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Korea and the Dominican Republic: A transnational case study-analysis

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Abstract

The study of transnational movement and the lives of individuals who cross nation-state boundaries has grown in recent decades. Transnational study regarding the Dominican Republic has continued since migrations to the U.S. in the 1960s and has primarily focused on “transnationalism from below” (Smith & Guarnizo, 2002) narratives, while study of South Korean transnationalism has focused on movement motivated by access to English in order to assure access to the competitive job market and opportunities for social mobility. This pair of case studies examines the lives of two relatively privileged Korean students who lived transnationally between Korea and the Dominican Republic over a prolonged period of years. The purpose of the study is to examine how transnational movement has influenced the lives of these students and their identities.

Keywords: transnationalism, South Korea, Dominican Republic, identity

“I’m headed home!” captioned the photograph of an airline ticket with a destination of a city in the Dominican Republic. Over the next few days my social media newsfeed filled with photographs of some of my favorite Dominican places with more than a few “selfies” Clara (pseudonym) had taken with friends and family. One of these photographs captured a family dinner with Clara’s parents and younger brother and it was captioned, “There’s nothing like my mom’s *kimchi*!”

While there has been substantial research conducted about the transnational lives of Dominicans (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Guarnizo, 1997; Levitt, 2001), transnational research concerning South Korea has been limited until recent years. Park & Lo (2012) explain, “The rapid globalization of Korean society has given birth to new modes of migration that have brought about a significant transformation in the ways in which Koreans imagine their position in the world” (p. 148). Research regarding Korean transnational movement involves a trend within Korean society called *jogi yuhak* (early study abroad). This strategy is commonly carried out with *kirogi* (wild goose) families, “families that are separated between two countries for the purpose of children’s education abroad” (Lee & Koo, 2006, p. 533). Exposing children to authentic opportunities to acquire English is “a transnational strategy of middle-class (and some working – class) South Koreans for securing capital for class maintenance and reproduction” (Song, 2012, p. 202).

Emphasis on English education (*yeongeokyooyuk*) in Korea began in the early 1990s when “the Korean government decided to include English listening tests into the national college entrance examinations (Park, 2009). South Korean transnational research has focused on this strategic and temporary migration to countries like New Zealand or the United States where children can learn English (Block, 2012; Collins, 2009; Park & Abelman, 2004; Stevens, Jin, & Song, 2006). There is an absence of inquiry regarding South Korean transnational migration that contrasts with this paradigm. The following two case studies contain narratives that do not ascribe to the current South Korean transnational patterns. The primary motivation for each participant’s family to move away from South Korea was for a parent’s employment with a multinational corporation. While it turned out that the city in which these two families lived had private school with U.S. accreditation where English and Spanish were both languages of instruction, this was more the result of serendipity than sagacity. It is possible that the existence of these transnational realities or

identities that do not have a space in the current taxonomy are “to some extent, not seen” (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009, p. 329). The purpose of this study is to describe two such cases in order that they may be recognized and perhaps that such cases may be the focus of broader study and understanding of transnational experiences.

In order to assess how the lives of these students contrast from others’ in the field of research, I have used case-study methodology as a way to gain insight into the lived experiences of two relatively privileged South Korean students who lived in the Dominican Republic and South Korea throughout their schooling experiences. My primary research question was: How does extended transnational movement between South Korea and the Dominican Republic affect students’ identities and schooling experiences?

Methods

Given this study’s focus on the experiences of students who have educational experiences both in South Korea and the Dominican Republic, I used purposeful sampling for maximum variation of responses for this intrinsic case study (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Participants’ transnational experiences fit within the bounded case of the study. Each participant spent time in the Dominican Republic and returned to South Korea for post-secondary study, but their family make-up and circumstances, as well as their experiences allow for nuances among the cases (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1981). One participant returned to South Korea with her family following high school and the other participant left her family in the Dominican Republic in order to attend university in South Korea.

The selected participants were students whom I taught in my three years teaching (throughout a space of six years) at a small American school (SMCS) in the Dominican Republic. Five years after I returned to the U.S., I had the opportunity to travel and research in South Korea. Throughout the course of those five years, I maintained contact with participants in order to provide support as their former teacher and in order to better understand their transnational experiences as a researcher

While this study references multiple years of interaction, the data collected for the study which included student journals, semi-structured interviews, observation and fieldnotes, and informal email correspondence,

was collected over a six-month period. Prior to my trip to Korea and following the return of consent forms, I sent initial journal-prompts to both participants. Journal-data was collected through email and follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype. Interviews were audio-recorded digitally, transcribed, and stored. Fieldnotes were kept in narrative journal format and include my recollection of students' quotations as well as the descriptive contexts that provided a backdrop to our conversations and shared experiences. Students were informed that their privacy would be protected with the use of pseudonyms.

