

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELATIONSHIP CULTURE:  
KOREAN AMERICANS' EXPERIENCE WITH THEIR  
ETHNIC COMMUNITY AND BEYOND

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Along with the increase in interest in civil society among Political Theorists, there is the growing concern with the decline in community amongst Americans. Ethnic communities, however, are largely excluded from this discussion, though ethnic minorities are often found to be quite active in their communities and civil society. Diversity is hailed as an ideal, and we are uncomfortable with homogeneous groups, especially those racially/ethnically homogeneous; and yet, ethnic communities seem to be thriving. Using the Korean community as a case study, the overarching question of my dissertation is: What can we learn about building community from the Korean American community? Is the Korean community incompatible with a healthy and vibrant American civil society?

Through interviews and participant observation of the second and 1.5 generation of Korean Americans in the Washington metropolitan area, I argue that there is more than

common ethnicity to the livelihood of the Korean community, and that the relationship culture, the defining of oneself and others in terms of relationships, reinforces the obligatory nature of relationships that are in place within this ethnic community. I further argue that there are serious benefits the ethnic community has provided for its members, and that we need not categorically be uncomfortable with ethnic homogeneity, as diversity is not a good in itself. I conclude by acknowledging that Korean Americans are at a point in time that will not be repeated, and that while we do not yet know what the nature of the ethnic community will be for the third and later generations of Korean Americans, there is a glimpse of hope for compatibility between the relationship culture and a healthy American civil society.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELATIONSHIP CULTURE: KOREAN AMERICANS'  
EXPERIENCE WITH THEIR ETHNIC COMMUNITY AND BEYOND

by

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## INTRODUCTION

### *Civil society and ethnic communities*

In recent years political theory has seen a surge in the concern for community life. Prominent scholars like Bellah, Putnam, and Galston, have pointed out an unfortunate phenomenon—Americans are partaking less in their communities and talking less to their fellow citizens, while hyperindividualism has become the norm and self-interest their dominant motive. Not all scholars agree on the sources or the remedies of this malaise, and for others still, not even on the very nature of the problem. The debate itself, however, has attracted a following, and community life in America has become a matter of growing significance in academia.

There is an important exception to this trend of decline, however—ethnic communities. If anything, ethnic communities seem to have gained vitality in the last few decades, in numbers as well as in degree of participation. Ethnic churches are springing up throughout the country,<sup>1</sup> along with ethnic (and racial) campus associations, business associations, and service-oriented organizations. At the University of Maryland alone, there are now at least sixty “cultural associations,” from the Bangladesh Student Association to the Royal Scottish Country Dance at Maryland. It is also not uncommon to see, throughout America, public places with de facto ethnic segregation or entire towns where English is hardly spoken. Informal and formal channels that serve and reinforce cultural roots are going on in America more than ever before. And while ethnic communities have received much attention from sociologists and anthropologists, they

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<sup>1</sup> See Rah 2009, and Warnock 2009, an online column aptly titled “America’s Ethnic Churches Grow While White Churches Struggle.”

have received surprisingly little from civil society scholars.

America is clearly not the melting pot it was once proclaimed to be. The once-popular metaphor has been long replaced by the salad bowl—rather than assimilating to the larger pool of “Americans”, ethnic minorities retain their cultural identities and practices, some more fiercely than others. Minority groups that speak their language, eat their food, and practice their customs and traditions, are scattered throughout the United States, without assimilating into the mainstream. Such trends may have been expected from first generation immigrants, those who immigrate as adults. The unexpected trend, however, is that the first generation’s children, and their children’s children, are voluntarily and actively keeping the ethnic communities alive. They are not assimilating—not exactly, anyway.

As of 2007 over 54 million Americans (roughly twenty percent) speak a language other than English at home, and over half of them also spoke English “very well.”<sup>2</sup> A growing group of bilingual Americans are the children of immigrants—the second generation, who are going to be a significant part of the adult American citizenry in the near future, who also have primary access to a culture other than the American one. They attend an American university but join an ethnic student association; they attend an English-speaking church but the members are of one ethnicity, ethnic church though the preachers preach in English; they watch American football while eating their native food; they work for the public school system but create an ethnic PTA. The United States is becoming a bigger salad bowl, with bigger, and more, ingredients.

The most logical and obvious explanation for the increase in ethnic associations is

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census bureau. 2005-2007 American community survey 3-year estimates. Only includes population aged 5 and over.

simply the increase in ethnic minorities. In 1970 ethnic minorities of America numbered around 11 million. As of 2008 that number was 67 million, and is projected to reach 171 million in 2050.<sup>3</sup> As astounding as these figures are, however, numbers alone do not create a community. It takes more than a group of people with a common ancestry to create and sustain a “spirit of community,” and assuming so would be grossly oversimplifying the inner-workings of communities in general, ethnic or non. Furthermore, the growth in populations also does not mean that all ethnic communities have the same patterns and trends. A close look into what keeps ethnic communities alive requires a more concentrated, but comparative, focus.

We have a vast and complex literature on American civil society—its history, its apparent recent demise, possible causes and effects, and countless follow-up rebuttals and exceptions. Within this literature, however, there is an unease with ethnic associations or ethnic communities. No one denies that a common ethnicity can be a powerful tool for community-building, but no serious scholar is portraying ethnic communities as the ideal place to do so. Mark E. Warren worries that ethnic associations alone are not enough to produce democratic citizens;<sup>4</sup> Amy Gutmann claims heterogeneous associations are more conducive to democratic citizenship;<sup>5</sup> Nancy Rosenblum calls for a “habitual disregard” for ethnic differences.<sup>6</sup> Civil society scholars often treat ethnic communities as outliers, a few steps behind or even backwards, cramping the ideal vision of civil society in a liberal democracy. Will Kymlicka, most known for his liberal theory on minority rights, sums up, “[T]here’s not much enthusiasm for ethnic associations... whereas associational life in

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census bureau. All figures calculated using: total population minus non-hispanic whites and non-hispanic blacks. Projection made in an August 2008 report.

<sup>4</sup> Warren 2001, Chapter 7.

<sup>5</sup> Gutmann 1998, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 332, 351.



general is commended as helping to produce solidarity and trust, multiculturalist support for ethnic groups is increasingly decried as helping to produce balkanization, tribalization and the ‘disuniting of America.’”<sup>7</sup>

Even fewer civil society scholars bother to look closely into existing ethnic communities, to see if they do, in fact, disunite America or fail to produce democratic citizens—or, to see if ethnic communities actually provide a genuine community which so many Americans are without, and perhaps even ameliorate minorities’ integration into the larger society. Despite their growing populations and their apparent advantage in building social capital, ethnic communities are largely excluded from the civil society debate. And when they do make an appearance, they are usually lumped together and uneasily danced around.

This is not entirely the fault of political scientists; extreme specialization of modern academia has essentially pushed anything involving ethnicity to minority or “cultural” studies. In fact, we have a swelling literature on the respective ethnic communities of America—their demographics, their norms, their generational shifts and conflicts, their educational and occupational trends, etc. However, by giving each ethnic group special attention, ethnic communities are often treated like their own little worlds, as if they are so unique that they couldn’t possibly contribute to a broader (Western?) literature. The majority of such works seem to say, “*This is what we are like,*” which only perpetuates the “them” and “us,” prematurely cutting off potential dialogue between the disciplines.

In the 1990s a series called *The New Americans* was published, with books titled South Asian Americans, The Cuban Americans, The Korean Americans, etc. Each work

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<sup>7</sup> Kymlicka 1998, 177.

is a detailed description of the particular group, written by respective “experts,” and the series is intended to “introduce these groups to the rest of America.” In 2005 a book titled *Multiculturalism in the United States* was published, with each chapter titled after an ethnic group—Polish Americans, Scandinavian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, etc. These works, and many others, follow this pattern of categorizing by ethnicity—*this* is what makes *them* different. And while there is a place for such specialization, it is hardly sufficient to end there. If ethnic communities are just about *them*, what could *we* possibly have to do with them? It is no wonder civil society scholars have little to say about ethnic communities.

What we don’t have enough of is what one body of literature has to do with the other, what particular ethnic communities have to do with the American civil society. It is as if the two are talking about two different worlds, and both bear responsibility for treating minority groups like permanent foreigners. But in actuality they are both very interested in America, or more specifically, community life in America. If political theorists are concerned with rebuilding community, rebuilding social capital, and revitalizing civil society, they must look into the particular communities that are doing just that, and look for lessons that can be applied elsewhere. They must also take seriously the hostilities between ethnic and racial boundaries, and refrain from unequivocally idealizing diversity. Likewise, sociologists and ethnic studies scholars ought to take seriously the more general concerns of theorists and work to make meaningful ties between practice and theory. They must also refrain from ignoring potential harms of racial/ethnic segregation, but address and, where necessary, correct them. Even if the forest and the trees cannot be looked at simultaneously, that is no

reason to forget the connection between the two.

It is worth noting here that I do not begin by taking a normative stance on ethnic associations or ethnic communities. I reject the assumption that ethnic communities (or even “enclaves”, which is almost always used in a negative light) inherently breed ethnocentrism, racism and balkanization, or that they disrupt the vision of an American community life. These are valid concerns that must be taken seriously, but there is no good reason to oppose outright any and all ethnic communities and ethnically homogeneous groups, or to praise any and all heterogeneous groups. That being said, there is also no good reason to unconditionally prefer segregated ethnic communities over assimilation, to preserve the salad bowl and burn the melting pot. The simple argument here is that looking into a particular ethnic community may shed light on the American community life, even if it is what *not* to do, and we need not be so resistant to such an approach in academia.

### ***The purpose***

One aim of this dissertation is to create a small bridge between existing ethnic communities and the civil society literature by using the case of the Korean American community. The overarching question that will guide this work is: How does the Korean American community reshape our understanding of civil society? Focusing on the children of first generation immigrants, Korean Americans who essentially grow up in two different worlds, I will attempt to show that the ethnic community must be included in the American civil society discussion—not as an exception or an anomaly, but as a useful case study for community-building. Though easier said than done, my goal is to

use a case without limiting the findings to the case, tell the story of a group without it being reduced to a mere story. And it is my hope that more small bridges will be built between mainstream society and various particular communities, ethnic and non, to avoid the pitfall of excessive specialization where only the experts chime in.

Another broad hope of this work is to bridge practice and theory. Theorists are often criticized for being out of touch with the real world, which is a valid criticism that demands redress. We can speculate all we want on how to revive American community life, but if there are completely different ways this is being done by fellow Americans, we ought to revisit the theory. This is actually the starting point of this work—as I became more familiar with the civil society literature, I realized that the Korean American community does not fit its “logic,” and I can only assume that there must be more of such cases. It is my hope that as more empirical research is conducted, theory will become more refined, and raise the questions that matter for today and tomorrow’s civil society.

It will be quite obvious that I lean towards communitarianism. I do believe that the disappearance of communities is a serious matter that ought to bother our minds, and I am encouraged by the many cross-disciplinary works, scholarly and non, that express a similar concern while offering ideas of remedy.<sup>8</sup> I see ethnic communities as a valuable resource that could potentially enlighten us on how we may go about recovering the fabric of our American community life.

### ***Why Korean Americans?***

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<sup>8</sup> Among many, one inspiring and encouraging recent work is Mark R. Warren’s *Dry Bones Rattling*. By using the case study of the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) network, Warren points to which conventional beliefs on community-building hold true and which need revisiting, and which new lessons need to be introduced. Warren delves deep into the realities of this group, warts and all, and manages to glean theoretical implications from it, in a manner that is both timely and cross-disciplinary. I hope to do the same.

No two ethnic communities are alike. The Korean American community is one I have access to, and one that I believe offers a fitting comparative challenge to the Western literature, precisely because it is an ethnic community that seems very exclusive. There are now well over one million Koreans living in the United States, with the heaviest immigration period having passed in the 1970s and 1980s. While some do return to Korea, for the overwhelming majority of immigrants and their children, America is their permanent home. Young Korean Americans are quickly becoming citizens, workers, professionals, and parents of America. And while a revival of ethnic identity is often attributed to the first and third generations, skipping the second (who often seek to assimilate), Korean Americans seem to have a second generation that is unusually active in maintaining ethnic solidarity.<sup>9</sup>

Korean Americans are not the biggest Asian group in America,<sup>10</sup> but their solidarity has certainly helped make their mark as an immigrant group, going beyond patterns like small-business ownership, priority of education, and the impact of the church. In a work celebrating 100 years since 102 Korean workers first migrated to the U.S. in 1903, Okyun Kwon noted, “[T]he Korean community is one of the most well-organized communities in many respects. Unlike other multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Asian nationalities... Koreans maintain a single ethnic and monolingual tendency, which makes them much easier to keep ethnic solidarity after immigration.”<sup>11</sup> Even in a work that studied Chinese Americans alongside Korean Americans, two immigrant groups that

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<sup>9</sup> Communitarian Amitai Etzioni wrote, “In recent decades a measure of return to community has benefited from the revival of loyalty to ethnic groups. While the sons and daughters of immigrants, the so-called second generation, often sought to assimilate, to become Americanized to the point that their distinct backgrounds were lost in a new identity, *their* children, the third generation and onward, often seek to reestablish their ethnic identity and bonds.” Etzioni 1993, 120.

<sup>10</sup> As of 2000, Koreans rank 5<sup>th</sup> in Asian American populations. The top four, from the first, are Chinese, Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese. Census 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Kwon 2004, 256.

perhaps have the most in common, the author found, “the family ethnic contexts of Korean Americans to be, in general, more self-consciously and actively ‘ethnic’ than those of their Chinese American counterparts.”<sup>12</sup>

This ethnic solidarity can be characterized as bonding as opposed to bridging, in Putnam’s terms. Bonding social capital, according to Putnam, is good for mobilizing solidarity, and can provide social and psychological support for members of the community.<sup>13</sup> Korean Americans seem to be quite good at bonding, and though bonding is a simple enough concept, there are many complex ways bonding can occur. In other words, it is not only common ancestry or the common immigrant experience that facilitates bonding. A look into how Korean Americans build community and what kinds of bonds they form can challenge conventional (Western) wisdom, and can be useful for exploring new ways to build community throughout mainstream America.

Of course, too much bonding and not enough bridging is exactly the source of the unease around ethnic communities. In fact, even Korean American scholars like Kwon express an ambivalence towards the self-segregating tendency of Korean Americans—their organization and self-help skills are impressive, but not being well-integrated into American society perpetuates exclusivity, raising alerts of ethnocentrism and racism. If such alerts are valid, this is no trivial matter. Korean Americans are not refugees or national minorities, in Will Kymlicka’s terms. They immigrate voluntarily and regard the U.S. as their new home. I am not suggesting that Korean Americans are completely isolated in their ethnic community (they’re not) or that they don’t ever bridge across ethnic lines (they do). They are, however, relatively more self-segregating than other

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<sup>12</sup> Kibria 2002, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Putnam 2000, 22.

ethnic communities, and they admit as much. The point is that the story need not end there. Why is this the case? Why do they self-segregate? Is ethnic segregation, indeed, “behind” the civil society vision? What makes bridging across racial and ethnic lines more or less likely? If we want to know more about building social capital, both bonding and bridging, Korean Americans can be a useful case—even if (especially if) some of the lessons are of what not to do.

Korean Americans are the subjects of this work, but there will be many similarities between them and other ethnic minorities. Though it is beyond the scope of this work to compare and contrast the Korean community to other ethnic communities, they are just as deserving of attention. They, too, need to be explored and tied to the American civil society debate—together they make up a great part of the existing American community life. This work is not intended to be a model for ethnic communities, but to provide a push for the on-going probing of what particular communities, ethnic and non, have to contribute to the civil society literature.

### ***Method***

My formal research began in early 2009, but my informal participant observation has been going on for about two decades. I immigrated with my family from Korea at age eight, and I have lived in the greater Washington metropolitan area since, which ranks third in Korean population size.<sup>14</sup> I have been well-connected to the Korean community, particularly through the ethnic church, which is a typical and well-documented route for Korean Americans. Using all connections available to me, I conducted in-depth

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<sup>14</sup> The metropolitan area with the largest Korean population is Los Angeles, and the second is New York/New Jersey.

interviews with twenty-five Korean Americans, all at least age twenty-five, either born in the U.S. (second generation) or immigrated before age thirteen (1.5 generation).<sup>15</sup> All of the interviews were conducted in English, with occasional Korean words and phrases. They lasted between one to three hours, and took place in homes and coffee shops. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The overall goal in interviews was to focus on two questions—one, how do informants feel about and/or act in their ethnic community? And two, how do informants feel about and/or act regarding ethnic diversity? I made the effort to arrive at informants' attitude toward and as well as their actual involvement, in both their ethnic community and its relationship with the larger American civil society. I typically began by asking factual background questions, then moving on to past or current involvement with the Korean community—Are you a member of any particular Korean associations? How much of your social circle is Korean? How does your association resolve conflicts that arise? And how do you feel about that? Then, I asked about their views on the Korean community in America—Should Korean Americans be less segregated? Do you think your involvement in the ethnic community keeps you from participating in the American society? And do you actively seek diversity/integration in your life? Of course, I could not anticipate in advance the direction of any of the interviews, and most of the questions I ended up asking were follow-up questions. No two interviews were alike, in content, order, or organization, and putting together the information and extracting patterns was perhaps the most challenging part of the research. Nevertheless, conducting the interviews was very enjoyable, though a great deal of what was said by my informants

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<sup>15</sup> The 1.5 generation refers to those who immigrated as a child. There is no scholarly consensus on the age range that immigration must occur in order to be considered 1.5, but I am following the work of Mary Yu Danico (2004), which defines 1.5 generation as those who immigrated before age thirteen.



never made it into the work. I began to understand the scholars who stick to reporting the facts—there is so much information there as it is.<sup>16</sup>

Korean Americans are not exactly hard to find, but it is a challenge to get to know them. They are not likely to talk openly with a stranger, much less a researcher, or to invite one to observe their daily lives. But once a connection is made, perhaps through a mutual acquaintance, (my being Korean American was indispensable here), the informants were very welcoming and helpful. Once I made a few contacts, it was relatively easy to meet more through the snowballing effect, and those who agreed to be interviewed were usually eager to cooperate. Most expressed concern about being “fit” or “having good answers” for the interview, and afterwards, more casual conversations and invitations to dinner were not uncommon.<sup>17</sup>

I excluded first generation Korean immigrants from the research primarily because their integration into American society is more or less at a standstill. Difficulties with English and other American norms, along with grueling work schedules and the perpetual minority complex, tend to leave the first generation with little desire and even less choice to socialize with anyone but fellow Koreans.<sup>18</sup> Their hardships are well-documented, and these patterns certainly have an impact on their children, but lifestyles of the first generation rarely pass to their children in the same form. And because the concern here is the American civil society, its future and its potential partakers, the first generation’s children and their new set of circumstances are much more revealing.

I decided fairly early on in my research that interviews would not be sufficient. The formal interview setting (no matter how cozy one tries to make it) always has its

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<sup>16</sup> See Research Appendix for more details.

<sup>17</sup> See similar reports in Hurh 1998 and Pak 2006.

<sup>18</sup> See Min 1995, Chapter 8.

limits, and as Koreans will admit, they are very good at saying what they are supposed to say. Furthermore, much of the most interesting and important dynamics in any community are not explicitly pointed out, and I found interviews to be lacking in uncovering those. In order to catch more patterns of norms and spontaneous speech, I had to be as much a participant as an observer, which was limiting and agenda-setting at the same time. I could only participate in things that I potentially could in my real life, as a single, 1.5 Korean American female in her twenties, who attends graduate school. Given these traits, I made the commitment to partake in as many gatherings as I can, formal and informal, and I became quite social once the research began. I visited churches, joined small groups, and attended gatherings of various sorts, from birthday parties to PTA meetings—often invited by an interviewee. For comparison purposes, the associations and small groups I attended were a combination of Korean and those ethnically diverse. Some were more fruitful than others, and some considerably more enjoyable than others. As any participant observer knows, everything is data, and much seemingly-wasted time needs to be spent before significant data unexpectedly appears.

Being Korean American, and having spent most of my life in the Washington area, it was nearly impossible to keep my research completely separated from my life. In many ways, the Korean community is “my community,” and it was never my intention to approach the research as an outsider looking in, as that would be both impossible and undesirable. Though the majority of my research subjects and all of the in-depth interviewees were people I did not previously know, many were reached through mutual acquaintances, and still others were later discovered to be a friend of a friend of a friend. On one occasion this happened at a Korean church to my surprise, to which a Korean

American causally responded, “Don’t you know all Koreans are connected somehow?” As Chapters Two and Three will highlight, Korean Americans have a tight-knit community all their own, their norms and taboos, their insiders and outsiders. I do not claim to paint the most objective portrayal of the Korean American community, but I believe I provide a unique perspective as a participant/researcher, insider/outsider. With every meeting and interview, the trick was to get the distance right. I quickly realized how useful it is to be bicultural and bilingual for an ethnographic research, and I was mostly able to flow through the member/researcher boundary with ease, facing the occasional “You’re Korean, you must know what I’m talking about,” followed by my, “Can you try to explain anyway?” When informants asked for my opinion, I gave it briefly but honestly, quickly returning to their point of view, though for some interviews sharing on my part was necessary to set the ease of a conversational tone.

To be sure, not all 1.5/second generation Korean Americans are a part of the Korean community. There are many who explicitly reject it, and deliberately associate only with non-Koreans. It may seem as though I am over-generalizing an entire ethnic population, and I do at times refer to “Korean Americans” without meaning all of them. My subject here, however, is not Korean Americans in general, but the Korean American community, which essentially excludes those who are not and/or don’t consider themselves a part of the community. (Plus, those who are not a part of the Korean community are less likely to volunteer to be interviewed, though a few did, warning me of their lack of participation in the community.) That being said, it seems safe to assume there are more Korean Americans inside the community than outside of it, particularly in this geographical location, and why there are relatively few who opt out is certainly a part

of the overarching question of this project.

### ***Beyond the association***

The associational life has attracted enough interest to spawn its own body of literature. In fact, voluntary associations are what many of us think of when we hear the words civil society. First observed by Alexis de Tocqueville, who is regarded a founder of sorts by civil society scholars, associations alone can bring citizens out of their private cocoons and bring them together in the public life, creating “reciprocal action of men upon one another.”<sup>19</sup> Though hardly the explicit purpose of associations, it is their by-products that make associations so significant to a democratic society, ultimately renewing sentiments and ideas, enlarging the heart, and developing the human mind. As “civil society” became a buzz word in the 1970s and 1980s, the significance of associations also became magnified, and the civil society literature began treating the associational life as a special realm, often designated as the “third sector” that serves more or less as the middle arena between two other sectors with dominating tendencies—between market and state, family and nation, private and public.

A subgroup of contemporary civil society scholars echo Tocquevillian sentiments, appropriately referred to as the civic culture school. This school of thought talks about the skills, characters and habits that individuals develop by participating in voluntary associations, and it has become widely accepted that “civil society is seen as a school of virtue where men and women develop the dispositions essential to liberal democracy.”<sup>20</sup> Today’s associational life is unlike anything during Tocqueville’s time, but the renewed

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<sup>19</sup> Tocqueville 2000, 491.

<sup>20</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 26.

interest in associational life has revived the scope with which Tocqueville looked at associations. It is the middle ground, the place that draws private citizens out of their private homes, out into the buzzing public life, which a healthy democracy requires. The idea here is that participating in voluntary associations builds civic virtue, interacting with different people builds an individual's tolerance, talking out details to arrive at a common goal builds an individual's deliberative skills—this strengthens the character of the citizenry, ultimately strengthening the democratic landscape.

Therefore, Robert Putnam, perhaps the most widely-read neo-Tocquevillian of our time, has argued that Americans' drop in associational life in the last few decades ought to raise an alarm. Because associations serve as the central place for many Americans' source of connecting to one another and thus building social capital, the decline in associational life could be the beginnings of isolationism—the potential nightmare in a democracy. Inviting widespread agreement, criticism, and perhaps most importantly, further research, the associational life in the twenty-first century is attracting much attention from political theorists. The tendency to address the associational life separately, however, has not been without serious drawbacks. The literature is not so much inaccurate, but for one, there is some dwelling on the less significant questions—for instance, the defining and categorizing of associations (What constitutes an association? What constitutes a good association? Must it be voluntary? Does the purpose matter? Decision-making processes? Size? Geography?)—which makes the mistake of overlooking the inner-workings of particular associations, in addition to the mistake of missing the larger implications of associations on society at large and vice versa.

There are also the more liberal-minded scholars, like Nancy Rosenblum and Amy

Guttman, who ask different questions altogether, but give associations special attention as well. For them, the voluntary nature is what really counts—the freedom of association exercised by autonomous individuals takes priority, in terms of entering, exiting, and everything in between. They argue it is impossible to normatively generalize about associations, and that certainly, not all associations are good, and furthermore, that a good association to one man is not necessarily to another. Rosenblum warns, “So I caution against the unwarranted assumption that the effects of an association on members can be predicted on the basis of a group’s formal purpose or system of internal governance. The moral valence of group life is indeterminate.” She continues, “That is why I emphasize the dynamic of association, pointing out that forming, joining, schism, and disassociation are as much a part of freedom of association as the solidity of identification and belonging.”<sup>21</sup> The experience of pluralism is what counts, perhaps even the only thing that can be counted, and the temptation to make general normative conclusions about the associational life should be resisted.<sup>22</sup>

The more communitarian-minded scholars (Amitai Etzioni, Michael Sandel, Mary Ann Glendon) try not to get caught up in the heuristics of what we broadly call civil society, while generously making normative claims, often to the horror of liberals. What voluntary associations look like and how academics categorize them may be important, but for communitarians, the good association cannot be a topic totally separate from the good family, church, and school—much of which is not voluntary, nor an association. The *community*, which encapsulates all of these separate but overlapping institutions, is the preferred term, as the term itself includes but does not equal something as concrete as

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<sup>21</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 8, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Rosenblum, however, is not promoting isolationism, nor is that my suggestion. She promotes some form of association or group life over anomic individualism.

a voluntary association. (It is worth noting that Putnam considers the extended family a potential form of social capital, along with the church, the choir group, and the neighborhood, though he clearly pays more attention to concrete voluntary associations.)<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, my work most resembles the outlook of communitarians—I see civil society as a much more interconnected place. This is not to suggest that there is no place for the voluntary association in the study of civil society, or to deny that the concrete nature of associations, with definite meetings, positions, and vision statements, make them easier to study than the elusive nature of communities. In fact, I began the research with plans to research Korean associations, but it became clear that what makes Korean associations tick is utterly inseparable from what makes Korean families and Korean communities tick. Thus, while more complex, the scope of the research here will go beyond the concrete association.

### ***Outline***

The driving theme throughout this work is that we can learn something about community-building from the Korean American community. The Korean American community makes up “civil society” differently from how Western works have constituted the topic, and this work is an attempt to reveal those dimensions. The chapters have been divided according to the different aspects and the (follow-up) questions about civil society that the Korean American community raises. The first two chapters look more closely into what keeps the Korean community going, and the remaining chapters more so at what a flourishing Korean community means for the American civil society.

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<sup>23</sup> Putnam 2000, 21.

Chapters One and Two highlight the “relationship culture” that Koreans have been noted for, and how it facilitates community-building. The relationship culture is not a term used in academia to specifically refer to Korean Americans,<sup>24</sup> but the notion that relationships are central to the Korean culture is well documented. I argue that a key factor in Korean Americans’ solidarity is their tendency to see themselves and others in terms of relationships, to use the language of relationships, which may be more difficult in an equality- and autonomy- idealizing society. Tocqueville is a key figure in the first two chapters, as he was the first to warn that conditions of equality can lay the groundwork for isolation among a citizenry. I further argue that the language of the relationship culture is largely habitual and considered “normal,” which demands a re-focusing of how important the “voluntary” nature of an association is.

Chapter Three considers what kind of community the Korean American community is, and I argue that the classification of a good community versus a bad one is a fruitless one. No community is always pleasant, and the Korean community contains elements which are inherent to group life of all kinds, elements that can be both good or bad. I argue that we need to be honest about the inevitable costs of communitarianism as opposed to adopting a wholly optimistic approach, looking into particular communities rather than measuring them with a universal standard. I further consider “civility,” and how the trendy word is not quite fitting for the Korean community, since civility is a virtue among strangers, and strangers Korean Americans are not.

Chapter Four, titled What’s So Great About Diversity?, addresses the valid concerns of ethnocentrism, racism, balkanization in and around an ethnic community. I consider the multilayered narrative of Korean Americans’ experience as a minority that

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<sup>24</sup> For one, see Choi et al. 1993, a work in Psychology.



confirms the unfortunate fact that diversity has a negative effect on participation.<sup>25</sup>

However, I also point out the very real benefits of an ethnic community, and what being “Korean” means to Korean Americans, and argue that diversity is not an end worth seeking in and of itself.

Chapter Five concludes by considering the bridging that needs to be done within the Korean community, particularly between generations, though they may seem sufficiently homogeneous from an outsider’s perspective. I raise the role of the 1.5 generation in the process of bridging, and how bridging within is required to improve and sustain the Korean community, as third and fourth generations of Korean Americans are born and raised.

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<sup>25</sup> Putnam reached this conclusion and was quite disturbed by it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE RELATIONSHIP CULTURE

“In centuries of equality all men are independent of one another, isolated and weak...”

(Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*.)

#### *The relationship culture*

Dain is a 28-year-old second generation Korean American, who works full time Monday through Friday as an accountant and spends his weekends working at his father’s car wash business. When asked how he feels about this arrangement, he shrugs and replies, “I’m the older one. ... There are times when I’m like ‘Augh, I’m tired,’ but overall, no regrets. I mean, I do it because I want to, no one forces me to do what I do. My parents would never tell me to do anything.”

Charles is a 32-year-old dentist, a Korean American 1.5er, who immigrated when he was eight. Describing his job, he says, “It’s nice, I’m the boss.... It only works because we respect each other, the boundaries that we have. For example, if I say ‘Let’s do it this way,’ my team member shouldn’t say, ‘I don’t want to do it that way.’”

Dain and Charles demonstrate the relationship culture in everyday life, where who you are is who you are *to others*. The relational role, such as son, boss, colleague, friend, all of which by definition assume a relationship with another human being, is the primary form of identification of oneself and others; while independent roles that can stand alone—man, 30-year-old, bowler, Buddhist—play a smaller part in defining the person. Relationships are regarded more highly than individuality, and an individual’s behavior is

understood and explained in terms of his part in his relationships, whether it be in the home, the workplace, society, or the nation. At home he is a brother, at work an employee, at church a congregation member, at a restaurant a diner, at the polling booth a voter, and so on. He is never a completely isolated being, even when he is technically alone—he is in some kind of relationship, at all times and in all settings. He has a relationship with his fellow citizens and his local representatives, just as he has a relationship with his parents and siblings. The nature of the relationships, of course, varies, but the fact that he is in some kind of relationship is constant.

Because the relationship culture sees relationships as the driving force in all areas of life, civil society is not a separate arena where an individual acquires skills and virtues that he cannot acquire elsewhere. It, *too*, places the individual in a myriad of relationships, just as the family and the nation do. He can and most likely does acquire skills and virtue from his networks, but they are primarily relational—he learns to be a member of an association, a player of a team, an attendee of a meeting. He does not merely learn how to listen, deliberate in public, and write letters—he learns how to listen to leaders, deliberate with newcomers, and write to elders. He learns how to be in a group, how to lead, how to follow, who to deliberate with and when.

For most of us, family is the first and most foundational network of relationships, the first place where the relationship culture is practiced, and some (such as Confucians) even say that all human relationships ought to be modeled after the family.<sup>26</sup> While the family is central to the making of the relationship culture, as it will be obvious throughout this work, the more important societal and political implication of the relationship culture is that it extends beyond the family. The constant reminder and reinforcement of one's

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<sup>26</sup> I purposely do not equate Confucianism with the relationship culture. See Chapter 2 for explanation.

various relationships work to keep his networks, family and others, lively and intact. And thus the relationship culture, where individuals see and approach one other as related, is what keeps the Korean American community flourishing. It is not merely the work of common interests such as language, food, customs, or even the acknowledged commonality of being Korean—they certainly play a part, but it takes more than commonalities to sustain a community.

I am not making an ontological claim with the relationship culture. That debate, of whether human beings are embedded and relational, or isolated and autonomous, has been unrealistically polarized by communitarians and liberals, respectively.<sup>27</sup> If pressed to choose between the two camps, the relationship culture is closer to the former, but more meaningful by far for the relationship culture is the recognition of one's obligatory relationships, which is more of an ideal than a truth claim. In other words, it is not merely that Korean Americans see themselves in relationships and communities, but that such an acknowledgment provides a language and a rationale for what they do, and more importantly, what they ought to do.

In turn, and this is a point often overlooked, just as the acknowledgment of relational beings makes relationships more likely, the acknowledgment of isolated beings makes isolation more likely. This is the problem with the Rational Choice camp—not so much that it is inaccurate, but that it may become accurate, a self-fulfilling prophecy that justifies its own claims. And thus it is not the ontological fact of isolated or relational self, but the practical outcomes (by-products?) of such assumptions, that have major implications for our real-life communities.

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<sup>27</sup> “But in the end I shall not simply side with either MacIntyre or his opponents. I want rather to move altogether beyond the debate between those called communitarians and liberals.” Stout 1988, 220. This excerpt is from Chapter 10, which in its entirety is an impressive critique on the debate.

The assumption of individuals as isolated and autonomous has been enjoying leverage in the social sciences for decades. To be fair, this is not very surprising—the West, relatively speaking, prioritizes individualism, and Political Science as a discipline is undeniably dominated by the West. Thus, political scientists’ tendency to envision autonomous, isolated individuals is understandable, but it is by no means an acceptable permanent assumption of the discipline. In a recent and admirable work, *Dry Bones Rattling*, Mark R. Warren (not to be confused with Mark E. Warren) directly confronts the individual-focused approach that dominates civil society literature: “[O]ur understanding of civic education itself is often quite narrow in its focus on individual skill acquisition.”<sup>28</sup> He continues, “In one of the most important studies of civic participation, conducted by Sidney Verba and his associates, relevant skills for participation included the ability to write letters, run meetings, and speak in public.” Social science often treats the collective as merely an aggregate of individuals, and the effects of collective settings as merely effects on the individual—as if a skill or habit acquired in a group is transmitted to the participating individual, which he then possesses as his own.

