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# Bringing My Asian Identity to Light Through Acculturation

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## *Narrative Twelve*

### Bringing My Asian Identity to Light Through Acculturation

*Seung-A Kim*  
*Susan Hadley*

Racially, I am Asian. I was born in Gimcheon, South Korea in 1963. I was raised in Seoul, South Korea, and moved to the United States when I was 23 years old, following in my parents' footsteps. Philadelphia became my family's new home in the US. I lived with my parents and siblings there for less than a year while attending Temple University and taking ESL courses. Soon after I moved, I married my husband in Philadelphia and together we moved to New York. I have lived in New York ever since. So, Philadelphia is a very special place to me.

Not knowing what was beyond the borders of Korea for the majority of my life, I found that moving to America was a life-changing experience. During my early years in the US, I was quite taken aback by how diverse it was! I had come from a homogeneous society where unity is a virtue and where people not only have the same skin color and common physical characteristics, but also a similar style and appearance. For example, people often wear a similar style of clothing and wear similar hair styles. So, if you wore something different and unique, you would stand out, and people may look at you because of the way you stand out. Here in America, it is hardly found that the two individuals have the exact same style of hair or clothing, except on some special occasion such as Halloween. On the one hand, I was glad that I didn't need to spend a lot of time thinking about how to dress and following trends so that I could fit in. On the other hand, I felt isolated because no one seemed to care about how I looked. I also remember how interesting it was when I first went to a Toys "R" Us store. I saw all different skin colors of Barbie dolls. Later on, when my sons entered nursery school, they drew people with a peach color, which was quite different from what I drew when I was growing up.

When I lived with my parents in Philadelphia, I also lived in a community where the majority of residents were African-American.

It seemed that people of the same color lived in the same community. Not far from the community where I lived was a community that was predominantly white. I thought it was very strange how segregated the community was. I also felt that my family and I did not seem to belong to either community. Wherever I went, I was a member of the minority. I could not find many Asians on the street. Yes, there were some exceptions. If I went to a Chinatown or Asian markets and restaurants, I finally felt more comfortable with my surroundings due to the familiarity of the people, the food, and the goods for sale.

When I first came to the US, my parents were going to an American church where the congregation was very diverse, including black, white, and Asian people. They were wonderful people, and they seemed to mingle together nicely. They would invite my family to their homes to treat us to a nice dinner to welcome us to America. Some even invited us to a Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra concert that was taking place in a park during the summer. However, interacting with these people was very stressful for me at the time. Language was just one thing. I was not only consumed with comprehending the conversations we were having, but also, just being with them made me feel different: the way I looked, the way I thought, and the way I behaved. I realized that for the first time in my life, I felt so drastically “different” from the majority of people in my community. Moreover, what I saw every day was so different from what I had imagined that America would be like in general. Their clothing, the way they presented themselves, and the way they associated with people ... many things were different from what I was used to.

When I first came to the US, I noticed so many differences between our two cultures. It has taken me time to learn and get used to what people do here. As time went by, I somehow found some similarities between the culture of those in my community and my own. I was especially drawn to African-American music, which evoked feelings of deep sorrow—“*han*.” These were emotions similar to the way I felt in listening to my own culture’s music, which was handed down from generation to generation. At times, I also felt that the way African-American people expressed themselves was familiar to me because people in my homeland generated corresponding, or even the same, expressions and gestures.

In stark contrast with my life in Philadelphia, the New York community I lived in was predominantly white. I rarely saw African-

American people on the streets. There were a few Asian residents and a few Asian stores in which they worked. Later, I learned that many of the residents in this community were commuting to Manhattan and that the community I was living in was a white immigrant community. So, the people in this community also had accents in their English and went to ethnic markets for groceries. Although it was an immigrant community, I still did not feel like I was one of them. I felt even more isolated living in that community than I had in Philadelphia.

