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International Sojourning in the U.S.: Perceptions from Children of a Visiting Scholar

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Abstract

The experiences of visiting university faculty have been documented in the literature, yet, there appears to be a dearth of studies concerning the impact of sojourning abroad on children of visiting scholars who join a parent for an extended visit to a host country. This article will present a case study that qualitatively examined the perceptions, expectations and reflections of two young Koreans who accompanied their father during his 10-month sabbatical at a large, public university in the South East United States. Specifically, data collected by the researchers through a series of interviews investigated socio-cultural and situational experiences and challenges reported by the participants who were living in a host country. The results of this study suggest that in order to have a successful international sojourn experience, prior to their departure, both visiting scholars and their accompanying family members should have a certain level of cultural competence and linguistic proficiency of the language of the host country, and be open to new life experiences and challenges that they will encounter abroad.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Visiting International Scholars

Although each U.S. institution of higher learning has its own particular definition of a *visiting scholar*, as does the literature (Bould et al., 2015; Sikes, 2006), for the purpose of this paper, this term will refer to a post-secondary scholar-professor from another university who is on paid-leave from his/her home institution who is engaged in an advanced research agenda that will be conducted at the host university. Whereby there are over 800 visiting scholars from 155 countries who receive Fulbright Scholar Grants (Fulbright, n.d.) to conduct advanced research at their host institutions, many U.S. universities and colleges sponsor international scholars who are funded either by their own governmental agencies and/or by their home institutions. Additionally, “Most visiting scholars bring their families to the host country” (Li & Chen, 2017, p. 39) as did the scholar in the present study.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to examine the personal experiences of a South Korean visiting scholar's children and their perceptions of their new lives as they attempted to adjust to the challenges they encountered in their new American environment during a 10-month sojourn in the U.S.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to examine the two South Korean children's perceptions as they adjusted to their new lives in the United States over an extended period of time abroad, the following research questions were used to guide the present study:

1. What were the sojourners' initial expectations for and perceptions of living in the U.S.?
2. What were their situational perceptions as newcomers to the U.S. during their sojourn?
3. What were their specific challenges as they attempted to acculturate to the host country?

2.0 Review of Relevant Literature

Sojourners to a host country are separated from their own familiar way of life, culture, language, family, friends and personal support networks. As such, they will need to negotiate particular challenges and learn how to adjust to an entirely new life abroad.

2.1 Cultural Adjustment Theories

As newcomers (i.e., "foreign-born students and their families who have arrived in the United States," U.S. DOE, 2017, p. 8) enter into a new culture, they will need to deal with various issues including proficiency in the new host country's language, and reconciling their own personal, social and even ethnic values with those of their new country (Finch, Kolody, & Vega, 2000; Romero & Roberts, 2003). Being members from one culture, they must learn to adapt or *acculturate* to the culture of the members of their new host country (Burnam, et al., 1987).

There is a variety of theories that describe the types and stages attributed to the inter-cultural adjustment process of sojourners (Berry, 1997; Giordano & Giordano, 1976; Goldlust & Richmond, 1974; Hoffman, Dana, & Bolton, 1985; Knight & Kagan, 1977; Mendoza & Martinez, 1981; Olmedo, 1979; Rosenthal & Hrynevich, 1985).

During the process of cultural adjustment, the majority of visitors to another country experience what is called *culture shock* (Barker, 1990; Pederson, 1995). This is "the trauma you experience when you move into a culture different from your home culture" (Chaney & Martin, 2000, p. 62) and "can be characterized by periods of frustration, adjustment, and even depression" (Swallow, 2010, p.1) in addition to feelings of elation, excitement and stimulation.

2.11 Swallow's (2010) Five Stages of Culture Shock

Whereby other researchers have identified different stages of the phenomenon known as cultural shock, Swallow (2010), who adapted her own paradigm based on from Barker's 1990 model, offers a five-stage process, consisting of the following.

- the *honeymoon stage* (feeling of euphoria and exhilaration for the new culture and environment);

- the *distress stage* (characterized by confusion with the new culture and isolation from the culture of the origin-country);
- the *reintegration stage* (sojourners begin to reject aspects of the host country's culture and consider it as inferior and inadequate compared with their own culture);
- the *autonomy stage* (also called the *emergence stage*, during which the visitors start to accept and appreciate the new host culture and its differences and begin to feel more confident and able to cope with issues that may occur); and lastly,
- the *independent stage* (when the sojourners “embrace the new culture and see everything in a new, yet realistic light,....“feel comfortable, confident,...and no longer feel alone and isolated” (Swallow, 2010).