A principal claim of Warren’s work is that relationships are the building blocks of communities, and ultimately, a healthy democracy. Studying the famous Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in Texas, Warren observes, “The people who enter politics through religious congregations are not the disconnected individuals appealed to by our political parties. Rather, they are members embedded in congregations and immersed in community relationships.”<sup>29</sup> Individuals are church members and neighbors *before* they

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<sup>28</sup> Warren, Mark R. 2001, 237.

<sup>29</sup> Warren, Mark R. 2001, 22.

enter the IAF—in fact, the pre-existing relationship is what makes them likely to join a political organization together. And once a group forms, Warren notes, IAF members are intensely engaged in the very time-consuming relationship-building that is at the heart of the IAF’s success.

Of course, simply having an acquaintance isn’t necessarily a good thing, and neither is simply joining a group. And Warren does not get very specific about what kinds of relationships exist prior to the IAF, or what kinds of relationships are being built in the IAF—it is as if relationships simply refer to people getting acquainted with one another, knowing one another, caring about one another. However, relationships come in all shapes and forms, and the various particular relationships, as such, deserve more focused attention in the civil society discussion.

In the relationship culture, relationships do much more than put individuals in touch and create networks. The particular relationship an individual finds himself in defines his expectations and responsibilities, and the fulfillment of those expectations and responsibilities reinforces that relationship. Recall the earlier example of Charles—as the boss, much of the decision-making was his responsibility, and maintaining the boundaries as “the dentist” and “team member” was what made for a satisfying workplace. It is probably safe to assume that much of his dental school education was not about human relations, but the particular relationships he, as the dentist, had with others, provided the rationale for the ethics of the workplace.

I am not suggesting that Americans are opposed to relationships or communities. The raise in alarm for the decline of community in America has spawned some serious community-building movements, in academia and beyond. I am also not suggesting that

there is no relationship culture in America. Sociologists (and others) argue that the defining of oneself in terms of relationships and roles is absolutely everywhere. There is, however, a dimension that is often overlooked, and that is the dynamics between relationship-building and the rhetoric of equality. Largely considered a fundamental American principle, equality has historically been invoked in the name of improving society, including relationships and communities, and it is rather inequality or hierarchy that falls under suspicion. However, the relationship culture found among Korean Americans demonstrates that hierarchical relationships can be the building blocks to communities, more specifically, to building obligatory relationships, by making each relational role more recognizable.

### *English as the language of equals*

In all of my interviews I asked, “How are Koreans different from Americans?” There were many common answers, but one that all respondents touched on was “the respect thing,” “respect for adults,” or some version thereof. I then asked what that meant, to which one informant said, “Americans are all friends. There’s no above and below. They’re all ‘ya’”—*ya* roughly translates as “hey,” an informal greeting only acceptable between equals, friends, or close acquaintances. Another informant, Brooke, described the “regular American culture” as “more of an equal society, whereas in Korean society you’re supposed to respect the adults.” Brooke was not implying that she herself is not an adult (or that Americans are taught to disrespect adults). But Brooke referred to anyone older (usually parents’ generation and older) as “adults,” which is quite telling—at twenty-seven, Brooke is an adult too, but she didn’t see herself quite in

the same category as “the adults,” or as another informant put it, “the adult-adults.”

Rubin noted equality as a mark of Americanization, specifically referring to language as a key indication.<sup>30</sup> Comparing the Korean Ministry to the English Ministry within his church, he said, “If you’re in the English Ministry side, even if you’re thirty, forty years old, it’s ‘Hey Sue,’ ‘What’s up,’ you get no respect.” In other words, the more Americanized one becomes, the more likely he is to treat and be treated, speak and be spoken to, as an equal. This is not a phenomenon only Koreans notice. As P.M. Forni, author of *Choosing Civility* notes, “People from other parts of the world are often taken aback by the prevalence of informality and familiarity in American social interaction.”<sup>31</sup> Brooke and Rubin didn’t go so far as to pass judgment on this difference, but they, like many informants, expressed their fondness (not necessarily preference) of the “Korean way” of showing respect to the elder. Some referred to the biblical command of respecting elders, and others claimed they simply want to be polite. Whatever their explanation, and considering how long they have lived in America, my informants had not yet adapted (or assimilated) to what they see as the culture of equality.

The use of the word “respect” has a specific meaning here. It refers to a form of elevating of others, whether according to age, status, or some other vertical measure. The implication is not that there cannot be respect between equals, but that an elevating respect is not the norm in American society. Language is what most informants use as an example, though language is certainly not the only way to display elevating respect—there are countless rules on how to treat the elder in traditional Korean customs, from

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<sup>30</sup> Rubin is a 1.5er in his early forties. He is the Associate Pastor of a Korean American church in Ellicott City, Maryland, where Koreans are the third largest racial/ethnic group only after white and black. (As of 2007, Koreans made up five percent of the Ellicott City population, at 3,080. Total population: 61,616. City-data.com.)

<sup>31</sup> Forni 2002, 161.



turning one's face away from the elder when drinking, to waiting for the elder to pick up his utensils before eating. Language, however, is the most explicit and obvious form of showing what my informants call respect, and it offers an especially stark contrast to English, or rather, the American language.

Some Korean Americans use language to deliberately reinforce the norms of a hierarchical relationship in order to prevent it from slipping into an equal one. Joyce referred to her relationship with Hannah, who is three years older, as one between *unnie* and *dongseng*.<sup>32</sup> *Unnie* means “older sister” but commonly refers to any older female acquaintance, and *dongseng* means “younger sibling” and commonly refers to any younger acquaintance. They met at church when Joyce was in college and she recalled consciously deciding to speak to Hannah in *jondemal*—the honorific form of the Korean language, which is usually reserved for speaking “up.” She said,

I'm sure a lot of people can have really good *unnie-dongseng* relationships by having that friend-level. But because I like Hannah *unnie* and I really respect her, I wanted to make sure that shows in the way I talk to her, too. She told me I don't have to, but I said no. [Is it just because she's older?] No. Actually, Hannah *unnie* was also already married. I think that has a lot to do with it. So it's also status. Plus, she has a kid now. So now she's somebody's mother and wife. And that made me view her at a higher level. Not a better person, but a higher level.

At the core of Joyce's decision is displaying the behavior and using the language that she deems appropriate for this particular relationship. Joyce's choice to speak to Hannah in *jondemal* is unusual (because it is a norm that doesn't require conscientious decision-making), but preferring a hierarchical relationship to an equal one is not uncommon. This is what Korean Americans have in mind when they talk about the respect difference

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<sup>32</sup> Joyce is twenty-eight and Hannah is thirty-one. They are both 1.5ers.

between the two cultures. It is not that Americans are anti-relationships, but there is a resistance of hierarchical relationships, perhaps with the assumption that the more intimate the relationship, the more egalitarian it ought to be. On the contrary, for Korean Americans, an unequal relationship does not necessarily imply distance or stiff formality. Joyce said, "Sometimes, the closer you are, you need to show even more respect."

The crucial part is what follows the language. For Joyce, the language was just the beginning. She said, "I've noticed when I talk to older people, and I don't use *jondemal*, I joke around more. But if I purposely choose to use *jondemal*, I can't fool around because of the way I have to speak to them. And because of the way I speak to them, I treat them differently." Not all informants were as articulate about how powerful language can be, and surely, the more languages one speaks, the greater the sensitivity to language becomes. But for Joyce, language set the tone for behavior, not unlike the clothes and shoes that force us to walk a certain way, and she was appreciative of it. Is this a restricting formality? Perhaps, but it was a restriction she imposed on herself, and it served as a means to define and reinforce their relationship. She did not interpret this formality as insincerity, but as a sign of proper closeness between *unnie* and *dongseng*.

Does the lack of an honorific form in English have its own restrictions?

Absolutely. Many Korean Americans find that because there is no English *jondemal*, they feel as though they are being disrespectful when speaking to Koreans in English, so they purposely choose to speak in Korean. Kevin always speaks to his mother-in-law in Korean, though he admits his Korean is not great and his mother-in-law is fluent in English.<sup>33</sup> In terms of understanding, it may make more sense for the two of them to speak in English, but he said, "I can't not use *jondemal*, it just feels so awkward and rude

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<sup>33</sup> Kevin is a 28-year-old second generation Korean American.

to talk to adults that way.” (Again, the reference to “adults.”) The Korean language makes it easy for Korean Americans to show respect, while also pressuring them to do so. It may be a burden, but it is a burden that reinforces the due respect of that relationship, which is not even an option in English. One informant even commented, half jokingly, “We use English when we know we’re supposed to use *jondemal*, but we don’t want to.” For the bilingual Korean Americans, English becomes the language of equals, the language providing the option to avoid acknowledging a hierarchical relationship—to avoid having to show respect.

Jim is a Korean American who is dating a white American girl. Describing their relationship, he said, “We all get along. Her dad and I play golf. [What do you call her dad?] What do you mean? What do I call who? [Her dad.] My girlfriend’s dad? What do I call my girlfriend’s dad? [Yes.] Frank. What else would I call him? Mister? Lindsay’s dad? [Well, would you if he was Korean?] Oh, of course not. But haven’t you ever been in an office environment?” Jim didn’t quite understand what I was asking at first, and even once he understood the question, he seemed to be baffled by it. What else would he call him, other than his first name? Why would he treat him any differently than how he treats the people he works with?

This is not to suggest that English is the language of disrespect. Kevin would not suddenly disrespect his mother-in-law if he were to speak to her in English, nor is Jim disrespectful to his girlfriend’s dad. It is not impossible to show respect through English, or through any language for that matter. However, Korean Americans see their use of *jondemal* in marked contrast to English, which provides no honorific option, and thus cannot as easily reinforce a hierarchical relationship. We should note here, however, that

language is not static. Just as language shapes its speakers, speakers shape their language, and it is not a coincidence that there is no option of *jondemal* in today's American vernacular. Words like "My lord," "My lady," or the general addressing of another that simultaneously reinforce a hierarchical relationship, are only to be found in books and films of what seem like a distant era (though not very distant in actuality). They have been replaced by the standard "Mister" and "Miss," (and "Missus") which do not reinforce any relationship, let alone a hierarchical one. ("Sir" and "Ma'am" are closer to showing an elevating respect, which also seem to be fading.) If language is any indication of its speakers' character, America is increasingly a society of equal and independent individuals.

### *America's love of equality*

Democratic peoples love equality, as first observed by Tocqueville, who wrote, "[F]or equality they have an ardent, insatiable, eternal, invincible passion; they want equality in freedom, and, if they cannot get it, they still want it in slavery. They will tolerate poverty, enslavement, barbarism, but they will not tolerate aristocracy."<sup>34</sup> What was once a foreigner's astute observation has become a distinctly American trait. Americans show an increasing preference for equality over hierarchy, horizontal over vertical, peer over authority. As Alan Ehrenhalt pointed out in his 1995 essay, "Learning From the Fifties," "There are bumper stickers all over Washington that say, in big block capital letters, QUESTION AUTHORITY. There are none that say, LISTEN TO THE BOSS."<sup>35</sup> Ehrenhalt was critical of the equalizing phenomenon, and a great part of his

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<sup>34</sup> Tocqueville 2000, 482.

<sup>35</sup> Ehrenhalt 1995, 10.

work was aimed at reviving a sense of authority. Since then, the swing toward peers and friends, and away from leaders and superiors, has only gone further. As much as we value leadership and positive role models, the lack of respectable leaders and the refusal to be role models by spotlight figures are all too familiar today.<sup>36</sup> Promoting equality and egalitarianism is always more agreeable with the democratic spirit of America, and many political theorists have enthusiastically chimed in.

In *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam claimed “horizontal alliances” in our political, religious, and social institutions, (among other things) make for a more civic community, ultimately strengthening democracy.<sup>37</sup> Putnam’s work was met with much criticism (and praise), but his claim about horizontal alliances was hardly a problem. The claim seems almost intuitive—equality and democracy are inherently and conceptually intertwined, why *wouldn’t* horizontal alliances work better for democracy?

Mark E. Warren’s *Democracy and Association* also prioritizes equality in contemporary American civil society. Warren names two ideals of democracy: 1) equal power to make collective decisions, 2) equal participation in collective judgment.<sup>38</sup> If the opportunity to partake is not available to all, neither the process nor the outcome is democratic, and autonomy, what he claims is the fundamental democratic ideal, cannot be realized. Democratic society requires democratic associations, and that means equal power and equal participation.

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<sup>36</sup> A Washington Post article, “Where are the leaders?” by David Rothkopf, a former Commerce Department official for the Clinton administration, was published at the height of recession woes in 2009. Rothkopf pokes fun at the Secretary of Treasury who looks like Harry Potter, and at the President who is making “Tonight Show” appearances. (Rothkopf 2009.) In 2010, another article is published, by Steven Pearlstein, “It’s past time for President Obama to show some leadership.” (Pearlstein 2010.) Articles like these are interesting because on the one hand they express a frustration with the lack of leadership, and on the other, they show how unapologetically critical we are towards existing leaders.

<sup>37</sup> Putnam 1993.

<sup>38</sup> Warren 2001, 60.

This is not difficult to accept. Since equality is the defining principle of democracy, it would seem to follow that associations promoting and practicing equality make for a richer democracy. An association, where all participants have equal say (equal power), and all are willing to listen to one another (mutual respect), is a vision of democratic politics at its best. A great deal of political theory, especially since Rawls, has been devoted to this vision, with autonomous individuals of various backgrounds and beliefs (diversity!), engaged in a fair and civil exchange (deliberating!), arriving at decisions that all participants have contributed to in one way or another.

To be sure, I am not opposed to the principle of equality. It is indeed equality that has provided the rhetoric for some of the nation's greatest accomplishments, from Women's Suffrage to Civil Rights. In addition, the belief in equality extends beyond politics, providing the basis for a widespread belief in self-sufficiency, also a cherished American value. Tocqueville wrote, "The inhabitants of the United States learns from birth that he must rely on himself to struggle against the evils and obstacles of life."<sup>39</sup> Whatever successes or failures one has, they are his alone. And because Americans answer to themselves alone, not to a master or a superior as in an aristocracy, their deeds are more authentic. An act, whether of virtue or vice, must be attributed to the actor alone, because he acts autonomously. There is no one above, commanding him to be nice to his neighbor or to chaperone a field trip. Because we are equal, and thus capable of acting autonomously, our actions toward one another are that much more sincere and meaningful. The rhetoric of equality is further used as a means of creating community, of creating obligatory and egalitarian relationships—I will not look down on you and I will treat you with respect, *because* we are equal. That is what "treating one another as

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<sup>39</sup> Tocqueville 2000, 180.

equals” means in America. The idea of reciprocity fits well with a society of equals, which Putnam described as, “I’ll do this for you now, in the expectation that you (or perhaps someone else) will return the favor.”<sup>40</sup> Reciprocity is only possible amongst equal and autonomous individuals, who have the capacity to willingly do for others as well as to return the favor.

Americans are quite uncomfortable with inequality, politically and economically, though they know it exists. The rhetoric of equality provides an ideal, a language for individuals to rely on, in the face of blatant injustice or discrimination that they instinctively know as unfair. In matters where hierarchy is arbitrary and seriously damaging, like race, the equality ideal is good news. However, is equality also the ideal in our small places of interpersonal relations? Should our civil societies and our communities also uphold equality as an ideal?

Warren’s answer is no, as he points out that autonomy is a political good, and that it does not work in primary relationships.<sup>41</sup> However, even in theory, and as well as in terms of the political good, hierarchy is not necessarily destructive to autonomy, and it can have a place in a vibrant community life. This may seem counterintuitive, as hierarchy is by definition opposed to equality, and equality may seem to be a good thing anywhere in a democratic society. However, we ought to revisit our love of equality, our reliance on horizontal alliances—they may have a hand at breaking down communities, isolating individuals, more so than we care to realize. Like many civil society scholars, community life in America is my concern, and I have no doubt that a lively civic community is essential to democracy. But equality, as an ideal, which is supposed to be

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<sup>40</sup> Putnam 2000, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Warren 2001, 62.

the great democratic achievement, may be starting to show long-term side effects that ultimately hinder community life rather than enhance it.

***What's wrong with equality?***

What happens in a society of equals when the reciprocity cycle stops? What happens when I do for you, and you don't do for me? What happens when I offer my hand you leave me hanging? What happens when I am the only one who repeatedly chaperones field trips? Reciprocity is broken, trust is replaced by insecurity, suspicion, and defensiveness. "I do for you, you do for me" becomes "I'll do for you *as long as* you do for me," or skips right to "I won't do for you and you won't do for me." This is the other side, the ugly side, of reciprocity—a sincere and mutual mind-your-own-business. Just as reaching out can be reciprocated between equals, ignoring can also be reciprocated between equals.

The ugly side of reciprocity is not the immediate result of a society of equals, but it seems Tocqueville was quite insightful about the long-term character of a democratic citizenry—"The same equality that makes him independent of each of his fellow citizens in particular leaves him isolated...."<sup>42</sup>; and this isolation changes the way we see ourselves and one another—"These owe nothing to anyone, they expect so to speak nothing from anyone; they are in the habit of always considering themselves in isolation, and they willingly fancy that their whole destiny is in their hands."<sup>43</sup> The conditions of equality that free us from arbitrary vertical chains also free us from any and all chains, which makes an atomized citizenry that much more likely.

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<sup>42</sup> Tocqueville 2000, 413.

<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville 2000, 484.



This is not to suggest that only selfishness motivates individuals to be in equal relationships. Generosity could very well be a motive—I don't want to be a burden on you, so let's mutually not do for each other. There is nothing malicious or blameworthy about such an attitude, but whatever the motive, a relationship between perfect equals (which doesn't exist in reality) is inherently more fragile, because it expects more of a balanced give and take, and undermines an independent obligation. Let us explore this further.

First, in a world of equals, it is instinctive to return self-interest with self-interest, or what game theorists call tit-for-tat.<sup>44</sup> An egalitarian relationship can easily turn into, if it did not begin as, a contractual one, where scorekeeping becomes all too easy, and nobody wants to give more than he has received. Why? What equals do for each other is perceived as easily comparable, whereas what unequals do for each other is not. Between equals, such as friends, it is the expected norm for the give and take to be relatively balanced—I'll buy lunch today, you buy lunch tomorrow, and so on. But if I buy lunch today and you refuse to buy lunch tomorrow, I will probably not buy lunch again. The decision is fair, justified, and ought to be expected. Perhaps I even "have a right" to not buy lunch again. After all, no one can be expected to continuously buy lunch.

My informant, Jiae, encountered this very phenomenon at her workplace.<sup>45</sup> She said, "My co-worker and I go to lunch together all the time, and at first I covered for her whenever she was short a few bucks. It wasn't a big deal, I didn't care. But after awhile, it was adding up, and she never offered to pay me back, or cover for me. I mean, I was

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<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting here that game theory, as well as Rational Choice Theory, fundamentally assumes equality, as well as autonomy.

<sup>45</sup> Jiae is a 27-year-old second generation Korean American.

never short, so I don't know if she would have covered for me if I was. But I wish she would have at least offered to buy me lunch once in awhile, because now we're like *nam-nam* (strangers) over a few bucks. We don't go to lunch anymore, and I don't like that. I don't want to be stingy, but I have to be. She made me stingy." Meanwhile, Jiae's boss buys lunch for her pretty consistently, and she sees nothing unfair about that.

Clearly, Jiae's co-worker didn't "make her" stingy. But between equals, it is instinctive to want to even the score, because the two by definition are supposed to be balanced, whereas between unequals, it is impossible to keep score. Jiae never offered to buy lunch for her boss, and her boss does not expect a pay-back, as the very idea of trying to equalize an obviously unequal relationship is absurd. Is a student supposed to return the favor to her teacher? Is a daughter supposed to pay back her mom? What would that even entail, anyway? It is impossible to adopt a tit-for-tat strategy with an unequal, and while there may still be reciprocity, it is of an asymmetrical nature—I will buy you lunch, you will work diligently; I will give lectures, you will do homework. And asymmetrical reciprocity is impossible to even out—how many lunches are equivalent to how many days of diligent work? The impossibility of comparison in an unequal relationship makes imbalance the norm, and it further makes the relationship less likely to turn into a deal. A teacher does not look to his students' effort to see how much effort he ought to put into his lecture, whereas co-workers look to each other and measure themselves up to the other. Therefore, a relationship between equals is likely to become uneasy or even break as soon as an imbalance occurs, as with Jiae and her co-worker. And once reciprocity has come to a halt between equals, it is unlikely to spark again. Jiae is probably cautious about lending other co-workers money since then, and who can blame her? As long as

they are equal, why shouldn't their give and take be equal?

Secondly, in an egalitarian relationship, obligation to the other is less recognizable. Stark inequality often creates a sense of obligation—the older feel obligated to look after the young, the experienced feel obligated to show the way, the leader feels obligated to be an example. It is the “bigger person” who feels obligated, who is associated with being an example, overlooking mistakes, forgiving, etc. It is not a coincidence that charity organizations portray the recipients, often children or more recently, animals, as helpless, unable to do for themselves, and “they need our help.” If they were “equal” to the audience, nobody would be moved to give. The audience is assumed to be the “bigger person,” otherwise, there is less of an obligation. Between equals, the instinctive reaction may sound like this: “We have the same capabilities and opportunities; why should I, or would I, do for you?” This is very related to the principle of self-sufficiency, which is not a bad thing in itself, but it contributes to undermining any obligation to the other.

Just as the give and take is expected to be asymmetrical between unequals, the nature of obligation is also expected to be asymmetrical. The smaller person has a different set of obligations from the bigger person's, and the two sets of obligations are not dependent on each other. For instance, the teacher is obligated to give constructive criticism on students' performance and the student is obligated to attend class and put effort into his performance—and each party's obligations stand, even if the other does not fulfill theirs. The teacher understands that his obligations are separate from the students' obligations, simply because he is the teacher and they are the students, and no amount of the students' refusal to do his work would justify the teachers' refusal to do his. It is their

difference, their inequality in positions, that gives each their respective obligations.

The lack of obligation to one another (or the refusal to acknowledge obligation) is precisely the issue raised by Alan Wolfe, in the now classic *Whose Keeper?*<sup>46</sup> The enemy here is laws of self-interest, which Wolfe associates with the laws of the market, and he blames the market for much of the self-interested mentality among the American citizenry. Wolfe is neither the first nor last to make this argument, and it is an absolutely valid claim that the language of the market turns individuals into anonymous consumers and producers, nothing more and nothing less. The only relationships are economic, the only goal efficiency. We need to remember, however, that while self-interest may be exacerbated by the market, it is by no means created by the market. As we learned from Hobbes, self-interest is an inherent part of the natural condition of mankind—where the market, or the state, did not exist. What did exist in the Hobbesian state of nature, along with self-interest, was equality.

Hobbes is credited as the theorist of equality—we are made equal by our ability to kill one another, and our mutual interest in survival. Our equality enabled us to recognize and act upon those mutual interests, but we also knew that the only way to prevent any of us from pursuing the self-interest of killing the other would be the creation of the sovereign—which, in order to be effective, must be utterly paramount in power over the subjects. The subjects created a relationship with the sovereign, not with each other. In other words, the contract was vertical, not horizontal—and this is the genius of Hobbes. If the contract was, instead, between free and equal individuals, to not kill each other at the very least, the deal would have been broken in no time, because it would have been in every individual's interest to do so. As soon as one individual failed to keep up his end of

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<sup>46</sup> Wolfe 1989.

the deal, the reasonable and intuitive reaction would be to seek revenge. (And to be the first one to break the deal would only be a result of self-interest and reason.) But the very concept of revenge does not quite fit in the unequal relationship between the subjects and the sovereign, because the sovereign remains the insurmountable bigger person over his subjects. A match between the two is no match at all. Subjects by comparison are too weak to even try to destroy Leviathan, or to leave the commonwealth, both of which would surely result in death, and that makes this unequal relationship, whether a pleasant one or not, permanent. The subjects do their part, the sovereign does his, and the obligations and benefits for the two parties are so utterly unequal, that they can neither forget it or alter the nature of the relationship.

It is not until Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, where individuals (citizens, not subjects) make horizontal alliances with one another, and there is, in the long run, a sense of mutual obligation. However, the way to fulfill the obligation to the other is indirect, primarily by pursuing one's own interest. In other words, their obligation to the other *is* to act in accordance with their self-interest. Today, economists take this for granted—help others by helping yourself, which assumes that human beings don't have direct obligatory relationships with one another, only contracts that must be worth the payoff for the individual. (And if the payoff is not worth the contract, any self-interested individual cannot be expected to keep the contract.) With Locke, we began to hail equality and autonomy not only as a natural condition, but as a worthy principle in itself. And here sets in the paradox—we uphold equality and we value mutual obligation to one another, but in a society of equals, it is in everyone's interest to break any and all obligatory ties.

The point here is not that all obligatory and community-building relationships must be hierarchical, but that a relationship between equals makes score-keeping more likely, and obligations less recognizable, thereby making relationships more deal-like and obligation-free. Loose relationships that can and ought to be dropped as soon as there is an imbalance or it no longer serves one's interest, are fragile building-blocks for a community. Furthermore, the language of equality is habitual, as any language is, and can rub off on the most obviously unequal relationships, making them seemingly contractual and obligation-free, which is explained away or even made legitimate by the language of equality. In other words, the ideal of equality becomes the cause as well as the effect.

It would be quite an exaggeration to say that American society is on the path toward isolation as a result of the equality ideal, but recent trends of “generational cocoons” and “sibling societies,” to which we now turn, seem to indicate that we are increasingly resisting the bigger person in our interpersonal worlds, from workplaces and schools, to families and neighborhoods. Now, not having bigger persons wouldn't be a problem, if we could be responsible self-sufficient individuals as equals, keep up with our reciprocity with others, and become our own critics. (And in many ways, this was the great vision of the Enlightenment.) However, the side-effects of relationships with equals only perpetuates itself, reproducing and legitimizing more fragile and obligation-free relationships with equals. The more we see each other as equals, the more accustomed we become to only equals, and the more uncomfortable we become with bigger persons.

***Result: sibling societies***

Suppose a teacher says, “I'm not going to prepare for class because the students

are not doing their work,” (which unfortunately does happen), or a parent says, “I’m going to live long enough to get back at my kids.” (I once saw a hat with this statement.) All kidding aside, this sort of mentality clearly disrupts the maintenance of obligatory relationships. Sure, a teacher with enthusiastic students is going to be more motivated, and every parent feels frustration with his kids at some point. But such a teacher or parent seriously undermines the nature of his relationship, by turning the relationship into a deal, not feeling the obligations of his position, and refusing to be the bigger person. The more we speak the language of equals, the more we only have relationships with equals, or, put another way, the more we equalize our relationships. Few works I find particularly compelling will be mentioned here, and while each describe different crises with different causes, they commonly highlight Americans’ increasing preference for equals with damaging results.

Poet and author Robert Bly calls contemporary America a “sibling society,” where “the teaching is that no one is superior to anyone else.”<sup>47</sup> Adolescence is now stretching to the mid-thirties, and the absence of fathers and mentors are wreaking havoc in our homes, schools, and politics. Daughters are more likely to become teenage moms, and sons face two hazards: “One is that he will plunge on into life too far or too quickly, and end up as a coarse person, cheating on everyone, unfathered, unmothered, insatiable, addicted, in jail. The other is that he will retreat into isolation and make his life perfect with a computer.”<sup>48</sup> What the sibling society clearly lacks is vertical ties, bigger persons. Instead of autonomous and equal individuals forming vibrant communities, reciprocating each other’s good deeds, and becoming their own responsible masters, the sibling society

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<sup>47</sup> Bly 1996, 132.

<sup>48</sup> Bly 1996, 126.

is made up of orphans, who have no one to look up to, and no one to look after.

Political theorist Benjamin Barber critiques the market and its “infantilizing” effects in his latest work *Consumed*,<sup>49</sup> which describes the love of equality in new heights. “Age denial is everywhere”—grandmothers have no wrinkles, pre-teens wear thongs, and supposed role models (i.e. athletes) live like children. “Acting one’s age” doesn’t mean anything anymore—we want to be “kidults” for as long as possible, surrounded by our peers. The desire to be with and amongst one’s equals is rapidly spreading, and is mutually reinforced by the culture of consumerism. Barber’s ultimate concern is the democratic citizenry, and his target is the market—which is not necessarily a shared point across disciplines. But his emphasis on Americans’ refusal (or rush) to grow up, increasing signs of equalizing, is revealed in the works of scholars of various academic backgrounds.

Mark Bauerlein’s *Dumbest Generation* is, at heart, worried for young Americans’ intelligence (anyone under thirty), and he places the blame on digital technology. But more than the simple criticism that computers make us think less, a crucial part of his argument is the “generational cocoon” adolescents wrap themselves in through their texts, blogs, and *Facebook*. Adolescence was once a “tenuous middle ground between the needs of childhood and the duties of adulthood... Not anymore.”<sup>50</sup> We live well into our thirties as “Twixters,” as if “mature identity is entirely a social matter developed with and through their friends.”<sup>51</sup> What is more, the mentors have also thrown in the towel, in an effort to not seem “mean-spirited.” The youth are encouraged to remain young by their computers, friends, and teachers, though the fact of aging is not so different in the digital

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<sup>49</sup> Barber 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Bauerlein 2008, 168.

<sup>51</sup> Bauerlein 2008, 173.



era from what it was ages ago.

To be sure, recent emergence of generational cocoons are not equivalent to the love of equality in Tocqueville's time. Then, democracy was new, equality was new, and though Tocqueville saw potential problems, he was relatively optimistic. Community, family, religion, the market—none of these institutions were in danger of breaking down or being the cause of a breakdown, and they were the very pillars that would prevent (or fix) the potential isolationism, the long-term worst-case scenario built into conditions of equality. Today, though we cannot pinpoint a breakdown in any one of these institutions as the source, much of Tocqueville's fears of an isolated citizenry seem to be coming true. Conditions of equality has stretched to new heights of extremes, far surpassing the political. Love of equality is not a problem in itself, but it is not a coincidence that equality-loving America faces community-declining woes.

Bly, Barber, and Bauerlein are not advocates of strict, hierarchical structures within our society, market, or school. (Neither am I, for that matter.) They do, however, point out worrisome trends that are clearly related to a stretched-out concept of equality. Whether we blame parents, the market, or the Internet, we are increasingly preferring relationships with our equals, and making ourselves equal to those who are not.<sup>52</sup> We are increasingly leaderless, traditionless, directionless—but we'll take that over demanding bosses, authoritarian teachers, and arbitrary superiors, any day. We don't want to look up, we don't want to be looked up to; we don't want to judge, we don't want to be judged; we don't want to be responsible, and we certainly don't want to be held responsible. By surrounding ourselves with equals, we are not obligated, nor expected, to do any of the above. Looking up or down is much more burdensome than looking sideways, and thus

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<sup>52</sup> Also see the growing trend of "best-friend moms." Goudreau 2009.

loose friendships with our “peers” suit us just fine, a pool which evidently grows everyday.<sup>53</sup>

Americans are uncomfortable with judgment, on both giving and receiving ends, which is quite logical in a society of equals, where everyone is supposedly his own judge.<sup>54</sup> If judgment comes from an equal, we are not as likely to receive it well, because who are they to judge? Equals may exchange, compete, even fight, but judgment has a one-way, and vertical, connotation, that it seems unwarranted coming or going from equals.

Again, the reluctance of judgment may come from a benevolent motive, not a selfish one. We see so much of our own faults that we know we cannot be the bigger person to others. There seems to be an unwritten rule among equals, that if you’re not taking your own advice, don’t give any out. Even when we do criticize, we may begin with a disclaimer, such as “I’m not perfect, but...” or “I don’t do this well, but...”

Looking at ourselves before judging others is not a bad rule in itself. In the Gospel of John Jesus himself set this standard when villagers were about to stone an adulterer, and he said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”<sup>55</sup> No one threw a single stone and the woman lived.

But was the woman blameless? No, she was not, but no one else was, either.<sup>56</sup>

Jesus’s point was not that the woman’s sins are not deserving of punishment, but that the

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<sup>53</sup> Generational cocoons are not just for the young—the booming number of retirement communities is also evidence of this trend. See FitzGerald 1981, on one of the first retirement communities of America, Sun City.

<sup>54</sup> Even television seems to reflect Americans’ reluctance to judge. Notice, just in the last decade, how many popular competitive Reality TV shows have featured a foreigner, usually British, as the judge. Examples include *American Idol*, *America’s Got Talent*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *Hell’s Kitchen*, etc.

<sup>55</sup> John 8:7. New International Version.

<sup>56</sup> The modern version of this lesson is the popular saying, the kettle calling the pot black. The kettle is not incorrect in calling the pot black; it is overlooking his own blackness. But the kettle’s blackness does not undo the pot’s—they are both black.

villagers also have sinned, and that they ought to look at their own faults before pointing to someone else's. While it is certainly a good thing that people don't take matters of serious punishment into their own hands anymore, this lesson only works where there is an ultimate judge, in this case, God. In a society of equals, however, the result may be a lack of judgment altogether, and perhaps, even the lack of the capacity to judge. Some may say this is a good thing, that we need less judgment, not more, but the fact that we should not judge others does not make our capacity to judge any less necessary. If anything, because equals don't judge one another, individuals ought to actually sharpen their capacity to judge, because they now have to act as their own judges. A sibling society is inherently in tension with the concept of judgment, but the complete lack of judgment does no favors for any society.

A hierarchical structure is not the unequivocally better option for society. However, in an unequal relationship, the obligations of each respective place is more recognizable, and that is precisely what the relationship culture reinforces. And once the language becomes familiar, we recognize that every relationship inherently carries a set of obligations, even relationships between equals—a friend has obligations to the other simply because he is the friend. My informants placed much more importance on knowing their place in relationships, as opposed to maintaining equality, and that was what created and held together obligatory relationships within the community.

### ***Knowing your place***

As part of my research, I set out to join a Bible study group organized by a

Korean American church. The church provided three separate groups—college students, post-college young adults, and married couples. I joined the only one I could, the post-college group, where there were about ten other Korean Americans in their twenties. At my first meeting, the leader of the group (who was also the oldest) asked me my name and age. This is not uncommon among Koreans. Age is almost always a part of the introduction.

Around the same time I joined another Bible study group, organized by an American church, with no ethnic affiliation, and here the members were racially diverse (4 white, 2 African American, 3 Korean American, 1 Mexican American). We met regularly for four months, and only halfway through did we find out everyone's age—and even then, the question was initiated by a Korean American member.

