

Communication Experiences of North Korean Defectors in Los Angeles: An Exploratory Interview Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

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Abstract

The present study is to explore the communication and adjustment experiences of North Korean defectors in the U.S. Based on Y.Y. Kim's integrative cross-cultural adaptation theory (2001), we examine communication-related difficulties, interpersonal networks, and overall psychological health vis-à-vis an unfamiliar host environment. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with four North Korean defectors who lived in South Korea and now living in L.A. in April and May, 2014. The results show that the North Korean defectors faced difficulties and challenges such as language distance, different cultural norms, and discrimination in their adjustment to the South Korean immigrant community in L.A. In addition, their interaction patterns show two different types of relationships including networks with South Korean immigrants and networks with North Korean defectors. The present study confirms that language competence of North Koreans was an important factor in determining their comfort level in the U.S.

Key words: North Korean defectors, Host communication competence, Host intercultural communication, Psychological health, Cross-cultural adaptation

1. Introduction

Recently, an increasing number of North Korean defectors have been defecting overseas. The 2010 Global Report of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported "917 North Koreans became defectors in a foreign country in 2010, and 277 applied for asylum" (N. Korean refugees increase, 2011). The countries include South Korea, UK, US, China, and other Asian countries. For North Koreans defecting from a politically closed communist country, resettling in a new, unfamiliar environment was not as easy as it seems.

Under this circumstance, the study of North Korean defectors has increasingly gained scholarly attention. Broadly, the studies of North Korean defectors have been conducted in two categories: the studies of North Korean defectors in China and the studies of North Korean defectors in South Korea. Regarding North Koreans in China, the studies have examined their unprotected status due to China's inhumane policy of repatriation and have urged the international community to give attention to securing protection for North Korean defectors (Cohen, 2012; Kim, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Lefkowitz, 2012). Other such studies analyzed the situations of North Korean defector women, who reportedly represent over 70% of North Korean defectors in China, and children, most of whom are orphans (Chung, 2003; Lee, 2010).

Concerning the North Koreans in South Korea, most of the studies have dealt with the challenges they faced in their adjustment to South Korean society, including prejudice, hardships, and maladjustment (Hegarty, 2013; Jeon, 2000; Lankov, 2006; McCurry, 2010; Yoon, 2001). These studies define the adjustment of North Korean defectors in South Korea as a process of cross-cultural adaptation. With the same ethnicity and common language, it has been assumed that North Korean defectors are more likely to adjust to South Korean society successfully. However, the above studies show North Koreans experienced great difficulties and challenges. Those who had difficulty adjusting to South Korean society sometimes chose the U.S. as their second place of resettlement. Just as they had in South Korea, these defectors continued to face the task of cross cultural adaptation in resettling to an unfamiliar environment in the U.S.

Although many studies have focused on the social adjustment of North Korean defectors in South Korea, the same line of study of North Koreans in the U.S. is relatively rare.

Thus, the purpose of the present study is to explore the cultural adjustment experiences of North Korean defectors in the U.S. Based on Y.Y. Kim's integrative cross-cultural adaptation theory (2001), the present study examines how their host communication competence and host interpersonal communication are related to their overall psychological well-being *vis-à-vis* their host cultural milieu. Examination was done through three research questions: 1) What kinds of communication- related difficulties do North Korean defectors face in L.A.? 2) What kinds of contacts and communication activities do North Korean defectors have with people in L.A.? 3) What is the overall feeling and life experience of North Korean defectors in L.A.'s cultural milieu?

In conducting the present study, we have hypothesized that most North Koreans in the U.S. rarely interact with Americans and American society at large due to their limited language capability. They usually begin their lives in L.A. with limited and exclusive interactions with South Korean immigrants in the Korean ethnic community. Just as the former studies posed South Korean society as a host environment in adjustment, the South Korean Immigrant Community in the U.S. plays an assumed role as an immediate milieu that North Koreans should deal with. Thus, the authors have treated the South Korean immigrant community in L.A. as another host cultural environment within L.A. in the U.S.

2. Background

Korea has been divided into the North and the South for almost 60 years since the 1950 Korean War. South Korea has developed its economy under a free-market system along with other capitalistic countries, while North Korea has developed a state-dominated financial system with other communist countries. Beginning from 1980, the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries espousing communism gave up their state-run economic systems and began adopting a capitalistic free market system to boost their economies. However, the North Korean government, that Kim's family had been running, resisted reform, in spite of the failure of its state-run economy, in order to pass on power to its immediate heirs (Lankov, 2008). In the mid-1990s, because of the collapse of the social system and the failure of the economy, North Koreans suffered from a series of natural calamities like disastrous flooding and drought, which brought severe famine (Goodkind, 2001). It was reported that over 2.5 million people out of the total population of 22 million died during the famine (O'Neill, 2009).

