Chapter 7
Korean Students' Acculturation Experiences in the U.S.

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Abstract This chapter aims to explore the adjustment experiences of Korean undergraduates at an American university and to look at how the negotiation between homeland culture and host culture influences adjustment experiences. By challenging ideas of one-sided assimilation that assume international students simply accept the language, cultural norms, and practices of their host country, this chapter is grounded in the theoretical perspective that students and institutions interact with one another and therefore influence each other in a variety of ways. This chapter suggests that possessing a sense of self in cultural, social, and historical contexts and negotiating a positive sense of self in the host culture are critical aspects of Korean students' adjustment experiences when studying abroad. Korean students often struggle to navigate the academic systems of their host university, and these experiences are intensified by their perceptions of "not belonging" to the institution. Therefore, additional attention should be paid to providing adequate support services and programming to promote these students' acculturation experiences and college success.

Introduction

Spurred by the South Korean government's advocacy for globalization and emphasis on international competitiveness and preparation of global citizens, there has been a rapid growth in the number of Korean students studying in foreign countries since the late 1990s (Cho 2000). Although the numbers of Korean students going abroad have declined in recent years following a peak of 262,465 students in 2011 (Korean Ministry of Education 2013), South Korea still remains an important source of sending their students abroad (Korean Ministry of Education 2013). According to the Korean Educational Statistics Service (2014), approximately 227,126 Korean students studied abroad in 2013. Institutions of U.S. higher education are the most

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popular destination for academic pursuits among Korean students, accounting for 30.7% of the entire Korean student population studying overseas. Of the 72,295 Korean students enrolled in U.S. higher education in 2013, 38,245 were enrolled at the graduate level, and 21,254 at the undergraduate level, and 12,796 were taking language courses (Korean Ministry of Education 2014).

Adjustment issues and challenges encountered by international students[1] in the U.S. have been well documented. In a broad sense, "adjustment" refers to the challenges faced by international students in the academic and living environments, as well as the coping strategies used to deal with academic, cultural, psychological, and social stress (Baker and Siryk 1984; Bennett and Okinaka 1990; Chartrand 1992; Klein 1977; Smedley 1993). Numerous studies (e.g., Andrade 2006; Choi 2006; Lee and Carrasquillo 2006; Gong and Fan 2006; Dee and Henkin 1999; Hanassab 2006; Pedersen 1991; Poyrazli et al. 2002; Sato and Hodge 2009; Wang and Mallinckrodt 2006; Ye 2006) have suggested that linguistic, cultural, academic, and social differences may limit student involvement in campus life and constrain interactions with other students among international students. International students must adapt to the academic and social norms of the host country, while also dealing with additional challenges due to differences in culture, lack of language proficiency, prejudice, discrimination, and financial challenges (Barratt and Huba 1994; Charles and Stewart 1991; Hayes and Lin 1994; Poyrazli et al. 2002).

Representing more than 180 countries, the international student population in U.S. higher education constitutes a markedly heterogeneous group of students with respect to nationality; race/ethnicity; academic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds; and customs (Institute of International Education 2014). Despite marked differences and heterogeneity, many international students are regarded as a homogeneous group of high academic achievers from their country (Leong and Chou 1996), and they are expected to "adjust to a narrowly defined set of roles and behaviors" (Hanassab 2006, p. 158) in the American educational system and society. Moreover, negative stereotypes are often ascribed to international students, who are perceived as deficient and lacking English-language ability and familiarity with the American academic system (Leong and Chou 1996; Mestenhauser 1983; Pedersen 1991; Paige 1990; Spencer-Rodgers 2001). Departing from a "one-way fit" framework in which international students must be integrated into the academic and social life in the U.S., this study attempts to explore what institutions can do to foster international student success from the international students' own perspectives.

To date, most studies related to the experiences of Asian international students have focused primarily on Chinese and Taiwanese students (e.g., Dao et al. 2007; Kline and Liu 2005; Swagler and Ellis 2003; Wang and Mallinckrodt 2006; Wei et al. 2007; Ye 2006; Ying and Liese 1991, 1994; Ying 2005; Ying and Han 2006, 2008). Overall, Korean students' experiences have been overlooked in the U.S. Moreover, despite the significant proportion of students from Korea, previous research has often lumped Koreans and other Asian students together (e.g., Chen et al. 2002; Cross 1995; Li and Gasser 2005; Lin and Yi 1997; Nilsson et al. 2008; Oguri and Gudykunst

[1] International students and foreign students are used interchangeably in this chapter.