In America it is considered rude to ask people their age, and even more so at the initial meeting. However, age, or rank and order, carries much weight among Koreans. Koreans want to know everyone's age so they can place each other in proper order (size them up), even if the age gap is relatively small.<sup>57</sup> (In both groups, all members were no more than ten years apart.) Only then, can they call each other by the proper name, use the proper language, and show the proper etiquette. This was certainly the case in the Korean Bible study group—almost all of the talking was done in English, but the members younger than me started calling me *unnie* or *noona*,<sup>58</sup> even asked me for advice at times, while the older members did no such thing. I also began calling the older members *unnie* and *oppa*,<sup>59</sup> seeing that that is the norm for this group. In my American

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<sup>57</sup> During my research, I came across Korean American twin sisters, who called each other *unnie* (older sister) and *dongseng* (younger sister). The *unnie* commented, "Twins care even more about order than typical siblings."

<sup>58</sup> *Unnie* is what a girl calls her older sister; *noona* is what a guy calls his older sister.

<sup>59</sup> *Oppa* is what a girl calls her older brother.

group, however, finding out each other's age made no difference. We began as friends, we remained friends. We each had distinct personalities and roles within the group, as with the Korean group, but age had nothing to do with our roles. Age was just one more piece of information we learned about each other, and the group carried on as they had.

There is a Korean saying, which I heard numerous times during my research, which literally means to “watch my place.”<sup>60</sup> The closest English translation is probably “to know my place,” or “to keep my place,” though the Korean is almost always used in the context of duty. Age is a major part of understanding where one's place is, because that is how one figures out how to behave, how to relate to others. The members of the Korean Bible study group could not even begin to have a conversation with one another, until they were able to see everyone in their respective places.

In the Korean family, ranking most obviously begins with siblings, and each sibling-position comes with a set of responsibilities, tendencies, and even personality traits. The oldest is the mature and responsible one, while the youngest is the baby and thus the most spoiled but lovable one.<sup>61</sup> Each place has its costs and benefits, but more importantly, each has its responsibilities. Recall Dain from the beginning of this chapter, who worked for his parents on the weekends, by choice, because he was “the older one.” He didn't work because he was the responsible one, or the one his parents relied on—rather, he was responsible and relied on by his parents *because* he was the older one. His place made him, not the other way around.

Because each sibling has its own place, sibling rivalry takes on a different meaning to Koreans. Rivalry is done between equals, not between the above and below.

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<sup>60</sup> *Jagi jari jikyuh*.

<sup>61</sup> See Pak 2006, especially Chapters 5 and 6, for similar and more detailed narratives on being the firstborn.

This is not to suggest that Korean siblings get along any better, that is beside the point, but rather, that sibling dynamics is often explained in terms of their order. For instance, Dain doesn't exactly get upset with his younger brother, but he disapproves of him. He doesn't fight with his brother, but he scolds him. Most importantly, and this is what makes the relationship culture endure, Dain fulfills what he believes are his responsibilities as the oldest son *regardless* of whether or not his brother is fulfilling his. At the time of the interview I had the impression that Dain was not so happy with his brother, but it didn't make him any less of an older brother. It didn't matter how bad of a younger brother Dain's brother was; the family arrangement was not a deal, and he was the oldest, period.

There are certainly families where the oldest is not at all the responsible one, but there seems to be an understanding that the oldest one is *supposed to be* the responsible one. Esther's family was one of those cases.<sup>62</sup> Though Esther has an older brother, she was designated as the one her parents relied on more (for mundane tasks that require knowledge of English, from calling the telephone company to filling out paperwork). She complained, "I don't know why I get stuck with stuff like this. I'm not even the older one." This is the form sibling rivalry takes in Korean families, if we can call it that. It is not that the responsibilities of each place are always fulfilled, but that there are responsibilities that ideally, as revealed in their language, come with the territory of each place.

Even when addressing conflict, the language of the relationship culture is used. Mindy's dad left her family years ago and she hasn't heard from him since.<sup>63</sup> She is

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<sup>62</sup> Esther is a 27-year-old second generation Korean American.

<sup>63</sup> Mindy is a 27-year-old second generation Korean American.

getting married soon, and her friend asked her what she would do if her father showed up to walk her down the aisle. Mindy answered, “He can’t walk me down the aisle. Can he even call himself my dad? It would be like a relative coming to my wedding. Dads don’t walk out on their family; he gave that up when he left.” To Mindy, her dad was not exactly a bad father, but not a father at all, because he did what fathers don’t do. He had left his place as a father, and as far as Mindy was concerned, that made him no longer her father.

“Knowing your place” may carry an authoritarian, perhaps even a chauvinistic, connotation. However, in the relationship culture, hierarchical relationships do not entail a top-down, dominating, command-control, where individuals merely obey the instructions of those above, and completely lose their autonomy. Rather, each individual willingly keeps his place and voluntarily stays within its expectations, limits and boundaries, because he identifies with the place he is in. In this way, the place in a relationship can become a source of autonomy, since the duties of that place does not depend on how well others fulfill their respective duties. Maintaining one’s place, as opposed to simply obeying or keeping a deal, is what gives the individual an identity, and keeps him connected to the various relationships he is in.

The relationship culture is perhaps most obvious in the family, but it goes far beyond, and age is not the only factor determining one’s place. Rather than a ladder with each rung representing one’s place, the more accurate picture would be a web. Not only are other positions above and below, but also beside, diagonal from, few degrees away from, and so on. Each individual occupies a place or a position in society, and they are all

linked, with each link being a specific kind of relationship, with a specific set of expectations. Not knowing one's place, or improperly fulfilling one's place, would be a source of disorder in the web. And not having a place would be a void that the relationship culture does not allow.

A group of Korean ladies were talking about a woman, who had become the center of gossip for having an affair. Instead of attacking the woman as an individual, they talked about her places, or more specifically, the abandonment of her places: "She calls herself a mother?"; "That's no mother"; and "Isn't she a deacon at so-and-so church?" Because she had not successfully "watched her place," she was being demeaned as a mother and a deacon. And by referring to the respective places occupied by the woman, the conversation served as a reminder of what mothers and deacons are (not) supposed to do.

But what if she wasn't a mother? What if she didn't have a family? What if she didn't go to church?<sup>64</sup> She would have been an isolated individual—and that would be unthinkable. In the relationship culture, the potential danger is bad relationships, but not no relationships, which is an absurdity. My advisor, Fred Alford, discusses the horror of no relationships in his work *Think No Evil*—a field study conducted in South Korea.<sup>65</sup> He argues that Koreans' definition of evil is isolation, or having no relationships, but because it is such a horrifying thought, they can hardly conceive of it, hence the title. Though the study was conducted more than twenty years ago, my informants displayed a similar discomfort with the idea of no relationships. One informant described a family she knows as, "They're one of those *isolated* families," and she said it in such a disapproving

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<sup>64</sup> For one, the ladies probably would have said, "No wonder she doesn't have family." There's a harshness in Koreans' speech that even I was at times shocked to hear.

<sup>65</sup> Alford 1990.



manner, lowering her voice, as if this family belonged to a cult. The normalness of the relationship culture that was found in Koreans in Korea years ago was also found in today's rising generation of Korean Americans.

When thinking about the relationship culture, I am often reminded of Plato's just city built on the noble lie, where according to the metal in your blood, you have a place, a function, a purpose. By staying in your place and fulfilling its purpose you are "minding your own business," which is the best, or the most just, thing you could be doing. Staying in your place is what contributes to the whole of the city and keeps you connected to the city. Now, it would be quite bad if you tried to squeeze into a place other than where your metal indicates—you would cause a disturbance for everyone, a rift in the city as a whole. But it would be even worse, it would be absolutely horrifying, if you didn't have a place at all. You would have no place, no relationships, you would be utterly alone—you would be, what the Greeks called, an "idiot," or alone.

Undergraduate students typically find Plato's city horrifying—you're stuck in a class! What could be worse than a system that dictates where you belong? The whole notion is totally un-American. But in today's liberal democracy, not having a place is a greater problem than being stuck in a place, especially for young people. The problematic trend is no longer strict parents who dictate their children's lives, or small towns where individuals don't have the option of branching out. It is rather placelessness, the insecurity of not having a place, that drives this extended period of "soul-searching" adolescence. Libertarians may treasure that kind of freedom, but as Ehrenhalt said with brutal honesty, most of us don't have what it takes to be libertarians! Most of us are *not* "bright and articulate and individualistic and wanting nothing more than the freedom to

try all the choices and experiments that life has to offer and express our individuality in an endless series of new and creative ways. . . . Most people want a chart to follow. . . .”<sup>66</sup>  
Most of us long for a place to belong more than the freedom to be utterly without a place.

Alford’s work was about Koreans in Korea, and how the age of globalization was a threat to traditional relationships. If Koreans do become atomized, if they do become more isolated, much of it will occur without their awareness of it. (Rarely does the spirit of community deliberately decline.) Korean Americans, however, are very conscious of the individualist tendencies of American society precisely because they see the contrast between their Korean community and the American society at large. (This is the sort of awareness that minorities, or even travelers, develop.) Korean Americans consciously understand that Koreans are more relational, that Americans are more egalitarian and individualist, and they are aware of the advantages and disadvantages to both because they face both on a regular basis.

This is not to suggest that the relationship culture makes for all healthy relationships, or that equality makes good relationships impossible. What the relationship culture does is provide a language that reinforces the place and relationships of an individual, and that language becomes a tool to counter self-interest in order to keep a relationship alive—often times, even if an individual has been wronged by a self-interested other. “You don’t do for me, I don’t do for you” is a meaningless statement in the relationship culture, because “I” am never merely an “I,” apart from my positions, and what I do for you depends on what place I am in, not what you do for me. The relationship culture provides an answer to “What if I do for you, and you don’t do for me?” I do for you anyway, because that is what I—the older brother, the student, the

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<sup>66</sup> Ehrenhalt 1995, 23.

pastor—am supposed to do; that is what older brothers (and teachers and pastors), by definition, do.

### ***Know and do***

Much of the literature on Korean Americans portray them as though they are under pressure from their family, community, and other traditionally Korean expectations, to conform to roles and what is expected of them. This is indeed the case for many Korean Americans, but the part that is not as highlighted is that much of the pressure is self-imposed.

Another often-repeated phrase I heard during my research was “*al-ah-suh-heh*” which literally means “know and do,” but can be translated as “do on your own” or “do without having to be told.” The relationship culture expects voluntarily self-imposed duty—it expects individuals to *know and do* what they are supposed to. This is not to suggest that Korean Americans always do what they are supposed to do—that is far from the truth. But there seemed to be an understanding among Korean Americans that upon reaching a certain level of maturity, individuals simply ought to know better and voluntarily perform their duties, defined by their relationships and places in life, without incentives or threats hanging over their heads. Each place voluntarily maintains its position, not under an order, which would make it not voluntary at all, but as a result of learning to identify oneself with the positions occupied. And in the event one does not voluntarily know and do, there will always be a relational other in the proper place to tell him so.

A few years ago I volunteered as staff for a youth group retreat at a Korean

American church. The theme of the retreat was Know Your Role, primarily focusing on the different roles for men and women as biblically commanded. At the retreat, boys and girls were frequently separated, and many gender issues were covered—the difference in roles between mother and father, husband and wife, and men and women in the church. A repeated point at this retreat was that one role was not better or more powerful than the other, but that they were simply different roles God had designated. And if you don't know your role, or you don't fulfill the role properly, not only would you be disobeying God, you would also be blundering the relationship with your church, your spouse, your children, and so on.<sup>67</sup>

The relationship culture is not particularly Christian, but the theme of this retreat was consistent with both. By fulfilling the roles we are given, we keep our relationships going, and even strengthen it. When we don't fulfill the roles, we are challenging the nature of those relationships, or threatening to break them off (and there are definitely circumstances where it is better for a relationship to end). And because different relationships have different expectations, (what my friends expect from me is not what my boss expects from me), maintaining good relationships requires knowing those differences.<sup>68</sup>

The expectation for individuals to “know and do” creates its own communication methods, since, as one informant put it, “Koreans aren't good at direct communication, especially to someone above.” In other words, because individuals are expected to know

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<sup>67</sup> I am not certain if non-Korean churches have similar themes in their youth retreats, but the ethics of keeping one's place is a commonly preached and practiced theme throughout Korean churches.

<sup>68</sup> The tricky thing about Koreans and their expectations is that it is rarely discussed. Koreans have a word, *noonchi*, which many of my informants mentioned as a major difference between Korean and American cultures. *Noon* means eye, *-chi* can be translated as sense, and *noonchi* is usually translated as the ability to sense something without being directly told so. It is like a sixth sense—but primarily used to refer to sensing the mood in the room or sensing what the other is trying to say without their having to say it. See Chapter 3 for more details on *noonchi*.

and do on their own, if they end up doing something wrong, others don't quite know how to react. One informant, Jae, shared such an incident at his Korean church, which is predominantly first-generation and Korean-speaking.<sup>69</sup> A few months ago, some of the church members started talking about a complaint they had with the pastor, who evidently had said something inappropriate on several occasions, deeply offending one of the members. Nobody approached the pastor about it, though a few members repeatedly discussed it amongst themselves. But what they emphasized during these talks was not how to approach the pastor with the complaint, but the fact that the pastor should have known better not to make such mistakes. Jae said, "If the pastor would just 'know and do' on his own, we wouldn't have had a problem." I asked, "How is the pastor supposed to know that he did anything wrong, if no one will tell him?" to which Jae replied, "He's the pastor. He should know. [But what if he has no idea?] Then what kind of pastor is he? Well, somebody had to tell him, but it wasn't going to be us. And it's insulting to him, for one of us to have to tell him what he did wrong." Eventually, one of the members discreetly talked to the pastor's wife, who then notified the pastor, at which point the pastor immediately contacted the member he had offended and apologized. Problem solved.

What seems like a very inefficient and roundabout way of problem-solving has its own logic. Jae and other disgruntled members did not directly approach the pastor because then, they would be going against what they, as members, should know and do. Talking to the pastor's wife was one thing, talking to the pastor was another—not even an option. When I first asked Jae why they did not directly talk to the pastor, he looked at

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<sup>69</sup> Jae is a 1.5er in his mid-thirties.

me, stumped, and said, “We don’t do that. Would you do that?”<sup>70</sup> I then asked, “So it’s okay for the pastor to approach you, but not the other way around?” Jae replied, “Right. He’s the pastor. . . . I mean, none of this would have happened if the pastor just didn’t make the mistake, but that doesn’t mean we should make a mistake, too.” So it is not that direct communication is simply frowned upon, but that there are appropriate ways of communication for different relationships. Somebody was in the right place to talk to the pastor, but it was not Jae. Jae seemed satisfied that things turned out the way they were supposed to. No relationship was damaged beyond repair, and everyone, including the pastor’s wife, played their part well.

Each particular relationship has its do’s and don’t’s, and maintaining the proper etiquette was key to maintaining harmonious relationships. The only way to be successful is to know one’s respective position well and adhere to its boundaries.

### ***Titles***

Importance of individuals’ respective positions means there is also an importance to individuals’ titles, the names we have for one another. Koreans make quite a deal of what to call one another, and not knowing what to call someone is just as rudely awkward as not knowing someone’s name. Like the earlier example of Joyce calling Hannah *unnie*, referring to others by a title is a sign of respect and the kind of relationship, but there is more to it than that. Titles also serve as a reminder of one’s duty and obligation.

Because families tend to immigrate together, it is not unusual for Korean Americans and their entire extended families to live in the same area. Claudia’s extended family lived within an hour’s drive from her, and she married a Korean American whose

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<sup>70</sup> To which I had to admit, “No, I wouldn’t do that, either.”

extended family also lives within an hour's drive.<sup>71</sup> (Claudia and her husband met at church, and both families still attend the same church.) Keeping in mind that older generations tend to have more siblings, a family gathering for Claudia is no small event. During the interview Claudia talked about the different titles she has to use for each one of her and her husband's family members, and she laughingly commented that she doesn't even know the proper names for all, because there are so many. For instance, there are eight different ways to say "brother-in-law" in Korean—one for every possible combination between age order and gender—and each title implies a different kind of relationship with its own set of norms and expectations.<sup>72</sup> Aunts are not simply aunts—they are either paternal (*gomo*) or maternal (*eemo*), and each aunt on either side has an order (first *gomo*, second *gomo*, etc.).<sup>73</sup>

A similar attention to titles go on in places like the church or the workplace. Vinny worked for a large Korean company, based in Maryland, and when I asked what that was like, he responded, "I think working there I learned more about Koreans than at any other time in my life."<sup>74</sup> He only worked there for a few years, and by the time of the interview he was working for an American company. I asked him what some of the differences are, and he said,

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<sup>71</sup> Claudia is a 34-year-old 1.5er. She immigrated at age 7.

<sup>72</sup> A man's older sister's husband is *maehyung*, a man's younger sister's husband is *maejeh*, a man's wife's older brother is *hyungnim*, a man's wife's younger brother is *chuhnam*, a woman's older sister's husband is *hyungboo*, a woman's younger sister's husband is *jehboo*, a woman's husband's older brother is *ajoobunim*, a woman's husband's younger brother is *doryunnim*. A similar pattern exists for sister-in-law, uncle, aunt—just about any possible position in the family tree has its own specific name.

<sup>73</sup> One informant passionately described the difference between *gomo* and *eemo*. Accordingly, *gomo* is more "strict" because "her nieces and nephews are carriers of her maiden-family-name," whereas "*eemo* is the cool aunt who just has fun with her nieces and nephews" because her nieces and nephews are the name-carriers of her sister's husband, who she has no blood-relation to.

<sup>74</sup> Vinny is a 29-year-old second generation Korean American.

I don't expect every other Korean company to be like this, but the one I worked at, everybody had a very specific title. Yeah, so it's almost military-like in there. There's rank and who's responsible for what and things like that. I mean there's definitely a camaraderie there, but I would liken it to how it would be like, how I would imagine, in the military. And the job I'm at right now is much more of everybody working together, much more lax, there's no formal titles. Like the guy I'm working with right now, technically he's two positions above me, but you don't even really think about it. . . . When we're talking we're just two people. But at the Korean company, there's definitely a distinction between who has a position and who doesn't. . . . It's in the way people talk to you, really.

Vinny clearly prefers his current job over his previous one, and it is indeed the case that many Korean Americans dislike the degree of importance Koreans place on titles, seeing it as unnecessary or empty formality.<sup>75</sup>

But when does formality become empty formality? When do titles become nothing but titles? When the individuals who hold those titles don't live up to them. Claudia articulated this very complaint: "In some ways the titles are good, but sometimes there's too much emphasis on the title instead of the person holding the title, as if the title is all that matters." When individuals insufficiently fulfill the positions they hold, they diminish the significance of that position. If all mothers of the world started abandoning their children and doing very un-mother-like things (let's use our imagination), "mother" would quickly become an empty formality. If there was nothing special about mothers, if there was nothing mothers had in common, if there was nothing to being a mother other than being called mother, the title "mother" would surely become meaningless. Likewise, if all CEOs turned out to be heartless money-grubbers, if all elders of the church began shoplifting, if all leaders turned out to be better at following than leading, the weight these titles once held would significantly diminish. The standing that the titles once gave individuals, and the expectations that made the individuals worthy of such titles, would

<sup>75</sup> See Danico 2004, Chapter 7 for similar example among 1.5ers.



fade.

Titles themselves don't have meaning; they have meaning so long as the individuals who hold those titles breathe meaning into them, by living up to them. Only then do titles reinforce the places we are in, keep up the obligations attached to those titles, expect the individuals who hold those titles to uphold them. It may even be that those who resist titles do so precisely because they know they have failed to live up to them, and titles are only a constant reminder of a guilty past they cannot change. However, the failure to live up to titles is no reason to lower the standards of titles or to abandon them altogether. If anything, the failure ought to remind the rest of us what the proper role of a given title is. Forgiveness is essential to life, but forgiving is not equivalent to forgetting.

Vinny used the military metaphor to mean strict, authoritarian, hierarchical, and to pay no compliments to the company. However, anyone with military experience may also speak of the satisfaction of contributing to something bigger than oneself, together with others, each with different roles, to produce something that cannot simply be reduced to the sum of its parts. The choir, theater groups, sports teams, are also fitting metaphors. By performing individual parts well, each becomes an essential part of the whole, creating an obligation between the parts, as well as a mutual understanding that each part needs all other parts. This is the alternative method of creating obligatory relationships—not the rhetoric of equality, where I do for you because we are equal, but the rhetoric of inequality, where I do for you precisely because we are unequal (e.g. sopranos need altos, and vice versa).

Admittedly, there is the other-extreme danger to taking roles and titles too

seriously, where too great of an obligation is attached to the title, that living up to it requires much sacrifice and risk by the individual. (Who can forget the climactic moment in Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, when after hours of torturous interrogation, the main character Rubashov finally decides to confess to a crime he didn't commit, at the mention of his title, "Comrade Rubashov.")<sup>76</sup> Titles can be burdensome, demanding, with ugly consequences, and many Korean Americans complain about this dimension—not the empty formality but the strict duty.

There is no magical balance to be identified here. Not one extreme is better than the other, and it is by no means easy to avoid either extreme. However, the potential danger of either extreme is no reason to ignore altogether the obligatory function of titles. Furthermore, America's individualist tendency is closer to the former extreme than the latter—we are more likely to scoff at titles as mere formality than to take our titles too seriously to the point of danger. Revisiting the purpose of titles, the consequences of using titles, could certainly be a useful exercise.

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<sup>76</sup> The full quote: "Comrade Rubashov, I hope that you have understood the task which the Party has set you.' It was the first time since their acquaintance that Gletkin called Rubashov 'Comrade'. Rubashov raised his head quickly. He felt a hot wave rising in him, against which he was helpless. His chin shook slightly while he was putting on his pince-nez. 'I understand.'" Koestler 1968, 193.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE HABITUAL NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP CULTURE

“It seems, in fact, as though the second half of a man’s life is usually made up of nothing but the habits he has accumulated during the first half.” (Fyodor Dostoevsky. *The Demons*.)

#### *A layered self*

Is the relationship culture, then, merely role-playing? Aren’t we terrified of that? Yes, we are—Milgram and Zimbardo taught us how dangerous human beings can be when they take their roles too seriously. By “simply doing one’s duty,”<sup>77</sup> ordinary men and women became (potential)<sup>78</sup> accomplices to harming others—as research assistants in Milgram’s experiment, and as prison guards in Zimbardo’s. Evidently, taking on a role can make individuals do things they would not otherwise do, justifying such horrendous acts.

There is a distinction, however, in the understanding of the self, between Milgram’s explanation and the relationship culture. Keeping in mind that roughly about a third of Milgram’s subjects refused orders to administer shocks to the maximum voltage, many of those who did obey underwent what Milgram calls an “agentic shift,” where the person “no longer views himself as acting out of his own purposes but rather comes to see himself as an agent for executing the wishes of another person.”<sup>79</sup> And because he is

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<sup>77</sup> “The most frequent defense of the individual who has performed a heinous act under command of authority is that he has simply done his duty.” Milgram 2004, 146.

<sup>78</sup> In Milgram’s study, the subjects were not actually inflicting harm, though they were told they were.

<sup>79</sup> Milgram 2004, 133.

no longer acting out of his own purposes, “the individual no longer views himself as responsible for his own actions....”<sup>80</sup> Metaphorically speaking, it is as though the individual steps out of his own autonomy (where he would be responsible for his actions), and steps into the shoes of another individual, the agent of the authority (where he is no longer responsible for his actions). The individual first goes through a detachment—there is no entering the agentic state unless he first leaves his state of autonomy. And because he has left his autonomy, he can rationalize that he is not acting according to his own will. *He* is not causing harm, *he* is not hurting anyone, because *he* is not autonomously choosing to do so.<sup>81</sup> It is the authority’s will he is obeying, and he is merely doing his duty.

The relationship culture, as much emphasis there is on fulfilling one’s duties, is not quite the same as the agentic shift. The more accurate metaphor of the relationship culture is the Matryoshka doll, more commonly known as the Russian nesting doll, where the opening of one doll reveals a smaller version inside, then another and another.<sup>82</sup> Each doll or layer represents a role, and though the individual may not take all of his layers with him everywhere he goes, each layer is no less a part of him. His autonomy does not get left behind as he puts on a new layer, so there is no psychological detachment as in the agentic shift. In other words, he *is* those roles, even when he is not actively playing them, because his autonomy is in every layer at all times. He cannot simultaneously fulfill the practical responsibilities of every role, but he never leaves his autonomy. Thus

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<sup>80</sup> Milgram 2004, 134.

<sup>81</sup> The burden of choice is also a major element in Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*, a work on the German police battalion that provided significant manpower in the killing of Jews during WWII. Browning supports Milgram’s theory, though peer pressure was a stronger force for the police battalion than official authority. See Browning 1992, particularly Chapter 18.

<sup>82</sup> This metaphor is also used by Alford to describe Koreans’ approach to relationships (Alford 1990).

the relationship culture's self is a layered self—the layer he has on indicates what he is doing at that moment, but all of those layers are his at all times.

Americans often refer to a true self or a core self, “who you really are,” as if there is a more authentic self that exists underneath all of the roles we play. This is precisely what scares us about Milgram's and Zimbardo's studies—that we are capable of leaving our core selves, along with our moral centers, when we step into a role. But this is an impossible task for the layered self, who does not have a separate core self, because all of the roles that one plays *is* the make-up of the authentic self, and no layer is without a moral center.

Jenny, an elementary school teacher, talked about the the contrast in the idea of the self, which she put in terms of the difference between Koreans and Americans.<sup>83</sup> She recalled an incident where she and the principal of her school, her boss, had run into a disagreement and they had met to talk. He had evidently not been very responsive to teachers, rather taking the side of other administrators in the school system, which Jenny criticized as an insufficient performance on his part, as the principal or the boss. She brought her complaint to him, and when the conversation was more or less over, the principal had said, “Well, I hope you still consider me a friend, that you still like me as a person,” to which Jenny said to me, “He just wants to be liked, even though I just told him I don't like him as a boss, that he's not a good principal, as if liking him as a person would make up for that. He's not even offended that I criticized him as a boss, as long as I'm not attacking him as a person. It's just a job to him. ... This is a cultural difference. Koreans don't do that.” In the relationship culture, you *are* your position, there is no “person” beneath the positions one occupies. Jenny knew and could articulate the

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<sup>83</sup> Jenny is a 29-year-old 1.5er.

difference between the two understandings of the self, and she understood it as a cultural difference, but she seemed almost offended that he didn't quite take her critique personally, that he saw his position as merely a position, and not an extension of his true self.

Separating ourselves from our roles is rather common in America. Take the Monica Lewinsky scandal. There was certainly public outrage, but there were also many who defended President Clinton using the logic of separation between our true selves and our roles. At the height of the scandal, the Gallup poll asked, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?" to which 62 percent approved, and 32 percent disapproved. The following question asked, "Now thinking about Bill Clinton as a person, do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of him?" to which 40 percent answered "favorable," and 48 percent "unfavorable."<sup>84</sup> The change in the numbers indicates that many Americans held an attitude of, "He may not be a good person, he may even be a lousy husband, but he's doing fine as president. What does one have to do with the other?" What *does* one have to do with the other? The relationship culture would say a whole lot. Failure in one position says a lot about the person, and cannot be separated from his other positions. The fact that polls even ask questions distinguishing between "as president" and "as a person," and the fact that the results reflect a distinction, actually feeds our fears of the agentic shift, while simultaneously validating it as a legitimate excuse for wrongdoing.<sup>85</sup>

There may be potential danger in shifting from one role to another, but only if the

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<sup>84</sup> Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll. August 17, 1998.

<sup>85</sup> This is perhaps the most disturbing part of discussing the Milgram experiment with college students—so many of them say (often with a shrug) that they would probably administer the shocks, using the same excuses Milgram's subjects did—"It's my job. And it doesn't make me a bad person."

roles are mere roles, meaning autonomy, along with responsibility, is left out of the role. If autonomy does follow, and each role is an essential part of the self, then taking one's roles seriously can be a safeguard to one's judgment, rather than an abandonment of it. The roles make for even greater responsibility, not less, because every role requires full envelopment of the self, which at least includes autonomy and responsibility. In other words, being aware of the many roles we play, even during the times those layers are not on, can function to keep us in check. There are things we would not do if we were reminded of our parenthood, our profession, our various positions and relationships. Even if an act does not interfere with our other roles, and even if the act is done in secret, the reminder of our positions serve as self-disciplining guides. Would a mother do this? Would a teacher do this? Would a president do this? Oftentimes it is not our own willpower or good judgment that keep us from making bad decisions, but rather the reminder of who we are to others, what we would do (or would not do) if they could see us, and the sense of pride and shame, that have a greater effect on our behavior. And that is why the habit of seeing ourselves in various roles and positions are so valuable—they remind us of the many layers that belong to us, obligations and responsibilities included, even when we don't have them on.

My informants saw themselves as being in between two worlds, each with its own distasteful extreme in defining the self—the American conception that allows for a “true self” as distinct from the roles one plays, and the Korean conception that clings to duty-defined roles to the point that individuality is engulfed by the roles. Describing their parents' generation, who they call “traditional Korean,” the strict duty-dimension of roles

was a common observation. My informants were, for the most part, ambivalent about taking one's role-as-duty too seriously. On the one hand, they certainly admired their parents' generation's commitment to duty, their willingness to do what they were supposed to do and what they had to do, rather than what they wanted to do. On the other hand, they felt pity for them, because their commitment to duty had left them without a freedom.

Anne, describing her mom, said, "She has such a sacrificial heart. Everything she does is for her family. She's always, just constantly, serving us. That's one thing I would want to be like."<sup>86</sup> At a later point in the interview Anne said, "My mom and dad, they don't have a good relationship. They're still married but they don't love each other. I don't think I would want to do that. But even though my dad is not loving towards her, she's, in her actions, so loving towards him. She'll still make him food, like the best stuff. And I wouldn't do that. Even though he's like, 'What is this, this tastes horrible,' she'll make him something better the next day. I'm thinking, 'Are you kidding me?' She's so loving, I don't know how she does it." Similar testimonies were given by other informants, particularly by females, about the older women in their lives (not always their mothers).

Compared to a political culture that values free speech and open communication, Anne's mom seems to live a pretty stifled life. But compared to a popular culture that prioritizes individuality and fulfilling one's dreams, Anne's mom seems peculiarly mature. Where we are constantly told to express ourselves, to follow our dreams, and to free our inhibitions, commitment to duty at the expense of our expressions, dreams, and inhibitions, can be a display of selflessness. She is the unhappy but dutiful wife and

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<sup>86</sup> Anne is a 28-year-old second generation Korean American.



mother, as Anne sees it, and Anne's response is a sincere ambivalence. She wants to be like her mom, but she doesn't at the same time.

Emphasis on duty does have serious disadvantages. For one, it is probably responsible for *han*, the angst that builds up resulting from suppressing so much inside. (Pastor Rubin attributed Korean churches' ritual of daily morning services, typically around 5 or 6 a.m., to the fact that Koreans have a lot of *han*, and their need to cry out to God, because they don't cry out to anybody else.) Indeed, one of the biggest cultural differences between Korean and American is the expression of feelings. Jenny, the elementary school teacher, recalled having to explain this difference to Korean parents who had recently immigrated. She said,

American teachers are actually trained, whenever a situation occurs, to ask, "How did that make you feel?" So even if the kids weren't feeling anything specific, they would have to say, "Sad, bad, happy," and because they said it, they instantly feel it. And because they're forced to express how they feel, they hold on to that feeling. And we teach the kids that they have every right to feel that way, and that they should be able to express it. With Koreans, if a boy is crying, we say, "*Namjaga weh ool-uh*" (boys don't cry) or "*Ddook geu-chuh*" (stop crying), and that's harsh but they get over it faster. My mom never asked me how I felt, I don't even know how to ask that in Korean. We just don't do that. So on the one hand, Americans are way too sensitive, always talking about feelings.... Well, I guess in the long run, it's healthier to express your feelings. Though that makes it easier to dwell on your bad feelings....

Like Anne, Jenny's ambivalence and mental weighing of the different cultural norms is common in the 1.5/second generation of Korean Americans. Their concluding values often clash with that of their parents,<sup>87</sup> as well as their American counterparts, which

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<sup>87</sup> There are numerous works with similar observations. One particularly memorable example, from an ethnographic work of Sociology, is a quote from a male Korean American 1.5er: "I tried saying 'I love you' [to my father] one time and he looked at me and said, 'Are you American now? You think this is *The Brady Bunch*? You don't love me. You love me when you can support me.'" Pyke 2003, 247.

allows them to see and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of both cultures.

Though I cannot claim that my informants practice what they preach, nearly every one of them talked about the need for some balance between the two cultures in their own lives, and many of them talked about the need to balance proper fulfillment of duty with a healthy dose of self-expression.

### ***Relational golden rule***

Without deliberately intending to do so, Jenny articulated a general rule of thumb she adheres to: “I treat my husband the way I think all wives should treat their husbands. I treat my kids the way I think all parents should treat their kids.” It is a variation of the golden rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, while accounting for the particularity of relational positions.

The golden rule has withstood the test of time and space, and its adherence assumes a moral capacity—we have to imagine ourselves in hypothetical interactions, then act in the way that we determine to be good. We generally expect most people to at least be capable of following the golden rule, if not to follow it, and it would seem that the adherence to this rule would yield desirable, community-building results: I will be friendly to you, as I want you to be friendly to me. I will not ignore you, as I would not want you to ignore me. I will fulfill my obligations to you, as I would want you to fulfill your obligations to me. Like many rules, however, the golden rule is only as good as how we choose to use it. The problem today is that this rule can be used to actually encourage isolation, providing the rationale behind much of today’s voluntary withdrawal from relationships and communities: I will leave you alone, as I want you to leave me alone. I

will not talk to you, as I want you to not talk to me. I will not expect anything from you, as I do not want you to expect anything from me.