In order to escape such miserable living conditions, an increasing number of North Koreans have been fleeing into South Korea despite the risk of death such flights entail. En route to South Korea after their escape, most people would not try to pass through the DMZ (*Demilitarized Zone*) in the South Korean border. To do so would be almost suicidal with the armed military presence, land mines, and electric wires across the areas (Lankov, 2006). Instead, they pass through China, which has left many North Korean defectors in China.

2.1 North Koreans in South Korea

According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, a total of 26,483 North Koreans are living in South Korea. 7,949 of them (30.4%) are males and 18,175 of them (69.6%) are females (Ministry of Unification, 2014). Upon their arrival in the South, the South Korean government provides orientation which begins with evaluating their backgrounds and security risks. After that, North Korean defectors are taken to "*Hanawon*," a government facility, for a 12 week education. The education program includes basic vocational training, lectures about Korean history and democracy, and the market economy. In addition, they receive psychological counseling, career-aptitude testing, and health check-ups (Cho & Kim, 2011).

For North Koreans living in South Korea, we have traditionally assumed that North Koreans tend to adjust to South Korean society smoothly because of shared ethnicity and language.

In spite of one survey revealing that most North Korean defectors mostly were satisfied in South Korea (Kwaak, 2014), many North Koreans reported problems adapting to South Korean society because of life style differences, linguistic differences, and the generally unfamiliar social environment of South Korea, which posed a great challenge and a serious culture shock to them. This is particularly true among young North Koreans who were used to a closed, communist society (e.g., Fackler, 2012; Sung & Go, 2014). Studies confirm that North Korean defectors have indeed experienced great challenges such as a language barrier, discrimination and alienation (Lankov, 2006), problems with family relationships, financial management (Chung & Seo, 2007), and dealing with the culture of a competitive, materialistic, and capitalist society (Caprara, 2015; Chung, 2008). In particular, young North Koreans in South Korea faced challenges including gaps in physical health, socio economic status, and psychological health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in school and workplaces (Sung & Go, 2014),

Under such circumstances, some North Koreans even wanted to go back to the North because of stress and a failure to integrate into South Korean society (e.g., Strother, 2013; Taylor, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Williamson, 2014). According to defector support organizations, a considerable number of North Korean defectors have applied for asylum in the U.S., U.K. and elsewhere because they failed to adapt to life in South Korea (N. Korean Defectors Fail, 2011). They believe that it will be easier to start over there—language barrier and all—than to manage the entire business of being Korean in an entirely different way (Faith, 2014).

2.2 North Koreans in the U.S.

Since the first group of nine North Koreans entered the U.S. in 2006, 171 others have entered the U.S. as refugees (Lee, 2014). These groups had not lived in South Korea. There are generally three kinds of North-Koreans entering the United States: legal refugees, those who are waiting after requesting asylum, and those who enter illegally. Legal refugees enter the United States through UNHCR (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees) or the US Embassy in China or Laos. This status is given after around one year of evaluation.

According to the Department of State, there are 163 North Korean defectors who received legal refugee status after the North Korean Human Rights Act was approved in 2004. This number refers only to those who escaped from North Korea and had their refugee request approved in a third country. If it included those who are waiting after requesting asylum and illegal residents, who entered the country illegally through Canada or Mexico after their settlement failure in South Korea, the number of North Koreans considered refugees in the United States would increase (Kim, 2014).

North Koreans who received legal refugee status in the U.S. receive case money for settlement, health insurance, and food stamps from their respective state government for several months. They are offered English education and jobs. After living about a year in the U.S., the refugees are granted permanent residency. Then, they are eligible to apply for citizenship after five years living in the U.S. (Lee, 2014). However, the adjustment of North Korean defectors moving from South Korea to the U.S. has become an increasing area of concern.

