced with a difficult situation?”

**Figure 2: Social ties of the immigrant workers**



Note: B (Bangladesh workers), C (Chinese workers), K (Kazakhstan workers), MO (Mongolian workers), MY (Myanmar workers), N (Nepalese workers), S (Sri Lankan workers), and V (Vietnamese workers).

For example, a Bangladesh immigrant worker recognized their moral superiority over Koreans through their own cultural and religious ritual such as *Ramadan*. B1:

I have to pray for Alas 5 times a day. Whenever I stop working to pray, my Korean boss often does not allow me to do that because it disturbs the process of work. But whenever I was not allowed to pray, I thought Koreans are greedy for money...They know nothing but money...

This Bangladeshi worker was negatively internalising Koreans by producing a symbolic image of Koreans who exploit immigrant workers to gain more economic benefits. Another crucial feature was that most immigrant workers had several nodes such as churches, mosques, and NGOs as a place for their immigrant communities. For example, a mosque was the physical space where Bangladeshi workers' fragmented experience from their everyday life is naturally shared, collectively re-interpreted, and critically learned. This collectively re-interpreted daily experience seemed to stimulate the resistant political attitude. The social ties of Bangladeshi workers had more density compared to other ethnic groups, which seemed to affect the result that the group was more likely to show the resistant political attitude. This result also suggests that feature of adult learners as the critical agent of social change was embodied by forming their own communities.

### Conclusion

Immigrant workers' critical re-interpretation of their social lives is based on social ties surrounding them because immigrant workers who have more advanced status in terms of social ties tended to represent more resistant political attitudes. This critical re-interpretation mediated by social ties seems to be closely related to immigrant workers' efforts to change social conditions forced, and this also seems to promote social change. This feature of adult learners as the agent of social change could be comparable to *Minjung*, which represented working class as both the oppressed and the agents of social change in the 1970s and the 1980s in modern Korean history. However, *Minjung* is based on class-consciousness in forming its political attitude, whereas immigrant workers in Korea shaped their political attitude through collective and critical learning based on their national and religious identity where the "culture of silence" (Freire, 1972) is forced.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several restrictions to generalizing the results found in this study. First, since this study focused on the social ties within the 50 immigrant workers, the social ties did not encompass more extended social ties of the workers, which include each immigrant worker's own ego-network. Second, this study did not reveal certain further relationships of other variables (e.g., gender, education, country, and religion) with social ties because of the significantly different sample size and the unequal variance among the groups categorized by political attitudes. However, the social network analysis employed in this study, which is a non-traditional approach in the field of educational research, turned out to be a useful research method for revealing the process of critical learning of immigrant workers. Considering that undocumented immigrant workers do not have a legal right to formal education in Korea, most of them may learn many things from informal learning situations mediated by their social ties. As this is the case, the approach based on social ties to adult learning is expected to contribute to the literature on adult learning theory as well as advise the direction of educational policy-making for immigrant workers.

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