2002; Wei et al. 2008; Yang and Clum 1994; Ye 2005). According to the Institute of International Education (2014), Korea was ranked third in sending their students to the U.S. Given the national population of South Korea, the ratio of Korean students in U.S. higher education institutions is 19 times higher than the ratio of Indian students and 25 times higher than that of Chinese students. Despite the significantly higher proportion of Korean students seeking U.S. degrees and academic credentials, scholarship on the topic has been limited. Some relevant studies have focused on Korean international students' overall challenges to adjustment to college life (e.g., Dee and Henkin 1999), their academic adjustment and learning experiences (e.g., Jang et al. 2009; Lee and Carrasquillo 2006; Lee 2009), mental health issues (e.g., Lee et al. 2004), cultural adjustment experiences (e.g., Seo and Koro-Ljungberg 2005), motivation to study abroad (Kim 2011), and racial and gender discrimination (e.g., Green and Kim 2005). I argue that Korean students might face adjustment difficulties similar to other East Asian international students due in part to the shared cultural values such as collectivism. However, these problems should be framed within the specific situational and cultural contexts of Korean students, rather than treating them as part of an Asian international student monolith.

Although South Korea has experienced and sustained rapid economic growth and industrialization (influenced by a Confucian emphasis on cultural elitism and academic achievement), many Koreans have experienced conflict and confusion between Western and traditional Korean cultural values (Seo and Koro-Ljungberg 2005). For example, Korean adolescents form their own "in-group" mentality and use Korean culture as a frame of reference for cultural judgments and understandings rather than embracing other ethnically different groups (Levine and Campbell 1972; Seo and Koro-Ljungberg 2005).

Taken together, this chapter focuses on Korean undergraduate students' own perceptions and voices that represent unique adjustment experiences in an American university. Both undergraduate and graduate international students face common problems as they adapt to a new college environment, including academic pressures, loneliness, and problems with developing personal independence, financial problems, and health issues. However, international undergraduate students' adjustment experiences may differ from those of graduate students due in part to different program levels, academic requirements, lengths of stay, marital status, and post-college plans. Therefore, this chapter aims to explore the adjustment experiences of Korean undergraduate students at an American university and to look at how the negotiation between homeland culture and host culture influences adjustment experiences. To illustrate how complex and multifaceted the adjustment process can be from a Korean student's perspective, this chapter will begin with a brief introduction to Korean culture and values, as well as the development of Korean higher education and a growth of Korean students in the American educational system. Then, a review of literature on the adjustment of international students will be discussed, followed by the theoretical framework that guides this research inquiry. Based on in-depth interviews with eleven Korean students, this study uses a phenomenological qualitative methodology with particular attention to adaptation, academic and cultural adjustment, and the ways in which Korean college students socialize with their peers in America.

Background of Korean Culture and Context of Korean Higher Education

Korean society is philosophically deeply rooted in Confucian ideology, which values social harmony, family lineage, filial piety, loyalty, and deference to elders as its primary code of conduct (Seo and Koro-Ljungberg 2005). These are manifested in hierarchy of power, vertical social structure, and academic prestige. As the main philosophical underpinning for traditional Korean values, Confucianism has long been ingrained as a fundamental belief system which cultivates academic achievement and elitism (Lee 1999; Suh 2002); in other words, one's academic background in Korean society is one of the most important indicators when evaluating an individual's success and ability.