3. Integrative Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory

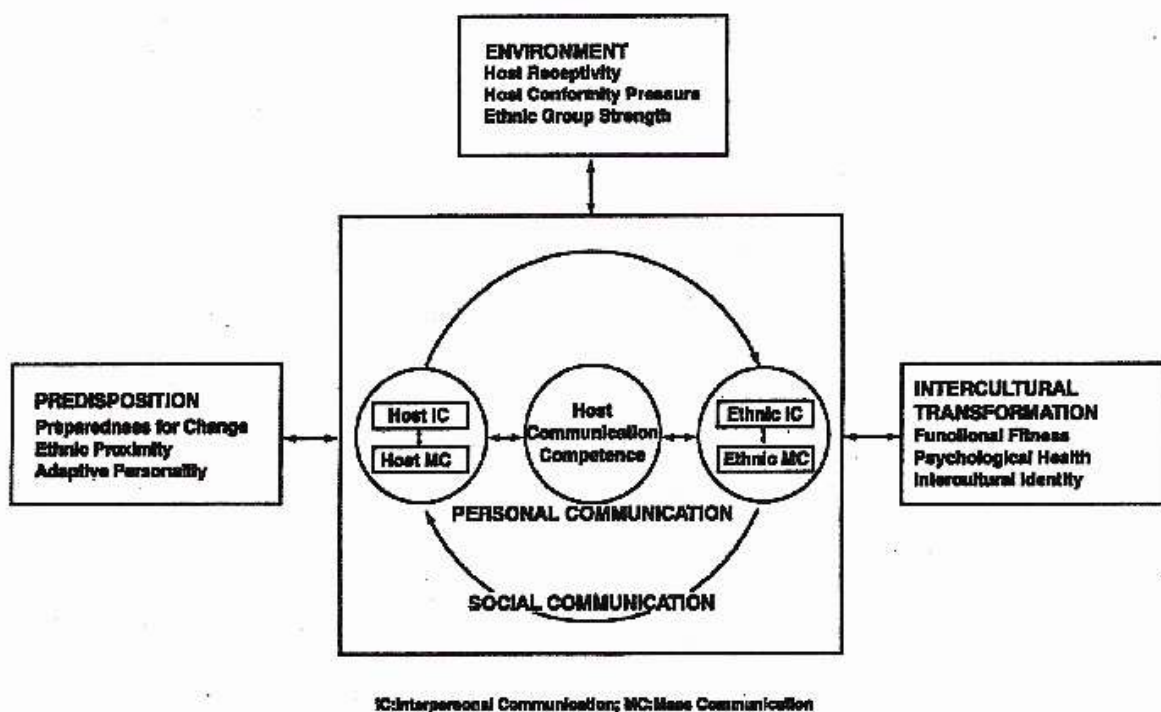
The current investigation is guided by Y.Y. Kim's (2001) integrative cross-cultural adaptation theory. As a culture general theory, Kim's theory conceptualizes an adaptation as a dynamic interplay of the person and the environment. The theory provides the basic theoretical ground for studying the interrelationship between communication competence and the psychological health of North Korean defectors *vis-à-vis* the South Korean immigrant socio-cultural environment in L.A. According to Kim (2001), "[H]umans have an innate self-organizing drive and a capacity to adapt themselves to environmental challenges" (2001, p. 35). Secondly, the "adaptation of an individual in a given cultural environment occurs in and through communication" (p. 36). Finally, "adaptation is a complex and a dynamic process that brings about a qualitative transformation of the individual" (p. 37). In other words, in a culturally new and unfamiliar environment, human beings have the natural tendency to adapt because "adaptation is fundamental to human existence" (2001, p. 45). The process of adaptation takes place through engaging in continual communication wherein one receives and responds to information, that is, one gets information and responds to information and eventually the result of the adaptation is a qualitative transformation that is represented as "growing," "maturing," becoming "refined," and "revised."

Also, Kim presents a structure of cross-cultural adaptation by using the concept of key dimensions and factors that influence the process (Figure1).

Kim starts with the dimension of personal communication, or host communication competence (Dimension 1), which refers to the cognitive, affective, and operational ability to communicate according to the host communication system. The dimension of personal communication serves as the core factor in the process of cross-cultural adaptation of newcomers.

Next, host social communication activities, which are inevitably linked to host communication competence, provide a tool to participate in interpersonal and mass communication in the host environment (Dimension 2). Ethnic social communication (Dimension 3) refers to the newcomers' interpersonal communication activities with fellow co-ethnics and the newcomers' mass communication activities with their own culture. The host environment provides the conditions for the personal and social (host, ethnic) communication activities (Dimension 4). The individual predisposition (Dimension 5), which influences the consequent development in personal and social communication, is the concept that includes the preparedness for a new culture and the adaptive personality attributes like openness and positivity. Finally, the above mentioned factors directly or indirectly explain and predict the various rates and levels of intercultural transformation (Dimension 6) (Kim, 2001).