Stake, in his 1995 text *The Art of Case Study Research*, explains, "There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations" (p. 71). Although my analysis was ongoing through reflective journaling, I began my post-data collection and formal analysis by looking for patterns related to my research questions within participants' responses through categorical aggregation as well as through direct interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). I accomplished this through multiple readings of participant responses, coding and recoding patterns, breaking down individual responses, and constructing meaning based upon the themes that emerged. (Stake, 1995). After identifying patterns, I examined the data looking for correspondence within each case as well as among the cases (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). From there, I extracted naturalistic generalizations (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995) that contribute to understanding transnational lives and specifically South Korean transnational narratives that don't match the *jogi yuhak* (early study abroad) or *kirogi* (wild goose) families, most commonly found in the current body of transnational research on South Korea. In an effort to provide a level of verification for my data-analysis I invited participants to member-check my drafts in order to triangulate my results (Stake, 1995). I sought patterns within the data for data source triangulation (Stake, 1995). My initial research question focused more broadly on the transnational experience and its influence on students' identities. These cases illuminated the presence of a student whose transnational experience was unique as it was not primarily motivated by access to English. And both participant identities reflect a cosmopolitan dimension.

What follows is a pair of case studies, each organized with the student's narrative. Each section contains the participant's voice and draws upon the history and relationship I have with each. Toma (2000) describes this

disposition as “subjective qualitative research,” where the researcher becomes an insider—a partner with the subject who is responsible for bringing the subject to life for the reader’ (p. 182). The cases are followed by a discussion and recommendation for future research regarding a transnational narrative that contrasts with the most common story of transnational movement coming from South Korea.

The Case-Studies

Eun Jung. Eun Jung’s brow furrowed as she leaned over the three open books on her desk: a Korean-English dictionary, a Korean graphic novel of *Romeo and Juliet*, and an English version with a parallel modern English translation. With her pencil, she marked Korean symbols above the English text. It was painstaking.

Eun Jung moved with her family from Korea to the Dominican Republic for her father’s job in the summer before her freshman year of high school. She explained,

It was hard for me to study in the Dominican Republic for the first few years because I didn’t know any English or Spanish. My first two years I was homesick for Korea. I wasn’t ready for a new country, languages, culture, or new people. Also, it was really hard to learn two languages at the same time. It was a big change but I think I gained aspects from school (SMCS) that is more free. The life of a student in Korea is really tough. Parents and teachers put pressure on them to make good grades. They stay very, very, very long in school and most of them have to go to educational institutions of math, English, piano, taekwondo, or others. In the Dominican Republic students say their opinions in front of the class there is a good mood and different teaching. There’s definitely less tension in the Dominican Republic.

It took a while for Eun Jung to find her place among her class however, there was another Korean student who knew neither English nor Spanish who came to SMCS at the same time; they formed a support for one another. By the time she was a senior, Eun Jung had acquired enough English and Spanish that, “I hung out with my Dominican friends a lot. We went on a senior cruise and we all had anatomy together. Returning to Korea, I was very lonely for them.”

Unlike many of the students from South Korea living in the Dominican Republic, when Eun Jung moved back to Korea for university her entire family returned with her. After four years living in the Dominican Republic, Eun Jung said:

It was really hard to get used to life in Korea. The hardest thing was that I didn't have any friends in Korea to talk about my worries. For the first year I missed my friends and people in the Dominican Republic so much. I also missed the free and lovely life we had there. My family had to restart from the bottom. We didn't have much money to buy the house and our furniture or household items.

Eun Jung told me this while we sat at a coffee shop in Seoul. She paused to smile and then said, "I was excited to eat Korean foods. I really missed Korean food. And Korean dramas and other Korean shows!" Eun Jung struggled to readjust to life back in South Korea in her interpersonal relationships as well.

The senior-junior relationship is very important in society here. They have to use formal language to the ones who are older than you. It was hard for me to adapt to this culture in Korea when I returned because Dominicans do not care about the senior-junior relationship. If they are not close in age it doesn't matter, they can be friends. Koreans just can't see treating your seniors (elders) as friends.