It was not until I had lived in the US for several years that I got into music therapy. In Korea, I had completed an undergraduate degree in secondary education, and then I went to graduate school for one year to study philosophy of education. However, I did not immediately pursue further education after arriving in the US. During the first few years, I was rearing my children at home. Gradually, I realized that I needed to establish a new life here. At that point, I already had my undergraduate degree, so I was looking for something that I would really enjoy. First, I enrolled in classes for early childhood education. However, after researching about more academic fields, I found out about music therapy. As I gathered more information about music therapy, something clicked. I knew this was something that I really wanted to pursue. Since then, I have truly enjoyed learning about and practicing music therapy.

Musically, I was trained as a classical pianist until my high school years. My parents had a great passion for music, so they enrolled me in piano lessons from the time I was in kindergarten and hoped that I would become a concert pianist! However, during high school, my interests were diverted and I wanted to study something other than music. Although I had not pursued music since my high school years up until that point, I was serving as an accompanist for my church choir every Sunday. The most important influence on my musical development at this time was my church activities. So, I decided to pursue a second bachelor's degree in music therapy. As soon as I graduated, I started to work as a full-time music therapist. I was so eager to learn as much as I could about the variety of methods and techniques used in music therapy that I then decided to pursue the master's degree in music therapy at NYU. During that time, I traveled extensively to observe music therapy sessions run by well-known music therapists in the tristate area. I also completed post-master's

training in analytical music therapy. After a few years of practicing music therapy, I went on to complete my doctoral studies in music therapy at Temple University. Over the years, I have been practicing music therapy and teaching it to a variety of racial and ethnic groups of clients and students.

As a student in the US, I faced two main challenges while adjusting to my new life: the issue of language and the issue of cultural differences. Language affects so many parts of a student's life, particularly social interactions. When you are a student, you not only study, but you also interact with people—students and professors. Without efficient language skills, students are not able to actively engage in the many activities that the school offers while they are studying. Furthermore, there are so many cultural differences to take into account. For example, learning about how people interact in this culture was difficult for me. The cultural nuances that I struggled with were completely natural for American students. However, for students who come from other cultures, it takes time to understand those behaviors and interactions. It takes time to understand the American way of studying in classrooms.

Language takes time to learn, but it does improve as time goes on. Cultural differences, however, can be very subtle and take a lot longer to learn, unless a student really tries hard to investigate them. For example, there are differences in terms of the interaction between a teacher and a student. I have also found that students in the US are more verbally expressive than students in Korea. American students are more expressive and active in group discussions. There is more two-way communication between professors and students in an American classroom setting, compared with a Korean classroom setting. Also, when I began my studies in the US, I was very mindful of my manners and my sense of respect. I was sometimes surprised in class that American students were, in my mind, talking back and expressing very different opinions from the professor's. To me, that was disrespectful. Korean students would not do that at all. I had a few experiences in the classroom where I thought, "Wow, how could you do that?" For example, my class was in a workshop, and it was a group setting, and at the end of the session, the student said to the instructor, "I paid for this workshop and I wanted to learn." What she was saying to the instructor was that she didn't feel that she got her money's worth. I am not sure whether that is an American thing

or just her personality, but I thought, “Wow ... I would never say something like that.” I couldn’t imagine anyone in Korea doing that. Even now that I have become much more acculturated, I would not say it, personally. I was really shocked at the time that a student could say that to the instructor, and yet the instructor seemed fine with it. She handled the situation well. But I kept thinking to myself that if that had happened in Korea, it would have been absolutely unacceptable.

Also, sometimes my expectations as a student were not met. On one occasion during my earlier years living in the US, we had a class activity where we ordered pizza to share. I thought that the professor would treat us, because in Korea usually the older people are the authority and so they have an obligation to pay, as is the custom. But after we all ate, we all chipped in, of course. This made me think that the professor was pretty cold. So, social behaviors like that were easy for me to misunderstand, whereas the American students were fine with them.

During my education here in the US, I was in the minority in most of my classes. Depending on the demographics of the students, I had more Asian peers, but we were still the minority. It is quite disconcerting, though, that sometimes peers or professors were unable to recognize us by name. I guess they could not differentiate us. As I look back, I think that when I studied at NYU, it was the first time that I was really exposed to race and ethnicity and I began to think more profoundly about the issues involved. I think this was because there were more Korean students at NYU and I was in a two-year experiential music therapy group, which is a requirement for all NYU students.