Figure1. Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A Structural Model



To explore communication experience and cross-cultural adjustment based on the above theory, the following three research questions are posed:

RQ1: With regard to the dimension of host communication competence, what kinds of communication-related difficulties do North Korean defectors face in L.A.?

RQ2: With regard to the dimension of host interpersonal communication, what kinds of contacts and communication activities do North Korean defectors have with people in L.A.?

RQ3: With regard to the psychological health, what are the overall feelings and life experiences of North Korean defectors in their host cultural milieu, South Korean immigrant community in L.A.?

4. Methods

The present study is based on an analysis of in-depth personal interviews with four North Korean defectors in L.A., California between April and May 2014.

4.1 Participants

The participants were North Korean defectors living in the area of L.A. who had gone to South Korea after passing through China. Most of them are not legal defectors yet; they are awaiting approval of their asylum request. The interviewees included three males and a female. The average age was 42.75, the average length of stay in the States was 6.25 years, and the average length of their stays in South Korea was 8.5 years.

The interviewees were selected based on the convenience sampling method because of the difficulty in securing North Korean refugee samples as they were unwilling to disclose their lives to others. There were about 100 North Korean defectors in Los Angeles (Kim, 2013). To recruit participants, the first author contacted the leader of a church where North Korean defectors attended, asking him to encourage North Korean defectors to participate in the present study. Out of 7 North Koreans attending the church, 4 North Koreans agreed to participate in the interview.

4.1.1 Profiles of Interviewees

Interviewee #1 (hereinafter called Kim for an alias): Male, 48 years old. He has lived for 11 years in the U.S. after 4 years in South Korea and 1 year in China. The main reason for leaving North Korea was the forcefulness of the communist system that makes even sick people go to work, and a longing for freedom. He was going to the U.S. but it was not easy. So, he first went to South Korea, then came to the U.S. according to his original plan. He works at his wife's massage shop, and lives with his son and daughter. He is the only person whose asylum request has been approved.

Interviewee #2 (hereinafter called Park for an alias): Male, 38 years old. He has lived in the U.S. for 1 year after 11 years in South Korea and 2 years in China. He left North Korea due to economic hardships and to search for freedom. He decided to leave South Korea, moving to the States, because his pride was hurt by the continuous surveillance of the government intelligence agency, wiretapping, discrimination and disregard. Adaptation into South Korean society was complicated because South Koreans seemed to be irrational and have no humanity or loyalty. He chose to come to the US for his children's better education. He is studying English after applying for asylum seeker status. He lives with his wife and two daughters in L.A.

Interviewee #3 (hereinafter called Yoo-Jin for an alias): Male, 51 years old. He has lived in the U.S. for 12 years after 9 years in South Korea. He left North Korea in 1993 as a government agent to promote foreign currency earning in Russia. He got shocked during the year he stayed there. He felt deceived by the North Korean government and felt repulsion against it because the reality of the outside world was totally different from what he had heard and learned in his country. He became skeptical of the North Korean system and more positive toward South Korea. He discovered he could come to South Korea while counting on South Koreans' help for North Korean defectors. He came to the U.S. when Kim, Dae-Jung, an ex-president of South Korea, started the so-called "Sunshine Policies" as part of an overall amicable policy toward North Korea, although it created an unstable situation for defectors from North Korea which actually led its defectors into a cold and unstable situation. He came to the U.S. seeking a more stable livelihood. He runs a restaurant with his wife and is waiting for approval of his asylum in L.A.

Interviewee #4 (Hereinafter called Young as an alias): Female, 34 years old. She has lived in the U.S. for 1 year after 10 years in South Korea and 2 years in China. She left North Korea in 2000 due to economic hardships. Her original plan was to return after earning some money. But she saw China was very different under the same communist government, offering more freedom and a financial surplus. She didn't want to go back, so she stayed in China. The problem was that she was illegal in China, as a North Korean defector, and needed to hide herself. She decided to go to South Korea, where she met and married her husband. She came to the US with her husband. For her, life in South Korea was comfortable and good.

4.2 The Interview Procedures

The interview was conducted by the first author in Korean, based on a Korean version of the interview questionnaire. The first author conducted this interview because she fully understands the nature of research. As she had attended the same church, she was familiar with North Koreans there, and it was easier for her to solicit candid accounts of their experiences in the U.S. The interview took place at a church in L.A. Conducted in the Korean language, the interviews lasted 1 or 2 hours. The interviews were not audiotaped because none of the interviewees felt comfortable with being recorded. Instead, the interviewer took detailed notes of interviewees' verbal responses. The interview began with casual conversation and moved on to main questions.