Korea is often cited as a successful case of fast economic growth and massive educational access (Kim 2002). After its liberation from the Japanese colonialism from 1910 to 1945, and the devastating Korean war from 1950 to 1953, the Korean government quickly adopted the American model for constructing its educational infrastructure (Kim 2002). Korean higher education has expanded significantly since the 1960s in conjunction with the progress of the country's industrialization movement. Enrollment in higher education grew from 100,000 in 1960 to 3.3 million students in 2014 (Korean Educational Statistics Service 2014). Markedly, Korea has one of the highest expansion rates of postsecondary education participation in newly industrialized countries and, worldwide, trails only the U.S. in proportional terms (Altbach 1999). Unlike other developing countries in Asia, Korea reached the goal of mass access to higher education in the early 1980s (Altbach 1999). South Korean students form the largest influx of international students in the U.S. after Chinese and Indian students. With the rapid expansion of higher education in Korean society, earning a degree in the U.S. is perceived to be a gateway to success and social status, as American higher education is considered superior, with recipients of U.S. degrees gaining the most favor (Kim 2011). Furthermore, with the growth in global interdependence and international contacts, English has penetrated deeply into the cultural and educational foundation of Korea; as such, English-speaking countries have become the preferred places for academic pursuit among Koreans seeking higher education.

Acculturation and the Role of Institutions

Acculturation theory, as advanced by John Berry (1997, 2003), looks at the process of cultural (e.g., customs, economic and political life) and psychological (e.g., attitudes, identities, and social behaviors) change upon intercultural contact. Berry's (1990, 1997) model is based on the interaction between cultural maintenance (the extent to which individuals value and wish to maintain their own cultural identity) and contact-participation (the extent to which individuals value and seek out contact with those outside their own group and wish to participate in the daily life of the larger society).

Several different acculturation models have been developed over time. The unidirectional or unilinear model of acculturation was an early theory proposed by Parks and Miller in the early twentieth century. According to these scholars, acculturation is unipolar in that the individual moves from a traditional lifestyle to one that is more assimilated. Specifically, the migrant family starts adopting the values and customs of the mainstream culture, leaving behind their own values and customs. The bidirectional model of acculturation is more comprehensive and more widely accepted in the literature (see, e.g., Cuellar et al. 1995). Berry's (1997) acculturation model focuses on two distinct axes, identification with home culture and identification with host culture, and consists of four acculturation strategies: (a) integration/bicultural, identification with both cultures; (b) assimilation/Americanized, identification with host culture; (c) alienation/marginalization, no identification; and (d) separation/traditional, identification with home culture. Integration refers to the process by which a migrant identifies with and becomes involved with both cultures. Assimilation refers to the situation where a migrant chooses to identify solely with the new culture. Separation refers to the instance when a migrant is only involved in the traditional culture, and alienation/marginalization is characterized by the lack of involvement with and rejection of both cultures. These acculturation models offer insights into the multifaceted interactions between a foreign student's culture and the dominant culture and help to explain more subtly the experiences of international students as well as allow an understanding of how individuals' cultural backgrounds play a role in adaptation (Berry and Sam 1997).

The notion of acculturation, however, may undermine international students' cultural backgrounds and other social and environmental factors that may influence student adjustment experiences (Sato and Hodge 2009; Spurling 2006). Arguably, the dynamic relationship between international students and their higher education host is not static; rather, institutions may influence international students' experiences during their academic sojourn, while these students may in turn effect change within institutions (Dey and Hurtado 2005). Given that much less attention has been paid to the research literature on the role of international students as sources of institutional change, a more complete view is necessary to look at the relationship between students and their institutional environments as both dynamic and reciprocal. Such an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979) views international students as actively shaping interpersonal environments, including their host institutions, while these institutional environments simultaneously play an integral part in fostering student adjustment and growth in college.

Research on international students in higher education has long been concerned with what international students must do in order to adjust to new host environments. Such dominant unilateral thinking blinds us to the important institutional and organizational structures and practices that construct the circumstances which thereby facilitate or hinder international students from engaging in purposeful activities and developing intercultural competency. Therefore, the underlying assumption of this study is that host institutions must provide enough structured opportunities for international students to engage with the host institution, as well as systematic student support services to enhance international students' study abroad experiences. This