Those experiences were invaluable. I was with some Korean students as well as students of other ethnicities. There were seven or eight students and two group leaders who were professors. We had a weekly experiential music therapy group, and in those sessions I really became aware that there were individual differences among students who shared the same ethnicity and background. There were two other Korean students, but just because they also came from Korea did not mean that their worldview—the way they thought and the way they behaved—was similar to mine. These two Korean students were much younger than I was and they were both single.

They were international students, yet there was a huge gap between us.

These encounters are what inspired my master's thesis, which was on transcultural experiences in music therapy. It is interesting that I really felt alienated in that group. I didn't belong to any subgroup there. It was a pretty powerful experience for me. At first, I think I expected that these Korean students would have very similar worldviews to mine—that they would behave in ways that I typically do—but I quickly learned that I could not think in that way anymore. I came to the realization that each individual is unique. Often, as therapists, we may consciously and unconsciously think that when we have clients who have backgrounds similar to ours, these people may do this or that because we have similarities, but this may not be the case. These days, there are so many subcategories and groupings, and many differences exist even within our own specific cultures. That was a very important lesson for me.

Throughout my career in music therapy, I have tried to learn as much as I can about what music therapy is. I came from a culture where therapy was not a common practice. In order to gather a comprehensive understanding of music therapy, I have worked with a variety of populations. The diversity of personal and professional experiences that I have had throughout the years has helped me to be a better teacher of and supervisor to my students. As a result of the different environments and situations in which I have been placed, I have gained a lot of insight. What is interesting is that in terms of race and culture, my experiences with clients have been different from my interactions with staff and caregivers. Furthermore, when I worked with older adults, race came to my attention more than when I worked with children with developmental delays.

With regard to issues of race, I have had both negative and positive experiences. At one point, I was working with a woman who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. My challenge was not with this client, but with her husband. In my very first encounter with him, I introduced myself and said, "I am a music therapist. I would like to work with your wife." He immediately asked me about my ethnic background: "Are you Korean, Japanese?" I had been asked the same question many times in the past, so when he first asked me the question, I was not offended. I told him I was Korean. When he first spoke to me, his tone of voice was very condescending, and as he spoke

more, I realized why he had asked me that question. He told me that he had fought in the Korean War and he had had terrible experiences there. He made it clear that he did not like Korean people. After that, I was nervous and tense when I worked with his wife because he was there most of the time, watching what I did with her, and often made comments that were not supportive. He didn't seem to like me, and he didn't seem to want me to interact with his wife. But I did what I could. I told myself many times, "Don't take it personally." It was a very challenging situation because, on the one hand, I had a responsibility to work with this client and I was the only music therapist working in that facility. On the other hand, while the client was responsive to music and to my presence, her husband appeared agitated whenever I approached her. His facial expressions were stiff when I was around, and he often made excuses for her like "She's tired" or "She doesn't seem to like music therapy." So, I tried to engage with her, but I think I was pretty tense most of the time. You can sense when you are with someone who is not supportive. It made me nervous. I would think, "What if I make mistakes?" This took place many years ago, so I was just beginning as a therapist. If I encountered a similar situation today, I probably would deal with it a little differently, but at the time, I was not really sure how to deal with him. He was an elderly man, and the way he talked to me was intimidating. I noticed that his interactions with other people were also not pleasant. Before then, I hadn't really thought about the ramifications of the Korean War and how it might affect my therapy sessions.

On the positive side, I truly believe that my race or my ethnicity has been an asset when working with elderly people because, for a lot of them, their ancestors also came from many different countries. The previous story I shared occurred in a building where the patients have Alzheimer's disease. However, I also worked with residents who were higher-functioning. We often used a variety of music from different ethnic groups there. The clients would sometimes ask me things like, "What is the Korean national anthem? What is the main food there? What is the weather like in Korea?" They truly wanted to learn about Korean culture. Of course, I did not let my personal stories get in the way of sessions, but I found that my ethnic background could be used as stimulation for them. For example, we often sang "God Bless America" in sessions, and sometimes group



members would change the words and sing “God Bless Korea,” too. In addition, some of the clients would take the initiative to talk about things that I might not know. For example, during Easter time, they would usually want to sing the traditional song, “Easter Parade.” After singing it, they would share memories of Easter Parades they had gone to when they were younger. They knew that I might not know much about that, and they were proud to share those stories with me. They knew that I was different, that I came from another culture. I was almost always the only Asian there in the group. So, I have come to believe that my difference actually can be used in a positive way.