Interview questions were adopted from Y.S. Kim's (2007) interview study of Korean Expatriates in the U.S. and modified to fit into the North Korean defectors' context. Interview questions were originally written in English. Based on Brislin's (1980) suggestion, the interview questions were then translated into Korean and the Korean version was back-translated into English by a bilingual Korean.

Among the topics covered in the interview, along with background information, open-ended interview questions dealt with the main research topics: communication ability and communication-related difficulties with local people ("host communication competence"), experiences of interacting with local people ("host interpersonal communication"), and overall feelings and positive/unpleasant life experiences in the host cultural milieu ("psychological health").

Regarding host communication competence, questions included different communication styles the interviewees found between communicating with North Koreans and communicating with South Korean immigrants in L.A.: "It is likely that you have opportunities to interact with South Korean immigrants in L.A. Do you find any differences between communicating with North Koreans and communicating with South Korean immigrants?" The question also dealt with communication-related difficulties they experienced when interacting with South Korean immigrants: "Have you ever experienced difficulties in communicating with South Korean immigrants?" Based on the responses, follow-up questions were used to elicit specific incidents and typical experiences illustrating these differences and difficulties, along with coping strategies used to deal with these difficulties.

With regard to host interpersonal communication, one question was asked to discover the amount of daily interaction with South Korean immigrants as local people (i.e., host nationals): "Of all your daily conversations, approximately what percentage of them do you have with South Korean immigrants?" Another question asked what percentages of close friends are between South Korean immigrants and fellow North Koreans in L.A.

Concerning psychological health, the interviewees were asked to describe their positive and/or unpleasant life experiences while living in L.A.: "What are some of the positive/unpleasant experiences you have had while living in L.A. so far?" In addition, questions probed general feelings about their life in L.A.: "Overall, how are you feeling about your present life here as regards your life experiences interacting with South Korean immigrants in L.A.?"

5. Results

Interview data were analyzed based on the qualitative verbal responses which were relevant to the interviewees' personal adaptation experiences in L.A. The interviewees' comments and testimonials in responses to the interview questions serve as the basis for addressing the three research questions posed above: 1) to identify the communication related difficulties that North Korean defectors experience in relating to South Korean immigrants in L.A.; 2) to investigate the kinds of contacts and communication activities that North Korean defectors have; 3) to identify the overall feelings that North Korean defectors have about their life in L.A.

In analyzing the interview data, after reading the interview note numerous times, we grouped verbatim data into common categories based on emerging themes of communication difficulty, interpersonal communication, and overall feelings and life experiences in the U.S. When there was disagreement about categories of themes between the two investigators, we discussed that area and finalized the themes.

5.1 Communication-related Difficulties

5.1.1 Language Distance

Regarding communication difficulty, they wanted to share their life experiences in South Korea parallel to their life in Los Angeles in the U.S. Most of them had lived in South Korea for several years before they came to the U.S. They reported their frustration with communication difficulty because of language distance between North Korean and South Korean.

Yoo-Jin first reported his experience in communicating with South Koreans while he was in South Korea:

I felt like I came to a foreign country when I was in South Korea. Especially I could not understand what people [South Koreans] were saying. For example, they were referring to "card" and I didn't know what "card" meant. They were using lots of foreign words and they even used slangs that could only be understood among the same age group or the same social group.

He continued to mention that with the lack of understanding of the meaning of these words, he could not dare to talk easily with South Koreans.

The “card” the interviewee refers to means credit card. The credit card is just one example of a foreign term South Koreans use without translating it into Korean. For the currently used Korean in South Korea, some of the terms and jargons have been adopted from foreign language or simply used just as they are. While Korean language in South Korea has been influenced by foreign languages, Korean language in North Korea has not been influenced by foreign languages because of their political system that isolates the country from outside influence.

Park also shared the communication difficulty because of different meanings assigned to the same words:

I went to a restaurant in South Korea, called “seagull restaurant” [*gal-me-gi-sal-sik-dang* in Korean] so I thought that they may sell seagull meat. But, later, I could see that “seagull” was a certain pork part. We don’t have that kind of expression in North Korea. I had many experiences like that.

After sharing their experience in South Korea, they reported the same language problems when they interacted with South Korean immigrants in L.A. This difficulty was due to their North Korean accent when speaking with South Koreans. The different accent engendered alienation from South Korean immigrants in L.A.