When she returned to South Korea, Eun Jung began studying Mass Communications at Incheon University, one of Korea's national universities. "My favorite courses are marketing and advertising," Eun Jung explained, "but my Korean is weak because I didn't study in Korean for a long time. My friends have helped me when I didn't know Korean or Korean history or politics." Eun Jung described how knowing English has been an asset stating:

I think the biggest difference between Korean students and me is that I know English. Actually, in my university there are many classes that are being taught in English. I already studied at a higher level in English at SMCS. Sometimes my friends expect me to know everything about English. It has been a little burden for me.

While Eun Jung had more years of university ahead of her at the time of this study. Eun Jung imagined her future and plans involving a life outside of Korea. “I want to live in Korea before I get married, with my family. I want to raise my children in another country like the United States or the Dominican Republic.”

Eun Jung’s experience contrasts with the typical South Korean transnational narrative where short-term transnational movement is primarily motivated by access to English. While Eun Jung acknowledges that the plan for her father to take a job in the Dominican Republic did not ensure the hoped for upward social mobility upon their return to South Korea, her high school diploma from a fully accredited American school where her coursework was in both English and Spanish, did support her entrance into university. She does not plan to leverage her command of English for her own social mobility in South Korea post-graduation, however. Instead, she hopes to leverage her knowledge of English and Spanish for a transnational future she imagines back in the Dominican Republic or the United States.

Chung Cha (Clara). As a first-year teacher, I spent most of my lunch hours in my classroom trying to keep my head above water. Clara and a small band of Korean students made their classroom a refuge from the heat and sun and chatted away in a mix of Korean, Spanish, and English. I temporarily left the Dominican Republic following Clara’s seventh grade year but returned when she was a junior and taught her throughout her junior and senior years of high school. Clara had become a mentor to new Korean arrivals at school (like Eun Jung) helping with homework, explaining Dominican culture, and planning activities for the “Korean Crew” who gathered on the high school stairs at lunchtime.

Clara and her family moved to the Dominican Republic when she was five and she spent ten years studying at SMCS. Despite her years at the school she explained that,

It was very hard to be a part of the Dominicans’ group because of the language barrier and my appearance. Even in pre-school, the kids asked me questions like, “Why are your eyes like that?” or “Why is your skin yellow?” I didn’t know how to answer so I just ignored them. In junior high it was terrible. I had great friends who understood me, but there were some other groups of friends who made fun of my race. The worst thing was when

they called me ‘Chinese’ even though they knew I wasn’t one. My classmates saw me as the ‘nerd’ of the class but I loved helping them with their homework and I think that is what made me finally fit into their group. Moving into high school my classmates were nicer to me and the mocking stopped. Everyone accepted me for who I was and no one called me ‘Chinese’ anymore. I was so thankful that they just called me by my name.

Just as she was one of the first South Korean arrivals at SMCS, who served as a mentor for Korean students who followed after her, in returning to Korea she has maintained her role as mentor as other SMCS Korean students have since returned for university. Clara was accepted to Seoul National University (SNU) and decided to major in pharmacy. She explained that,

I was excited to come to Korea because I knew that Korean society was very developed and I wanted to see all the tall buildings. I wanted to ride the train, subway, and visit all the different places that I had not seen before. I wanted to see my aunts, uncles, and cousins. But it was hard because it had been so long since I had lived in Korea. I didn’t know much about Korean society, prices, where to ask for help.

Clara described how her transnational experience shaped her identity and how she felt different than peers who lived their entire lives in South Korea. “I identified myself as a Dominican more than a Korean because I was more familiar with Dominican culture than the Korean culture. Music and dancing is a part of my everyday life, thinking positively and not worrying about every single thing in life—these are aspects that make me different than most Koreans.” Like Eun Jung, Clara also struggled with some of the cultural transitions including those related to age and respect. She said:

In Korea it is very strict when dealing with people who are older than you. You have to speak with respect and treat them as if they are a higher position than you even if you are very close in age. Another cultural piece is the speed; your actions have to be in perfect condition while being very fast or efficient. It sometimes seems that we are robots. For these reasons, at first, when I came back to Korea from the DR, it was hard to adapt. In the DR when you were introduced to new people they would all treat

you as a friend you have known for a long time. In Korea it was so hard to keep track of how to deal with certain types of people.