Of course, this would not happen if we used the golden rule properly, namely, treat *everyone* the way *you* would have *anyone* treat you. The golden rule is supposed to be anonymous and universal—“you” can be anyone, and you must imagine being in anyone else’s shoes. The anonymity and universality may even be considered necessary qualities to any rule—after all, what good is a rule if not everyone can follow it? Perhaps Kant, an Enlightenment thinker, had the right idea of universalism with his Categorical Imperative, which, grossly simplified, is: “Don’t do anything that the universal doing of which would make you not want to do it.” In other words, whatever act you are about to perform, imagine a universe full of individuals performing the same act, and only if you can desire that universe, should you proceed with the act. Since we, assuming we have moral capacity, would not desire the universal doing of killing, lying, stealing, and cheating, we are to conclude *on our own* that we ought to refrain from such acts. And by universalizing any act we are about to do, we make it impossible to use the Categorical Imperative selfishly—just as we would not want a universe full of killing, we would not want a universe where everyone ignores one another, doesn’t talk to one another, and doesn’t have any expectations from one another. Leaving each other alone in isolation is among the things we should not do because we would not desire the universal doing of it.

For those who understand themselves primarily in terms of relationships, however, where no one is an isolated individual, and everyone has a relational identity, the very universality and anonymity of rules make them difficult to use. For instance, what does it mean for me (your daughter, your employee, your constituent) to treat you

(my mother, my boss, my representative) as I would have others treat me? What does it mean for me to treat my mother the way I would have everyone treat everyone else? Or is it that I should treat everyone the way I would have my mother treat her daughter? Can I desire a universal doing of being a good mother? Can I even conceive of a universe of mothers?

Yes, I am playing with words. The point here is that the way *I* want to be treated, and the way *I* treat *you*, depends on what *our* relationship is. And the two treatments are not always mirror images, because we don't all occupy the same positions. Do bosses want to be treated by their employees the same way employees want to be treated by their bosses? Do diners want to be treated by their waitresses the same way waitresses want to be treated by their diners? No; diners want their waitresses to be knowledgeable and quick, while waitresses want their diners to be hungry and generous (for instance). And it would be absurd to desire a universe of the quick and knowledgeable or the hungry and generous. One part (waitresses) requires the other (diners) to even make a desirable universe. This is why the relationship culture requires more particularity in any standard rule—the basic assumption is that one needs the other to fulfill his place. The two different places must be present together to complete one relationship.

Thus, the relational golden rule, as articulated by my informant, is universal enough to be applicable to anyone, but particular enough to suit the various relationships we identify with: treat your husband the way you would have all husbands treated; treat your employees the way you would have all employees treated; treat your neighbors the way you would have all neighbors treated. The rule habituates us to imagine what would make those relationships good or better, and to think of individuals as participants in

those relationships.

In adhering to the relational golden rule, there are two forms of reciprocity that emerge. The first is more direct and immediate, which is the more familiar form of reciprocity. Take for instance, my informant Jessica's weekly small group organized by her church.<sup>88</sup> In this group, all members took turns hosting, which meant opening their home and providing the food. This kind of short-term give-and-take is horizontal reciprocity. Every member had the responsibility of hosting, as well as the opportunity to be the guest. The second form of reciprocity is more long-term and indirect, vertical reciprocity, which was also present in Jessica's group. In addition to their regular meetings amongst themselves, the group held special gatherings once in awhile inviting younger members of the church, with the aim of "training them to properly lead and partake in a small group." Doing for the future members in this way does not yield any direct return to the present members, but the hope is that the payoff will go vertically, into the future when the future members are in the position of present members—also known as pay-it-forward. Anticipating long-term reciprocity is an example of what Robert Bly calls vertical thought—"the Native American view that whenever one makes a decision, one should think of its effect down to the seventh generation...."<sup>89</sup> By understanding ourselves as relational beings, in addition to the anonymous and universal "I do for you and you do for me," a teacher does for his students, anticipating that one of those students will one day become a teacher, and do for his students. A boss does for his employees with the anticipation that one of those employees will one day become a boss, and do for his employees. A mother does for her daughter with the anticipation that she

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<sup>88</sup> Jessica is a 33-year-old second generation Korean American.

<sup>89</sup> Bly 1996, 211.

will one day become a mother, and do for her daughter. Relational roles actually encourage vertical thought, especially in hierarchical relationships where keeping score is not as easy.<sup>90</sup> Sometimes the only way to return a favor is to do the same for a different person in the same relationship down the line, and the relational golden rule provides the language for such vertical reciprocity.

### ***The proper role***

If the relational golden rule is to be followed, then, the question is, how would we have all employees treated? How would we have all neighbors treated? What is the proper role of a CEO? What defines a friend? A soldier?

The problem of defining roles is impossible to overcome. There would be countless answers to the question “What is a friend?” and none would be perfectly adequate. Of course, the question is missing the point—we cannot define many relational roles in words, but not because we do not know what a friend is. We know a friend when we see one. We also know what a friend is not when we see a bad one. Most of us hold familiar images of what various roles look like. In fact, entire cultures hold familiar images of what certain roles look like, and when the images are so different, we call that culture shock. To my informants, this form of culture shock occurred so often, that it no longer shocked them.

Charles (from Chapter 1) recalled his first time going over to a non-Korean-friend’s house, and feeling “strange,” because “the father would play with us. And I thought, ‘Why is he playing with us? He’s so like me, he’s like a young kid.’” For a Korean American boy who was familiar with only Korean fathers, who he described as

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<sup>90</sup> See Chapter 1.

“stern, not very emotional or expressive,” and who “never plays with us,” his friend’s father presented a totally foreign image of what a father looks like. Another informant, Jeannie, female and recently married, talked about the notorious stereotype of the Korean mother-in-law, more specifically, the husband’s mother (*si-uhmuhni*).<sup>91</sup> She sarcastically commented, “We have so many horror stories about our poor in-laws. They’re supposed to mistreat you (haha) so when they don’t, that’s good but we’re weirded out, like they’re pretending to be nice.” Fortunately, Jeannie’s mother-in-law, who was “so Americanized,” did not fit the Korean stereotype. She said, “My husband’s whole side is so Americanized. Even when I tried to do her dishes, she wouldn’t let me touch anything in the house. And I like that, but sometimes it makes me uncomfortable because I’m not doing enough. What if she’s just saying ‘no, no, no,’ but I’m supposed to say, ‘please, please, let me do your dishes?’”<sup>92</sup>

From the role of parents to in-laws, teachers, and colleagues, my informants recalled experiences of initial discomfort when their familiar images were shattered, but they eventually learned to anticipate the difference and understand the difference as just that, without determining one as correct and the other as incorrect. The dad who plays with his kids is different, but not wrong, and perhaps an even better dad, according to Charles. In other words, my informants understood that others held different images of certain roles, and that they were not necessarily wrong, but they still prioritized fulfilling roles properly—the dad must still be a dad—and they firmly held on to their own image of what a dad looks like.

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<sup>91</sup> Jeannie is a 30-year-old second generation Korean American.

<sup>92</sup> Based on how well-known this stereotype is, it would seem that the horrible mother-in-law is common. Interestingly, however, all of my married female informants talked about how their mother-in-law is not the “typical *si-uhmuhni*.” And yet, all of them considered themselves uniquely lucky for not having the typical *si-uhmuhni*.

The relationship culture does not dictate “The teacher is supposed to be x, y, and z,” but it does say “Don’t forget he is the teacher.” Recognition of the relationship, or bothering to ask, “What am I to you? And what obligations follow from that?” is the important part, not so much a consensus on what certain relationships’ obligations are. It is one thing to disagree on what the proper role of a teacher is; it is another to declare that *because* there is no consensus, it matters not what kind of teacher one is or we can forget that one is a teacher at all. Disagreement is no reason to turn relativist, or to neglect altogether the significance of relational roles.

Like other rules, the greater purpose of the relational golden rule is not so much to arrive at a consensus to enforce the rule, but to think seriously about what roles look like when properly fulfilled. There will be disagreement, and there will be a range of answers, though no absolutely right answers. There are, however, wrong answers, or improper ways to perform roles—the actions that put an end to that role or relationship. The proper role of a friend may cover a wide range, but it would not include no longer being a friend; the proper role of a husband may cover a wide range, but it would not include no longer being a husband (or divorcing his wife). The point of thinking about proper roles is not to condemn those who disagree, but to remind ourselves that we do, in fact, have such roles, and to perform them in the way we believe fulfills the obligations inherent in that role. Just as the golden rule assumes a moral capacity of the individual, the relational golden rule assumes a moral capacity of the relational individual. Mothers are capable of envisioning a good mother, and teachers are capable of envisioning a good teacher.

Is the relational golden rule asking too much? Is imagining various proper roles too difficult a task? I think not. There is a great book called *I am the Teacher, You are*



*the Student*, by Patrick Allitt (a British professor of American History, who has taught in the states for decades but still calls himself a foreigner), which promotes a “stay within your role” motto for today’s college professors.<sup>93</sup> He begins the book by urging teachers to resist becoming friends with their students, which evidently is increasingly common, and he repeats this mantra throughout the book. Allitt does not get philosophical about what exactly a teacher is, nor does he offer a grandiose explanation of a teacher’s obligations. But he does not have to. He is assuming that the simple reminder of “I am a teacher” is sufficient. He certainly gives examples and suggestions for teachers, but the underlying message is not “This is what makes a teacher,” but rather, “Be a teacher.” For ordinary people in ordinary places, the sheer recognition of one’s position in relation to the other can be the beginning of fulfilling the proper role, and it need not be a difficult task.

It is worth addressing here a question that any East Asian scholar would have asked by now: Is the relationship culture the same as Confucianism? There are certainly parallels between the two—the relationship is the basic unit, hierarchy is essential to any interaction, and properly playing one’s role is central to the goal of social harmony.<sup>94</sup> The Confucian influence on Koreans is undeniable, and in form, the relationship culture can certainly be Confucian. However, the content is where the two diverge, and thus I am hesitant to label the Korean American community as Confucian. Confucianism models all relationships after the family, but as noted by Mary Yu Danico, the nature of immigration dramatically alters the Korean American family, making it very un-Confucian. For

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<sup>93</sup> Allitt 2005.

<sup>94</sup> From translated works of Confucius and Xunzi, classic Confucians, respectively: “[T]he ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son.” Ames 1998, 12.11; “Where the classes of society are equally ranked, there is no proper arrangement of society; where authority is evenly distributed, there is no unity; and where everyone is of like status, none would be willing to serve the other.” Knoblock 1988-1994, 9:3.

instance, parents become more dependent on their children (something as mundane as calling the cable company, or translating a letter, is an all-too familiar task for young Korean Americans); both parents contribute to the household income; and because both parents work, grandparents (who often cannot communicate with the grandchildren) become the caretaker.<sup>95</sup> In other words, Korean Americans prioritize properly fulfilling roles (form), but their idea of what the proper roles looks like is far from the Confucian ideal (content).<sup>96</sup>

### *Habits of language*

Recognizing one another in terms of relationships is largely acquired as a linguistic habit over time. Mostly in their late twenties or early thirties, my informants held rather solid ideas of what certain roles are supposed to look like, though they did not always live up to them. This is, I suppose, the predictable product of individuals raised within the relationship culture. Regular reminders of what brothers do, what friends do, what students do, become ingrained in their minds and habits. Language is largely habitual, and even small comments made in passing, when done regularly, can become the voices in their heads when they are not spoken anymore.

At a Korean American church I was visiting, several children were playing while their parents watched nearby. Two boys, David and Jacob, were fighting over the same toy. It eventually led to both of them in tears, at which point one of the moms came over,

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<sup>95</sup> Danico 2004, Chapter 4.

<sup>96</sup> To be sure, as many scholars argue, contemporary Koreans *are* Confucian, whether they know it or not. (See Koh 1996 and Lee 1998.) However, if Koreans are not identifying themselves as Confucian, and further, if many Koreans are explicitly against Confucianism, I hardly see any worth in insisting that Koreans are, in fact, Confucian. When addressing Korean Americans of the 1.5 and second generations in particular, Confucianism becomes even remote, as most of them are not at all familiar with term Confucianism.

took the toy and handed it to Jacob. David cried (in Korean), “Why does he get it?” The mom replied (in Korean), “because you’re the *hyung* (older brother). You have to give in to your *dongseng* (little brother).” This is actually not a reasonable answer at all—being younger is no logical reason to get the toy. But this is how the language of the relationship culture goes. The response to “Why do this?” is “because I am the so-and-so.” It is not a utilitarian answer (because this produces the best outcome), or an emotivist answer (because I feel like it), or even a just answer (because this is fair).

David didn’t like the answer much, and there is probably no answer he would have been satisfied with. But the lesson from this short interaction is that *hyungs*, just by virtue of being older, are supposed to give in to their *dongsengs*.<sup>97</sup> And with a repetition of such lessons, we can imagine how David will eventually not need someone else to tell him what to do as the *hyung*. He will, on his own, do the things that he believes *hyungs* simply do. And Jacob, also having heard the mom, will learn the same lesson that *hyungs* give in to *dongsengs*, and when he is one day the *hyung*, he will know that he is supposed to give in to his *dongsengs* (hence vertical reciprocity).

Recognizing our obligations to others does not happen over night. As much as we want to foster responsibility toward others, if we don’t acquire the habitual language that regularly remind us of our obligatory relationships to each other and the reasons why, we will not see the obligation in our relationships. If our primary language is one of individualism and not that of relationships, we are *going to* look more like self-interested individuals than a community. This is precisely the angle taken by Robert Bellah (and company) in *Habits of the Heart*. While the authors’ evidence for the claim that ordinary

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<sup>97</sup> I found out later that David and Jacob are not actually brothers, and I never found out if the mom who settled the dispute was either one of the boys’ moms. But David *is* older, and both families are members of the same church.

Americans do, in fact, derive their morality from some form of individualism is questionable,<sup>98</sup> they compellingly argue that language is largely habitual, and that habits acquired over time shape the character of individuals and that of a collective. In their later work, *The Good Society*, the authors point out that utilitarian individualism works to neglect any moral meaning and the common good, but instead promotes the calculation of means and ends. The utilitarian language, “Does it work? Is it effective?” is increasingly becoming the only common language in American society. If it works, it’s good; if it doesn’t, it’s bad. Because we live in a liberal democracy where we believe that everyone is free to formulate his own idea of the good, we expect utility to be the only agreeable version of the good; that is, we expect to disagree on “the good,” but we expect to at least agree on whether or not something works. So at times, we resort to the utilitarian language, even if we don’t mean it, simply because we don’t have any other common language.<sup>99</sup> We do not aspire to be purely utilitarian, or to neglect the common good, but we end up sounding and acting as if we do. And precisely because language is habitual, in more ways than one, we need to be attentive to the kind of language we use, especially with our children.

Recently, cash incentive programs for students, programs that pay students for good grades, have begun in various parts of America. There are many variations of the program, and they are being implemented from elementary schools to college, but the general idea has attracted much attention and debate. Studies claim that it works—cash-

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<sup>98</sup> See Stout 1988, Chapter 9, for a critique on the interview methods in *Habits of the Heart*.

<sup>99</sup> I was quite disturbed but not very surprised when a discussion of torture with my undergraduate students quickly turned into a utilitarian one—“Does it work?” was determined to be the only question that could decide whether or not a state ought to use torture. Applying the same question to significant issues such as slavery or, more recently, universal healthcare, is also disturbing.

for-kids schools, as they are called, show significant improvement in grades.<sup>100</sup> I have not looked into the studies themselves, but I have no doubt that it works. What I find troubling is the habitual language spoken in such a practice, even if the language is not the intention of the program. By paying students for good grades, students are getting the message that they should study hard *in order to get paid*, not because that is what simply students do. Proponents of the program say, “But it works! Grades are up!” as if results are the only thing that matter. If the answer to, “Why do I study?” is consistently “because you want to get paid,” we are habituating young Americans to only do what pays. We shouldn’t be surprised if these students grow up to be adults only capable of speaking the utilitarian language, only looking to maximize the payoff. Bad habits, as well as good ones, are hard to break.

What the relationship culture does, that the individualist culture cannot, is to habituate us to recognize ourselves as being in relationships, and thus move us to voluntarily fulfill the obligations inherent in those relationships. To some degree, that is precisely what many scholars, those concerned with the decline of community, are trying to do. Communitarian Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals* reminds us that human beings are interdependent on one another, just by virtue of being human.<sup>101</sup> Stephen Carter begins his book *Civility* by stating that our isolation, the assumption that we have no passengers, is an illusion.<sup>102</sup> In profound ways, the relationship culture has similar veins, and the promotion of community is certainly a shared aim.

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<sup>100</sup> See *New York Post* article entitled “Learn & Earn Plan Pays Off: Scores soar at cash-for-kids schools” by Kelly Magee and Yoav Gonan. June 8, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> MacIntyre 1999.

<sup>102</sup> Carter 1998.

To be sure, there are limits to the relationship culture, in addition to the risks that were mentioned thus far. For one, not every human interaction can be a sustainable, meaningful relationship, as it is difficult to see some human interactions as anything beyond strictly contractual. It is much easier to think of primary relationships as being inherently obligatory, and even they are difficult (perhaps more so at times) to maintain. What the relationship culture does is make contracts more like relationships, rather than make relationships more like contracts, as the language of the market does. Relationship culture assumes fundamentally that there is something more to every human interaction than a contract, even in a relationship as explicitly economic as between a diner and a waitress. As soon as a relationship is recognized, they are no longer strangers, no longer anonymous consumers and producers, and that is what a sense of community is. The ideals of the relationship culture is not unique to Korean Americans, but it inadvertently is what lays the foundation of the Korean American community.

### ***About choice***

If the relationship culture is habitual, is it voluntary? Is the habitual language of the relationship culture a form of brain-washing, beginning at a young age, indoctrinated into seeing oneself and others as being in relationships they did not autonomously choose? How important is the “voluntary” part of “voluntary associations”? How important is the “freedom” part of “freedom of association”?

The subject of choice and freedom in relationships and associations is by no means a simple matter. It may seem as though the relationship culture only emphasizes the fulfilling of one’s relational obligations, regardless of whether or not one voluntarily

signed up for those relationships—duty over choice, collective over self, relationship over autonomy. While such an impression is not entirely incorrect, the dichotomy is quite an exaggeration. Prioritization is perhaps a more helpful tool than stark dichotomization. Rather than parting people, ideas, and scholarly camps, into oppositions, framing debate in terms of the order of priorities is not only more accurate, but more appealing. Very few scholars, and even fewer ordinary Americans, intentionally position themselves in one or other extreme, and the real differences between major camps often lie in the order of priorities.

For instance, in civil society discussions, liberal scholars prioritize the “voluntary” aspect—the freedom to associate (or not), and what that freedom entails. Rosenblum’s priority is the *experience of pluralism*, the freedom to go from one group to another, not so much the existence of pluralism, or the variety of groups (and never mind the commitment to a group).<sup>103</sup> Of course, the experience of pluralism would not be possible if it were not for the numerous groups, but that is essentially a given background factor. She is (correctly) assuming that plenty of associations exist, but concerned that even with so many, individuals are prohibited from experiencing pluralism, due to any number of reasons—from exclusive and greedy groups, to lack of access to any group for certain individuals. She writes, “The principal thing is that alternative associations are available for the alien or unwanted. And that associations do not keep their members captive or permanently cut off; that members have a real choice of discontinuing affiliation.”<sup>104</sup> And this is precisely why the underclass is a major concern—associations

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<sup>103</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 17. “But it does not suffice for moral development that the social stock of values and practices carried by associations is abundant if the lives of men and women are terminally fixed and situated, if they are unable to exploit freedom of association. The possibility of shifting involvements among associations—the *experience of pluralism* by men and women personally and individually—is what counts.” (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>104</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 64.

are not available to them, so they do not have the option to join any, even if they wanted to.

Liberal scholars also recognize the costs that come with the territory of freedom of association, including the freedom to exclude, to *not* associate. (The exemplary case heavily cited is *Roberts v. Jaycees*, where liberal scholars mostly agree that the Court's decision infringes upon the members' freedom to *not* accept women as full members.)<sup>105</sup> The correct solution to exclusion is not to coerce groups to be inclusive, but to make more inclusive groups available to more people, so that they *can* choose to join a group (or create their own). In essence, by prioritizing freedom and choice, liberals are not anti-community or anti-relationships, but pro-freedom and pro-choice. A tight-knit community is not bad in itself, and neither is not belonging to a group, but the first question is always, "Did you freely make this choice? Can you freely walk in and out of this group?"

The rhetoric of choice and freedom has always been fundamental to liberalism, though as Barber notes, the meaning of choice has changed over time. Whereas the concern was once with "pluralism of the human condition and the openness of human development" (which is, I believe, what Rosenblum is talking about), "choice" has now been distorted to refer to "endless trivial choices," in the market and society at large, which was not the vision of liberalism nor capitalism.<sup>106</sup> Still, however evolved the depth and scope of choice may be, freedom of choice is the fundamental element of liberalism and of liberal democracy. Thus, not only liberal scholars but general attitudes of the free market and the free society, may look unfavorably upon the norms of the relationship

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<sup>105</sup> See Rosenblum 1998, Chapter 5, and Gutmann 1998, Chapters 1, 3-6, 8.

<sup>106</sup> Barber 2007, 335.



culture, which often treats relationships as a given, and prioritizes the obligations inherent in those relationships, whether or not one voluntarily entered the relationship. In other words, the relationship culture assumes individuals are always in relationships, but how they got there is not of primary importance. This is by no means to suggest that the voluntary aspect—the freedom to enter and leave relationships, especially if they are harmful—matters not at all in the relationship culture, but rather that the order of priorities are different. “What are the obligations of this relationship I find myself in?” is the first question. “Did I freely enter this relationship? Can I freely end it?” is not the most pressing matter. The recognition of the relationship comes first, in chronology and significance.

To be sure, Rosenblum is talking about associations in general, not only interpersonal relationships or tight-knit communities. Nonetheless, the un-liberal stance of prioritizing relational obligation over individual choice raises important questions about the connection between relationships and choice. Do we, in fact, choose our relationships? Should we? And if we don’t choose our relationships, should we still be expected to properly fulfill our relational roles?

In actuality we seem to have very little choice in much of our relationships. Just as Stephen Carter (and Tocqueville) claimed that isolation is an illusion, the ability to choose our relationships is also, to a large degree, an illusion. Just as we live amongst passengers but fancy that we live alone, we often find ourselves in relationships but fancy that we choose them (or we simply refuse to recognize them). Even the relationships that we do choose bring with them a whole host of relationships we did not choose. For instance, we choose a spouse, but not our in-laws. We choose a professor, but not our

classmates. We choose a job, but not our bosses and colleagues. We choose a roommate, but not our neighbors. We choose our friends, but not our friends' friends. As much emphasis as civil society scholars place on the voluntary association, most of us have more relationships with those we had little say in than those we deliberately chose.

It may be argued that meaningless interactions and by-products of chosen relationships do not constitute relationships at all, and that until the individual chooses to form a relationship with the in-laws, classmates, and others, there is no meaningful relationship. The liberal sentiment is that the direct aftermath of an individual's choices ought to be his to deal with, but not much else. The saying, "You've made your bed, now lie in it," is a nice sum-up, point being that choice comes first—the bed gets made before one lies in it. And because the bed was made by choice, one *ought to* lie in it. The flip side to this attitude is that what an individual did *not* choose is *not* his to deal with—if one did not make his bed, he does not have to lie in it. (Perhaps the bed isn't even considered his anymore, if he didn't make it.) Following this logic, individuals cannot be expected to recognize relationships they did not choose, let alone fulfill the obligations of those relational roles.

There is a reason Americans are perplexed by ancient Greek tragedies. The characters often pay the price for choices they did not freely make—the ultimate tragedy, what Alford calls "responsibility without freedom."<sup>107</sup> Why does Oedipus have to suffer for an act he was doomed to commit? Why does Antigone have to suffer for an act she

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<sup>107</sup> See Alford 1992, Chapter 5. An excerpt: "Consider the case of a young man, one of ten thousand children born to cocaine-addicted mothers each year in New York City. . . . Finally, imagine that he gets caught up in drug dealing, finally kills someone, and is arrested and bound over for trial. What is a just resolution? Was this young man truly free to choose to do otherwise? . . . He was not free. Nonetheless, he is responsible for what he has done and should be punished. But that is not fair, it might be argued. In fact, it is tragic. Absolutely. That is the point. tragedy means, above all else, that people are responsible without being free." 115.

was doomed to (born to) commit? Did either of them have the freedom to do otherwise? No, they had no freedom, but they are still responsible. That is tragedy, according to Alford. The whole notion is utterly contrary to liberalism and Western ideals, which essentially associates choice with legitimacy. There is no satisfying explanation for an unhappy ending when there was no freedom of choice involved.

At any rate, what is more important than whether or not we have a choice, is whether or not we *believe* we have a choice. The belief that we choose our relationships feeds the illusion, and just as the language of isolation can lead to actual isolation, the emphasis on choice can lead to individuals trying to choose all of their relationships in actuality. While the attempt at total control over entering/exiting relationships could have fortunate outcomes (freedom! empowerment!), there could be unfortunate outcomes as well—one, we may be severely disappointed when we realize we can't choose all of our relationships; two, we may end up cutting off a lot of our ties (of course, by choice) and eventually become isolated.

As Michael Walzer pointed out, many relationships are not freely chosen, but that does not make them any less legitimate. In fact, those involuntary associations are necessary for us to learn how to exercise the freedom we have. In his contribution to a work titled *Freedom of Association*, edited by Amy Gutmann, Walzer writes, “The ideal picture of autonomous individuals choosing their connections (and disconnections) without restraints of any sort of an example of bad utopianism.” He continues, “Many valuable memberships are not freely chosen; many binding obligations are not entirely the product of consent. . . . We join groups, we form associations, we organize and are organized—within a complex set of constraints. These take many different forms, some

of which I shall try to describe in such a way as to suggest their legitimacy.”<sup>108</sup> Walzer is perhaps taking the concept of freedom too far—few liberal scholars believe in total and utter freedom from childhood, and even they would find eliminating all forms of involuntary ties unimaginable and impossible. He is, however, making the very valid and much needed point in a culture (and discipline) in love with freedom—free choice requires involuntary association.<sup>109</sup>

Walzer’s first legitimate and involuntary form of constraint is familial and social (family, country, social class). The family is arguably the most obvious form of association where exercising little choice is accepted and expected. The attitude regarding choice toward family members is very different from the attitude of choice toward others. We largely don’t choose our family, and though we do exercise some choice (through marriage, divorce, etc.), our general attitude towards family is that they are permanent (and even unconditional) relationships. The question of choice—did I choose this family member? can I leave this family if I so choose?—does not quite fit in a family. Family tends to be viewed as “given,” the people in our lives who we cannot pick or kick out—not because we chose to be related to them and we must live with our choices, but because we *are* related to them. They are a part of who we are, and vice versa, which makes the power of choice in a family hardly empowering.

Of course, there are plenty of instances where considerable amount of choice is exercised in the family, most notably through marriage or divorce, but also in more subtle ways like who to see more, who to get along with, etc. There are also instances of

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<sup>108</sup> Walzer 1998 (Ed. Gutmann), 64.

<sup>109</sup> The full quote: “The point is obvious, I think, but still worth stating clearly: free choice requires involuntary association. Without it, there won’t be individuals strong enough to face the uncertainties and difficulties of freedom; there won’t be clear and coherent alternatives among which to choose; there won’t be any political protection against the enemies of free choice; there won’t even be the minimal trust that makes voluntary association possible.” Walzer 1998 (Ed. Gutmann), 72.

harmful families where the choice to leave actually is empowering or even a matter of survival. For the most part, however, in just about every culture known to man, family is still largely a treasured place, and the involuntary nature of the family is still largely considered a norm. What may not be universal is treating non-family members like family—to see them as somehow related, and to accept those relationships as involuntary and “normal,” without the element of choice being a priority. This is the relationship culture—habitually recognizing others as related.

Listening to my informants talk about their community, their social circles, and their associations, the term “family” was used again and again—sometimes referring to actual family, and sometimes highlighting the family-like dynamics of the not-necessarily-family. When we habitually use the language of the relationship culture with those who are not family, we inadvertently create a community that is as normal and inherently obligatory as the family. As Philip Selznick writes, “The prime virtue of community is an ethos of open-ended obligation.” He continues, “Parents have open-ended obligations to their children, and children to their parents. In these relationships people often make choices—whether and whom to marry, whether to have children, and how many—but once the commitment has been made, choice fades in importance.”<sup>110</sup> For my informants, their community was a normal and open-obligatory staple in their lives, just as their family was.

### *Normalness of community*

I asked my informants, “Do you consider yourself a part of the Korean community?” to which most responded, “I guess,” or “I think so.” Some shrugged, and

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<sup>110</sup> Selznick 2002, 24.

some weren't sure what I meant by Korean community. One informant answered, "No, but I know all the Koreans around here." Though none responded with a clear "No," few were enthusiastic about belonging to the Korean community. Based on this observation alone, it may seem as though there is no vibrant Korean community, at least not among the 1.5/second generation. It turned out, however, that almost all of my informants were part of large networks primarily consisting of Koreans (social, familial, business, and religious), with those networks almost always overlapping.

Why, then, the apparent lack of enthusiasm about their community? For one, my informants seemed uneasy with the idea of belonging to a community solely identified by ethnicity. They often talked about "the Korean community" as a group separate from themselves, and sometimes in a negative light, referring to the stereotypes of Koreans. But when they claimed (or realized) that their regular contacts, social circles, and intimate relationships—in other words, their communities—were mostly Korean, they seemed to have the attitude of "my community *happens to be* made up of Koreans, but it didn't have to be." This attitude is what ignited and confirmed my belief that the Korean community is dependent not so much on the ethnic make-up of its members, but primarily the values, ideals, habits, and customs. (This will be further elaborated in Chapter 3.)

The second reason (and the focus here) my informants were not very enthusiastic about belonging to a Korean community, is that they were too used to it. Most of them had also been living in the Washington area since childhood—comments like "We grew up together," "Our parents have been friends for twenty years," "I've been going to this church since I was born," were very common. Seen in this light, the Korean community

my informants belonged to resembles the traditional community, where the rules are unwritten and enforced by norms and mores, circumstances have unintentionally created a community (such as immigration, mobility, job, suburban lifestyle, etc.), and the community itself becomes so present in everyday life that it becomes the backdrop, which often goes unnoticed. So it is not that they decided to enter the Korean community, or that they like or dislike being in it, but rather that they have never been without it. Though there are Korean Americans more explicitly aware of the Korean community, the majority of young Korean Americans are not. Several of my informants even commented that they had never reflected so much on their own lives as a part of the Korean community until the interview. Accordingly, among this generation of Korean Americans, it is more accurate to speak of a “sense of community,” as opposed to an identifiable “community.”<sup>111</sup>

This is not to downplay the enormity of ethnicity, immigration, or the concrete ethnic associations that initiate and renew the sense of community. However, as stated in the Introduction, the ethnic community is viewed very differently between the first generation and the 1.5/second generation. The 1.5/second generation does not so much need or seek out the ethnic community, nor deliberately tries to maintain its livelihood, quite like the first generation has done and continues to do. Thus the backdrop factor is unique to my informants’ generation, and they primarily think of their community as a personal or social one, people they simply know or have known for a long time, and not necessarily distinguished by ethnicity.

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<sup>111</sup> See McMillan 1986, 9, for a definition of sense of community: “In a sentence, the definition we propose is as follows: Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.”

My informants repeatedly commented, “We all know each other”—“we” meaning fellow Koreans in the region. The church was evidently a vital place in bringing Koreans together (perhaps the most vital for first generation), but it was by no means the only one. One informant recalled her high school as having “Korean lunch tables” where all of the Korean students just knew to sit from the first day, for four years straight. Another informant remembered being sent to a private elementary school, where she met the only two other Korean girls, who she remains best friends with to this day. And another informant talked about a Korean family who moved across the street long ago, who became friends, classmates, church members, and eventually business partners. There is serious overlapping of relationships amongst Korean Americans; their claim that they all know each other is hardly an exaggeration.

Lotte is a Korean grocery store in Ellicott City, and it has become a regular stop for Koreans in the area. Mark, an informant, said, “A Korean couple should not go to Lotte together unless they want everybody to know”—“everybody” meaning Koreans.<sup>112</sup> Brooke said, “Going somewhere like Lotte, chances are, ninety percent, you’re going to run into somebody you know.” Of course, knowing everybody does not mean they enjoy regularly running into them. Brooke continued, “Sometimes I don’t want to go there because maybe I don’t feel like doing my make-up or taking a shower, when I just need to go pick up something.” Running into Koreans they know happens so frequently, not only because they go to places where there are a lot of Koreans, but because they know so many Koreans.

The dating scene has its own patterns among a population where they all know each other. Set-ups by a third party are common, as meeting somebody at a bar or striking

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<sup>112</sup> Mark is a 32-year-old 1.5er.



up a conversation with a stranger are extremely rare—because chances are, they are not strangers. (And how embarrassing would it be to find out you unknowingly hit on your friend’s sister?) Joyce (informant mentioned in Chapter 1) was set up with her to-be-husband by a mutual acquaintance, and she recalled one of their first dates: “We talked about all the people we know, and it turned out we know a lot of the same people. He’s been around for awhile, he knows everybody.” Likewise, Brooke recalled a similar experience, of finding out her and her husband-to-be had many mutual friends.

“Knowing everybody” is so common, that Korean Americans actually assume beforehand that they know each other, that they are no more than a few degrees apart. Lois, an informant, said, “Especially since my sister’s married now, I’m pretty sure we’re related to everybody, because his family is huge. You meet someone new, you may say their name and it’s ‘you’re so-and-so’ and ‘oh how do you know them’ and ‘oh their sister’s cousin is married to my brother,’ and it’s crazy. So not only do we all somehow know each other, we’re all related. (Pointing to me) we could be distant second cousins.”<sup>113</sup> Lois is exaggerating a bit, but the point is that discovering mutual acquaintances happens so frequently among Korean Americans that it does not surprise them anymore. In fact, they are surprised when they meet Koreans they have absolutely no connection to.

After an interview with Esther (from Chapter 1), a friend of hers joined us. The friend, wanting to set Esther up on a date with a guy, said, “He’s Korean, lives around here, went to Hebron (a high school in the area). His name is Peter, I don’t think you know him.” Esther responded, “He’s Korean and he went to Hebron and I don’t know him? Why don’t I know him?” as if to say, “Is something wrong with him?” This is the

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<sup>113</sup> Lois is a 28-year-old second generation Korean American.

flip side of the belief that community is normal—those who are unknown are strangers, or just strange.