Yoo-Jin, who came to the US in early 2000 after requesting refugee status, said:

When I first arrived in L.A., everybody asked where I was from because of my different accent [North Korean accent]. When I said where I came from, they could not believe it. It does not mean that they gave me special attention, but instead they did not show any interest in having a relationship with me. I thought that I might as well be living in North Korea, alienated as I was in L.A.

However, **Young**, who came to L.A. recently, reported her experience differently:

It was uncomfortable in South Korea when they asked me where I came from when they noticed my [North Korean] accent, and whenever I answered I was North Korean, they asked me what I used to eat in North Korea. But, here in L.A., I do not think they treat us differently as South Koreans did in South Korea. When I greeted a new neighbor [South Korean immigrant] who recently moved near to my house, they didn’t express any surprise even though I said where I came from. But I don’t know how to interpret it. Does this mean they show disinterest toward me or they fully accept me just like a compatriot?

Park shared his friend’s case of unfair treatment due to a North Korean accent:

For sure, there are bad experiences, too. One of my friends from North Korea needed to rent a room but the landlord (South Korean immigrant) didn’t want to rent it after hearing his accent. Probably he was afraid that my friend would not pay the rent. Only reason was that my friend was from North Korea.

5.1.2 Different cultural norm

Along with the language distance, one interviewee mentioned a different social and cultural norm between North Koreans and South Koreans in L.A., posing a culture shock and a barrier to developing interpersonal relationships.

Yoo-Jin mentioned cultural differences regarding seniority in interpersonal relationships between North Korean and South Korean immigrant communities:

In North Korea, we are friends even though there are 3-4 years of age difference. But, in South Korea and in L.A., we need to give respect strictly even to somebody 1 year older than me, and if I don’t do that, they cut the relationship.

5.2 Interpersonal communication contacts and communication activities

Regarding the question about their interpersonal relationships and social activities in L.A., all the interviewees responded that they don’t have any interpersonal relationships with Americans because of their lack of English language proficiency. The interviewees explained that they usually maintain two different types of relationships in L.A. Some have more relationships with South Korean immigrants than with fellow North Korean defectors. Others prefer to have closer relationships with other North Korean defectors than with South Koreans in L.A.

Kim shared his positive experience of having more relationships with South Korean immigrants in L.A.:

It is easier to have South Korean friends since we shared the same way of thinking. In addition, I had a life experience in South Korea for 10 years. Presently, more than 50% of the people I have met here are South Koreans. In the case of North Korean defectors, they don’t open to each other and they exercise vigilance. Probably they don’t like to expose their past wounds, and they are very sensitive about being reminded of their past.

On the other hand, **Yoo-Jin** reported the deeper personal relationships with other North Korean defectors because of his frustration with South Korean immigrants’ attitude, saying:

Around 70-80% of the people I have met here are South Korean immigrants. [but] We have different life values. Sometimes, they usually talk about who they were and what they did in South Korea to show off to others. It is a lot easier and more comfortable for me to develop deeper friendships with other North Korean defectors based on the sense of kinship. Whenever I talked about my personal troubles with South Korean immigrants, they seemed to care about me, but ended up hurting my pride in many cases. Because they consider North Korean defectors inferior, they always try to teach us.

5.3 Psychological health

Regarding overall feelings about their life in L.A., interviewees provided their impression of America when they first came to L.A. and their life experience. Because of their language barrier (i.e., English), it seemed that North Koreans were rarely connected to American society at large. Their life was totally related to the South Korean sub-culture in L.A.

Young said:

I got so surprised when arrived in L.A. town. I felt like I had come to North Korea again since the buildings and people looked very poor. But it is comfortable to be here too. The reason is they don't show special attention or treat North Koreans differently. I feel sorry for not having the opportunity to learn English because all communications are done in Korean. That's why we continue living in Korea Town, because the communication will be very difficult out of the community.

Kim said:

When I was in [South] Korea, I thought the U.S. would be very fancy. But L.A. is not what I thought. I rarely think I'm in the States because there are so many South Koreans here. But I face language barriers (i.e., English) whenever I need to solve my kids' educational matters or negotiate civil services.

Park also shared the positive aspect of his life in L.A.:

When I arrived in L.A., I thought it was worse than the countryside of South Korea. But I'm learning how to adjust successfully to an unfamiliar environment. People here in the Korean community helped me a lot to settle down. One of the good things is that people accept diversity and don't treat us differently because everyone is an immigrant. And people are not too sensitive to fashion or trends. In South Korea, everybody needs to follow the trends and if you don't do it, you feel left behind. I feel comfortable in my life here in L.A. because I do not need to be sensitive to follow the trends here.