Clara struggled in adjusting to South Korean culture and with feeling 'homesick' for the D.R. and her family who had remained in the Dominican Republic. She said:

I was so homesick for the D.R.. My parents are still there and I wanted to see them and be with them. I missed all my friends, the culture, the food, the beach, and school life. The D.R. and Korea are two very different countries so it was hard to adjust. I still get homesick. My parents call me every day to check up on me and we tell each other what is new. They remind me to cheer up and to keep up the good work in Korea.

Clara established a network of friends at SNU and also maintained connections with her transnational peers, coordinating reunions of SMCS students in and around Seoul for dinners to reminisce and provide support. She described the challenge of having friends who did not share her transnational schooling experience and how difficult she found it, at times, to explain her experience of living and going to school in the Dominican Republic.

My friends here say they understand about living in another country but I don't think they really care much about it. Korean students who have lived their whole life in Korea are very competitive and selfish in some ways. When there is a chance of winning in a contest or any other things, they always say that they have not prepared much or that they are not good at something. However, in actual performance, they show that they have practiced and prepared beforehand. They are eager to win. On the other hand, from what I have seen in my friends who have lived in the DR and in other countries, they are supportive and care about each other. My friends here don't understand all my good memories from SMCS the teachers, my friends, the after school activities, sports, fair day, drama, the community. There are things that a Korean student will never imagine or understand. They would ask me, "How could you hang out with teachers?" I would tell them, "Why not? Teachers are great friends too!" But that idea is hard for them to understand.

When I asked her about where she sees herself living in her adult-life, Clara said:

I am planning on getting my master's degree in Korea. After that I would like to work in the hospital or pharmaceutical company. However, if I get the opportunity I would like to challenge myself to study medicine and to become a doctor...until I have kids I want to live in Korea. After I get married and have kids, I want to live abroad for my kids.

Clara's experience also contrasts with the typical South Korean transnational narrative Clara's entire school experience prior to university happened in the Dominican Republic and despite the challenge as a preschooler feeling like an outsider among her Dominican peers, she describes herself now as being more Dominican than Korean. Clara's family moved to the Dominican Republic for her father's job in order to secure social mobility upon the return to South Korea, but nearly twenty years later, the family remains in the Dominican Republic. Clara also plans for a future transnational life following her university graduation and hopes her children experience life outside South Korea.

Discussion

Unlike the transnational narratives of Korean families in pursuit of experiences that enable their children to acquire English, these cases illuminate the narrative of transnational students whose move was primarily motivated by family social mobility and was more permanent, in the case of Clara's family. While it turned out that these students did gain access to English language instruction as a result of their families moves to the Dominican Republic; their narratives are not represented among the transnational literature regarding South Korea, which *primarily* focuses on "Korean goose families," whose moves are temporary and motivated by access to English for children to acquire before returning to South Korea for exams that will determine students' future university placements.

Themes that emerge from these two South Korean transnational cases include strands evident elsewhere in the field. Both Eun Jung and Clara shared examples of not fitting completely in either place. Each struggled that in returning to Korea there was a level of 'missing' what they left

behind in the Dominican Republic and identify a different outlook on life they particularly missed from their Dominican life. Eun Jung described this as “a free and easy way of life,” and Clara described how challenging it was to adjust to the “speed” of life back in Korea, stating that, “your actions have to be in perfect condition while being very fast or efficient. It sometimes seems that we are robots.” Clara lamented, “The D.R. and Korea are two very different countries so it was hard to adjust. I still get homesick.” Smith (1994) describes the transnational experience as, “[t]his multiple-conception of home or of being ‘neither here nor there’ (p. 17), which has a place in the literature as a third-culture transnational construct or *ethnoscape* (Appadurai, 1996).