I have had other experiences that have made me conscious of my race, but these have come from interactions with staff members or caretakers. At one point, I worked at a facility with clients who had developmental delays. This was my first full-time job as a music therapist. In this facility, the majority of the staff members were white, and there were also some African-Americans. Of the entire staff at the time, there were only two Asians. One was me and the other was a Japanese person. This Japanese person left after a year, leaving me as the only Asian working there. In addition, our clients were predominantly white, with a few African-American clients. I was very fortunate, because we had three music therapists working together. That was really great because the other music therapists were very supportive of me as I was beginning as a music therapist. Also, this meant that I was able to integrate into the team more easily than I may have in other situations. However, I still felt like I stood out among my fellow colleagues. My race became really apparent to me during lunch hours. It was very interesting to me, because when I went to the cafeteria, I could see that there were tables where white people sat together and tables where African-American people sat together. There was no table for Asians! I would think to myself, “Why do they do it that way?” I had come from a homogeneous society, so it was an interesting phenomenon to me at the time. This was the first time that this kind of grouping hit me in a very distinct way. I noticed this in other social situations as well. We had many social gatherings, birthday parties, or farewell parties for staff members. Again, whenever I went to any of these events, I saw the same groupings, and I didn’t know where I was supposed to fit in. Consequently, I mostly went wherever the other two music therapists were.

Other times when I strongly experience my race are when I meet people. It is interesting to see how much effort it takes people to do something as simple as learn my name. I know that it may be hard for some people to pronounce, and I totally understand that, but that can be alienating. I have noticed that some people do not bother to say my name the first time I introduce myself. The second time I meet them only makes it worse because they don't want to ask me again how to pronounce it. Other people are more forthright and explain that it might take them some time to correctly pronounce it, and I really appreciate their interest in learning my name correctly. Some people shorten my name and just called me Seung, instead of Seung-A. And some people just don't seem to try to care about pronouncing it correctly. Another interesting thing about names is that I didn't know that American names could be shortened. For example, my son's name is Daniel, but people here call him Dan. I didn't know this custom because it was not done in my homeland. When people shortened my name to Seung, I didn't like it because I didn't know it was a common American thing to do. Later on, when I learned that it was a common practice, and people began to call me S, or S-A, I didn't mind as much. But it still does not sound right to me, as my name was given to me by my parents. As I have become more acculturated, I have had fewer misinterpretations of people's actions.

The ramifications of my race vary depending on the situation. For quite a while, I worked primarily with clients who were white, until I developed a music therapy program in a Korean immigrant community. When working with Korean women who share the same race and culture as me, I have found that the therapeutic relationship seems to be formed faster due to the familiar background that we share. We accept each other as part of the group. Furthermore, since I am one of them, as a therapist, I assume that they probably have had similar experiences as me. Certainly, countertransference can enact strongly when working with people of the same race and culture. It may be because the clients and I share some experiences relating to our race and culture. However, this does not always pose as a benefit for therapy work.

I currently teach in a predominantly white community. The student body and faculty are only about six percent Asian. I don't think of these racial demographics much because I am so used to that social system now that I have acculturated more and more. In addition,

the faculty and student body have been very welcoming. My position as a faculty member has an impact on my relationships as well. Also, I am most likely able to sense any racial issues when the incidences take place and have developed effective coping strategies, e.g., utilizing my own resources and support systems.

Implicit and explicit racial issues seem inevitable even in a familiar and supportive environment because our race is essential to our psyche and being. What is different now is probably how I deal with the situation when it arises. I learned that sometimes an individual who belongs to a group that can be vulnerable to discrimination can become sensitive about racial issues.