At the same time, interviewees also reported unpleasant and stressful life experience while living in L.A.:

Yoo-Jin talked about his stress living in L.A.:

I chose L.A. because of English language problems. I could speak the Korean language to carry out my daily life. In the beginning, South Korean immigrants despised and made light of us for being North Korean. Only because we didn't have enough food and we were not living well in North Korea. I got very stressed whenever they asked about my hometown, my age and my family members.

Park commented:

We don't come from a different planet. We were just isolated from the rest. I wish they [South Korean immigrants] would treat us equally, and as of the same nationality.

Compared to their life in North Korea, they had acculturative stress due to the nature of a capitalistic society while they were trying to adjust to a capitalistic societal system in L.A.

Kim provided his thought:

As it is comfortable and free in the U.S., on the other hand, there is stress. People say we become unsmiling after getting out of North Korea. Probably it is because of stress from living in the U.S. or South Korea. Even though I make money here [L.A.], I spend the money making payments. It is not easy to adjust myself to this capitalistic society. There is no word like stress in North Korea because there is no competition there. In a way, life in North Korea had more fun. I would want to live in North Korea if I have freedom there because there is no stress.

Regarding his life, **Yoo-Jin** shared his thoughts about reunification of Korea and his strong desire to reclaim his identity as a North Korean even though he has lived in South Korea and the U.S. for a long time:

I desire unification. But North Korea will not be changed. I mean that even the people over there also will not be changed. As I have experience of immigration, I think there will be many problems with South and North Koreans living together.

In my case, I've lived for more than 20 years in South Korea and the U.S. after defecting from North Korea. But I cannot become a South Korean. But I consider myself as North Korean. I don't think I will be a South Korean even after a long time. It should be the same to South Koreans. A North Korean is a North Korean and a South Korean is a South Korean. So there is a long way to go for South and North Korea to be reunited and live together.

6. Discussion

The purpose of the present analysis was to explore North Korean defectors' adjustment in the U.S. Y.Y. Kim's (2001) Integrated Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory has served as the basis of examining how their communication experiences are related to their psychological well-being *vis-à-vis* their host cultural milieu.

Results of the study showed that there are unique features about North Korean defectors' adaptation in the U.S. Although North Koreans come to the U.S., they rarely have contact with Americans and American society at large because of their lack of English competence. For the interviewees who had lived in South Korea before they came to the U.S., they are allowed to decide to stay in L.A. because there is a large South Korean immigrant community where they are able to carry out their daily lives, speaking the Korean language. Their settlement in the L.A. community helps alleviate any culture shock from dealing with American society. They, however, still have to deal with challenges in their adaptation to the South Korean sub-culture in L.A., just as they would in South Korea. As with American society as a larger host environment, the South-Korean immigrant community in L.A. plays the role of another host cultural milieu.

The interviewees revealed the problems and difficulties they experienced in South Korea such as language distance, different cultural norms, and perceived prejudice based on their North Korean accent. They complained that all these issues kept them from being blended into South Korean society. Although it seemed that their prior experience in South Korea might help them a little to deal with South Korean subculture in L.A., North Koreans showed mixed reactions. Some still felt they were being treated differently because of their different accent, just as they had been in South Korea. Others, at least, didn't feel the same feelings as they had in South Korea even though those in L.A. seemed indifferent to them.

Along with the language distance issue, North Koreans reported different cultural norms about seniority in social relationships. Sometimes, just as it happened in South Korea, not complying with this norm might cost the personal relationships with South Korean immigrants in the L.A. community. That was a culture shock to North Koreans.

In spite of challenges they faced in L.A., North Koreans indicated that they were having less difficulty in L.A. than in South Korea. This could be explained through their prior cultural and linguistic experience in South Korea. In addition, the South Korean immigrant community in L.A. probably offers the relatively less tough environment to North Korean defectors.

In addition, interviewees showed different preferences for their personal networks patterns in their life in L.A. Some had closer relationships with South Korean immigrants in L.A. because it was difficult for them to have open, honest and committed relationships with other North Korean defectors. Others, however, preferred closer relationships with other North Korean defectors than with South Korean immigrants, because they had unpleasant experiences dealing with their superior or condescending attitude. None of them had interpersonal communication contacts with Americans because of their lack of language competence (i.e., English); that is, they were totally disconnected from the larger host environment—American society—because of the language barrier.