chapter illustrates the perspective that the interplay between students and institutions is dynamic and complex. It is important to note that this chapter is grounded in the theoretical perspective that students and institutions interact with one another (as opposed to assuming that students are the only ones adjusting to a new college environment) and that students and institutions therefore influence each other in a variety of ways (Dey and Hurtado 2005). With that in mind, I will explore the meanings of the acculturation experiences of Korean students in U.S. higher education and the unique challenges they face by seeking to answer the following questions: How do their own cultural values influence Korean students' decision to study abroad? How do Korean students perceive their adjustment experience in American higher education? Do Korean students remain attached and maintain strong ties to their homeland while remaining linguistically, socially, and culturally distant from American campus life?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore South Korean international students' acculturation experiences at an American university. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it "involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience" (Moustakas 1994, p. 13). Moustakas (1994) describes that the "aim" of phenomenology is to understand the essence of the lived experiences directly from individuals and to make meaning of those experiences. Qualitative research allows the researcher to understand and to interpret findings in specific contexts and environments, by delving into the deeper motivations, attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of individuals and environments (Creswell 1998). In this study, connecting the voices of Korean students and their adjustment experiences in relation to the cultural and social contexts of college, peer interaction, and psychological well-being provides a deeper understanding of Korean students' experiences of adjustment in an American university and addresses some of the adjustment challenges these students encounter from their own perspective. Thus, this phenomenological approach adequately addresses how Korean international students experience, perceive, and negotiate their adjustment issues in an American higher education setting by providing the essence of their experiences, and by uncovering meaningful themes pertinent to the study through the participants' own voices (Creswell 1998).

Research Site and Study Participants

The interview data was collected from a large, public, research university in the American Midwest. At the time of the study, more than 7000 international students at this university were enrolled at either the undergraduate or the graduate level.

Seventy percent of the international students were studying at the graduate level, accounting for approximately one third of the university's total graduate student enrollment. International undergraduate students comprised about 5% of the total university undergraduate population, and approximately 15% of these were nondegree exchange students. More than 1000 new international undergraduate students enroll at this university in any given year. These students represent some 120 countries from around the world. Seventy-five percent of all international students come from Asia, with South Korea (24%), China (18%), India (12%), Taiwan (8%), and Turkey (3%) as the top five senders.

For an in-depth qualitative investigation of South Korean undergraduate students' issues and challenges associated with the adjustment process in the U.S., 11 international undergraduate students (six females and five males, seven degree-seeking and four exchange students) were recruited through the Korean International Student Association on campus. Their ages ranged from 19 to 25 and their fields of study ranged from English to Engineering; they had an average length of stay in the U.S. of 1.3 years. I included only exchange students who participated in a minimum one-year exchange program, excluding exchange students participating in a short-term stay such as 3 weeks, a summer exchange, or a one-semester-based exchange program.

I employed in-depth interviews as a primary method of data collection to elicit rich, detailed accounts (Lofland and Lofland 1995). The interview protocol allowed me to establish rapport and establish a baseline understanding of each participant, with attention to their motivation to study abroad and initial adjustment concerns. The follow-up interview was more structured, allowing me to probe more deeply into the areas I explored in the first interview, as well as to delve into family and peer influence, perceptions of the college environment and the process of adjustment. Each interview ranged in length from one to one-and-a-half hours in the fall and subsequent spring semester. Interview questions included the following: What was your original intention for studying in the U.S.? What barriers or obstacles have you faced while studying in an American university? Tell me about your experiences while interacting with other student groups. Is there any aspect of the American university environment that you particularly like or dislike? Is there anything that you feel needs to be changed?

All digitally recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and served as the primary data source supplemented by field notes. Each interview transcript was analyzed by deriving significant and emerging themes across the interviews. I chose a theme-based analytical methodology as a major element of this qualitative inquiry to explore and interpret Korean students' experiences in American higher education. By focusing on emerging themes across the interviewees' shared stories, I tried to better understand their experiences and construct meaning associated with them. I carefully read and reread the transcripts line by line and divided the data into meaningful analytical units. When I located meaningful segments, I grouped them and assigned each a descriptive category. I continued this process until I had segmented all of my interview data, thus completing the initial categorization. I then sought out relationships between various categories that I had previously identified and related these ideas to what participants meant.