Take the Virginia Tech shooting of 2007, which shook the Korean community and ignited all kinds of conversations in Korean circles. The attacker was 23-year-old Seung-hui Cho, a Korean American 1.5er, and a student at Virginia Tech. I asked all of my informants what their reaction was, and one informant answered, “I remember thinking, ‘Who let him get away with that? Where was his family? Where was his church?’” The thought that a young Korean American 1.5er, “just like me,” with parents who own a business, lives in the area, and grew up in the church, could have done something so unthinkable, was difficult to swallow. Something must not be right when a Korean American is not connected to fellow Korean Americans. (We will elaborate further on other reactions to this incident in Chapter 3.)

When a sense of community and the assumption of “knowing everybody” is believed to be normal, then those individuals already speak the language of the relationship culture. They assume that they are a part of the web-like structure—and that is what a community is. To be sure, this community does not have to be an ethnic one, but the ethnic community that the first generation created has become the community where the second generation grew up in and belong to. As a result, my informants perceive the ethnic community as their community. Of course, as mentioned in the Introduction, there are plenty of Korean Americans who leave this community for whatever reason, but for those who stay connected to the community, there is a widespread belief in the normalness of it all. The ethnic dimension does not have to be a part of that normalness, though it inadvertently is.

The relationship culture is not unique to Koreans, and there is no reason it has to be. Many informants used the language of the relationship culture with non-Koreans, though such examples were usually limited to the workplace and not intimate relationships. It could be argued that sociologists have claimed for years that all human beings, in fact, are in some sort of relationship at all times, which is the basis of the relationship culture. We can imagine, however, an interaction between an individual who adheres to the relationship culture and an individual who adheres to the individualist culture, and its outcome; or what happens when one acknowledges a relationship and the other does not—the relationship does not exist. A relationship is not tangible; it cannot exist, be nurtured, or endure, unless it is regularly recognized, reinforced, and maintained by both (or all) participants. Like Jiae (Chapter One), who became “strangers” with her co-worker, my informants told stories of how they have to relate to Americans differently because they do not recognize the relationship as easily or habitually. Clearly, a relationship or a community cannot begin to form unless the recognition is mutual.

The relationship culture may seem rather tautological or self-fulfilling—Korean Americans see each other in terms of relationships and therefore they are in those relationships. As unsatisfying (and unreplicable) as this sounds, today’s belief that community is normal is perhaps the most powerful predictor of tomorrow’s community. Building a community does not happen overnight, and the relationship culture, like any culture, did not emerge overnight. As much as we want to revive a sense of community in our society, habits are hard to break. And it is the habits, the habitual norms and mores of the Korean community, that has sustained and continues to sustain the community.

When I first described to my advisor the relationship culture using references to

my informants, he said, “It’s society through the eyes of family.” This seems right. Like family, they understand individuals as related in some form, they see those relations as not necessarily chosen, and yet there is a legitimacy and a normalness in those relationships. As previously stated, the recognition of relationships does not always lead to healthy maintenance of relationships, but the relationship culture rubs off in the form of linguistic habits—giving individuals a vocabulary to uphold and reinforce their respective places in relationships and communities.

The assumptions of the relationship culture has much in common with the assumptions of communitarianism, the Western movement that emerged as a counter to liberalism and the hyper-individualism it encourages. Are Korean Americans, then, communitarian? Does the Korean community have anything beyond a communitarian message? Is the Korean community a good community? We turn to these questions next.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE GOOD KOREAN COMMUNITY?

“*Milosz*: They live in that world, they fall in love there, marry, and spend all their time there.

*Wat*: The warmth of brotherhood. *Fraternité*. Obviously, it took the genius of Dostoevsky to understand that this was *fraternité ou la mort*. Dostoevsky foresaw what that *fraternité* was capable of turning into.” (Aleksander Wat. *My Century*.)

The relationship culture discussed thus far may sound similar to a growing movement, communitarianism. Leading the call for reviving communities in Western academia, communitarianism cannot be ignored when discussing any community, and the relationship culture explored thus far conveys much of the communitarian principles. At the very least, the relationship culture essentially presupposes a community by presuming the existence of relationships. Thus the more appropriate question for Korean Americans is not whether or not they constitute a community, but rather, what the nature of that community is. How does the Korean community measure against communitarian ideals? Is it a good community? And is that even the right question? What are the particulars of this community? Is it merely an ethnic community? Does this community have a place in today's and tomorrow's American civil society? What does civility have to do with this community? These are the questions that will guide this chapter. This chapter will first consider the Korean community alongside communitarianism, attempt a more realistic (or less utopian) take on the nature of communities in general, then consider the

relevance of the Korean community with the “civil” part of civil society. This chapter will also, compared to the first two chapters, rely more on the interviews and the participant observations of my informants.

### ***Communitarianism***

In *The Spirit of Community*, Amitai Etzioni makes a call for rediscovering a moral voice and a sense of “we-ness” in America. He rightly points out that such a call is particularly appropriate for the time, 1990s, and the place, America. He writes, “The people of China, Eastern Europe, and Japan for that matter may well need to move in the opposite direction.... But this is not our problem at this stage of American history. To worry about excessive ‘we-ness’ is like suggesting in the depths of winter that we shouldn’t turn on a space heater because it might make us sweat.”<sup>114</sup> I couldn’t agree more—the brilliance of any idea depends on the context in which it springs and is applied. But this begs the question, what about the people of two worlds? What direction do the Polish Americans, Japanese Americans, and Korean Americans need to move, on this spectrum of we-ness?

Communitarianism is, for the most part, in a debate with liberalism or, its greater (easier) target, libertarianism. Though communitarians insist that they are not urging a return to traditional communities (neither possible nor desirable), they insist even more on halting the path we are now on, to isolated individualism. Balance is the magic word for communitarians, and their primary opponents are liberal camps that promote individual over collective, rights over duty, and freedom over responsibility. And because communitarians are trying to pull their audience toward the direction of “we” and away

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<sup>114</sup> Etzioni 1993, 25-6.

from “me,” it may seem as though communitarians do not have much to say to those who are already closer to the we-extreme—those already in communities, including members of tight-knit ethnic communities. In fact, members of ethnic communities may better fall under the category of those who need to shift towards the other direction, the “me” extreme, and thus not be the appropriate audience for the communitarian agenda. After all, while ethnic communities may not be the ideal community, they are at least communities. Do ethnic communities, then, not have much to learn from communitarianism?

I am not certain how obvious it is that ethnic communities *are*, in fact, communitarian. For one, the assumption of a linear spectrum with “me” on end end and “we” on the other, may sit well with both communitarians and liberals, but not with ethnic communities, or more precisely, with the Korean community. In his book, *The New Golden Rule*, Etzioni creates the communitarian rule that essentially sums up the need for balance within the me-we spectrum: Respect and uphold society’s moral order as you would have society respect and uphold your autonomy.<sup>115</sup> (The book is aptly titled, for the running theme from cover to cover is finding the happy medium between a social order that has a clear moral voice and an individualism that leaves everyone on his own.) The point I want to make here is that the golden rule assumes that “you” (the audience) *would* uphold your autonomy—that anyone in this day and age would likely prefer a lean towards the “me” end, *and* that this is an assumption shared by the opposing liberal camp.

The me-we spectrum is certainly useful in providing the language for much of the communitarian argument, in conveying the communitarian message, and in

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<sup>115</sup> Etzioni 1996, xviii.

demonstrating the push and pull with their libertarian opponents. To be sure, the essence of communitarianism does not rest on the spectrum alone, and one can be communitarian without necessarily agreeing with it. The me-we spectrum, however, is one with Western roots, which is perhaps why it is not noticeable (or not worth pointing out) to a Western audience. To non-Western peoples and communities, however, such a spectrum may make the entire debate nonsensical.

The spectrum is especially ill-fitting for the layered self of the relationship culture, illustrated by the Russian nesting dolls, as discussed in Chapter 2. For the layered self, one's relational position *and* autonomy is embedded within every layer, and every layer is simply one more sense of "we" as well as "me." As a result, the layered self does not experience an inverse relationship between the "me" and "we" (as "me" strengthens, the "we" weakens, and vice versa). Rather, the two have a direct relationship—as "me" strengthens, *so does* "we." This is not a push-and-pull, but a push-and-push. Alford briefly comments on this contrasting understanding of the self. He writes, "The individualism-collectivism continuum is misleading because it almost succeeds in rendering incomprehensible a fascinating empirical finding: Koreans who score highest on many measures of individualism also score highest on many measures of collectivism."<sup>116</sup> How can communitarians persuade an audience to "embrace community just as you embrace autonomy," when that audience's idea of autonomy *is* community?

This is not to suggest that Korean Americans cannot be communitarian, but that theories themselves are often embedded with cultural assumptions, resulting in their inability to translate well to all audiences. The relationship culture conveys a subtly different version of communitarianism. It *assumes* the existence of a community, which

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<sup>116</sup> Alford 1990, 51.



is not equivalent to advocating or embracing community, and in the relationship culture, embracing community *is* embracing autonomy. The key is not finding a balance between the two but figuring out which layer to put on when.

Not only is communitarianism Western in its roots, it also contains a rosy-colored utopian character—a point often raised by critics, and not just the liberals. Jeffrey Stout, who doesn't necessarily identify himself with either the liberal or communitarian camp, candidly summarized, "The main problem with communitarian criticism of liberal society, then is its implicitly utopian character. The critics do succeed, at times, in articulating quite reasonable misgivings many of us feel concerning life in our society. Yet they very rarely give us any clear sense of what to do about our misgivings aside from yearning pensively for conditions we are either unwilling or unable to bring about. ... Liberal responses to communitarian criticism, on the other hand, often show what seems to be smug insensitivity."<sup>117</sup> Herbert Gans, also not necessarily on either side, commented, "When Bellah insists that genuine community is 'an inclusive whole, celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all,' he simply asks too much."<sup>118</sup> Stout's work, *Ethics After Babel*, was published in 1988 and primarily focused on MacIntyre as the spokesperson for communitarianism. Gans's work, *Middle American Individualism*, was also published in 1988, and treats Bellah as the communitarian spokesperson. At the time, the communitarian movement was limited to a small group of outspoken and sometimes controversial scholars, who managed to sound pessimistic and at times even bitter while simultaneously delivering a utopian message. Since then, the communitarian movement has gained an impressive

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<sup>117</sup> Stout 1988, 229.

<sup>118</sup> Gans 1988, 113.

following, created journals with prominent scholars, and published numerous popular books in its name. The criticisms, however, remain valid. Communitarians still seem to provide eternally optimistic happy-medium answers, and while it is difficult to disagree with them, it is also difficult to overlook their utopian tone.<sup>119</sup>

The argument here against communitarianism is not so much an attack, but a critical reminder. The Western root of contemporary communitarianism is understandable, even if that is not the authors' intention, given that communitarians and their audiences are primarily Western. Their utopian character, however, largely ignores or downplays much of the problems inherent in community, that not only liberals, but communitarians themselves, can readily point out. Though I am largely sympathetic to the communitarian agenda, communitarians often seem to get so swept up in their vision, that they forget to mention the inherent costs associated with communities.

It is worth noting here that a communitarian is not necessarily a member of a community and vice versa. Embracing community, or embracing the idea of community, does not require the real commitment of time and effort to any existing community. However, it would be difficult to imagine a genuine and knowledgeable communitarian who has no real experience as a member of a community—an experience which would inevitably expose the warts-and-all of that particular community, while teaching a lesson about belonging to communities in general.

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<sup>119</sup> Take, for instance, Etzioni's *The Spirit of Community* (1993), which is filled with optimistic happy-balance solutions: "[W]e need to strengthen the communitarian elements in the urban and suburban centers, to provide the social bonds that sustain the moral voice, but at the same time avoid tight networks that suppress pluralism and dissent." (122); "Communitarian proponents of pluralism-within-unity urge that everybody learn English while maintaining or regaining a knowledge of Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, or whatever as part of their subculture." (157). Such goals are so much easier said than done, that the ease with which Etzioni declares them almost mocks the difficulty with which they would have to be carried out in real life.

### ***Talking about community (a digression)***

Scholars who worry about the decline of community often provide arguments as to why it is beneficial, or in our interest, to be more engaged in community. A section of *Bowling Alone* titled “So What?” is dedicated to just that, a list of the categories that would benefit from a rise in social capital: education and children’s welfare, safe and productive neighborhoods, economic prosperity, even health and happiness, and of course, democracy.<sup>120</sup> While Putnam may be right that participation in group life leads to advantages in other areas of life, framing the argument in terms of why it is better for us to be in communities invites a line of criticisms. The most common is a straightforward “you are wrong” approach, that a strengthening of community does *not* always result in positive outcomes, that in fact, some groups and associations are only destructive to safe neighborhoods, prosperity, and health and happiness. Liberal scholars lead this line of argument, but they are not the only ones, and of course, both sides are right—some groups produce good outcomes while some produce bad ones. But at this point, the temptation is to become consumed with defining what constitutes a good association or a good group.

When Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* first appeared as an article, Michael Foley and Bob Edwards wrote, “[W]e must pursue nagging empirical questions about the ways in which social power is constituted, distributed, and managed in contemporary societies. One avenue... would be to inquire more deeply into the sorts of associational life likely to produce the ‘social capital’ on which Putnam has put so much weight.”<sup>121</sup> Many scholars have made similar claims, and numerous case studies have been conducted, with

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<sup>120</sup> These are the titles of *Bowling Alone* Chapters 17-21.

<sup>121</sup> Foley and Edwards 1996, 48-49.

the question, Is this association good or bad? This sort of categorization, then, tends to dominate the debate, though most groups are not wholly good or bad, and such labels only miss the point of the more important concerns of group life in general.

There is another line of criticisms, one that does not result in a superficial categorization, but in messier empirical research that deserves more attention. During the course of my research, I enrolled in a course in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning. The course was, broadly speaking, about communities, and the first paper assignment was, “What is a good community?” The question is simple, but I quickly realized the impossibility of the assignment. Good for whom? Its members or its society? Good in what way? A sense of belonging, self-respect, or charity? Good from my perspective or others’? And what exactly constitutes a community? I came up with more questions than answers, which, I suppose, was the point of the assignment.

Identifying and defining a good community is no easy task, and in order to do justice to any group, we must resist the urge to categorize a group as “good” or “bad,” and even more so, the urge to base goodness on whether a group produces civic virtue or not. Every group is its own small world, and sweeping generalizations do more harm than help to answer the important question of what the nature of a particular group is and what it has to do with the society at large. This is a much broader topic, perhaps so broad which makes the study more difficult, but that is no reason to drown ourselves in categories and definitions or to throw out the important inquiry altogether.

Years before Putnam became famous, Roland Warren wrote in *The Good Community Revisited*, “There is no one good community.”<sup>122</sup> Warren began the work with a list of “desirable characteristics that are often mentioned,” but warned that the degree of

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<sup>122</sup> Warren 1986, 35.

one characteristic is going to affect the degree of another. For instance, autonomy is on the list and so is community viability, but as the former increases the latter decreases.<sup>123</sup> In other words, the characteristics are inseparable and interdependent, which would make increasing each characteristic to the maximum a backfiring exercise, and get us no closer to defining a good community. Warren continued, “Rather there is a whole series of good communities, depending on what weight you’ve given to each of a whole spectrum of different values. But this is not to say that serious consideration of the characteristics of the good community is meaningless or futile.”<sup>124</sup>

Warren also noted that characteristics like apathy and ambiguity, conventionally believed to belong on the bad community list, are actually necessary to make a community better. In a wry tone, he wrote, “[T]hose apathetic people who don’t really care enough to take sides, but who only don’t want their peace disturbed. Good for them! We need controversy. We need issues portrayed emphatically and with strong representation. But we also need constraint. We need bystanders. In this sense, we need apathy. We need people who will clamp the lid on excessive partisanship.”<sup>125</sup> Warren concluded the work with the following remark:

Yes, I believe in the beloved community—whatever that means to you. I am not sure I know what it means even to me. But I’m going to keep trying to think and act in ways that help us to reconstruct our communities to be more worthy of human beings, and although we may occasionally disagree, I know that you will be dealing with the same things, but in your own way.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> “You can’t have both beyond a certain point, and the hard choice is to find that point which gives the greatest amount of one at the least cost to the other.” Warren 1986, 26.

<sup>124</sup> Warren 1986, 35.

<sup>125</sup> Warren 1986, 37.

<sup>126</sup> Warren 1986, 38.

Once we acknowledge that there is no one good community, that the goodness of a community need not be measured by any specific number of things, and that every community inherently produces costs and benefits, we can move away from categories that are altogether unhelpful and move on to more careful studies of existing communities to ask what the nature of that particular community is, which would certainly include effects on the members' health and happiness, effects on democracy, amongst others. For instance, rather than stating that a community ought to provide room for individual autonomy as well as the collective voice, we ought to study the dynamics of autonomy and collective within a particular community—question the members' attitude regarding it, how the community deals with a clash between the two, what the outsiders' perception of it is, etc. Rather than asking, “Is this a good community?” we ought to ask, “What is the nature of this community?” or simply, “What is this community like?”

Numerous recent works have made such attempts, including Putnam's later work, *Better Together*, a collection of rich stories on various communities, none of which can be simply summed up as good or bad, for democracy or otherwise.<sup>127</sup> Likewise, we should not be so quick to categorize our findings, that we go in with a criteria in our hands and leave once the checklist is complete. Warren was not dismissing categories, but he emphasized the depth with which we ought to look at particular communities, prior to making broad generalizations, and prior to making normative judgments. I end this digression with a reminder that my intention is to do just that.

We now turn to discussing “warts” within the Korean community—minding others (*noonchi*), representation, and shame, which are shared values of this community

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<sup>127</sup> Putnam 2004.

that were repeatedly mentioned by my informants, and I call them warts because they are an inherent part of this community but are not without harm. Furthermore, these are the concepts that are, in some shape or form, present in any group life. What I wish to argue here is that every community has its warts, which the communitarian literature does not discuss well, and that while communities are no panacea, they are still to be preferred over an isolated citizenry—warts and all.

***Minding others: noonchi (1)***

At the sheer presence of another human being, we automatically become, at the very least, aware of them or mindful of them. Minding others is not equivalent to having feelings for them, conversing with them, or even thinking about them—all of which may result from their presence, but not necessarily. The bare minimum effect is minding, and even that alone can be stifling, since it demands more heightened senses than if they were not there. How well we mind others may also be known as social skills or people skills, but whatever we call it, it is only learned, practiced, and tested *with others*. As with most activities, the more we do it, the more accustomed to it and the better at it we become, and minding others, an inherent part of group life, is no exception.

I use the phrase “minding others” because it has no obvious normative connotation, whereas terms such as “comforting” is clearly good and “stifling” is clearly not. Critics often say communities can be stifling, precisely because we have to mind others, and communitarians respond by reassuring audiences that the traditional communities of fast-gossip and no-privacy are long gone, and that embracing community does not have to be equivalent to embracing a stifling community.<sup>128</sup> They then go on to

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<sup>128</sup> See Etzioni 1993, 122.

elaborate on all of the good communities have to provide, inviting the criticism of utopianism. While communitarians are right, in that the traditional communities are indeed less common today, communities are inherently stifling, as some degree of minding others goes on in any kind of group life. We need not, however, try to hide or make up for this fact, or determine that it is a price we pay for the benefits of community. We ought to look more closely at what it means to mind others in particular communities and what the effects of minding others are.

My informants demonstrated instances of minding the members of their community, and for them, it was not so much a matter of being pressured to do it or even being aware of it, but rather, something subtly weaved into their everyday interactions with one another. Most of them shrugged it off (just as they shrugged off their membership in the community; see Chapter 2) and minding others had become “normal” behavior. Mark (from Chapter 2), who was a member of a Korean church I visited, was contemplating when to visit his brother who lives out of town. He eventually decided to go during weekdays, taking time off of work, so as not to miss church on a Sunday. He said with a smile, “There’s too many eyes here.” An outsider may easily determine that Mark’s church puts too much pressure on him, making him feel not even free enough to visit his brother on a day of his choice. Mark, however, would simply rather give his church less to question him about, than to miss church and deal with having to explain his absence. Mark added, “It’s not a big deal either way, but still.” Likewise, recall Brooke (from Chapter 2), who would rather not go to Lotte without make-up than go and run in to an acquaintance. Either informant’s choice is, to a degree, stifling, in the sense that it is made while keeping others in mind, and they probably would have made different



choices had they not minded others or had no one to mind. But they seemed to accept minding others as part of the territory of belonging to their community, and it was, as they said, “no big deal.”

When my informants talked about having to mind those in their community, they were pretty nonchalant about it. However, when they talked about minding others as something that Koreans in particular do, and thus from the third-person perspective and not the first, they were more judgmental, or even angry. Jiae, at her dad’s insistence, had bought her car from a dealer managed by a Korean, which meant paying more for the same car than if she were to buy it elsewhere. Like Mark and Brooke, Jiae talked about it as an inconvenience, still went along with it, but was sure to note, “This is how ridiculous Koreans are. They have to do everybody favors, remember everybody, even strangers, just because they’re Korean.” Of course, if strangers are remembered, they are not exactly strangers. To Jiae, however, the dealership manager was no personal acquaintance of hers, and thus no different from a stranger. When Jiae had protested to her dad, he simply responded, “*Geu-ruh-neun-guh ah-ni-ya,*” which essentially means, “That’s not right,” or “We don’t do that.” To Jiae’s dad, the manager was no stranger, because no Korean was a stranger. And though Jiae is here talking about Koreans as though they are a group apart from herself, she did add that the favor was somehow returned to her dad and her family. Jiae concluded, “I get that Koreans look out for each other and that’s great, but sometimes it’s just ridiculous.”

Though minding others is a part of any community, Korean Americans especially uphold it as a shared virtue, even if it is “ridiculous” or “borderline paranoid,” as another informant put it. Several informants talked about minding others as if it were a uniquely

Korean trait, referring to the concept of *noonchi*, which is the ability to sense what the other is thinking or feeling without their having to say it.<sup>129</sup> Emily, a counselor at a Korean non-profit counseling center, said, “Amongst Koreans there’s this concept of *noonchi*.”<sup>130</sup> She continued,

It’s a skill, an individual skill, I know Korean people who don’t have it. But in the Korean community you’re expected to at least cultivate some form of it, you know? So you don’t necessarily have to say stuff to know what’s going on, or know what someone’s thinking or feeling, or that something’s not right. You can look at each other and know, “This is not gonna fly.” But with my white friends, everything has to be said. There’s no *noonchi*, there’s nothing assumed. Of course, on some level there is, like the more familiar you are with someone, there’s that, but on a functional level you’re expected to say what you think, say what you feel. Nothing is taken for granted. So when I’m in the Korean community I don’t necessarily have to say a whole lot because I know people just know. But when I’m with my white friends I have to readjust. My friends look at me like they’re waiting for me to tell them what I’m thinking or feeling, whereas I’m sitting there thinking, “Can’t you see my face?”

*Noonchi* evidently appears early (or is taught early) in Korean families, as an interesting study shows. Researchers observed Korean American and Anglo-American pre-school children playing, comparing the two groups’ speech and behavior.<sup>131</sup> They found that while Anglo-American children speak their minds and use direct speech, Korean children tend to talk around an issue, hoping playmates will pick up on it—meaning not only do Korean children *have noonchi*, they expect or hope others do as well. In addition, Korean children were more receptive to playmates’ suggestions, using more relational techniques such as agreeing statements and polite requests, while Anglo children rejected playmates’ suggestions more often.

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<sup>129</sup> See Chapter 1, Footnote 43.

<sup>130</sup> Emily is a 29-year-old 1.5er.

<sup>131</sup> Farver and Shin 1997.

It is doubtful that children consciously understand the difference between the virtues of one community over another, or that children feel the need to “readjust” from one group to another as Emily did. Adult Korean Americans, however, understand that *noonchi* is a Korean virtue, so they expect it only from Koreans. They may be frustrated with non-Koreans who don’t have it, but they are not surprised. And thus *noonchi* takes on an ethnic character, though technically, it is not. *Noonchi* may be a Korean term and a shared value in the Korean community, but it really is nothing more than a heightened version of minding others, which is embedded in any community.

At local traffic intersections where the same drivers pass each other everyday, the traffic laws are broken less. Stop signs and traffic lights are obeyed, and the obedience has more to do with fellow drivers than the driving etiquette of individual drivers. The knowledge that we are going to have regular interaction with the same people is enough to influence our behavior, from trivial matters like keeping our yards neat, to more serious ones like not stealing from our neighbors. Regular interaction with others transforms any stranger into a familiar face, creating a sense of community, and the familiarity is enough to mind them, or to naturally provide *noonchi*. While too much *noonchi* can certainly be dangerous, if it becomes more like paranoia than consideration, the experience of community naturally and inevitably cultivates a sense of minding others in participating individuals, to the point that they see minding others as “no big deal.”

### ***Representation (2)***

A second and related shared value of the Korean community is a sense of representation, the idea that one represents the group, and vice versa. This point is not as

emphasized in the communitarian literature, but it is one of the more real and obvious differences between those who belong to a community and those who do not.

During my years as a teaching assistant, I led a few undergraduate classroom discussions on *The Cheating Culture* by David Callahan.<sup>132</sup> The key question was why people cheat, and the discussions usually began from a utilitarian angle, in terms of the costs and benefits of cheating (usually money, but also status, recognition, and reputation.) Some students proudly told tales of their cheating experiences, laughing at themselves, but claiming they (and others) would cheat if the payoff was worth it. As the discussion went on, a different kind of comment eventually surfaced: “It depends on how you were raised. I was raised that cheating is just wrong.” Such a comment had a hushing effect. Evidently it is one thing for an individual to cheat for his own gain. It is another to cheat (or not cheat), when others are included in the responsible party.

How one was raised may or may not be the dominant factor in one’s decision to cheat—that is an empirical question, one to which there is no simple answer. Clearly, however, the introduction of others into an individual’s decision to cheat, in this case, one’s parents and family, seemed to make students think twice about what they were going to say. For one, no student said, “I was raised that cheating is okay.” Even young college students who essentially bragged about cheating just the minute before felt the weight of bringing their families into their individual choices—choices they know to be wrong. Once others, those with whom we share something, enter the picture, we automatically become more conscious of our moral selves, which is precisely the point communitarians make. In order for us to ask, “How do I make us look? How do they make me look?” there must first be recognition of an “us,” a “we,” a group bigger than

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<sup>132</sup> Callahan 2004.

the self. Once we recognize that we represent something bigger than ourselves, and the more we recognize it, the more accustomed we become to looking beyond mere individual interest—whether we like it or not.

Representation is, like *noonchi*, a shared virtue of the Korean community; and like *noonchi*, representing more than oneself is not always a pleasant experience. It is relatively easier to represent our families, with whom we share so much, and it is often by choice or out of pride that we represent them. Representing an ethnic group, however, is often not by choice of the member, but rather an inevitable result of ethnic/racial prejudices formed by insiders and outsiders alike (which, no matter how “wrong” it may be, happens on a regular basis). For instance, one Korean’s behavior may be assumed to be common among all Koreans, and whether or not the assumption is correct, Koreans believe there is a high probability of that assumption being made by others, and as a result, they inadvertently end up representing Koreans. My informants expressed ambivalence about the process, and at times resented it, but it was also a regular enough phenomenon that they could not get away from altogether. Even with no intention of representing fellow Koreans, or the desire for fellow Koreans to represent them, my informants were accustomed to the constant representation of their community.

The complexity of representation became clear when I asked my informants their reaction to the Seung-hui Cho incident. Only one informant answered, “I reacted the same way I would have with any crazy shooting like that.” All remaining informants, and most Korean Americans from what I recall immediately following the shooting, reacted in some way that touched on ethnic representation. Lois answered, “My initial reaction? ‘He gave us a bad name! He gave us Koreans a bad name! We’re good people! We work

hard!' That's what I thought initially." Dain answered, "At first when the news broke we didn't know if he was Korean. I thought, 'Please don't let him be Korean!' And when we found out he was Korean, 'Why did he have to be Korean?!' I was ashamed."

The most common response, in fact, was, "I was ashamed." When I asked, "Why?" Dain answered, "You only want to hear good stuff about your people." Brooke answered, "Asians are not very known in America as it is. And I felt very angry because the one time we get publicity it's over an Asian guy who shot up all these people."

Charles answered, "I was ashamed. It was like we failed him." All of my informants (with the exception of the one mentioned above) identified ethnically in some form with Seung-hui Cho, and had a corresponding reaction. Many informants also said they were afraid of retaliation against Koreans following the shooting. However, when I asked if there was any, all answered no. Charles added, "But there could have been. And there might not have been actual retaliation against Koreans, but we don't know how Americans look at us differently because of that."

If the media is any indication, it seems fair to say that Americans did not look at Koreans any differently as a result of the shooting, as it did not associate the incident with his being Korean in any direct way. Koreans, however, both Korean Americans and Koreans in Korea, anticipated Americans to make the association, which is why they feared retaliation, and almost braced themselves for it. The Korean president even made a formal apology, as though all of Korea was responsible for Seung-hui Cho's crime. This bothered Emily. I asked her, "Why do you think he did that?" She responded, "Because we're a collectivistic culture. One of us represents all of us." A Korean American church also had the notion of collective responsibility. The church of an informant, Nathan,

wanted to organize a fundraiser for the victims' families following the incident.<sup>133</sup> The fundraiser never happened, however, due to much opposition, of which Nathan was a part. He said, "When the idea was first brought up, I said, 'For what? This guy's not representing the Korean community. He just happened to be Korean—why do we have to apologize for that?' That makes it even worse, as if we are responsible." In the end, my informants' reaction was layered and complex—they felt some level of connection with Seung-hui Cho, but understood that the shooting was an isolated incident and not the collective responsibility of Koreans, yet still anticipated that others will make such a connection, and was therefore prepared to defend themselves in the event that they did.

Even if the sense of representation is not always intentional, and no matter who is creating or reinforcing the grouping, the group experience forces us to feel responsibility, or at least a connection, for something bigger than ourselves. As ethnic minorities, which is visible, Korean Americans have grown accustomed to representing the Korean population. And while it brings them to shame for Seung-hui Cho, and makes them wish stereotypes didn't exist, it also puts them on their best behavior.

Emily, though she was bothered by the Korean president's apology, also felt responsibility at times as *the* Korean throughout her life. Recalling her college years at James Madison University, located "in the middle of the country," she recalled the occasional visits she made outside of campus.

If I were to walk into the Waffle House, all the townies, the old Southern white people, would be there, and they would all look at me. And I know some of them have never seen Asians. So for me, I thought, "Okay, they've never seen an Asian person. I better make a good impression." So when I would go to Wal-Mart and I know people are staring at me, I smile and I'm nice, because I want them to say,

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<sup>133</sup> Nathan is a 37-year-old 1.5er.

“I saw an Asian and they’re not that bad.” It’s not their fault they’ve never seen an Asian. So, accept reality, you know? They’re not being mean, so just make a good impression.

A common identity allows (or forces) one to represent a collective and vice versa. We often have no say in how that representation is carried out, and in how others view the representation, but it is nonetheless an inevitable part of group life. The most common and meaningful forms of representation occur in primary relationships. For instance, we may say to our friends or family, “Don’t embarrass me,” or “Make me proud,” and even if their actions are unrelated to us, it is our sheer acquaintance with them that magnify sentiments of shame or pride. No matter what the nature of a group is, however, representation goes on at some level, and it is the source of collective pride and/or shame. We cannot feel one without the ability to feel the other, and neither would be a possibility without a recognized common identity. Strangers, those with whom we have nothing in common, cannot make us feel proud or ashamed of them. Such feelings are reserved for those who we recognize as part of “we.”

During the period of my writing and research, the Winter Olympics and the World Cup took place. As much as contemporary social scientists highlight the autonomy of the individual and the arbitrariness of nationalism or group identity, events like these are evidence that deep-rooted shared identities, and the enthusiasm for “we” are alive and well around the world. Whether at the national or local level, representation happens in groups of all shapes and sizes.

### ***Shame as motive (3)***

Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote, “It is not enough to *encourage* people to be moral; it



is also necessary to *shame* them into being moral.”<sup>134</sup> Just as we can feel ashamed of those with whom we share a commonality, we can also be shamed *by them* into behavior that we as a collective approve of. This is the only way shaming people works—if both shame-er and shame-ee recognize shared values. Pride and shame in a collective body is developed, meaning it cannot be directly taught or un-taught, and is a process that takes time. Because that pride or shame is ultimately rooted in some form of commonality, it can serve as a strong motivator for individual behavior. Groups will surely differ on their method of shaming and what is worthy of shaming. As isolationism becomes widespread, however, shaming as a motive is likely to fade, because shaming only works when shared norms are recognized. And the more isolated one is, the more shameless one can afford to be, because without a “we,” he does not have anyone in his life capable of shaming him.

The Korean culture is particularly known as one where shaming is a dominant motive for behavior. Psychiatrist David S. Rue, in contribution to a sociological work entitled *Korean Americans: Conflict and Harmony*, wrote about the contrasting approaches to shame between Koreans and Americans.

[A]voiding the risk of triggering shame in others and in oneself is a constant preoccupation of Koreans. ... In contrast, the Americans are proud of their rebellious iconoclastic spirit... The undergirding principle in the Declaration is the American defiance against tradition, the shedding of shame that ties, binds, limits one’s behavior and dreams. This penchant for disinhibition, spontaneity, and independence is so highly valued in America that social missteps and cultural naïveté are often tolerated and forgiven, especially if faux pas is omitted by a “red-blooded American.”<sup>135</sup>

My informants were well aware of such a contrast in attitudes toward shame. At a

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<sup>134</sup> Himmelfarb 2000, 98.