Given that the South Korean immigrant community could be regarded as another host cultural milieu, to North Korean defectors, the relationship with South Korean immigrants might be counted as an interpersonal relationship with host nationals. North Korean defectors' adaptation in the U.S. could be mostly limited to the South Korean immigrant community. Regarding their overall feeling about their life experience, almost all the interviewees generally reported that they felt more comfortable and positive about their life in L.A. than in South Korea.

Obviously, the South Korean immigrant community in the U.S. turned out to be a less daunting host environment than South Korea. This could be attributable to several factors. First, North Koreans draw less scrutiny as defectors in L.A. than they do in South Korea. Probably, unlike traditional South Korean society, the L.A. South Korean immigrant community offers a more diverse and resilient environment where even South Koreans in L.A. were deemed as immigrants within American society at large.

In this climate, North Koreans feel less pressure to conform to a certain trend than they did in a collectivistic, culturally homogenous South Korean society.

However, even though there is a lesser degree, they still commented on their frustration with bias and discrimination toward North Korean defectors in the South Korean immigrant community. For the interviewees, the most difficult challenge hindering their adjustment to both South Korean society and the Korean community in L.A. was being treated differently by other Koreans. One desired to be assimilated into the South Korean society and treated as a member of the same nation. At the same time, another desired a distinctive identity as a North Korean. Clearly, this contradictory response indicates that South Koreans and North Koreans have followed different paths over the last 60 years, developing different social and cultural norms in spite of a shared ethnic identity. In this context, even after reunification, the encounter between North and South and resettlement of North Korean defectors in South Korea or in the U.S. should be understood in terms of the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

Most North Korean refugee adjustment studies have been descriptive without offering theoretical accounts. Theoretically, this study explores North Korean defectors' lives and their adjustment experience in the L.A. community based on integrative cross-cultural adaptation theory. The results of this study illustrate that communication-related difficulty based on language distance and cultural difference might be a barrier to maintaining meaningful relationships with South Koreans (either in South Korea or among South Korean immigrants) and may pose a challenge to a smooth transition into South Korean society or South Korean immigrant communities in the U.S. Even though North Koreans have their own preferred relationship networks in L.A., open and positive relationships with South Korean immigrants in L.A. could be part of meaningful life experiences in their adjustment into the L.A. community in the U.S. Clearly, as Kim's theory predicted, adaptation occurs through communicative interaction *vis-à-vis* their host cultural milieu (e.g., the South Korean immigrant community in L.A.) and this study shows the centrality of communication in the process of adaptation for North Korean defectors.

Methodologically, the present study uses personal interviews to describe communication and life experiences of North Korean defectors in a South Korean immigrant subcultural milieu. This emic perspective of qualitative interview yields richer information about the reality North Koreans face in their cultural adjustment into a South Korean immigrant community in the U.S.

Practically, the present study provides insights into North Korean defectors' adaptation. Results reveal language distance and cultural difference as main sources of challenges for their resettlement. The South Korean government or South Korean immigrant community leaders should devise an intervention program that enhances host language competence—that is, learning South Korean language and familiarizing with social norms of South Korea. In addition, North Korean defectors mentioned prejudicial attitudes and discrimination by South Korean society and the South Korean immigrant community. A diversity training program could be offered to South Koreans to accommodate differences and reduce prejudice toward outsiders. This will help improve receptivity toward North Koreans in society after reunification. As cross-cultural adaptation is a long-term process, the intervention program should not be a one-shot approach, but rather it should be comprehensive and long enough to manage the progress of North Koreans.

We need to note one interviewee's claim of the strong North Korean identity. While he has spent a long time in South Korea, he identified himself as North Korean. We would suggest all adjustment or resettlement programs should aim at integration of North Koreans instead of assimilation into either South Korean society or a South Korean immigrant community.

We must acknowledge the difficulty of recruiting North Korean refugee samples because of their unwillingness to disclose themselves. With the small sample size of 4 interviewees, the present findings should be interpreted with caution. The present study was also limited to those who have the same life experience of having lived in South Korea before coming to the U.S. It is said that out of 100 North Korean defectors in L.A., some of them have already received refugee status; others have requested asylum, and some are students. For future studies, it would be more comprehensive to include people of different status, age (e.g., young North Koreans) and life experiences. While the present study aimed at the adjustment of North Koreans *vis-à-vis* a South Korean immigrant community, future studies and programs should be designed to help North Koreans adapt to American society at large as a larger host cultural milieu.

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