2.2 Acculturating to a Host Country

“Student sojourners frequently face significant difficulties transitioning to the host culture, particularly at the initial stages of the sojourn” (Goldstein & Keller, 2015, pp. 187-188) as cited in Brown and Holloway (2008). Consequently, their social and academic success may be negatively impacted (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) until which time they learn to acculturate to their non-origin country. Berry (1977) developed an acculturalization model which addressed specific attitudes and behaviors associated with specific coping strategies,

...based on the negotiation of two underlying issues: a) *cultural maintenance*: the extent to which acculturating individuals and groups identify themselves with the host culture as opposed [to] their origin culture; b) *cultural contact*: the extent to which acculturating individuals and groups wish to involve in the host culture as opposed to their origin culture. (as cited in Li & Chen, 2017, p. 40)

Researchers Goldstein and Keller (2015) identified potential predictors of successful cultural adjustment that could assist sojourners in their acculturalization to their host country. These include self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), openness to new experiences, an interest in world languages, and cross-cultural competence. Furthermore, to ease the acculturalization process, Cai and Hall (2016) suggest that it is highly recommended that sojourners receive pre-departure support for living in the new environment that are specific to the situation in which they will find themselves in the host country.

3.0 Method

3.1 Participants

Although the present study primarily focused on the acculturalization of the two school-aged, South Korean students who were children of a visiting scholar, as the main participants in this case study, two other secondary participants were the father of the children, the visiting scholar, and the part-time English language tutor of the eldest child.

The primary participants were Jin-a (pseudonym), 7th grade female who had very little English instruction (consisting of minor English survival skills) prior to her moving abroad. Jin-a was an energetic, outgoing child who appeared to be excited to be in the U.S. for the first time. Her brother, Yung-Su

(pseudonym), 19-year-old male, 1st year college student in a prestigious school in his origin-country, had good English proficiency skills but was not confident in his communication skills, extremely introverted and self-effacing, yet appeared to be motivated to attend school in the United States.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected using a series of semi-structured interviews, conducted over a period of 10 months in both Korean and English, by the second author of this article. Even though the interviewees had the opportunity to respond in English, responses to the interview questions, were not given in Korean but rather in English by the participants. Also, supplementary data were gathered through informal meetings between the participants and the researchers during shopping outings and family dinners in the host country and via semi-structured emails when the visiting scholar and his children had returned home.

4.0 Results

The findings of the data analysis will be framed by each of the three research questions that guided the present study.

4.1 What were the sojourners' initial expectations for and perceptions of living in the U.S. prior to their arrival?

4.1.1 Jin-a

Jin-a strongly expressed the desire to improve her English and make "a lot of American friends." Her first perceptions of Americans were extremely favorable; she thought that they were "nice, kind, and educated." When probed further about what she knew about America, Jin-a added that she thought that most Americans were White, based on the limited number of American TV shows and movies that she had watched while in Korea. Referring to her own country's homogenous ethnicity she commented, "People on TV in Korea are almost Whites. So I haven't thought about Black people."

4.1.2 Yung-Su

Compared with those of Jin-a, Yung-Su's initial perceptions about his new host country were not particularly positive. Due to his age (19) and knowledge of U.S. military personnel in South Korea (many of whom he had encountered were in their late teens and early 20s), he had a negative opinion about *Americans* prior to his arrival in the U.S. Yet, based on Hollywood's artificial projection of *American culture and life*, Yung-Su had had highly-positively inflated expectations about life in general in the United States.

4.2 What were their situational perceptions as newcomers to the U.S. during their sojourn?

4.2.1 Jin-a

Following a couple of months as a second semester 7th grader, Jin-a's initial perceptions of Americans she encountered had changed dramatically. "I thought they [Americans] were nice and kind even to strangers, but it was not true." When asked about her experiences in the classroom she responded, "There are many bad students." When further coaxed to elaborate, she commented about the lack of discipline in the local public school where she attended both daily ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and mainstream content area classes.

Jin-a's reported that her English skills had markedly improved, even after a few weeks, particularly with listening and speaking and writing. She smiled broadly when asked about her new ESL teacher and

shared, “Since we had [have] a new ESL teacher, we don’t do worksheet activities anymore. We learned how to write an essay and also short story questions. Although I enjoy the class, I don’t want to miss mainstream class[es].” Jin-a also spoke animatedly about her use of an electronic dictionary (that her father had given to her) and the internet, which she felt helped her English.

Jin-a felt that her English skills were improving, and she strongly shared her fondness for attending mainstream classes rather than being in the ESL class, “There are other Korean students [in the EL class] and when we have questions to answer, we exchange answers in Korean [with] each other.... We don’t listen to teachers [the teacher] well because we can talk [to] each other.”

When asked about her interactions with peers and teachers during an interview that took place during the fall when she was in 8th grade, Jin-a’s optimistic and outgoing personality shone through.