Results

Perceptions of and Motivations for Studying Abroad

Most Korean students perceived studying abroad as a luxury—an opportunity to learn about diverse cultures, to experience English-language immersion, and to advance their immediate job placement prospects. Some students regarded studying in the U.S. as an opportunity for academic enrichment and a riskier undertaking than pursuing educational opportunities at home. One interesting finding from this study is that several Korean students expressed dissatisfaction with the Korean education system, which motivated them to attend college abroad. They felt ill-suited to the Korean education system, in large part because of its emphasis on entrance exams which begin in secondary school and culminate with the University Entrance Exam. Jeremy, a sophomore majoring in engineering, described himself as struggling academically in high school in Korea. Jeremy recounted that he was afraid of not getting into one of Korea's prestigious colleges. Rather than going to a second-tier Korean school, Jeremy and his parents decided that he would have a better chance of getting into a U.S. college. As many as seven students in the study sought greater opportunities in the American higher education system as a means to steer themselves away from Korea's "education fever" (Kim et al. 2005).

Jeremy described his thought process with regard to studying abroad:

> I thought about disadvantage of staying in Korea. All like there were just three colleges I may be able to get in. It would be better if I just come to U.S. and study and, like, get more experience and I will be able get to [sic] many chances to get a job and have better life.

Sandra made the following point:

> I was a very good student until elementary school. After I went to middle school, there were so many classes and subjects I had to study, almost 9 or 10 subjects. I was not interested in almost half of these subjects. I completely lost motivation to study. The result was, of course, bad grades. I had little vested [sic] in Korean education system. All I wanted to escape this hell. I believe that things would be a lot better in the U.S.

The Korean educational system is described as a "testocracy" because of the numerous secondary school performance and college entrance exams that ripple through the system (Sorensen 1994). Korean students who participated in the study feared becoming second-class citizens who would be unable to gain admission to the best schools in Korea, or any college at all, for that matter. They viewed Korea's educational system as an unjust mechanism that thwarted their ability to fulfill their potential. Thus, their motivation for coming to the U.S. was primarily to get into college by avoiding Korea's strict entrance exams and stiff competition.

Perceptions of Learning Environment and Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are formed over a period of time, and various social and cultural factors contribute to the development of different strategies (Bennett 1999). All participants commented on American students' active participation in classroom discussions and other learning activities and noticed a comparatively passive general pattern of learning by Korean students. They also acknowledged the strong points of American students' learning strategies: "They are very independent, exploratory, and creative in solving problems." "They might not remember the formulas during the calculations, but they tried to find alternative ways to get their results." "They liked to ask questions about what they were doing, and they liked to discuss their ideas with TAs and professors." These activities often helped them "take academic risks," and one participant, Nathan, thought this was "a very effective way to learn, though it is often challenging and daunting" for Korean students.

Reflecting on their experiences with the general academic environment in the U.S., several Korean students felt that professors encouraged students to raise questions about their studies, and they would often tell them that "you have made a good point, and you feel good about yourself," said study participant, Victoria, whereas, according to Kelly, "you always feel that the authoritative figures [in the Korean education system] are so powerful and you feel like you are nothing." Korean students commented that American professors seemed to appreciate "even some small ideas and findings," and Alicia felt that the American educational system "encourages you to believe in yourself and achieve your best as long as you put in the best effort you can."

Interestingly, at least half of the respondents reported a positive perception of their status as international students interacting with peers, professors, and university staff. Victoria stated, "The fact that when you are a Korean international student, it's a good passport for you. People are really cool, because they ask you why you are here, and what you study. American students seem congenial and genuinely interested." However, this perception was not shared by all. Some students reported ambivalent or negative stereotypes of international students. Kelly said:

> I don't think I get any attention. I think no one cares. I don't want to compare things very much, but when we have international students [in Korea], we would ask about their country, their language, try to make friends, and try to help them out with their classes.

Katherine felt that the American college environment did not welcome her to reveal her Korean identity, nor did she feel visible on campus. She stated, "I don't tell people that I am from Korea anymore. I am too tired of telling them, you know. I don't want [Americans] to see me as Chinese or just Asian. I feel like I am just one of many Asians." During the adaptation process, a sense of isolation was not uncommon among Korean participants. Adjustment appeared to be more difficult for those students when they held negative stereotypes.