<sup>135</sup> Rue 1994 (Ed. Kwon), 24.

birthday party, to which I was invited by an informant, I had the chance to speak to her and her mother, who owns a convenience store in Baltimore. As my informant stood by and rolled her eyes apologetically, her mother talked, in Korean, about the shamelessness of her customers: “Americans have no shame. My customers tell me everything about their lives, from how many divorces they’ve had to how their kids refuse to talk to them. I thought they were joking at first, but now I know, they’re just not ashamed. I’m more embarrassed than they are when they tell me their stories, but what can I say? Koreans don’t do that. And if they did, I’d say, ‘Are you bragging?’ and that’ll shut them up. I guess Americans are different.” To be sure, Koreans are not exempt from neither divorce nor bad family relationships. They are, however, terribly ashamed of broken relationships, and the last thing they would do is share such shameful information with strangers. Apparently, it is one thing to be divorced; it is another to be public about it.<sup>136</sup>

Koreans have a fierce pride of their groups, whether that group is their family, church, or nation. They tend to stay mum about their problems because they believe their dirty laundry is nobody else’s business, and more importantly, that they *ought* to be able to take care of their groups. Accordingly, talking about the group’s problems to a stranger is only embarrassing the member who is talking, which is perhaps why there is such a strong stigma associated with therapy among Koreans. Nathan, who studied Christian Counseling, wanted to bring counseling to the Korean church. “Unfortunately, it didn’t work out,” Nathan said. “Korean churches, they don’t want it. It’s a big taboo.” Another informant, Christin, was seeing a therapist at the time of the interview.<sup>137</sup> She said, “I go

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<sup>136</sup> James Q. Wilson also makes the interesting point that poor Latino families are only one-fifth as likely as black families to receive welfare payments, which he attributes to the stigma of being on welfare amongst Latinos. Wilson 2000 (Ed. Eberly).

<sup>137</sup> Christin is a 28-year-old second generation Korean American.

to therapy because I don't want to end up like my mom. [What do you mean?] She has issues that she has to deal with but you know how Korean people are about the whole stigma with the therapist thing. She's embarrassed to go. She thinks the therapist is going to judge her, and that her friends will, too, which only makes her problems worse.” Christin's mom is shamed into not going to therapy, because she cares too much about what other people will say.

Not surprisingly, Nathan and Christin, who are both raised in America, believe that Koreans take their taboos and stigmas too seriously, and that their level of shaming is nearly paralyzing, too far beyond the healthy dose for self-discipline and self-control. They wish the older generation would lighten up a bit, that they wouldn't let others' opinions influence their behavior too much. There is, however, something to be said for such a strong notion of shared values, caring almost too much about what their community thinks, whereas turning too easily to faceless professionals and bureaucracies is the opposite problem that is unlikely in communities with a high sense of “we.”<sup>138</sup> Shaming one another is certainly not a comfortable process—for the shame-er nor for the shame-ee. Shaming, however, happens naturally in group life, to the point it cannot be prevented, while it cannot even be done forcefully amongst isolated individuals.

This is not to suggest, however, that only Koreans are familiar with shaming. Even a cursory look at an introductory-level sociology work would reveal numerous American studies that attest to the power of shaming and stigmatizing. Dr. Rue indeed exaggerates, when he writes, “Americans are so unfamiliar with shame and shame-based behavior that they are befuddled when they are confronted with a shame reaction...”<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> See McKnight 1995.

<sup>139</sup> Rue 1994 (Ed. Kwon), 24.

Shame may not be as prominent of a motive among Americans relative to Koreans, but that does not mean Americans are incapable of feeling shame or shaming one another.

Americans are also well aware, however, of the disappearance of shame in the last several decades. In *The Dumbest Generation*, Bauerlein discusses not only the unwillingness to read and study among today's young Americans, but their "new attitude, this brazen disregard of books and reading."<sup>140</sup> Ordinary Americans, in everyday conversations, are also observing the trend of shamelessness. In the Bible study group I joined (the non-ethnic one, see Chapter 1), one of the members, Jamie, casually talked about this recalling her weekend. Jamie, who is Anglo-American, was standing in line to buy tickets at a movie theater, when a few kids began "cursing up a storm" in the presence of adults. Jamie said, "We wouldn't dare do that when we were young; we were embarrassed to do that. But these kids were shameless. What's worse is that nobody said anything to them! Including me!" The point is not that kids rebel and curse—kids will always rebel—but that kids now rebel and curse shamelessly, *and* that those who are capable of putting the kids to shame, if there are any, are not bothering to do so. The two phenomena, of course, go hand in hand—the disappearance of shame is the responsibility of both shame-er and shame-ee.

This is not to suggest that the decline in community is solely responsible for an emergence of shamelessness, but the relationship between the two cannot be ignored. A community can shame its members into upholding the values of that community, meaning, that for the individuals without a community, the pool of those who can effectively shame them is going to be significantly smaller. Furthermore, one's community must be recognized *prior to* the shaming, which means becoming capable of

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<sup>140</sup> Bauerlein 2008, 40.

shaming and being shamed takes time. The community and its sense of “we” has to get under the skin of its members in order to shame them effectively—and it is as unpleasant as it sounds. Shame is a powerful yet unbearable emotion. It is not surprising, therefore, that as more individuals withdraw from communities, the more shameless we become as a whole—which ought to raise an even greater alarm, given that where communities cannot effectively shame individuals, little else but the state is left to remind individuals of moral or proper behavior.

Alan Wolfe pointed out that as civil society dwindles, the more we depend on the state as moral authority. There are many problems that result from this phenomenon, but for one, it certainly pushes us further into shamelessness. The state cannot shame us the way our communities can, the state cannot share values or identify with us the way our communities can, and more often than not, the rules of the state cannot mean more to us than the rules of our communities. We are more concerned with how our communities view us than how the state views us, and while the state can coerce us, it cannot shame us. And in the end, which strategy allows individuals to autonomously think and act for themselves, and exercise their own moral capacities? Neither scaring individuals with threat of punishment nor enticing individuals with incentives (sticks or carrots), gives human beings enough credit. Even animals can be motivated with punishment and reward.

A powerful authority over isolated individuals is a Hobbesian view, who is not only the theorist of equality (see Chapter 1), but credited as the father of Rational Choice Theory. The setting in Hobbes’s natural condition of mankind is isolation—every man for himself, there are no ties and bonds, there is no community. In a hostile environment

where individuals are jealous, suspicious, and fearful of one another, the authority has no choice but to rule with an iron grip, with the threat of painful sticks. Nothing can meaningfully affect individuals other than whatever resources are available to the sovereign, and as a result, whether intentional or not, the sovereign alone wields immense power. If there was a sense of community among the individuals, the sovereign's power may not need to be so absolute. The more isolated individuals are, however, the tighter authority's grip needs to be, to ensure order, and in Hobbes's view, survival, which leaves no room for a sense of community to develop. And an authority with such immense power can threaten us, but it cannot shame us.<sup>141</sup>

By pointing out the three traits, *noonchi*, representation, and shaming, I am not claiming that they are unique to the Korean community. The purpose in discussing them is to highlight the shared values of the Korean community that are also, in some form, inherent to group life in general, and to suggest that their absence is to be expected in individuals who have little experience with group life. Communities certainly do not produce benefits alone for its members, and we need not pretend they do, but even a community as full of warts as the Korean community is better than a society of isolated individuals, at the very least in its inevitable development of we-ness for its members.

I also wish to point out that the three traits are not assigned to the Korean ethnicity, but rather, the Korean community. As strange as it may sound, it is not

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<sup>141</sup> In Chapter 1 I make the argument that an unequal relationship, such as one between the sovereign and his subjects, is more likely to last, and its obligations easier to recognize. Here, I make the argument that the sovereign has no choice but to use coercion because there is no sense of community. It may seem that I am both praising and criticizing Hobbes, with respect to Korean Americans. My (very ideal) claim is that the Korean community has the best of both worlds with respect to Hobbes—they have the lasting and obligatory benefits of an unequal relationship (relationship culture), but also the benefit of community which renders coercion as unnecessary.

primarily the common ethnicity that sustains this ethnic community. In a 1968 work on residential communities, Herbert Gans wrote, “Little is known about what characteristics must be shared before people feel themselves to be compatible with others. We do not know for certain if they must have common backgrounds, or similar interests, or shared values, or combination of these. Social relations are based, not on census data, but on subjectively experienced definitions of homogeneity and heterogeneity...”<sup>142</sup> In a 1988 work Sydney Brower wrote,

We do not know just what it is that makes people feel that their neighbors are not the same kind of people as themselves. It does not seem to be based on objective measures such as differences in age and length of residence, education and prestige of employment, income, household size, or marital status. It does not even seem to be based on *perceptions* that their neighbors are different in age, religion, income, or education. Instead, it seems to be a global judgment based on such things as childrearing practices, respectability, responsibility, privacy, property maintenance, and civil behavior.<sup>143</sup>

Then and now, we don’t know precisely what brings and keeps people and communities together. We do know, however, that there is more to it than quantifiable and sociological factors.

A sense of community is typically regarded as a good, but deliberately creating a sense of community where none exists is a rather oxymoronic and artificial idea—we-ness develops naturally, and more often as a by-product than the explicit end. We cannot force others, or even ourselves, to connect or bond over shared values, if the individuals themselves do not recognize them. Communitarians may convince one to agree with the communitarian argument or to adopt the communitarian outlook, but that is not

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<sup>142</sup> Gans 1968, 156.

<sup>143</sup> Brower 1988, 81.

equivalent to convincing one to become a member of a community, to actually develop the we-ness in a group. To mind others, to represent others, or to feel shamed by others, requires immersion in a group, which is different from, and more difficult than, merely agreeing with an argument. And to experience the uncomfortable and stifling nature of a community would hardly serve as a selling point, but it is nonetheless an inherent part of the community experience.

To be civil, however, is perhaps an easier point of persuasion for today's audience. Civility has become the closest thing to shared virtue for a liberal pluralistic society—why is this the case? Is civility also a shared virtue of particular communities, such as the Korean community? Can the Korean community fit into a civil society? We turn now to the dominance of civility today, and its relation to the Korean community and particular communities.

### ***Civility: the strangers' virtue***

In Howard County, Maryland, where I live, a trend has emerged. Green bumper magnets all over the suburban towns are demanding, "Choose Civility in Howard County." The slogan can also be found on posters in libraries, schools, and public buildings. The magnets are available at public libraries, and are part of the county's program that aims to (what else?) promote civility. What began as a few librarians' effort to promote manners in the library has bloomed to a county-wide movement for citizens' everyday behavior, including but not limited to, traffic behavior. (Choose Civility has spawned another movement, "Choose Cycling," with look-alike bumper magnets. Imitation is a sure sign of the original's success.)



At a glance, civility is a simple enough idea. Most of us understand civility without difficulty, typically as some version of manners or consideration of others. Civility is also a basic expectation, as a matter of course or common sense, in everyday actions such as standing in line, being quiet in a library, etc. This does not mean that we *are* civil; in fact, the literature on civility (and our own experiences, I'm sure) would confirm that we increasingly face incivility, and perhaps that is why civility has become a more pressing issue. Whether or not we *are* civil, however, civility is not a difficult concept to understand. What is worth noting here is the word choice. Why civility? Why not goodness? Why not "choose goodness" or "choose kindness"?

In certain contexts, civility is used interchangeably with goodness or kindness. In *Choosing Civility*, the book that inspired the county-wide initiative (and a mandatory reading of the program), author P. M. Forni, a professor of Italian literature, writes, "I looked at my students and realized that I wanted them to be kind human beings more than I wanted them to know about Dante."<sup>144</sup> Civility can mean, among other things, a kindness or generosity that human beings ought to show one another, simply because it is the good and decent thing to do. The book goes on to list twenty-five rules of civility, ranging from "Pay attention," "Listen," and "Speak kindly," to "Mind your body," "Be agreeable," and even "Respect the environment and be gentle to animals." They are rules that are commonly accepted as the rules of good behavior.

Stephen Carter's book, *Civility*, another book on the program's suggested reading list, also talks about civility as though it were equivalent to goodness or kindness, perhaps even more so than Forni. Carter writes, "The key to reconstructing civility, I shall argue,

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<sup>144</sup> Forni 2002, 7.

is for all of us to learn anew the virtue of acting with love toward our neighbors.”<sup>145</sup> Often relying on the Christian command to love one another, Carter argues that we are on the road with fellow passengers, who simply by virtue of their being human, deserve to be treated with civility. Those of us who do not share the Christian faith may easily disagree with Carter, who writes, “[E]very encounter with another human being should inspire in us a powerful sense of awe. Why? Because that other human being, whatever his or her strengths, weaknesses, and simple complexities, is also a part of God’s creation.”<sup>146</sup> Though Carter himself is clearly a believer, his call to civility, and the urgency with which he does so, is directed at believers as well as non-believers. Ordinary men and women need no command from a common God to be civil or to agree that civility is a good thing.

In fact, it is the very lack of commonalities required, the assumption of pluralism, that make “civility” the appropriate word choice, and not merely a substitute for goodness or manners. Civility has become a buzz-word precisely because words such as “goodness” invite excessive disagreement in a pluralistic society, where one man’s definition of the good is not necessarily another’s, and a liberal society, where that man has the right to define for himself the notion of the good. It is not a coincidence that the county program uses “civility” as opposed to any other term.

As MacIntyre forcefully argued in *After Virtue*, the world no longer speaks a common moral language, where, as a result, the concept of virtue disappears.<sup>147</sup> It is not that virtuous acts disappear or that virtuous people disappear, but rather that the consensus on what virtue is disappears, rendering the concept essentially useless. Given

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<sup>145</sup> Carter 1998, 18.

<sup>146</sup> Carter 1998, 101.

<sup>147</sup> MacIntyre 1981.

such circumstances, dramatically referred to as a moral crisis, some academic camps have bluntly and adamantly called for a revival of virtue, though not unanimously for the Aristotelian tradition like MacIntyre (Gertrude Himmelfarb calls for the Victorian virtues;<sup>148</sup> and Alan Ehrenhalt for 1950s America<sup>149</sup>); and some have instead embraced liberalism, given its inherent disconnect from virtue (John Rawls, Nancy Rosenblum). Most ordinary Americans, however, probably spend little time pondering the problem of common virtue in a liberal society or choosing one theory as its solution. They may be well aware of the tension between a pluralistic liberal society and common virtues, but that does not mean they have given up on the notion of the common good in the small places of their lives. In fact, scholars like Forni and Carter, who seem to use civility as a substitute for virtue, help blur the line, as they talk about civility and virtue as related, but don't explicitly equate the two. A polite request for people to be polite? Something like that.

In some scholarly discussions of civility, however, distinctions are made much more clearly between the civil and the good, or between the civil society and the good society. In these dialogues, civility is not a synonym for goodness at all, but the most that can be agreed upon or asked of strangers in a liberal society. In other words, civility is the lowest common denominator in terms of virtue—which is insufficient, communitarians argue, to deal with the societal breakdown of moral fiber and moral truths, hence their emphasis on the good society *as opposed to* civil society. According to Etzioni, the very disconnect between civil society and morality makes the good society necessary, as a concept and in actuality, because rather than promoting “one comprehensive doctrine,”

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<sup>148</sup> Himmelfarb, 1994.

<sup>149</sup> Ehrenhalt, 1995.

civil society “simply provides the forum in which a plurality of such doctrines can be debated ‘indefinitely without end.’”<sup>150</sup> Civility is more about “respecting each other’s differences,” which can become dangerously close to indifference, and civility can hardly portray the passionate sense of right and wrong or the triumphant spirit of doing good.

Communitarians are right in making the subtle distinction, as civility is in no way equivalent to solidarity or a consensus on the good. And as much as scholars have tried to locate community-building in the realm of civil society, civility is only the bare minimum shared virtue within communities. Civility is, more precisely, the virtue of strangers. We may admire strangers who are civil with one another, but we expect more than civility to and from those with whom we share a we-ness. Civility may be the solution for incivility, but it is no solution for isolation. Perfectly civil individuals may also be perfectly isolated strangers, because civility does not require we-ness or accountability. In fact, a major part of civility is leaving others alone in isolation, if they so desire. Of course, civility can lead to we-ness, and civility may even be a pre-requisite of community-building or strangers becoming friends. However, once a community is established, or once a we-ness is recognized, there must be more to the members’ shared virtue than mere civility. And in many cases, communities with the greatest solidarity and strongly-shared virtues may not value civility at all—they may even be considered deeply uncivil, by insiders and outsiders alike.

*Noonchi*, representation, or shaming, are perhaps uncivil examples of the Korean community when analyzed on their own. As previously noted, there is a degree of pain or at least discomfort, that goes along some of the inherent traits of group life. Is shaming someone an instance of civility? Is having to represent an entire group without choice an

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<sup>150</sup> Etzioni 2000, 360-361.

example of civility? Probably not. Any form of collective pressure on an individual can hardly be categorized as civil, but it is certainly necessary to reinforce the sense of community. On the contrary, when we don't bother to criticize or to shame one another for whatever reason, we remain strangers and reinforce the barriers that prevent us from community-building. If the problem of today's society is isolation, the lack of community, or the lack of we-ness, civility is hardly a solution. Some incivility may be required as part of the solution, as civility alone can actually promote isolation.

Some scholars believe that civility among strangers is to be desired over excessive solidarity which potentially suppresses individual liberty. Sam Fleischacker, for one, describes the "insignificant community," where members are loosely connected and mutually disinterested, as the ideal form of community in a liberal society.<sup>151</sup> He argues that communities actually flourish when individual members are allowed to leave, because active individual commitment is what allows for the natural by-product of community, as opposed to a community kept in existence by the need for community itself. Rather than assuming "thin" communities are weak, Fleischacker suggests, we ought to consider the possibility that communities of strong bonds and solidarity can be more dangerous to liberal society.

I wholly agree with the argument that traditional tight-knit communities contain uncivil elements—I have pointed out how uncivil some community-building efforts can be, and there are numerous demonstrations of incivility from the Korean community. However, the point here is that in a society of strangers, or insignificant communities, not only do individuals lack we-ness, they lack the *capability* of having we-ness. Not only are strangers unwilling to mind others, it doesn't occur to them to do so. Not only are

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<sup>151</sup> Fleischacker 1998 (Ed. Gutmann).

strangers unwilling to shame and be ashamed, they hold shameless attitudes and don't see the need to shame others. Not only are strangers unwilling to represent others, they don't recognize the prerequisite commonality. Even if individuals were committed to civility, civility alone can become its own form of incivility, contributing to the widespread problem of today's atomized citizenry. In other words, tight-knit communities are not categorically better than solitude, but solitude destroys any potential of an individual's sense of "we." It is not a coincidence that some individuals are participating in numerous groups at any given point in their lives, and that some participate in none. We-ness is habitual and reinforcing.

When Tocqueville praised civil society as the place where individuals came out of their narrow places and into a space where differences can be expressed, heard, and worked through, he assumed that individuals *had* their respective places *to come out of*. We still praise civil society as the place where strangers can come together, but we seem to forget the importance of their respective places of origin. Today we see more emphasis on tolerance and the acceptance of others, as opposed to the commitment and reinforcement of shared virtues, but not having a place of "we" can be just as problematic as only valuing one's homogeneous group. And while our civil society is by no means hopeless, it is doubtful just how civil a society can be for strangers who have no concept of "we."

Of course, the counterargument here is that individuals in tight-knit communities are incapable of being civil with strangers, or of stepping out of their respective communities. And if Korean Americans are too comfortable in their homogeneous community, are they incapable of getting along with strangers? Are they incapable of

being civil with non-Koreans?

### *The uncivil Korean Community?*

In striking contrast to their fierce loyalty to those they know, my informants seemed to hold an utter disregard for all others, who, in their eyes, have no relation to them, and are thus deemed strangers. This goes back to the relationship culture—if there is no relationship, they don't know how to act, they don't know where they stand. My informants commented on the inability of Koreans to express the in-between or subtle politeness, the small acts of civility between strangers. One informant said during an interview, “White people are so good at the small talk! I don't know how they do it. What do they talk about?”

If civil society is the place we connect with strangers, Korean Americans are just as absent from it as anyone else. However, Korean Americans' absence is not due to isolation or withdrawal from others. Rather, they are so absorbed in their own circles, that they hardly seek relationships beyond those they already have. Nearly every Korean American I interviewed or spoke to made obvious references to their very busy social lives, filled with family, friends, church, etc. And if anything, the direction of complaint was “not enough time” to tend to the people they already had a relationship with, most of whom turned out to be Korean as well. When I asked my informants, “The people you spend the most time with are Korean?” many had a somewhat apologetic reaction. “Yeah, but it didn't have to be that way,” or “Yeah, I wish I made more non-Korean friends,” were some common responses, as though they didn't deliberately choose the ethnic homogeneity of their daily lives, but weren't unsatisfied enough to do anything about it.

Though many Korean Americans stay in their Korean circles, that does not mean their social worlds require any less effort. Outside observers may assume that members of ethnic communities intentionally refrain from reaching beyond their comfort zone, but that was hardly the case with my informants. Most of them simply couldn't stretch themselves that thin, as they seemed to believe that they had enough relationships to maintain with their fellow Korean Americans alone.

It is no surprise that those very involved and committed to their community have less connections beyond their community. Keeping up with *we-ness* is energy- and time-consuming, and my informants had no real desire to create new connections beyond the ones they already had. In fact, the several instances they did become voluntarily involved in non-Korean communities was not to make new connections, but to escape or find relief from the existing ones—to deliberately become the stranger. My informant, Lois, had been a member of Bethel (a Korean church in Ellicott City) since childhood, but she recently began going to Bridgeway, an American church with a racially diverse congregation. When I asked why, she answered, “Bridgeway is big—so big, I could get lost, fade in the background.” Like Lois, several Korean Americans talked about their involvement in “American” communities, more to escape the Korean community than to become part of a new one. Lois continued, “But I miss those friends from Bethel. [Can you make them at Bridgeway?] Yeah, I can. And I’ve tried to get involved, but it’s been hard for me to really commit, which I know is not good... I would love to have that relationship and friendship with people at church because I know the value of it and I miss it.” To be sure, numerous factors other than ethnicity probably contributed to the difficulty of making new friends for Lois. Whatever the cause, my informants were on



the whole so involved with the people and the goings-on of the Korean community, but not much beyond. The intention here is not to portray Korean Americans as good or bad citizens, but to suggest that the matter is not so simple. After all, which is worse?

Individuals who are committed to their homogeneous community but make no effort to reach beyond? Or the individuals who are committed to the idea of civil society but have no strong ties to any particular group?

Anyone concerned with the well-being of the American civil society may respond that the former is worse. Isn't America an immigrant country, where foreigners from all over the world come to form one united nation? And isn't homogeneity the very threat to such a grand vision? Perhaps the worry surrounding ethnic communities is legitimate, given its members' reluctance to branch out, to meet strangers in their society, or to be genuinely civil with their neighbors. The Korean community may even be close to what Nancy Rosenblum calls a "greedy institution," which "immerse[s] members in the organization and take[s] up every moment of their lives,"<sup>152</sup> preventing them from integrating into the larger American society. Indeed, most informants claimed they were sufficiently preoccupied within their community. They weren't exactly victims of racism or the minority complex, but they didn't have much of a desire to integrate. They were, in other words, ambivalent about integration.

Sheryl Cashin claims that black people are ambivalent about integration, and that this is a dangerous thing.<sup>153</sup> If ethnic/racial integration is the vision of today's American civil society, she is right, and an ambivalent attitude is just as dangerous or uncivil for blacks, Korean Americans, and any other ethnic group. However, even if diversity is clearly

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<sup>152</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 98.

<sup>153</sup> Cashin 2004.

praised everywhere, from university mission statements to church bulletins, diversity is not necessarily an unequivocal good. As much as Americans may want to put conflicts of race in the past (or pretend it doesn't exist), there are also significant advantages that cannot be ignored in groups with a common race or ethnicity. Though I maintain the argument that there is more to the Korean community than mere ethnicity, the ethnicity factor cannot be ignored. We now, finally, turn to the ethnic dimension of the Korean community, its causes and effects, costs and benefits, and whether those who care about civil society ought to reject ethnic communities.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT DIVERSITY?

“[A]t 11:00 on Sunday morning when we stand and sing that Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.” (Martin Luther King, Jr.)<sup>154</sup>

In his book *Diversity in America*, Peter Schuck wrote, “Diversity is right up there with progress, motherhood, and apple pie.”<sup>155</sup> Schuck is right. Across America, schools, businesses, and churches promote diversity as a good and worthy principle.

Organizations and even entire university departments are created primarily in the name of promoting diversity, and institutions of all kinds declare their commitment to “enhancing diversity.” From purpose statements and mission statements, to employment regulations and evangelizing strategies, diversity is undoubtedly a buzz-word of our time.

Homogeneity falls under suspicion, while claims of commitment to diversity are almost always met with agreement and approval.

Therefore, it may be disturbing to find that as diversity increases, civic participation decreases;<sup>156</sup> or that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of our nation; or that the small crowds in front of McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland are often segregated by race. To be sure, a diverse population is not equivalent to an integrated one—is diversity, then, merely a euphemism for segregation? Or is it a genuine coming-together of individuals of different backgrounds for a common purpose?

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<sup>154</sup> King often said some version of this, but this specific quote comes from a speech King gave at Western Michigan University in 1963. See <http://ww.wmich.edu/library/archives/mlk/q-a.html>. Accessed September 16, 2010.

<sup>155</sup> Schuck 2003, 12.

<sup>156</sup> Putnam 2000.

Is integrated society a pipe dream? Or is it, if ever so slowly, becoming a reality?

In the last chapter we discussed some of the particular values of the Korean community and how those values work to further solidify and reinforce the sense of “we” among Korean Americans, while simultaneously shaping their perspective of themselves and the American society at large. In this chapter, we will discuss why diversity is not a prized virtue or a priority of Korean Americans, and how they view their own ethnic minority status in the American society. I will argue that diversity is not in itself an unequivocal good worthy of praise, note the familiar yet crucial benefits of a homogeneous ethnic community, and mark my informants’ insistence that there is more to individuals than race/ethnicity. In the next and final chapter, we will turn to divisions that exist within the Korean community, taking into consideration the subtle but deep divisions within this seemingly homogeneous group. I will conclude by referring back to the relationship culture of the Korean Americans, and how that demands bridging within their own community as a greater priority, rather than bridging out to “other” individuals and groups.

### ***No diversity without commonality***

A quick search through the website of any American college is likely to reveal that school’s commitment to diversity—explicitly in text as well as by photos of racially diverse students and faculty. The University of Vermont, which scored .12 on the diversity index, meaning nearly 9 out of 10 students on campus will be of the same race,<sup>157</sup> has a webpage dedicated to “Diversity on Campus” and posts photos of racially

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<sup>157</sup> All college diversity index figures are found on: <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com>. Accessed January 12, 2011.

diverse students.<sup>158</sup> The University of Ohio, which scored .17 on the diversity index (student population is 84.6 percent white), posts similar photos on its website, and has an Office of Diversity, Access and Equity, dedicated to “infusing diversity ubiquitously.”<sup>159</sup> The website for Nebraska at Kearney, where the student population is 77 percent white, also shows similar photos, with promises of a “rich and diverse campus life.”<sup>160</sup>

A quick search through corporate advertisements is also likely to reveal a company’s commitment to diversity—also in explicit text as well as images. The National Fair Housing Alliance, in a collection of radio advertisements and promotional posters under the theme of “A Richer Life,” explicitly made diversity a key selling point. With lines such as, “Neighborhood diversity doesn’t just sound good, it sounds *great*,” “Diversity shouldn’t be left behind at work each day,” and “Diversity promotes a greater sense of engagement,” and posters displaying racially diverse individuals happily working or playing together, the organization packs each advertisement with a glorification of diversity.<sup>161</sup> Not all corporate advertisements explicitly promote diversity, but it is not uncommon to see diversity in advertisements, from commercials for birth control pills to posters for a bank. Advertisements of all kinds are filled with images of racially diverse and happy people, promoting not only the product, but the goodness of diversity.

Evidently, racial diversity is praised for its own sake—assumed as a good, pleasant, and attractive thing in itself. We often pose diversity, whether it is an accurate picture of or blatantly contradictory to reality, and this is increasingly becoming the

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<sup>158</sup> See <http://www.uvm.edu>. Accessed January 12, 2011.

<sup>159</sup> See <http://www.ohio.edu>. Accessed January 12, 2011.

<sup>160</sup> See <http://www.unk.edu>. Accessed January 7, 2011.

<sup>161</sup> See <http://www.aricherlife.org/downloads.html>. Accessed September 22, 2009.

trend. Racial homogeneity, on the other hand, is rarely praised. Rather, homogeneity is often perceived with suspicion or even criticized. We go out of our way to display and declare our commitment to diversity, even in cases where there is stronger empirical evidence of homogeneity. And in cases where diversity is the reality, well, they are simply very proud.

*Nytimes.com* praises Hilton Hotel Corporations for having the highest diversity index, thanks to the diversity committee of the company's Board of Directors.<sup>162</sup> Hilton is credited with being the first in its industry to offer an outreach program "to further educate minority and female entrepreneurs on investment." Hilton also has partnerships with several historically black colleges, including mentoring programs, aimed at increasing the level of diversity in their own staff as well as the people they do business with. There is even a web-based supplier-diversity tracking system, to quantify the company's spending with minority- and women-owned businesses. Hilton likes diversity and is committed to fostering it—and there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with that.

Is this, however, forcing diversity to some degree? This is precisely the topic of a *Washington Post* article by Kathleen Parker, "You'll Love Diversity—Or Else," where she cites the National Fair Housing Alliance advertisements as her primary example.<sup>163</sup> Parker writes that while she herself is a fan of having diverse individuals in her neighborhood, "[H]appy diversity is an organic process that results when like-minded citizens congregate around shared values and interests." She goes on to write, "But is diversity the key to prosperity and happiness? Or is diversity what naturally occurs when people from different backgrounds are drawn to a nation where prosperity can be earned

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<sup>162</sup> See <http://www.nytimes.com/marketing/jobmarket/diversity/index.html>. Accessed January 12, 2011.

<sup>163</sup> Parker 2009.

and the pursuit of happiness is a founding principle?” Parker is raising an interesting point. Is diversity even worth praising, when it is the result of careful and strategic planning by the diversity police? Isn’t accidental diversity the only form of diversity actually worthy of praise?

One may answer, yes, accidental diversity is ideal, but unfortunately rare, and somewhat-constructed diversity is better than no diversity. After all, where would we be, if it weren’t for forced integration in our schools? If there were no policies and committees dedicated to diversity, if there was no active push for diversity, then companies, schools, and certainly neighborhoods and social groups, would be much more homogeneous than they are today—and that would exacerbate segregation or any unfair discrimination that may linger in a historically racist American society. The more connections that are made between different groups of people, the better—or in Putnam’s terms, the more bridging social capital, the better. So goes the argument.

According to Putnam, bonding social capital refers to connections made between similar individuals often in the name of that similarity—for instance, an ethnic association that brings together and celebrates individuals of a common ethnicity. Bridging social capital refers to connections made by individuals who are not of the same category in terms of race, class, gender, etc.—for example, a church where blacks and whites worship together, who become friends and create lasting connections, despite their racial differences. Putnam, however, who is an advocate of diversity *and* social capital, came to the disheartening conclusion that bonding social capital is much more easily created than bridging, which is not the ideal. He wrote,

If we had a golden magic wand that would miraculously create more bridging social capital, we would surely want to use it. But suppose we had only an aluminum magic wand that could create more social capital, but only of a bonding sort. This second-best magic wand would bring more blacks and more whites to church, but not to the same church, more Hispanics and Anglos to the soccer field, but not the same soccer field. Should we use it?<sup>164</sup>

Putnam's answer is essentially that there is no simple answer, that it depends on the scale of the problem. And while Putnam's observation that diversity actually makes social capital decline is discouraging, it is understandable. It comes as no shock that when Americans' participation in community was at its height in the 1960s, there was more or less a consensus on what it meant to be American—“[W]hite, straight, Christian, comfortable, and (in the public square, at least) male.”<sup>165</sup>

Are we, then, doomed? Are diversity and social capital mutually exclusive? Not quite. When discussing diversity, one point that is often overlooked, is that diversity is truly worthy of praise when there is some form of commonality there as well. People with absolutely nothing in common being in the same room, with no thought or care for the other, is not the form of diversity we glorify, and nothing to be proud of. (And is more accurately described as segregation.) It is when different people are in the same room to work together for a common goal, *regardless* of their differences, or even *because of* their differences, that diversity is successfully working. We push diversity so much to the point of implying diversity is good in itself, but what we really mean, and we must not forget this, is that diversity works best when it is assisted by a commonality. That is what bridging social capital is—without some commonality, no form of social capital can be created.

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<sup>164</sup> Putnam 2000, 362.

<sup>165</sup> Putnam 2000, 17.



When put in such terms, the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital becomes insignificant, because even bridging social capital is based on some commonality. Blacks and whites who worship together are different in terms of race, but share in their religious beliefs. Anglos and Latinos who play soccer together are different in terms of ethnicity, but share their common interest in soccer. Christians and Muslims who volunteer at the hospital are different in their religion, but share their will to help those in need. Great emphasis is placed on any path-crossing between the sociological categories, (i.e. race, gender, religion, sexuality) as an achievement of diversity, but no individual is defined by those categories alone (a point we will return to later in this chapter), and commonality, in any minor or major sense of what defines an individual, is the basis of what brings individuals together to form a sense of community. In other words, commonality is what produces any kind of social capital, including the bridging kind.

In *Dry Bones Rattling*, Mark R. Warren repeatedly points out the harmonious bridges made between different ethnic groups, contributing to the success of the Industrial Areas Foundation. His detailed description of the progress, however, shows how crucial the common religious values were to those bridges. In a racially segregated society, “A set of common beliefs, a shared identity as people of God, helps people to identify themselves as members of the same community.”<sup>166</sup> It seems that the easiest way to enhance diversity is to identify something those diverse individuals have in common—but is that bridging or bonding? It is both, and at that point, the distinction hardly matters. It also hardly matters which similarities bring individuals together, as long as they are enough for the individuals themselves. For my informant James, something as trivial as

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<sup>166</sup> Warren 2001, 117.

the same form of childhood discipline was a source of bonding.<sup>167</sup> James, “annoyed” that Koreans only stick to each other, said,

I mean how do they come to the conclusion that Americans are “different” without ever learning whether or not non-Koreans have those same experiences? Like me and my buddies, one of my best friends, is a white guy. And the general stereotype of white people is that they don’t punish their kids. And when they do they put them in time-out or make them sit in a corner. And that’s not true at all. I got my ass beat when I was bad and so did half of my buddies, and we joke around about it all the time. I know what he’s been through and he knows what I’ve been through and it’s not that different.

Whether form of discipline, taste in music, or ethnicity, what individuals see as a commonality can become a source of bonding. If ordinary men and women don’t put so much emphasis race/ethnicity alone, why should scholars?