When I think of my race and how it affects my therapeutic relationship with clients in music therapy, there are multiple factors involved. The more I experience and think about this matter, the more I feel comfortable with and proud of my race. I accept the fact that race is something that is socially attributed to us and there are things that I cannot control related to my race. However, I can continue to educate people who seem to ignore issues of race or culture or who have an ethnocentric attitude, so that I participate in making this world better for us and our next generation. I accept that there are prejudices and presumptions that people hold for me because of my race and, in turn, I may have prejudices and presumptions about people as well. Yet my aim is to continue educating people who may not have been exposed to other cultures. I want to show the benefits of acculturation and hopefully make the world a better, more unified, place for the next generation. What I can do for myself is to continue to examine, change, and expand my worldview. I no longer feel oppressed or intimidated by people of other races.

As my self-awareness and understanding has grown over the years, my understanding about the cultures and races of my clients has grown as well. When this happens, the empathy that I have for my clients creates more lasting and rich relationships. More and more, I no longer see a client as an individual with many labels, such as ethnicity, race, or medical condition. This does not mean that I disregard the aforementioned factors relating to this person. Rather, I have a genuine inquisitiveness about the person, including everything about his or her past, present, and future.

My race becomes visible in every session, whether I work with clients of the same race or a different one. This is because my race is

part of me and I bring my whole self to my sessions. My experience with race in relation to music therapy is relational in nature. When working with Asian clients, we seem instantly to form a therapeutic relationship. It may be because we understand the complexities of our foreignness. This sameness may come from our commonalities such as race, customs, and status as immigrants in America. These factors seem helpful in building an effective therapeutic relationship. As the therapy work begins, I find it interesting that our experiences in terms of our race are relational and varied. Some clients are more sensitive about the power imbalance inherent in this society. Others don't seem to put a lot of thought into this and easily accept it as a condition that is already established in this society. In one session, a Korean client shared that recently she was traveling to another state where she could hardly see any minorities. When her family went to a restaurant, she felt embarrassed because the people there seemed to be looking at her family. When she shared her feelings of embarrassment and anger, the responses of the group members were varied. I, personally, had had a similar experience, and I empathized with her experience. From these stories, I have become more aware of countertransference feelings that I may have regarding these experiences, especially when making music together with them. When a Jewish client also shared a similar story about how her son was subjected to discrimination on the school bus, I began to realize that it wasn't just specific groups that were suffering, but that a tremendous assortment of races, cultures, and creeds were affected.

When I work with clients of a different race, it seems that the therapeutic relationship depends on the client's openness, past experiences, worldview, and attitudes toward my race. It does take some clients more time to gain trust in me and my therapeutic program. This may be due to the fact that I am Asian and have a different background and appearance. However, I usually form effective therapeutic relationships with clients, and I rarely perceive that my race has tangibly gotten in the way during my therapy work. This may be because the clients can see my genuine care for them, and I use music as a primary modality in my sessions.

When I was growing up, music was a mandatory subject until high school. All students were required to learn music theory and singing. What I appreciated the most was learning world music, especially folk music. I have continued to develop my interest in

music further through my life and education. Although I am Korean, I am equipped with the ability to utilize various styles of music that are helpful when working with diverse clients. I believe that we are all musical, regardless of race, and that music is a universal phenomenon. In many occasions, it is amazing to see how music can transcend past our differences and help us bond easily: "Music can have a mysterious effect on those who listen to it together. I had accepted his music, he was ready to hear mine."<sup>1</sup> I believe that this is part of the reason that I was able to create effective therapeutic relationships with my clients regardless of our differences in race.

I am proud to be Korean and an Asian music therapist. I feel fortunate to be able to share my unique background with my clients, and they seem to benefit from my diverse experiences. The more I practice, the more I believe that each individual is unique and provides a unique perspective. Openness and flexibility as a music therapist are essential assets for serving clients effectively. I truly believe that differences between the therapist and client can benefit both when each is open with the other and each believes in the creative process of music-making.

<sup>1</sup>Priestley, M. (1975). *Music therapy in action*. St. Louis, MO: Magna music-Baton, p. 50.