Building Co-national Friendship and Social Networks

While examining a sense of oneself in relation to others within academic and social contexts, Korean students tended to maintain strong ties to their Korean peers, or other Asian international students who were from backgrounds similar to theirs in terms of race/ethnicity, culture, and language. These relationships have been identified as a source of support and comfort, where similarity becomes a safe haven (Furnham and Alibhai 1985). Such conational networks of Asians provided emotional support for Korean students because they found shelter in customs and traditions with which they were familiar. Kevin said, "All my friends are either Korean or Taiwanese. We share similar cultural values. I feel most comfortable being around them."

However, despite the strong co-national networks of Asians, there is a noticeable difference between degree-seeking students and exchange students (though this was not a primary focus of this study). Exchange students tended to adjust and immerse themselves in the host culture shortly after arriving in the U.S. because their academic performances did not affect their academic standing at their home institutions. The degree-seeking students, in contrast, felt more academic pressure and, as a result, concentrated less on their social lives. For example, the exchange students sought out social networks by actively participating in an international buddy program, which was designed to pair former American study abroad students with international students. Degree-seeking students rarely chose to participate in this program; instead, they had a tendency to minimize their involvement in cocurricular activities during their first few semesters in favor of focusing on academic achievement. Therefore, interactions with other racial or cultural groups were limited to academic activities such as group projects, note-taking, and exam preparation.

On the other hand, during their stay, exchange students seemed to utilize advising services and cultural programs, including meeting with academic advisors and teaching assistants, and participating in campus social events. Kevin illustrated this point, "I made several American friends through the buddy program on campus. We hang out almost every Friday night for fun. My buddy, Mike, also introduced a bunch of his American friends to me. I felt like having real friendship here." This may be that most exchange students who perceived short-term study abroad as an opportunity to learn about diverse cultures engage themselves in learning English language in order to enrich their educational experience, while degree-seeking students regarded their longer-term studies as an opportunity to obtain a more prestigious degree than they could from Korean universities. Therefore, high academic performance and completion of coursework were of greater concern for the degree-seeking students. Several degree-seeking students found it difficult to make friends with students from the host country, because of the cultural distance they felt between themselves and their American classmates, in addition to academic pressure.

Negotiating and Preserving the Cultural Values of the Homeland

While these Korean students adjusted to a new academic environment, they began to develop a sense of interdependence, which often entailed redefining their values and ideas about the kind of person they wanted to be as well as developing both an awareness of their individual strengths and weaknesses and an ability to handle life's problems with less reliance on family. Several participants expressed strong, integrated personal values embedded in Korean culture and familial relations. Participants in this study overwhelmingly reported maintaining strong relationships with immediate and/or extended family members during their time abroad. Among Korean students, it was prevalent to identify oneself as a son, daughter, brother, sister, or friend—defining one's role in a social sense, rather than an individual one. Kevin illuminated the importance of family in the following quote:

> We have family togetherness. Family comes first. We have weekly family gatherings and we try to help each other. If something happens to one of our family members, we will try to be there for them.

David echoed this sentiment, "I think for all of us [in my family], the most important thing is that family must be the most important in our lives." However, some students reported that though they respected their family and cultural traditions, they also began to build a sense of independence from them. Nathan said:

> I'd say those are my values, but I'm a little more open-minded than [my family] because they grew up in a very enclosed culture, whereas I've been influenced by Western cultures. I've traveled America and I've got to see so many different cultures.

In spite of their efforts to learn about American culture and its educational system, Korean students expressed a definite preference for their own culture and maintained the values of their native country. Several students noted, "I think I quite agree with our family values. I mean, I do accept other things and traditions and cultures, but I think I would still follow like, what my people have." For others, spending time in the U.S. solidified their sense of self as a member of their native culture, as in the following response from Marie:

> I realized as much as I do now that I am Korean and now that I am [in America], everything is important to me, like the language or the music or the food. If I go out and I listen to Korean song, music, I would be very, very happy; and that didn't happen before so now I am kind of more aware of the pride of being Korean and I wasn't before I came here.

Coping with Limited English Proficiency

Much research indicates that limited proficiency in English is a major constraint for international students' academic adjustment process. Lack of English-language proficiency also affects international students' socialization with other international

and American students (Sawir 2005; Sherry et al. 2010). Pedagogical strategies focused on conversational English, class participation, and group discussion put these international students at a disadvantage, and these students tend to be more passive in the classroom (Sawir 2005; Sherry et al. 2010). Research also indicates that students who are proficient in English when they arrive in the U.S. perform better and adapt more readily than those with little or no English-language proficiency (Barratt and Huba 1994; Hayes and Lin 1994; Poyrazli et al. 2002).