Eung Jung and Clara described their struggle to fit in with peers on either side of their transnational divide. Within their experiences at SMCS, Clara and Eun Jung maintained connections with South Korean peers as well as developing friendships with Dominican classmates. Clara, as the Korean student who had spent the most time at SMCS, became a mentor in the Korean community at school. She assumed this role after she returned to South Korea as she welcomed other SMCS students upon their return, organizing reunions among the group spread out in various universities in and around Seoul. Clara remembered not fitting in among Dominican peers because of her language and expressed frustrations when her Korean-identity was overlooked as peers identified her as ‘Chinese.’ She stated that she was relieved when her peers at SMCS began calling her by her name, which is interesting, in that her peers were not using her given Korean name (Chung Cha), but calling her Clara, the name her parents had selected for her when they enrolled her at SMCS as a preschooler and not the name that she uses now that she has returned to South Korea. In her first two years in the Dominican Republic, Eung Jung found refuge in the small South Korean community at SMCS, but by her senior year she said, “I hung out with my Dominican friends a lot.” Following graduation and returning to South Korea with her family, Eung Jung shared that the first year back in South Korea she was “very lonely” for her Dominican friends. While there is an extensive literature around the negotiation of place among transnational youth (Coll & Marks, 2009; Olson, 2008; Pollock & Van Reken, 1999), literature around broader transnational movement beyond the short-term ‘wild goose’ families of South Korea is sparse.

For these two case-study participants, the experience of an alternate, long-term transnational narrative motivated primarily by family social

mobility made feeling at home upon their return to South Korea challenging. Both Eun Jung and Clara struggled to navigate social and cultural norms among their peers, particularly in adapting to the “senior-junior relationship,” where a younger Korean shows respect in language and obedience to elder Koreans (Lim & Giles, 2007). Both described how they missed having close relationships with older peers and teachers, which is typical in the Dominican Republic and difficult to negotiate back in South Korea. “It was hard to adapt to this culture in Korea when I returned because Dominicans do not care about the senior-junior relationship. If they are close in age it doesn’t matter, they can be friends. Koreans just can’t see treating your seniors (elders) as friends,” Eun Jung explained. While Eun Jung in particular described struggling with her Korean academic language upon return because she had studied in English throughout her entire secondary school experience, this need for support from peers became a bridge to developing friendships back in Korea when classmates “helped me when I didn’t know Korean or Korean history or politics.” Eun Jung was able to return this favor of help when it came to her English, because, “I already studied at a higher level in English at SMCS. When Clara, who most overtly described herself, “as a Dominican more than a Korean,” graduated from SMCS she was anxious to experience life in Korea but nervous to learn how to negotiate a place where she didn’t really remember. She felt different than her new classmates at university where, “there are things that a Korean student will never imagine or understand.” Her years in the Dominican Republic, Clara, explained, meant that, “Music and dancing is a part of my everyday life, thinking positively and not worrying about every single thing in life—these are aspects that make me different than most Koreans.”

Eun Jung and Clara constructed a cosmopolitan transnational identity resulting (Collins, 2009; Park & Abelmann, 2004; Turner, 2002). While their case share much in common with cases in the broader transnational literature (Coll & Marks, 2009; Levitt, 2001; Olson, 1998) their narratives contrast with much of the extant literature focused on South Korean families whose migration has been primarily motivated by giving children access to English. While the participants did acquire English and Spanish proficiency while living the Dominican Republic, this was an added benefit above and beyond the primary purpose of their move, which was greater social mobility resulting from career opportunities available through moving to the Dominican Republic. For Eun Jung’s family the did not work out

how the family had planned and they had to “start at the bottom,” when they returned to South Korea. Eun Jung acknowledged that the opportunity she had to study both English and Spanish provided her with opportunities that did include access to a national university upon her return.

While this study illuminates the presence of a transnational student experience not currently represented among the literature regarding South Korea it is limited by its participant pool. More research should be conducted to examine how a prolonged transnational experience motivated by social mobility contributes to the development of a cosmopolitan transnational identity that Beck (2002) would describe as ‘rooted cosmopolitanism,’ enabling participants engaging in transnationalism to have both “roots and wings at the same time,” to have identities that “are ethically and culturally *simultaneously* global and local” (pp. 19, 36) rather than a short-term transnational experience motivated by access to English. Future work could also examine multi-generational transnational families as both Eun Jung and Clara use similar language when they describe desiring a future transnational reality for their children. Despite the acknowledged challenges transnational life, including a complicated sense of home and homesickness, and the personal challenges of being an outsider in either nation, both participants desire their future children to share their transnational identity and experience. Recently, Clara’s Facebook status popped up in my newsfeed. It simply read, “I miss DR.” The first comment in response was from one of Clara’s Dominican classmates, “And I miss you.” Cases like Clara’s and Eun Jung’s serve as a reminder to broaden the scope of inquiry in order to truly understand the nuances and complexities inherent in the transnational experience and identify.

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