Umm, I’m [the] same to [with] my family, but I more often talk to friends and hang out with them. It is more often than [when] I was in the 7th grade. I go to [the] mall every weekend with friends. Another testament to her successful acculturation to her new environment is evident in the following statement.

Teachers sit on their chairs and we solve our problems. I sometimes ask questions. If they talk to me, I answer. We became close. The other day, a teacher told me, my clothes is [are] pretty. So the next day I told her that her clothes is [are] pretty.

Jin-a had similar positive experiences with her peers, even during the initial month of her sojourn. She went to the mall with her new school friends and felt very comfortable and socialized with them. “My American friends are very similar to my Korean friends. They were [are] talking about school, teachers, friends and clothes. We also listen [to] music, and do the Internet, and play video games.”

4.2.2 Yung-Su/”But it is not like this in American movies!”

The new city, to which his family moved while considered to be large for the South East U.S, was certainly not the fast-paced, exciting, and public-transportation-friendly major metropolis of Seoul, South Korea where he had previously been a new college student. Yung-Su was very dissatisfied with what he deemed to be “Small Town U.S.A.” Due to his preconceived notions of what he thought U.S. life would be, he was extremely disappointed with living in what he viewed as being a small, quiet, provincial American city. To add to his dismay, he had to depend upon his father to transport him wherever he wanted to go, not having his own vehicle or access to public transportation in his new host environment.

Before I came here, I thought about wonderful buildings and fascinating cities like Chicago, something that you can see in Hollywood movies. In those surroundings, I thought I would have fun with foreign friends. Having fun with them, communicating with them without any difficulties, and going [to] some fun places.

In addition to his feelings about his new hometown, Yung-Su was extremely frustrated attending an English Language Institute (ELI) where he felt that he did not learn *authentic* English. “Even though my talk is not exact, they [the other non-native English speakers at the ELI] interpret it again into their language. Sometimes it’s OK with me. But it’s not a real English communication skill.”

After attending the ELI during his first few months of his sojourn, Yung-Su was able to register at a local Community College the following fall where he was not happy with his lack of interactions with the other students (who were primarily American). Although he stated that he wanted to make friends at his new school venue, he was not successful.

I didn’t try to make friends. First [there was the issue of] transportation and second, language. I was afraid that I could not understand them [the Americans] clearly....Everybody leaves right after class. Although they talk during the class, I don’t think they are close outside the class.

Yung-Su stated emphatically that he wanted to meet Korean-Americans and to take classes at the university where his father was a visiting scholar.

4.3 What were their specific challenges as they attempted to acculturate to the host country?

4.3.1 Jin-a

According to an informal interview conducted with both Jin-a's English tutor, and Jin-a, the tutor acknowledged that initially, Jin-a did not like her ESL class, with her first ESL teacher. "Her English [ESL] class was [that] she hated it. It was awful. She just spoke Korean all the time. So that doesn't help her." Jin-a added, "There was a Korean student in the 7th grade and I copied her notebook...when I had her, I know what's going on clearly because she told me." In other words, she was allowed to speak Korean and not complete her own work, which obviously, did not present a challenge to her.

As explained by her English tutor, Jin-a experienced difficulty at first with the academic language or with understanding the content in her mainstream classes. "Her father helped her with basic academic English (i.e., identifying key vocabulary terms in math and science)." Jin-a's father corroborated this fact in another interview that took place with the researchers early during Jin-a's first semester at her new school.

Math questions were so easy but she couldn't solve them. So I interpreted basic sample questions. For the first 2-3 weeks, I helped her like that. Her math grade got better and then, I looked at [the] geography [and] history stuff that she is learning. I read them [the subject information] and interpreted for her. [In particular] the vocabulary frequently used...I had her look [it] up [in] the dictionary and memorize them [the vocabulary words]. She continued it for a month and then she seemed to be O.K.

Even though the researchers felt that Jin-a was acculturating well to her new life in the U.S., it was understandable that she would miss her Korean friends back home. "I miss my school, friends, I miss sleepover[s] the most, and also talking with teachers, and most [of the] things [that] happened in the school."

4.3.2 Yung-Su

In addition to his despondency with living in a small, American city, one of the particular challenges that Jin-a's brother experienced in his acculturation journey was his lack of self-confidence in his English communication skills. He found it particularly difficult to make American friends, particularly at the community college where he attended classes during the fall, after his spring semester at the ELI. Yung-Su shared during an interview, "I just look at books and take some notes....Because of my English ...my English is not good... "I was alone all the time. I ate lunch by myself."

Yung-Su's poor self-perception of his English skills, however, differed from the opinion of his English tutor who eventually stopped working with him, due to the fact that she felt that "His English was very good. So, it wasn't [doing any good]... I didn't feel like I was helping him at all."