In Chapter 3 I recalled attending a graduate seminar on communities. One night in class, we had a guest speaker, Sidney Brower, author of *Good Neighborhoods* and a professor at the University of Maryland.<sup>168</sup> He asked the class, “What are some of the qualities that you think make a good neighborhood?” A student quickly answered, “Diversity.” Brower responded, “So, crooks and cheaters are okay, too?” The student said, “Well, no,” slightly rolling her eyes, meaning she clearly meant a different kind of diversity that excludes crooks and cheaters. Brower raised an important point here. When we praise diversity, we are not embracing any and all kinds of differences. We are praising a commonality *despite* the difference—in this case, the shared virtue of *not* being crooks and cheaters, and even something as simple as the mutual caring of the neighborhood. Bridges alone cannot be sustained without some form of bonds, and

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<sup>167</sup> James is a 28-year-old 1.5er.

<sup>168</sup> Brower 1996.

therefore, advocating diversity requires that we remember the commonalities.

### ***Benefits of the homogeneous Korean community***

This is not to suggest that I, or Korean Americans, are against racial/ethnic diversity. My informants were, generally speaking, appreciative of diversity, and a few, like James, even explicitly rebuked fellow Korean Americans for not actively seeking diversity. They were, however, more knowingly cautious about the difficulties of achieving diversity naturally and accidentally. One of my informants, Pastor Dan, is the pastor at a non-ethnic church in Baltimore, where about eighty percent of the members are white, and the rest are mostly black or Asian.<sup>169</sup> Though he grew up in the Korean American church, he made the conscious decision to be the leader of a non-ethnic church, and diversity in his congregation has always been a priority. He said, “I’m not saying a diverse church is more holy, but there’s a certain aspect that reflects God’s bigness when you’re able to worship with a diverse congregation. But it’s hard. What do they say, Sunday mornings are the most segregated times in America? That’s true. It’s very hard to grow a church with the goal of being diverse or multiethnic. I’m trying, but it’s tough.”

Unlike Pastor Dan, most informants, who have little say in the racial composition of their workplace, did not think much about how they view diversity or how they were going to increase diversity in their own lives. It would be more accurate to say that they had become accustomed to diversity in certain parts of their lives, mostly in the workplace, and as a result, appreciative of it, rather than to say that they deliberately sought diversity. My informant, Lois, a middle-school teacher, recalled an opportunity to teach in Korea, which she did not take. She was initially very excited about the idea, but

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<sup>169</sup> Pastor Dan is a 37-year-old second generation Korean American.

she quickly changed her mind after seeing a picture of the Korean students who “all looked the same.” She said, “It’s scary. In my classroom now I can look and see five white kids, seven black kids, three Korean kids, two Thai—you know, all different. And I love that about them because they come and tell me all these new things, and I learn things about them. But to see them all the same, it’s scary.”

Though my informants were generally appreciative of diversity, none of them were opposed to the homogeneous Korean community, either. Even those who currently take no active part in the Korean community had done so at some point in their lives, and talked about that experience as the time and place where they became comfortable with their ethnic identity. Though the effort to accept and protect minorities in American civil society has improved significantly, being the minority is hardly easy—especially for children, which is what most of my informants were when they first began to recognize their minority status in America. Christin recalled, “I was a very insecure kid.” Not only was Christin one of the few Asians in her school, her parents were also divorced, making her feel different in more ways than one. She said, “I just wanted to be more like everybody else—have both parents, be Americanized. It’s good to be different, but when you’re a kid, you want to be like everyone else.” Similar experiences of being “the only Asian” were shared by most informants, and though they are perfectly secure with, even proud of, their ethnic identity today, they clearly remembered the insecurity of being the minority in their childhood.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> My informant, Jenny, a teacher at an elementary school, said that there are more Asian children in the area today than there were when she was growing up, and that as a result, Korean American children today probably feel less insecure about their minority status than they did in her generation. Most of my informants are in their late 20s to 30s, meaning their childhood was in the 1980s and 1990s, when the Korean population in the U.S. was much smaller. I suspect that there is a regional difference here as well—in Los Angeles or New York, where the Korean population has remained the two highest since waves of immigration began, Koreans may have experienced less of a minority complex, or experienced it earlier.

In their classic work, *To Empower People*, Berger and Neuhaus wrote,

Within one's group—whether it be racial, national, political, religious, or all of these—one discovers an answer to the elementary question, “Who am I?” and is supported in living out of that answer. Psychologically and sociologically, we would propose the axiom that any identity is better than none. Politically, we would argue that it is not the business of public policy to make value judgments regarding the merits or demerits of various identity solutions, so long as all groups abide by the minimal rules that make a pluralistic society possible.<sup>171</sup>

While one's identity is not confined to an ethnic identity, unbearable insecurity with any one of the identities given to (or chosen by) an individual can be detrimental to his self-respect and dignity. And what kind of pluralistic society can exist with individuals who lack self-respect? What good is liberty, progress, or even diversity, if the general population lacks sufficient self-respect to participate in society at large? Insecurity, shame, and inferiority are all side-effects that are known to often accompany the minority, and if homogeneous groups help minorities overcome such complexes, they arguably have a crucial stepping-stone role to a healthy pluralistic society. Dignity or security within the groups with which they identify is perhaps a prerequisite for individuals to branch out and meaningfully bridge with a group outside of their own. In other words, though seemingly counterintuitive, homogeneous communities may be necessary for a healthy heterogeneous society.

Of course, ordinary people, especially children, don't think in terms of dignity or its significance in the long-term goals of a diverse society. A minority's practical solution is to find refuge from being the minority, or somehow finding a way to deal with being the minority, which is why in immigrant families, encouragement or pep talks on how to

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<sup>171</sup> Berger and Neuhaus 1996 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 202-203.

deal with potential teasing or bullying are common. Several informants remembered such talks, like Nathan, who said, “My parents always told us, ‘Be proud that you’re Korean!’”; or Joyce, who said, “My dad used to tell me, ‘If they make fun of you for not knowing English, you make fun of them for not knowing Korean.’” These talks had varying effects, some more influential than others. According to nearly every one of my informants, however, what really did the job of assuaging the minority status (or creating pride in the ethnic identity), was the ethnic association—namely, the Korean church. Without deliberately trying to cultivate the self-respect of minorities in order to better live in a pluralistic society, the Korean church managed to do just that.

The significance of the Korean church has been so well documented, that it is rare to find a scholarly book on Korean Americans without any mention of the Korean church. My informants, however, talked about *their* church as though it were a unique and personal experience. Charles, who “pretty much grew up in the [Korean] church,” and to this day attends one, said,

My church really helped me to feel proud of my heritage. Cool *hyungs* (older brothers) would speak Korean, they would listen to Korean music, and we would all get into it. If you don’t know the Korean culture, you’re not one of us. It’s not cool, you’re a *migooksaram* (an American), not one of us. It was the cool thing when I was in high school—totally opposite from elementary school, when we were all trying to be Americanized. And now, raising my son, I want to teach early on that being Korean is something to be proud of, that it’s a cool thing.

Pastor Dan, though currently the head of a non-ethnic church, recalled and understood the appeal of the Korean church. He said, “I’ve heard some Koreans say that they spend all week with white people, they want to have a weekend to spend with Koreans. It’s understandable, there’s a natural affinity.” Interestingly, in the churches my informants

attended growing up (and for some, the churches they attend today), everything was conducted in English, from the sermons and worship songs, to the informal conversations among the church members. In other words, my informants could potentially attend a non-ethnic church with no language problems, which is a completely different situation from their parents' generation and recent Korean immigrants, who, because of their limited English, have little choice but to attend a Korean church, if they want to attend church at all. However, for a Korean American teenager, who grew up in America but was one of the few Koreans at his school, the ethnic church was one of the few places where he could find refuge from his minority status, or forget his minority status, by being in the majority. Ethnicity was made a source of bond and pride at the Korean church, not uniqueness or embarrassment. The once-a-week relief turned out to have much more lasting impact than they, or the church, set out to provide.

For the most part, my now-adult informants' sense of security and comfort with their Korean identity was obvious, either they expressed it directly or indirectly, and all of them had little trouble living or working in a diverse environment. Only a few explicitly said, "I love being Korean," or "I'm glad I'm Korean," but all of them recognized their Korean identity as a major defining feature of themselves. This is typical for ethnic minorities, and though peace with one's ethnic identity is not a sufficient condition of happily participating in a diverse environment, it is at least a necessary condition of the self-respecting minority. Liberals like Rosenblum, however, argue that an ethnic identity is one among many identities we adopt for ourselves, and not intrinsically more meaningful than the others. She writes, "[I]dentification with one's ethnic or cultural ancestry—or with one idiosyncratically selected thread of mixed

ancestry, which is commonplace—is voluntary. It is an option, despite the rhetoric of group belonging and the fact that individuals may *believe* their identity is ascriptive, or an inheritance. Intermarriage is well documented.”<sup>172</sup> While I grant that participation in an ethnic community or the degree of identification with an ethnic identity is under some control by the individual (though I hardly see intermarriage as sufficient evidence of voluntarily not choosing one’s ethnic identity), the declaration that ethnic identification is voluntary does not give due weight to what that ethnic identity means to the individual. For the individuals who do identify with their ethnicity, it is precisely the primordial and involuntary nature of their ethnicity that makes the ethnic identity so powerful and not negligible, and often a source of strong emotional ties.

The concept of blood often came up with several informants, as they discussed their ethnicity and its involuntary nature. As Kibria discussed in her book, to Korean Americans, their ethnicity is a “primordial, a matter of blood... an essential, unalterable matter, rooted in the deep-seated, biological forces of blood.”<sup>173</sup> And rather than the involuntary nature of ethnicity becoming a source of resentment due to lack of choice, it becomes a source of a connection to something bigger than the self. The familiar rhetoric of “I’m born this way” or “This is who I am” may not be sophisticated or even persuasive, but it is powerful and genuine for the one who is saying it.<sup>174</sup> This is not to promote politics of recognition, which is the ultimate target of Rosenblum’s criticism in her claim that ethnic identity is voluntary, but we ought to give due weight to what ethnic identity means to those who hold it and look for the potential connection between ethnic identity and diversity, as opposed to disregarding it as having no place in a contemporary

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<sup>172</sup> Rosenblum 1998, 332.

<sup>173</sup> Kibria 2002, 46.

<sup>174</sup> Advocates of other minority groups, such as gay rights activists, use a similar rhetoric.



diverse society.

Furthermore, even if we grant that the individual is free to choose or not choose an ethnic identity, such a claim undermines the burden put on the minority by his external world. Even if a minority wishes not to identify with his race or ethnicity, that identity is often given to him by others. Because race and ethnicity are visible, neither is easily negligible, no matter how much the minority may wish to neglect it. Rosenblum accounts for this difference between the minority and majority, or non-whites and whites, but there is a sweeping sense in which she discusses the “ethnic option,” which in actuality is not so optional for the minority. This is precisely why ethnic communities can be a place of comfort for the minority—they allow the members relief from being recognized by others as “the Asian.” Liberals and libertarians may claim that we ought to not let others shape our identities, that rather, we are free to shape our own. But to quote Alan Ehrenhalt again, “Libertarian ideas are seductive and would be nearly impossible to challenge if one thing were true—if we lived in a world full of P. J. O'Rourke, all of us bright and articulate and individualistic....”<sup>175</sup>

To be sure, there are plenty of ethnic minorities who seem to confirm Rosenblum's claim by opting out of the ethnic community. For instance, James was different from my other informants, in that he deliberately chose to not partake in the Korean community. His social circles were mostly non-Korean, he spent little time with his Korean family, and when we first discussed the possibility of an interview (which he agreed to), he said, “I don't know how useful I'd be. I actually try really hard not to be associated with that whole Korean thing.” However, opting out of the ethnic community is not equivalent to opting out of the ethnic identity, and neither is a totally autonomous

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<sup>175</sup> Ehrenhalt 1995.

process, to be designed and influenced by the individual alone. James recalled his high school and college years, when his Korean friends put him in the category of “white boy” and he “began to see people’s attitudes toward me slowly change.” James said, “I really don’t like it. It’s one of my biggest pet peeves. Whenever you have a preconceived notion of someone, that person begins to mold themselves into that preconceived notion. And it’s just not, you know, conducive to growing, as a person.” In other words, James’s problem was not only others’ incorrect opinion of him—for one, he was “just as Korean as anyone else”; but, more importantly, others’ labeling reinforced his labeling himself. At the time of the interview James was in his late twenties and he seemed to embody the self-respecting individual who chooses not to identify with his ethnic community. However, his experience with the Korean community was clearly not one that was always smooth and easy, nor one that he himself had complete control over.

My informant Lois, who also enjoyed a diverse group of friends, had taken it upon herself to frequently point out her minority status when in the presence of non-Koreans, as though her being Asian is consistently the elephant in the room. She said,

I know that when I go out with my one girlfriend and all of her friends who are white, I’m always like, “One of these things is not like the other!” and they all laugh at me and say, “You are!” It’s like a running joke with us, and I’m comfortable with that, and they’re comfortable with that, I think. [But you’re the only one who makes the joke?] Yeah. [Nobody else would make that joke.] Yeah. Nobody else would make that joke. [Why do you make that joke?] I just think it’s funny. Because I’ll look at us, and definitely in that situation, it’s like if my whole class was white, maybe to alleviate, if anything, you know. [Do you say it because you know somebody’s thinking it?] No, I just say it to be funny. And now it’s like a running joke.

I wasn’t sure what to make of Lois’s joke, or if I understood the joke. I did, however,

hear from many Korean Americans, the numerous ways in which they deal with being the minority in the room, and how the burden is on them, to somehow “alleviate” something, if anything. Sometimes, the self-consciousness is self-generated, as though they feel others are looking at their race and only their race, even if they are not. For the most part, however, Korean Americans understand, realistically, that their appearance or the mere sound of their names give away their race first and foremost, and for the bulk of the time that they are in non-Koreans’ presence they cannot shed their ethnicity.

When something that is believed to be innate becomes the source of one’s insecurity, or when one has little choice in being identified as a minority, finding peace with that innate minority status is a priority to one’s basic well-being. Only once the born-with-it identities have been accepted and secured, can we hope for those individuals to exercise their liberty in the voluntary belongings and in the pluralistic society. Emily, as mentioned in Chapter 3, had decided to make a good representation of Asians by smiling and being friendly to strangers who stared at her at the Waffle House—and she held her own. Her roommate, however, had not been able to handle similar treatment from the locals, and eventually transferred to an area with a bigger Asian population. Both women felt they had no choice in their ethnic identity, but they dealt with it in different ways. Emily, who reported always having had a secure sense of her ethnic identity, decided to take on the additional burden of representing her ethnic group. Her roommate, however, had not (yet) found a comfort with her minority status, and thus sought relief from it. While ethnic communities do present the risk of keeping their members locked in, they first provide the escape from self-consciousness of the minority and the grounds for building self-respect *given* their minority identity, preparing them to

eventually be the self-respecting minority in a pluralistic society. Without any kind of stepping-stone, it is rather presumptuous to claim minorities can actively and voluntarily participate in a pluralistic society, with dignity and all, where they will have no choice but to remain the minority.

The goal here is not a population where everyone respects themselves—as desirable as that may be, that is hardly possible, and not the issue. What I wish to point out here is that pushing an abstract concept like diversity without first taking seriously the diverse identities individuals hold is a superficial and fruitless task. Before dismissing homogeneity and embracing diversity categorically, we ought to take seriously the costs and benefits of both. My informants were, on the whole, sympathetic to both diversity and homogeneity, though in a complex way. Emily said, quite honestly,

In America, there's this fad of multiculturalism, and it's the white people who feel like they have to say, "Okay, let's try and understand them." So it's still them and us, and they need to lower themselves to understand us and embrace us. It's not an intentional "We're better than you," but they've just never been racially discriminated against. It's condescending, but not intentionally—they've just never been a minority. And because of that subtle wall, and I know minorities feel it, minorities would rather just not challenge that or deal with it, and would rather live in their own comfort zone. And I understand that.

Out of all of my informants, Emily was perhaps the most ethnic-conscious, if for no other reason than her workplace, the Korean American Family Counseling Center. She put effort into speaking without prejudice, and genuinely wished Korean Americans were more open to befriending non-Koreans. She was also the only informant who talked about her white friends and their discomfort at being the minority in her Korean world. (Most of my informants didn't have such tales to share, since they had mostly Korean

friends.) She said, “If my white friends were to come to my church or something like that, they would feel all kinds of discomfort and they couldn’t handle it. They’re uncomfortable but at the same time it’s like them being gracious. It’s really hard to explain, it’s like, ‘I’ll slum it for the day, I’ll be ethnic today,’ like they’re exploring something exotic or something. Which is insulting to the minority, you know? That’s everyday for us. Welcome to our world.”

In her book, *The Failures of Integration*, Sheryll Cashin noted the similar discomfort white people feel in the rare occasions they find themselves as the minority. However, while accounting for all of the benefits of a racially homogeneous community, Cashin came to the difficult conclusion that an integrated society is still better—for the minority. In order for blacks to truly have equal opportunity, an integrated society is necessary. She wrote,

The point of integration is not to pursue it for its own sake, although it has its own inherent social benefits. The point of integration is the same as the core motivation of the civil rights movement itself. Integration, then and now, is the best route to equal opportunity for everyone. As I argue in Part II of this book, I have become convinced of this—even as I recognize the nurturing benefits of a racial enclave—because of the virulent inequality that our separation is begetting. I have come to believe that racial and economic integration, particularly of the social institutions that offer pathways to upward mobility, is the best route to closing the egregious gaps of inequality that weaken our nation.<sup>176</sup>

While I sympathize with Cashin, she is writing on behalf of blacks, a population who has faced and continues to face unfair discrimination on a mass scale, due to the absence of an integrated society. Korean Americans, however, are not exactly in the same boat. For

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<sup>176</sup> Cashin 2004, 81.

one, there are not enough Korean Americans, or even Asian Americans, that can make up a majority in any major city or create a genuine ethnic enclave resembling the scale of black enclaves. Furthermore, Korean Americans as a group have not, at least not yet, fallen into a massive underclass cycle, where they are stuck in ethnic enclaves that also happen to be economically disadvantaged. To be sure, it is not the fault of blacks that they lose opportunity by forming ethnic communities. In fact, it is not the black population who intentionally create black enclaves and black-majority towns and schools, but rather, according to Cashin, the result of white flight. And thus the blacks' cyclical underclass is largely due to whites' response to blacks, which is a completely different situation from Korean Americans. If it were the case, that Korean enclaves resulted in Koreans' economic and other opportunities being denied, Korean Americans may be more tempted to pursue more integrated lives and I may be more tempted to advocate it. However, my informants (nor I) see such a phenomenon among Korean Americans. Koreans, and Asians in general, don't quite experience white flight. If anything, Asian Americans have been labeled the model minority, and even if they are, in fact, missing some opportunities by not pursuing more integrated lives, the costs are not on a massive enough scale for them to be seriously bothered by it.

By having a place, like the ethnic church, where a sense of pride in "who we are" can be cultivated, Korean Americans are ultimately in a better condition to live in a pluralistic society *as* the minority. Most of my informants, who live and work in diverse settings, still reserved small Korean places in their lives, whether in church, family, or close friends. They were not so much in *need* of the Korean community (anymore), nor did they feel discomfort in being the minority in their daily lives. They did, however,

*prefer* homogeneous settings every so often—not only as a result of “natural affinity,” but interestingly, in order to “protect the culture.”

### ***“Protect the culture”***

Many second generation Korean American children attend what they call *hangul-hakgyo*, or Korean language school. These classes are often organized and taught in the Korean church, the bedrock of the Korean community. Most Korean Americans are so accustomed to the affiliation between *hangul-hakgyo* and church, that they hardly question it. However, it is somewhat strange—is a church, a religious institution, the best place to teach a language? I raised this question to the pastor’s wife of a Korean church, who leads the language classes there. She answered, in Korean, “Where else would we do it? Church is the only place where Korean is spoken for so many of our children. We have to protect the culture.” Of course, the pastor’s wife, as will the members of her church, attests to their priority of faith over ethnicity. However, ethnicity being what it is, and the ethnic church being what it is, the order is not always clear.

Some informants, more so than others, made conscious decisions to maintain the Korean things in their lives (and their children’s lives)—language being the most obvious and often-cited. Brooke said, “When we have kids and stuff, I’d love for my kids to know Korean and be bilingual. [You’re going to teach them Korean?] Yeah, and obviously send them to *hangul-hakgyo* and stuff. [Did you go to *hangul-hakgyo*?] I did. When I was younger I didn’t remember how to read or write Korean or anything like that, so my parents were like, ‘This is a no-no.’ So they sent me to *hangul-hakgyo* and I went and I learned how to read and speak. [Did you like it?] I loved it. I loved it. I was like the

teacher's pet. I loved it." Joyce said, "I love Korean, I love the language. My kids are going to speak Korean for sure." Charles said, with a smile, "My son doesn't know any English, and he won't until he goes to school!" The old belief that learning one language will hinder the fluency of another seems to hold no validity in this group.<sup>177</sup> Even informants like Claudia, who spoke little Korean, cited one of her reasons for attending a Korean church as her appreciation for the language "just being spoken in the building."

When I asked why retaining the language is so important, most of them gave somewhat vague answers—"I just think it's important," "Well, we need to communicate with adults," while some gave economic answers—"It's so useful," "It's going to come in handy, career-wise." David, a 1.5er who attends a church I visited, spoke as though he had contemplated this before. He said, "I'm afraid in years and years Koreans are going to turn out like African Americans—just lumped together with other Asians, just become Asian Americans. Lose the language and the food and the culture. Become just another race." To those like David, who cherish not only the language but all things part of the Korean culture, keeping marriages within the ethnic group was important. Sean, a single 35-year-old 1.5er, had evidently dated non-Koreans in the past, but had recently decided to only date Korean. When I asked why, he said, "I would be the first one in my family to marry someone not Korean. I would get so much crap for that, and so would my wife. It's not worth it." Sean, following our interview, invited me to a family event, where sure enough, everyone was Korean. I asked a few of his relatives what they think of interracial marriage, giving the hypothetical example of Sean marrying a non-Korean. A very friendly cousin-in-law said, "There's nothing wrong with it, but when I married into this family, I realized they were all still Korean, which is rare for a family that's been here for

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<sup>177</sup> See Shin 2005, for a compelling argument against this belief.



so long. And because of that, I think we all kind of feel a pride about it. And Sean's next in line to get married—so to be the first one to ruin it, yeah, he'd never hear the end of it.”

In the church as well as the family, sentiment of protecting the Korean culture was abundant. Charles, who came to learn in the church that being Korean is “cool,” was very fond of his English-speaking Korean church in Virginia. While affirming that the gospel is the priority of his church, he admitted that the members are not exactly seeking ethnic diversity in the church. He recalled the few occasions when an interracial couple or a non-Korean individual visited his church, and with a guilty expression, he said, “We're kind of ill-equipped. We don't really know how to treat non-Koreans when they come to our church. We just wonder why they came, and it's almost a relief when they leave. We should learn, but... (shrug).” Nathan's church, which is also an English-speaking Korean church located in Baltimore, actually had a few regular non-Korean members. He said, “We have this one mixed couple, and a few others, but they're not as part of the group as everybody else. [Why not?] I don't know. I hope it's not because they're not Korean.” Like most Americans today, my informants were careful not to seem overtly ethnocentric or racist. Instead of being anti-diversity, they tried to sound pro-Korean—we don't have anything against other ethnicities, or even mixing with other groups, but we want to keep some things reserved for just us Koreans. It is a delicate balance, one which Korean Americans may be unaware that they are doing.

An increased loyalty to one's ethnicity is a common phenomenon among immigrants or minorities. After all, it is not as meaningful to be pro-Korean in the midst of Koreans. Korean Americans, relative to other immigrant groups, however, seem

especially protective of their culture—language, food, traditions, and all things Korean, or rather, what they believe to be all things Korean. Here, the rapidly-changing and growing Korea cannot be ignored, which is not applicable to all immigrant groups. Korea is often referred to as a modern success-case of democratization and industrialization. And because the 1960s and 1970s were still the early stages of this growth, which was also the time immigration waves to the West began, Korea today is utterly a different place from the Korea my informants (and their parents) know. To be sure, changes have been largely for the better, but not entirely without costs, including the loss of traditional values that Korean Americans believe are the essence of Korean culture. As Korean Americans realize that Korea is a rapidly-changing nation, whether by seeing how different recent Korean immigrants are, or by visiting Korea, they feel responsible for saving the Korean values they they know, or what the believe to be the “true Korean” values. As one recent immigrant put it, “The Koreans here who have lived in America their whole lives are so much more Korean than the Koreans back in Korea.” The Korean diaspora (as many like to call themselves) who settled in America, see themselves as characteristically different from native Americans, as well as the native Koreans. Identifying the real Koreans, then, or the insiders of the Korean American community, becomes much more complex, not to mention subjective.

Nostalgia is always in vogue, but this is no simple longing for the past. Koreans living in Korea are plenty nostalgic as well, but because they are inseparable from the changes around them, they have little power in holding on to or recreating the past. Korean Americans, on the other hand, precisely because they are a minority and have formed their own ethnic community outside of the native place, they are outsiders of

whatever changes took place in Korea after they left, which allows them to look at the aftermath with a critical (and at times judgmental) eye. Plenty of Korean Americans I came across spoke disapprovingly of recent immigrants—from “they don’t work hard,” “they’re too competitive,” to “they only care about money and status,” “they raise their children to be materialistic.” For Korean Americans, it is one more way to distinguish the insiders, the real Koreans, from the outsiders.

In his book *The Communitarian Persuasion*, Philip Selznick wrote, “It is obvious that community is not a comfortable idea, blessed with simplicity. On the contrary, it is one of those great concepts from which we learn the perplexities and burdens of social life. Most important is the conflict between exclusion and inclusion.”<sup>178</sup> In every group, there are those who belong and those who don’t, and echoing the previous chapter, the fact that there are insiders and outsiders is not necessarily good or bad—just the nature of group life. And as we previously discussed, the insiders and outsiders of the Korean community are not simply Koreans and non-Koreans.

However, a notable tendency of Korean Americans, and other racial/ethnic minorities for that matter, is to associate or equate their shared habits and values with their likewise-shared ethnicity. For instance, Korean Americans speak in ethnic/racial terms, such as “He’s so Korean,” or “He’s really white.” Often such terms are used to identify insiders and outsiders of the community, which sometimes results in the ironic situation of Koreans being outsiders of the Korean community, for not being “Korean enough.” Thus, while the boundaries of an ethnic community are not drawn by ethnicity alone, they are perceived and spoken about as though they are. In my interviews, informants showed more effort in using the correct terms, referring to “the Korean

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<sup>178</sup> Selznick 2002, 26.

culture” or “Koreanized,” but in everyday settings, Korean Americans freely reverted to descriptions such as “so Korean,” “so white,” “trying to be Korean,” “acting white,” etc. Once in awhile someone would interject, “Well, we are all Korean,” overtly pointing out the incorrect use of the term. More often than not, however, all participants of a conversation seemed to understand perfectly what it means to be “Korean.”

What then, does it take to be an “insider”? In essence, the insiders care about the Korean-ness of their fellow Koreans, and if a Korean shows no interest in his own Korean-ness, he cannot quite be an insider. As one informant put it, “If you’re Korean but ‘white-washed,’ you’re kind of ‘out.’ If you marry a non-Korean, you’re kind of a traitor.” This sort of comment is rare but honest, and very few informants were as blunt. And though most informants held a nonchalant attitude of their insider status, they had experienced and understood the awkwardness of being faced with a fellow Korean who is an outsider of the Korean community.

Nathan recalled an uncomfortable event during his college years, when he invited his girlfriend to a family gathering. She was Korean, but adopted by a white American family. She spoke no Korean and knew little about the Korean culture, none of which had bothered Nathan before. Reflecting on the family gathering, however, he said, “My mom and my aunts, they were all trying to get along with her, but they just couldn’t communicate. And they speak English pretty well, so it wasn’t just the language. That’s not why we broke up, but after we broke up, I was like, ‘I want someone who’s more Korean.’” Nathan later did marry someone who was “more Korean,” and he talked about how much more at ease he is, “when everyone is all Korean American.” From knowing “how to interact with parents,” to “not having to explain what food they are eating,” “the

little stuff like that” is what marks an insider from the outsider.

It seems fair to say that ethnicity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for membership of the Korean community. The use of ethnic terms, however, makes it sound as though ethnicity is the only condition, and creates an image of an exclusive ethnic community with signs of ethnocentrism or racism. Furthermore, the members create their own idea of what it means to be “Korean,” and when they are met with Koreans who do not fit this image, the common response is, as one informant put it, “Are they not Korean?” There is a bit of a tautology here—you don’t belong because you’re not Korean, and you must not be Korean because you don’t belong.

To be sure, Korean Americans are not the only group who use racial or ethnic terms, laden with values and habits associated with that group. Some degree of group-identity construction goes on in all groups, and it is a tool that builds solidarity for insiders while excluding outsiders. Scholar Karyn Lacy conducted a research study with middle-class blacks, many of whom talked about “how black” one was, as though it can be measured.<sup>179</sup> In one memorable quote an informant recalled her daughter coming home from her first day of school asking, “Are we black?”—a confusion in her young mind, because though she had always thought she was black, she evidently didn’t “*talk black*” according to a schoolmate. Another informant in Lacy’s study said, “You know, I hear people talking about, ‘that little girl don’t know she’s black.’ To me, that’s the most ridiculous thing you could ever say!” His point is well taken—it *is* ridiculous to include and exclude an entire racial/ethnic group, including children, based on how they talk and act. Not only is it inaccurate, it also exacerbates the narrow stereotypes of groups (like James pointed out), for the perspectives of insiders and outsiders alike.

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<sup>179</sup> See Lacy 2004, 911.

Like the middle-class blacks of Lacy's study, the "Korean world" is an "interpretive community," defined by a "cultural repertoire" that the insiders rely on to define the Korean experience. And also like the middle-class blacks, Korean Americans maintain their ties to the Korean community not only as a refuge from racial discrimination, but also because they simply enjoy interacting with fellow Koreans. By using language, albeit incorrectly, an ethnically defined community establishes the insiders' status and strengthens their solidarity, which inevitably and simultaneously establishes outsiders and intensifies their difference from them. In the end, protecting their culture may not be without costs, and it may not be a good thing that we use ethnic terms to include and exclude. But again, that is the nature of group life, to include and exclude. The characterization of insiders and outsiders *in terms of ethnicity* may be unique to ethnic communities, but the fact that insiders and outsiders are identified at all is not exclusive to ethnic groups.

***Best of All Worlds—Korea and America, old and new, ethnic and non***

Does membership in an ethnic community, then, demand an opposition to a pluralistic, integrated, society? No. Korean Americans want the best of both worlds, and they have the luxury of choosing not only a mixture of homogeneity and diversity, but also a mixture of Korea and America. This picking and choosing from two cultures has been given different names, such as strategic assimilation, selective acculturation, or accommodation without assimilation.<sup>180</sup> No two processes are identical, but all involve some mixture between two cultures, and minorities of all kinds follow some version

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<sup>180</sup> See Dhingra 2007, Pak 2006, Lacy 2004, Gibson 1988.

thereof.

Minority groups, not exclusive to ethnic minority groups, often have two theoretically conflicting desires—to be recognized for their difference, as well as to be treated the same as everyone else. The former assumes a special or privileged status and the latter advocates an equal-opportunity approach. Instead of choosing one or the other consistently, ordinary individuals usually end up with some form of mix between the two. It was ironic but not surprising to hear informants say, “We’re Korean, we don’t do that!” just to say a few minutes later, “We live in America, we can’t do that!” At times it seemed as though Korean Americans chose at their convenience when to be Korean and when to be American. For instance, my informant David said, “I’m Korean, so they know I’m going to work hard,” when moments ago he had said, “People look at me weird or assume I’m Chinese—why can’t I just be American?” When it suited them to be Korean, they were Korean, and when it suited them to be American, they were American—which seemed to present no real conflict for Korean Americans. In fact, my informants had a good-natured attitude about their picking and choosing from the two cultures. Pastor Dan, who recently became a dad, became more aware of the selective lifestyle he led as a Korean American. He referred to “weeding out some of the things that aren’t as valuable” from the Korean world, but “emphasizing what we do think are the strengths.” When asked what are some of the strengths of the Korean world, Pastor Dan answered, “Things like family, or respecting folks who are older than you, things like that. Thinking of others before yourself—not that that’s Americans don’t do that, but it’s different.”

Pastor Tim, who is the head of a church where the majority of the members are

Korean American, held a similar goal of balancing, but for his congregation.<sup>181</sup> He said, “For me, it was always U.S.A. But now, I’m beginning to embrace a little more Korean and trying to understand. But America is my country and I want to embrace the good things about the U.S. culture. I want to instill that to the next generation of Korean Americans, in a, of course, biblical way. So we need that perfect blend, because we live in a country that we weren’t born in, but is now our country.”

In nearly every interview, my informants talked about “balance”—whether it be between Korea and America, or the old and new. And in nearly every interview, my informants referred to an identity other than an ethnic one. Perhaps after an hour of talking about being Korean, even the most ethnic-conscious informants simply wanted to talk about something else. Whatever the reason, most informants insisted, “I’m Korean, but that’s not all there is to me.”

After about halfway through the interview with Joyce, I said, “So, your social circles and the people you see regularly are Korean?” to which she responded, “No, they’re all Christian. I don’t really look for Korean friends, but I look for Christian friends.” If Joyce was the only informant who insisted as such, I may have overlooked the significance of the non-ethnic identity. However, the pattern resurfaced in nearly every interview—Korean Americans who have Korean-only social circles explicitly maintained, “They’re all Korean, *but they’re also*”—Christians, photographers, mothers, Ravens fans, students, coffee drinkers.

Bora, an informant who, like Joyce, was very “plugged in” (her words) to the Korean community, disapproved of some of the actions taken by Korean Americans,

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<sup>181</sup> Pastor Tim is a 46-year-old 1.5er.



when done in the name of the Korean community.<sup>182</sup> When I asked her about the Seung-hui Cho incident, she said,

The whole vibe of how the Korean community was, they were just kind of apologetic towards the victims. I think that just portrays like a wrong message, that we're still, even though second and third generation are growing up in the States, that we're still sort of seeing ourselves as "I'm Korean." I think individually, it's good to have that sense of background, who you are as a Korean. But as a community, how you handle things, it should be dealt little bit differently... It's like "This happened, he was Korean, we have to say something, let's get together, sorry."