As his 10-month sojourn continued, Yung-Su withdrew from physical interaction with Americans and appeared to feel more comfortable by vicariously interacting with his host country's community. "I watched TV a lot, for example, [the TV series, *Friends*]. I feel I lack advanced English, like some words on [the] News, I could not understand. But I could understand slang. I used online slang dictionary....Well, if you know a lot of slang, you would feel like you were more American."

5.0 Limitations, Discussion, and Conclusion

5.1 Limitations

The researchers accomplished what they set-out to do--explore specific aspects of the acculturation process of a visiting scholar and his children to their new host country. Indeed, there were several inherent limitations to the present study. This was a simple case study, focusing on only one small family unit, during a 10-month period of time, in one city located in the South East U.S. Only three open-ended yet highly-focused research questions guided the study and they dealt with only specific stages of Berry's (1997) cultural adjustment theory and did not examine cultural integration (Boski, 2008).

Additionally, data were gathered through a series of semi-structured interviews and informal interactions. The primary participants in the study were two children of one visiting scholar; the secondary participants were the visiting scholar and one English language tutor who worked with the children for the first half of their sojourn experience. Whereby, the results of the study do augment the published research on the topic, caution must be taken when attempting to generalize any findings. Therefore, the researchers recommend that further research be conducted on the issues presented in this paper, including a larger group of participants, over a longer period of time and involving more in-depth ethnographic data collection measures.

5.2 Discussion

The results of this study corroborate both the results of Berry's (1977) Acculturation Model and Swallow's (2010) Five Stages of Cultural Shock. Berry purports that successful acculturation takes place once a sojourner has negotiated *cultural maintenance* and *cultural contact* with members of the host country. For Jin-a, this was evident. Indeed, mid-way through her time abroad, she was able to identify with the host country's culture (*cultural maintenance*) and was more than willing to be involved with its members (*cultural contact*). For her, during her 10-month stay abroad Jin-a was successful in adjusting to American culture in her host country. And, upon her re-entry to Korea, in an email to the researchers, she reflected upon her extremely positive experience, "It was good to live in America. It's also good to live in Korea. I wish I could go to [the] U.S. someday again."

Due to his hesitancy in trying to identify with his new American culture and his unwillingness to become more involved than he was with Americans, Jun-Su's experience abroad resulted in only a partially- successful sojourn experience, which was validated only after his arrival back to Korea. He emailed the researchers, "I miss the days that I lived there [U.S.]. Our family was very close. When we were in Korea, we lived in different places and did not get together often....I miss using English too."

Both children of the visiting scholar progressed through Swallow's (2010) Five Stages of Cultural Shock, although, Jin-a did so more easily than her brother; she arrived at the fifth and final stage, the *independent stage*, well before her departure home. In contrast with his sister, Jung-Suon only reached the third stage, and remained at the *reintegration stage* until the end of his sojourn.

Examining Jin-a's reactions to her new host country's environment from the interviews, the researchers determined that overall, she was open to cultural differences and had no major prejudices or biases to new cultural experiences. She had stable and frequent contacts with people inside and outside school (except during the summer break when she traveled with her father and brother). Unlike her brother, however, she did not have extremely high expectations (e.g., improving English conversation) and was pleasantly surprised with her improved language skills at the end of her sojourn. She left the United States on a proverbial high note and re-entered Korea in like manner.

Jun-Su's journey through part of the Five Stages was much more difficult for him, for the same reasons he was unable to successfully negotiate both Berry's (1997) *cultural maintenance* and *cultural*

contact with members of his host country. He did not see himself capable of embracing American culture nor did he ever feel comfortable or confident in his interactions with them, in both academic and social settings. The researchers suggest that perhaps his pre-sojourn inflated and somewhat unrealistic expectations of what his life would be like in the U.S. could have potentially negatively impacted his ability or willingness to adjust to the culture of his new host country in the beginning of his stay abroad and his introverted, non-risk-taking demeanor prevented him from arriving at even Swallow's (2010) fourth stage, the *autonomy stage*.

5.3 Conclusion

Visiting scholars "do not receive adequate preparation prior to their departure" from their origin country (Cai & Hall, 2016). Furthermore, the "implications of this unpreparedness may mean a reduction in intercultural competence" which in turn will impact cultural adjustment to the host country (Gopal's 2011 research as cited in Cai and Hall, 2016, p. 250). The researchers hold that the same may be true for the children of visiting scholars who accompany their parent(s) abroad. Thus, in order to facilitate a potential successful cultural adjustment to the host country, it is essential that visiting scholars and their sojourning family members learn as much about their new country as possible, the language that is spoken in it, all aspects of its culture, be open to new experiences, and gain some level of cultural competence of the host country, as suggested by Goldstein and Keller (2015).

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