Bora didn't use the exact words, but all informants seemed to agree that not everything is about ethnicity, and not everything Koreans do have to do with their ethnicity. For Pastors of Korean churches, the distinction was sometimes blurred in practice, but in interviews, they prioritized the other identity, namely Christianity, over ethnicity. Pastor Rubin said, "I'm proud of being Korean American, but I always tell myself I'm a Christian first. I'm a Christian, I'm Korean, and I'm American."

Insistence on identities in addition to the ethnic one may be interpreted as Korean Americans' way of staying within their ethnic circle without having to admit it. As strong as their connection to the ethnic community may be, they don't want to appear ethnocentric or racist, though evidently not enough to actively bridge out of it. To be sure, Korean Americans, as a collective, have not yet bridged out of their ethnic circles, or actively sought out racially integrated spaces. If the goal is racial integration in primary relationships, Korean Americans have a long way to go. If the goal, however, is active participation in a community, they are already there. Recalling Rosenblum's emphasis on identities-by-choice, the claim I've attempted to make in this chapter is that

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<sup>182</sup> Bora is a 28-year-old 1.5er.

Korean Americans are able to voluntarily choose more identities, once they have found a level of comfort with their ethnic identity—at which point Korean Americans may be more willing and able to bridge out of their ethnic communities, to bond over a commonality with those not of the same ethnicity. Would that be bonding or bridging? It does not matter.

In Putnam's most recent work, *American Grace*, he introduces a Catholic parish located in Chicago that is apparently "diverse," but is actually more like two churches in one—the Spanish-speaking congregation and the English-speaking one.<sup>183</sup> Each group has its own services, bulletins, activities, programs, small groups, and even leaders. The two hardly have any interaction, but they use the same space, though at different times. An outsider may call this parish "diverse," noting the racial make-up of the two congregations put together. What may seem diverse and an instance of bridging, however, does not necessarily indicate meaningful connections over differences. And likewise, what may seem like bonding does not necessarily indicate connections over commonalities alone, if we allow for the numerous identities individuals adopt for themselves. As homogeneous as the Korean community may appear, there are deep divisions within, that call for a bridging of a different nature, a bridging within, which is one more thing that takes priority before bridging out to other ethnic groups. We now turn to the concluding chapter, emphasizing the need for a bridging within the Korean community.

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<sup>183</sup> See Putnam 2010, Chapter 7.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### BRIDGING WITHIN

“If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?” (1 Timothy 3:5. *New International Version*)

As Kibria and Danico have argued in their respective works on Korean Americans, the Korean American identity is one that is continuously “becoming.”<sup>184</sup> The 1.5 and second generations have yet to (if they ever will) construct a common identity that defines and marks the group. They have also not yet grown into old age as a group, nor has a significant part of the third generation grown into adulthood. The current situation of the Korean American population, bulk of the first generation growing into retirement and the second generation approaching middle-age, is one that has not yet been seen and will not repeat itself, making for an uncertain future—one that ethnic associations and communities will continue to play a crucial role in. In this concluding chapter, we turn to the patterns of divisions within this seemingly homogeneous community, and how the process of dealing with the divisions can heavily influence the future of this ethnic community. We will refer back to the relationship culture, and how it requires that bridging within their own ethnicity to be a greater priority than bridging out to “other” groups. Here, a special notice will be given to the 1.5 generation.

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<sup>184</sup> Titles of the two works Kibria 2002 and Danico 2004, respectively, are *Becoming Asian American* and *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai’i*.

### ***Bridging Within***

Every Sunday, members of Bethel Korean Presbyterian Church head to worship. Four economy-sized vans pick up members from Ellicott City to Baltimore, and parking attendants busily direct traffic in the small parking lot, as Koreans of all ages make way to the same building throughout the day. They are not, however, all going to worship together. Bethel offers five worship services on any given Sunday.

Bethel did not always offer five Sunday services, as churches in their beginnings rarely have the resources to do so. Bethel opened its doors in 1979, and after a few years of initial settling, began by providing three Sunday services—two Korean services for adults, and one English service for the youth. The Korean services were predominantly attended by first generation immigrants, and the English service by their children, who were, by far, more comfortable with English, and not quite adults yet. At this point, all church members fell into one of two groups—Korean speaking adults or English speaking youth.

As the youth grew up, however, English-speaking Korean Americans became too old to attend youth service, but lacked sufficient knowledge of Korean to attend the adult service. As a result, Bethel created another service for this third group—an English service for young adults, also known as the English Ministry. Soon after, Bethel continued to grow in size and popularity, and as the region attracted more Korean immigrants each year, a fourth group appeared at Bethel—Korean-speaking young adults, consisting of international students from Korea and those who immigrated in their late teens or older, creating the need for yet another service. As a result, there are now four major groups at Bethel—Korean speaking adults (two services), Korean speaking young

adults, English speaking young adults, and English speaking youth. (There are not (yet) older adults who prefer English, nor youth who prefer Korean.) To be sure, there are individuals who are capable of fitting into more than one group—many Korean American young adults are bilingual and would have no problem attending any service. However, once they become a part of one group they tend to stick to it.

Each group has its own leaders, and the four groups have hardly any interaction with one another. In fact, the English Ministry, the English-speaking young adults' group, is essentially its own church, with its own name, leadership, budget, and agenda.<sup>185</sup> When asked about the separate groups within one church, the members are not too worried, if they even notice. After all, "That's how all the churches do it," as several informants put it, and they are right—Bethel's structure is quite typical of the "successful" Korean American church. The leaders show slightly more concern, but even they provide justifications for the separation. Pastor Rubin, from Chapter One, is the leader of the Korean-speaking young adult group, who he describes up as "the 1.5 group." He said, "There's no interaction between the 1.5 and the English Ministry. It's not the best set-up, but they can't mesh. Not only the language barrier, but their interests, hobbies, lifestyles, what they talk about—they clash." Like most leaders, Pastor Rubin thinks more about *his* group, and the harmony within, than how well the group interacts with others. The separation in this case, however, is somewhat ironic and perhaps surprising, precisely because all of the members are Korean and in the same age group. One informant, a member of Bethel, even thought the creation of this group was superfluous. Can individuals' time of immigration really create such a difference?

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<sup>185</sup> During the time of my writing, the leader of the English-speaking young adults' group left Bethel and set up its own church, and the majority of the members left with him. Bethel has yet to find a replacement for the English Ministry leader, but the services continue with a rotation of speakers.

For Bethel, the answer is yes, and there is reason to believe that the phenomenon is more pronounced for Korean Americans than other immigrant groups. As we discussed in Chapter Four, the economic and industrial growth of Korea, along with the constant upgrade and acceleration in technology and the mode of communication, have had a significant impact on the cultural and social aspects of Korean society. According to Nam-Joon, a Korean male in his twenties who is in America to study, the rate of change in Korea is increasingly speeding up. He said, in Korean, “It used to be that a generation would pass every eleven years. Now it’s every eight years, and it’s going to get shorter. That means in the near future, someone just a few years younger or older is going to be considered a different generation—with their own culture, values, personality, likes and dislikes.” Though the phenomenon described by Nam-Joon is not as easily noticed by Korean Americans, they certainly notice that the more recent immigrants are “different.”

As referenced in Chapter Four, the 1.5/second generation often take a critical tone towards Koreans who recently immigrated. Jenny, who immigrated over twenty years ago, said, “Koreans who came, after Korea got rich, they’re different. They raise their kids differently, they don’t know the meaning of hard work, and they take things for granted. Oh, and, they’re too proud to be Korean. [What do you mean?] We like America—not all things, but we at least see America as home. But they try to bring all of Korea to America, and they judge.” (Never mind the fact that Jenny sounds pretty judgmental herself.) Jenny’s criticism was echoed in other informants, and is a pretty well-known phenomenon among Korean Americans. It is not quite hostility, but a prejudice placed by one group of Koreans on another, that keeps them in their own respective camps, merely as a result of the timing difference in immigration.

We may be familiar with minorities' different approaches to assimilation and their segregation from society at large. What we may not be familiar with is the effects of the different assimilation tendencies, particularly, the effects they have on the inner-workings of a homogeneous community, and the ripple-like effect on their attitudes toward each other and the world outside of their community, as a result of the divisions within. For Korean Americans, as judgmental as they sound, concern with the inside seems to trump concern with the outside. For them, bridging within, connecting with fellow Korean Americans, is a more urgent and pressing matter than bridging with-out, with non-Koreans.

***Too busy to bridge with others?***

Based on with whom they spend their time, my informants may seem anti-integration. Based on their insistence on identities beyond their ethnicity, however, they may seem nonchalant or ambivalent about ethnicity. Furthermore, my informants did not strongly affirm nor deny questions of integration, ethnocentrism, or racism, which when put together with previous observations, may be interpreted as an indifference or disregard for matters of ethnicity in general. However, my informants, Korean Americans who consider themselves a part of the Korean community, have quite strong feelings about fellow Koreans as well as about the matters of race/ethnicity in their everyday lives. What the outsiders may not easily see is that Korean Americans' focus is usually on each other and the relationships they have *within* their ethnic community, prior to individuals in other ethnic groups. And here we return to the relationship culture.

A pattern emerged with my informants, one that was not obvious at first.

Compared to discussions about non-Koreans, whether personal acquaintances or Americans in the abstract sense, my informants were much more energetic, enthusiastic and expressive when the topic turned to fellow Korean Americans. Whether expressing approval, disapproval, or a simple observation, when referring to fellow Koreans, they displayed heightened emotions, using facial expressions, head nodding/shaking, tone of voice, etc. Pressing this further in interviews, I found that Korean Americans feel more strongly about fellow Korean Americans, or “themselves,” or more specifically, that they feel the need to take care of “themselves” as a greater priority than the need to bridge with other ethnic groups.

Many Korean Americans I met held a contempt for those whose personal lives are in shambles, no matter how successful they were in another sense. There is a definite order of priorities that Korean Americans seem to agree on, and it absolutely begins in the home, in the most intimate of relationships. The majority of my informants seemed to believe that if things in the home are not right, then any successes outside of the home are not worth it—or that they are not really successes. And the home tended to include fellow Korean Americans before others. Bora, though she criticized the Korean community on many counts (Chapter Four), talked about her change in shopping habits since the recession began. She had made the conscious decision to buy, when possible, from not only local businesses but local businesses owned by Koreans. She said, “Instead of going to eat at a chain restaurant, I’ll go to the Lotte food court. These Korean places only cater to Koreans, so we have to help each other out.” Jenny, an elementary school teacher, began a monthly informal meeting with the mothers of Korean students, remembering how difficult it was for her parents when they first immigrated. She said, “I would have



loved to have a Korean teacher, and my mom would have, too. It's so hard for them, and this is something I feel like I need to and should do." They are do-gooders, but predominantly for those included in their idea of "we." Does this make them against integration?

Pastor Dan, relying on a biblical rationale, also discussed the importance of "keeping our homes straight before reaching out to others," referring to himself and his church as an example. He said,

I have people praying for this, that we keep the right order of priorities. As good as planting a church and doing the work of the gospel, it can become a horrible idol. And the cases of marital strife in church planters, it's horrendous. I constantly ask people to pray that priority will be God first, then my wife, even before kids, then church after that. If that priority's not right, the church is just going to be a mistress. [And that's biblical, right?] Oh, it's very biblical. You can't be an elder if you don't have good kids. How can you shepherd a church if you can't even shepherd your family?

Though Pastor Dan is referring to his church which is mostly non-Korean, the same rationale of "How can you take care of others if you can't take care of yourselves?" was echoed in the way he prioritizes the different elements of his life.

The question at this point, which I do not have the answer to, is about the future—how long are Korean Americans going to reach out exclusively to the Korean community? When will non-Koreans become a part of the "we"? There is no clear answer, at least not yet. Even Korean Americans who are critical of Koreans' tendency to stay within the ethnic community show no real signs in their everyday lives of making a bridge outside of the ethnic circle. For instance, with a tone of disapproval, Emily said, "I look at the Korean community, and when someone outstanding comes out of the Korean

community it's just the Korean community that's proud of you. And it's like, 'How long are you going to stay relegated to your own people?' You know? There's a bigger world. And if you have gifts and talents that are going to benefit people, why are you just doing it for this community?" And yet Emily herself attends a Korean church, works for a Korean counseling center that only deals with Korean Americans, and intentionally keeps her white and Korean friends separate, believing "they won't mesh." I am not suggesting that Emily is hypocritical, or that she does not mean what she says. Bridging out, however, is easier said than done, especially when there is bridging to be done within.

### ***Generativity***

Bridging the gap between generations was a special concern for many informants, and a topic that came up often in interviews. This refers to not only bridging the gap between age groups, which is not a concern unique to the Korean community, but between the Korean-speaking first generation, many of whom are well into their fifties or older, and the English-speaking second generation, who are now young adults. Because the two groups have so many clashes, not only in age and language but also values and lifestyles, divisions along this line are common in Korean churches, organizations, and even homes. And though Korean Americans create these conditions themselves, whether intentionally or accidentally, they are not always happy with the results of the separation. Many informants were concerned with the increasing space between the two generations, and were taking active steps to bridge it.

The first generation is largely excluded from this work, but as the second generation is getting married and having children, they are becoming more aware of the

gap that exists between themselves and their parents, with an increased sense of urgency to bridge that gap. Many of the first generation Koreans, who “worked so hard for us” according to nearly informant, have rather distant relationships with their grandchildren, which was not satisfying to any of the parties involved. Furthermore, going beyond their own family, many informants made painful observations of young Korean Americans today who have fragile relationships with their parents, mostly due to language barriers, which tended to also lead to lack of communication, understanding, and time spent together—basic things necessary for a healthy relationship. A few informants also observed Korean Americans who married non-Koreans, and the tendency in those couples to not be as close to the extended families—resulting in the informants’ preference to marry Korean not simply on account of racism or opposition to non-Koreans, but rather, because they had seen the difficulties that the presence of a non-Korean spouse posed on the extended family. Again, bridging gaps is easier said than done, but for the second generation, upon seeing the far-reaching results of the distance between the first and second generations, they seemed to hold a priority for generativity in their care for “each other.”

Broadly defined, sociologist Erik Erikson sees generativity as the care that one generation gives to the next.<sup>186</sup> While beginning with a basic form, from parents to children, Erikson extends the virtue of generativity to all places of society, claiming a general responsibility on all to those who come after them. Wanting to pass down values and priorities from one generation to the next is common enough in groups of all kinds, and an ethnic group is no exception—generativity within an ethnic group must not be reduced to merely preserving/passing the ethnic identity. Like the “communities of

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<sup>186</sup> Erikson 1982.

memory” discussed in *Habits of the Heart*, the Korean community has a history, but it also turns toward the future with hope. And part of that hope is to preserve the community itself—maintain it, nurture it, improve it, for the future generations. For Korean Americans, this sort of desire for generativity is often highlighted in the church. More Korean Americans are increasingly realizing the costs of the separation between generations, not only in their families but also in their churches—which for many informants, is one and the same.<sup>187</sup>

During the period of my research, I had a visit from a Korean pastor, an old family friend, who was spending a few years as a visiting pastor at a Korean American church in Virginia. He was spending most of his time with first generation Korean American pastors who had served the Korean immigrant church for decades. Naturally, our conversations revolved around the church. To my surprise, he said, “All of the pastors acknowledge one area of failure, and that’s the second generation, the whole English Ministry structure. [A failure?] A failure. We failed them. The second generation, we set them up in the church to go their own separate way, not to grow up and take our place. They all leave eventually. I haven’t seen one church where they bring the two generations together well.” How accurate his statement is, especially the last part, I’m not sure. Generativity, however, is increasingly becoming a priority among Korean Americans, upon reflection of past decisions’ long-term consequences. I am not sure if it is too late—after all, just because generativity is now a priority, that does not guarantee anything will or can be done about it.

At the time, I was preparing a lecture on Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* for my intro-

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<sup>187</sup> Other than the fact that the church is a staple of the Korean community, religious associations in general have long been recognized as an appropriate place to instill and practice the virtue of generativity. See Bellah 1991, 279-283.

level undergraduate course, and the idea of generativity was fresh in my mind. According to Putnam, one of the two main reasons for the decline of community since the 1960s is “generational shift”—an engaged generation is being replaced by a not-so-engaged generation. The civic virtues and habits of participating in one’s community that defined one generation did not get passed down. Putnam does not go so far as to place moral responsibility on any one group or generation for the shift, but logically speaking, no group (or community, church, association, etc.) will last if there is no generativity. Though this is a common issue for groups of all kinds, immigrant communities are especially sensitive to generativity, because there is a small and exclusive group of individuals who even have the capacity to take the place of the old generation. Furthermore, second generation Korean Americans are in a completely different place than their parents were, and their children will be in yet another place.

Some churches put more effort into generativity, though the rate of success is another story. Brooke attends a small Korean church where the pastor’s explicit goal and mission is to bring together the older and younger groups of Korean Americans. Brooke frowned and said, “But strangely at my church there’s old people, senior citizens, and then young people in their twenties, and no in-between.” These two groups hardly interact—“*I eensa* (greet them), but we don’t have service together. Ours is at a different time, and in English.” Clearly, not the ideal picture of the pastor’s vision, but a familiar picture of the separation within a Korean church.

Nathan is a member of Hope Chapel, the English Ministry of Baltimore Korean Presbyterian Church, with a congregation of mostly second-generation young-adult Korean Americans. At the present time, members of Hope Chapel have no plans to one

day become members Baltimore Korean Presbyterian Church, nor does Hope Chapel have plans to become its own autonomous church. According to Nathan, the two groups differ in their approach to church, in addition to the language difference. Nathan said, “Our generation is just comfortable. Our parents worked those long hours and still they made time for early rise service, Wednesday night service, made sure we went to church, youth group, all the retreats. We don’t do that. We want our service to end at a certain time and we want to eat and then go home. And then we want to watch our big screen TVs.” He chuckled, shook his head, and continued. “Our parents went through what they went through so we can live better. But living better, I don’t know if it’s really helped us. I think we’re struggling more because of that.” The goal is not necessarily worshipping together, but it seems that the separation between the two ministries is reflective of an indifferent attitude towards future generations. Even within Hope Chapel, Nathan felt there was not enough care that one generation is giving another. He continued, “I think mentoring is a key thing that should be happening in the church, starting with myself and the rest of us older guys, we should be willing to mentor. Some of these younger guys are in serious relationships, and not that our relationships are perfect, but to still provide guidance and to still have someone to talk to, you know, that should be there.”

Brooke or Nathan did not have immediate plans to put generativity into action, but awareness and recognition of the need are the first steps. And for Korean Americans, the church is a good a place as any to put these bridging ideas into action.

### *The 1.5 Generation*

Though I made no significant distinction between the second and 1.5 generation throughout this work, a special note regarding 1.5ers is in order. As a group that, by definition, is between or a mix of two groups on many levels, 1.5ers have a special role in the task of bridging the gap, more specifically, bridging the gaps *within* the Korean community. Here, I want to highlight a few notable examples of 1.5 informants who did more than merely talk about bridging, and put meaningful bridging between generations into action.

#### *Jenny—KPTA*

As briefly mentioned above, Jenny began at her elementary school what she calls the Korean Moms' Meeting, but is more formally known in other schools as the KPTA—Korean Parent Teacher Association. When Jenny became a teacher Howard County, she realized how unreachable the non-English-speaking parents are. She said, "I had some students who recently came from India and Pakistan, and I would dread anything that would come up that would require me to communicate with their parents." Like many teachers and staff, Jenny was initially frustrated at parents' ignorance of English, but Jenny soon realized how frustrating it must be for the parents as well, if not more. She continued, "When I first came to America, I was ten, and my parents couldn't read any of the letters from school, or take their phone calls, and we had to translate everything for them. But some of these kids, they don't speak English that well either, so it's tough. But it's important, because the kids who don't have parent involvement in their school stuff, they have a harder time. And it's not that parents don't want to be involved, they just

can't.”

Even before Jenny began the KPTA at her school, teachers would often ask her for translation help with the Korean students and their parents. “We don’t even have that many Korean kids, but at least once a week, some teacher will ask me to call a parent to ask for a permission slip, or tell them about a project, or something. So I knew most of the Korean parents before we began the official meetings.” Translating was not a problem for Jenny, who is perfectly bilingual. Her Korean suffered a bit when she was a teenager, but she quickly relearned it in college, mostly as a result of attending a school where there was a large group of Korean international students. “I didn’t intend to get so into the Korean scene, but I’m glad I did. I love the language. There are things I can say in Korean that just doesn’t work in English.”

KPTA was Jenny’s idea, one which her principal, the teachers, and the moms were thrilled about. Once a month, before the school day begins, five or six Korean moms gather in Jenny’s classroom. They eat breakfast, drink coffee, and they talk. “We talk about all kinds of things. Last time, we talked about some of the difference in signs, and what they mean. [Signs?] Yeah, so for Koreans, when an adult is talking to you or scolding you, it’s rude to look at them in the eyes. But for Americans, it’s rude to not look at them. They say, ‘Look at me when I’m talking to you.’ The moms thought this was so weird. They were like, ‘Why would you look at them? Shouldn’t you show you’re sorry?’ It’s subtle things like that, difference in communication. They just don’t know, and it’s not their fault.”

According to Jenny, the meetings not only make it easier for the school to communicate with the parents, but it also significantly improves the students’ situations



—at school and at home. Jenny said, “I remember, when I was a kid, I would take advantage of the fact that my teachers and my mom don’t talk to each other. And maybe not all kids do that, but either way, kids do much better in school when they know that their parents and teachers talk. And it makes communication between the kids and the parents better too, because the parents can ask specifically about what’s going on in school, because they know about it. Usually it’s just ‘How’s school?’ ‘Good.’ This way, they can do more than that.”

Jenny and her experience with the KPTA is an example of not only the cultural bridge that is taking place between Koreans and Americans, but also the generational bridge, between the first and second generations of Korean Americans. To be sure, the more explicit purpose of the KPTA is the former. However, the by-product of these meetings is a remedy for a mistake that was made collectively by the first generation for decades—leaving their kids alone while they go work, and having little to talk about when they come home. Young-adult Korean Americans, like Jenny, are learning from past experiences, and putting their time and skill to fulfilling a need in the effort of generational bridging. What makes 1.5ers like Jenny vital here is that they have the skill and understanding of the different parties involved, that they are able, as well as willing, to serve as a bridge. Plenty of Korean Americans feel the need for such bridging, but lack sufficient knowledge of Korean language or customs to do what Jenny is doing. Jenny doesn’t consider herself a hero, but she is pleased the moms are happy with it. She said, “It makes the kids better. And it’s not that hard for me, so I might as well. I enjoy it, and I think something like this is really necessary.”

*Emily—KAFCC*

Emily works as one of the two main counselors for a non-profit organization in Virginia, called the Korean American Family Counseling Center (KAFCC). Emily is the primary counselor for children and adolescents, who are usually second generation, while the older and mostly first generation Korean Americans are assigned to the other counselor. “I enjoy working with the kids,” Emily said. “It’s not always about the culture clash, but a lot of the kids’ problems have to do with their parents.”

Traditionally taboo in the Korean culture, counseling is becoming more acceptable in the Korean community, especially since the Virginia Tech shooting. According to Emily, the incident was a wake-up call for many Korean Americans, and a push to get help as opposed to making the situation worse in order to save face. Emily usually talks to the kids, but not their parents, claiming that though the source of the problem at hand may largely rest on the parents, the course of action for a solution often cannot. “We can’t fault the parents,” she said. “Parents are doing the best they can with what they know and what they grew up with, in a system that worked for them in Korea.” Oftentimes, problems arise because the parents can’t change. “It’s too ingrained for the parents,” Emily continued, and therefore, “It gets put on the kids.” Emily’s time is mostly spent trying to help the kids understand, and “get over the parents.” I asked, “Is that okay? For the kids to take the brunt of it?” Emily responded,

No, it’s not okay. You know, though, I find that kids already figured that out to a certain extent. And they just need help getting over the parent thing. They pretty much figured out their parents aren’t going to change. They know that much. So what we do is help them work around their parents, to accept and embrace their parents for who they are and be thankful that they’re doing the best they can in providing for you. And you need to figure out how to live your life... [Would you

say you had to do that too?] I think every Korean kid has to do that—find a way to live your life without going crazy. And there’s usually resistance from parents...

Though Emily considered KAFCC more of a stepping stone than a permanent place for her career, her role there was crucial. Though the literature and industry for counseling minority groups are continuing to grow,<sup>188</sup> there are currently only a handful of Korean Americans who have the professional qualifications to counsel, as well as the bicultural sense of identity and awareness it takes to understand and successfully give appropriate counsel to Korean American youth in their unique situation. Counselors who are not familiar with the Korean culture or with Korean Americans’ lifestyles and struggles would have much greater difficulty finding solutions to the kids’ problems. In fact, from a Western point of view, the blame would mostly go to the parents, and in a very serious way. Emily recalled many patients who came to KAFCC after unsuccessfully having gone to an American counselor first. She said, “There’s so many things, just the way Korean culture is structured, where if you were to present the family background to a white therapist, immediately, bells would go off, everything is unhealthy. So a white therapist would start addressing all the wrong issues first, instead of the issue that they came to get addressed. And then it’s tedious for the minority to have to explain.”

Emily firmly believed that the Korean American youth are in need of counselors like her and counseling centers like KAFCC, who understand what the youth are going through and provide a space for the youth to be heard, especially given that parents at home are often unable to do either. Emily is less of a bridge between the Korean and

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<sup>188</sup> See the following works, which specifically focus on therapy, counseling, and mental health of Korean Americans: Pak 2006, Yoon 2004 (Ed. Kim), Uba 1994, Chin et al 1994.

American but more explicitly a bridge between the two Korean generations, which is the other way around from Jenny's role in the KPTA. But like Jenny, Emily is making a valuable contribution to the Korean community, in that she is part of mending the gap between two generations, which has been neglected and only widening since Koreans' first major wave of immigration.

*Pastor Tim—New Life Church*

Pastor Tim Oh is the head of New Life Church, where the congregation is predominantly English-speaking Korean Americans. Only four-years-old, New Life holds Sunday services at a public elementary school in Columbia, Maryland. Pastor Tim is forty-six years old, happily married with three kids, and a self-proclaimed 1.5er. Before he became the head pastor at New Life, he was the pastor of the English Ministry at a well-known Korean church. Then and now, Pastor Tim's vision of a church has always been, what he calls, the family worship.

The family worship is not typical in a Korean American church. As worship begins, about a dozen small children gather near the pulpit, as Pastor Tim sits with them on the floor. He proceeds to give the short kids' version of that day's sermon, after which they are dismissed to Sunday School classes. Then the full version of the sermon begins, with all other members sitting in the congregation—mostly young adults in their thirties and forties, with several teenagers and college students, all amounting to around fifty people.

Compared to Bethel, or most Korean American churches in the region, the family worship is unconventional. And because the structure is unlike anything most Korean

Americans are used to, according to Pastor Tim, there are occasional complaints. He said, “My congregation members sometimes hate it. And the reason for that is they’re so accustomed to the Korean culture church, which is to separate. And they want quiet worship, they don’t want the children. I said no. That’s not church.”

With the family worship, Pastor Tim is looking to the future, while criticizing the way Korean churches have operated in the past. He said, “The first generation, what the church has done, they gave their all, the best they could. But they really did not train the younger generation up to become adult Christians in a church. What they have done is basically give them money, money, money, to just have activities and have fun. And I see people coming back as grownups, age-wise, with children, and I ask them to do church. They don’t know how. They’ve never experienced it, they don’t know what leadership is, and they have come to understand that when they go to church that there should be services available to them. And I don’t blame or fault them.”

The language barrier, which is the primary justification for separation in most ethnic churches, has evidently bred the kind of separation that makes generativity in a church impossible. Pastor Tim’s reference to the younger generation’s “inability to do church” is similar to the “failure of the English Ministry” mentioned by the visiting pastor. And while acknowledgment of the past mistakes is common, what each can and will do about it is not. Pastor Tim continued, “I am praying that there will be more churches like New Life Church where 1.5 and second generation pastors can endure and persevere so that even though the size may be small for the next twenty to thirty years, that they can persevere as leaders and teach young people that we need to do church as our parents did.” Likening the responsibility of New Life Church members to “owning

your own place as opposed to living at home,” Pastor Tim looks forward to the second generation of Korean Americans maturing, though not without worry. “Will the English-speaking group ever become mature, and become elders, so that they can sit together with the Korean elders and govern and rule that one body of Christ? At the moment, it’s not there. To get to that maturity level, it’s hard. It’s really hard.”

Even without a major language barrier, the family worship is not for all churches—age groups are often separated in a church, and with good reason. Teenagers and senior citizens have little in common, and some sermons will be appropriate for one and not the other. Likewise, in New Life, where middle-school-students and 40-year-olds alike are worshipping together, Pastor Tim admits to the challenges of giving sermons appropriate for all. However, for Korean American churches, where decades of separation has produced harmful long-term effects, Pastor Tim believes the remedy is something like the family worship, which makes no excuses for unnecessary separation, even with the new inconveniences. And like Jenny and Emily, Pastor Tim’s life experience as the 1.5er gives him an advantage, or a calling, as he sees it, to serve the generations that are not quite ready to leave the ethnically homogeneous church but lack the training to serve the church alongside the first generation.

The 1.5 generation did not quite choose to become what they are—bilingual and bicultural, easily fitting in two worlds. Nor are the 1.5ers responsible for the generational gaps that exist in the Korean community. Many of them do, however, choose to use their skills and assets, inadvertently creating a small bridge between generations. They are both willing and able to mend fragile relationships, recognizing the need for a bridging within. It is such individuals who keep the sense of community alive for the future, which

depends on generativity.

### *Summing up*

There are many Korean Americans I met, and even more I have not met, who are and will continue to be the movers and shapers of the Korean American community. And as I finish this work, the Korean American in me feels a tinge of guilt, as though I have aired out the dirty laundry of my family members. The researcher in me, however, is excited, as this work has raised important findings and questions for future research.

The main argument of this work is twofold: one, the Korean community is composed of individuals who define themselves and one another in terms of relationships, making their relationships more obligatory and “normal” as opposed to contractual; two, members of the Korean community at this point in time are not well-integrated into the American civil society, but are certainly not in danger of becoming isolated individuals or losing their community. I would like to argue that the relationship culture and a vibrant civil society is compatible, and that a homogeneous ethnic community need not be a problem for a healthy American civil society—and it seems there is some evidence of that today, particularly with the ease with which many Korean Americans, especially the 1.5, flow in and out of their Korean and American worlds. However, the evidence is admittedly weak, and because this research is based on a point in time that we have not yet seen nor will see in the future from Korean Americans, much of the more important and interesting patterns are yet to be seen.

The Korean community shows no signs of fading or losing its significance, but it is still quite young. As I review the interviews with my informants, I notice an underlying

assumption (by both my informants and me), that Korean Americans, the second generation of today, need *and* want the Korean community, whereas the first generation created the Korean community more as a result of immediate need than long-term desire. That being said, we have yet to see an emergence of a third generation, and there is no telling what their attitudes/approaches will be to their ethnic identity or their ethnic community, and if a vibrant community will even exist. What we do know is that there is a lot riding on the second/1.5 generation—if, over time, they identify less with their Korean identity and are less involved with their Korean churches, associations, and families, and their views translate in the way they raise their children, the third generation will not have much of an ethnic community to participate in, whether they want to or not.

Though the existence of ethnic communities may, in fact, provide more opportunities for ethnic segregation, I am inclined to believe that such phenomenon need not worry us. As emphasized in Chapter Four, I am confident that the existence of the Korean community *does not* contribute to Koreans' racism or hostility towards other racial/ethnic groups, and because my research has persuaded me that there is so much more that sustains the Korean community than affirmation and protection of the Korean identity, it is my conclusion that ethnic communities are not in themselves a hindrance to a harmonious diverse society, but rather, that ethnic communities provide a place for citizens to build and maintain *their* relationships and communities, ultimately preventing those members from becoming a part of the isolated citizenry, and possibly contributing to a rather engaged civil society.



## RESEARCH APPENDIX

### *Interviews*

Twenty-five Korean Americans were interviewed for this research. The criteria for my sample was: 1.5 or second generation Korean American, at least twenty-five years old, some participation in the past or current in an ethnic association and/or identify oneself as a member of the Korean community. Eleven informants were second generation and fourteen were 1.5; thirteen were male and twelve were female. Fifteen were in their upper twenties, eight in their thirties, and two in their forties. Six informants requested that I use pseudonyms; for all other their real names were used. All informants were, at the time of the interview, residing in the Washington metropolitan area. All interviews took place either in a home, office, or coffee shop, and were recorded then transcribed.

Though most of the interview questions were follow-up questions specific to the informant, the general questions I asked all informants were as follows:

- When did you (or your parents) come to America? What was your childhood like?
- What is your current daily/weekly routine like? Who do you interact with the most? What is the ethnic/racial breakdown of your social/professional environment? How do you feel about that?
- What associations or communities, ethnic or non, have you participated in? (Would you like to?) What is the structure of those associations like? What kinds of problems arise, and how do the members go about solving them?
- Do you consider yourself a part of the Korean community? Do you think Korean

Americans are too segregated?

- Do you actively seek more racial/ethnic integration in your life? How do you feel about Korean Americans who do or don't?
- What was your reaction to the Virginia Tech shooting?

### ***Participant observation***

In addition to interviews, I joined three Bible study groups for the purpose of research. One was organized by a Korean church and was an on-going group, which I attended for a total of two months. The other two Bible study groups, which were multi-ethnic, and organized informally by members of a non-ethnic church, lasted for three to four months, which I attended for the full duration. I visited a total of five Korean churches, once each, with the exception of Bethel, which I visited on several occasions. I also visited Jessica's small group meeting once (Chapter 2), Emily's counseling center several times (Chapters 4, 5), and Jenny's KPTA meeting once (Chapter 5).

In addition to the participation observation explicitly for the purpose of research, much of the material in the work was discovered on occasions that I did not necessarily intend as research—for instance, the church retreat where I was a volunteer (Chapter 1), the church where the *hangul-hakgyo* was conducted (Chapter 4), the birthday parties or casual social interactions that followed interviews, the visit from a family-friend pastor (Chapter 5), etc. Several individuals who were named were not formally interviewed, but were present in places I visited or was invited to—for instance, Mindy (Chapter 1), Jeannie (Chapter 2), David (Chapter 4), the visiting pastor from Korea (Chapter 5), etc.

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