While students knew English well enough to attend this university, they struggled to improve their English during their stay. Even though their worst difficulties with English were behind them, the majority of participants indicated that their English skills had suffered since arriving at college. Alicia explained:

> [The] language of confidence or competency is so key, you know. I bet a lot of international students like me feel that way. Even though you have the potential, but it's not being fulfilled because of English. This is considered as a barrier. So it's not just you, I mean, I've been studying here for a while but I still haven't overcome the language barrier completely, but I guess I just have to have thick skin. You've got to have that to survive to not let people get you down. I was very outgoing when I was in Korea, but when I came here I got so shy because [of] the language…. I think I should be able to overcome now. But for some reason I just can't get out of comfort zone. I don't know how to do that. I am just nervous whenever I am talking to native speakers.

Jeremy also remembered his struggle to learn English:

> I thought I could get used to speak in English really fast because I was getting good grade in English. So I was kind of adored [with] myself with the score. Even my friends told that you are gonna get used to, you are gonna feel well, so I trusted and went to freshman orientation. They [international office staff] spoke something in English and all I saw was their mouth moving and some voices coming to my ear and totally no idea what they were talking.

Nearly all participants expressed some level of discomfort with their ability to communicate effectively in English, and this often had a negative impact on their perception of their own academic ability and emotional stability. The following response from Sandra illustrates this point: "Studying here, actually, I was very competent and confident studying in Korea. But now, I think I am not doing good because of my poor English. I can't understand what professors are saying. I was good at most of subjects in Korea. I thought I had adaptability but because of my English, sometimes, I cannot speak of what I want to say and cannot contact with others easily."

While dealing with their English-language proficiency, the majority of respondents gravitated toward peers who spoke the same native language and/or came from the same or a similar cultural background. The use of this coping mechanism is illustrated in the following response from Patrick: "I've been becoming friends, especially with this girl because she's a Korean-American, so we're both Asians, so that's kind of important, we know what we talk about, we have same language, we kind of have the same music." In addition, one's self-perception of their lack of English ability is among the most salient hindrances to participation in classroom discussions and to active interaction with peers and professors. The gap between students' actual English abilities and their own perceptions is central to their struggle to acculturate themselves to a new environment (Gregersen and Horwitz 2002;

Table 7.1 Description of participants

Name	Age	Gender	Major	Year in school	Length of stay in the U.S.
Kelly	22	Female	Psychology	Sophomore	15 months
Jeremy	20	Male	Engineering	Sophomore	6 months
David	21	Male	Computer science	Senior	36 months
Victoria	19	Female	Political science	Sophomore	6 months
Alicia	23	Female	English history	Senior	12 months
Katherine[a]	25	Female	Business management	Freshman	6 months
Marie[a]	21	Female	Communication	Junior	10 months
Sandra	21	Female	Biology	Junior	24 months
Patrick	25	Male	Business administration	Junior	11 months
Nathan[a]	24	Male	Design/merchandise	Junior	8 months
Kevin[a]	23	Male	Computer science	Sophomore	6 months

[a]Denotes exchange students

Lee 2009). Such language learning anxiety often lowered Korean students' self-competence and negated any underlying ability to perform as confidently as they could (Table 7.1).

Institutional Accountability for Korean Students

The interview data indicates that a few Korean students have been in contact with their academic advisors, who are one of the main persons through which they receive assistance and are connected to resources on campus. A typical response to the question about the relationship with an academic advisor is, "My academic advisor is really nice. He helps me out a lot. Thanks to him, I am able to find solutions to all my problems." Although a handful of responses are positive, the majority of Korean students indicated that they did not actively seek assistance from academic advisors. David said, "I haven't had much need to contact my advisor so far. I haven't had specific questions to ask other than course registration at the beginning of the semester."

Several students pointed out the need for administrators' help in attaining greater cultural awareness and asking for assistance adjusting to American culture. Korean students acknowledged that they need to assimilate to a new academic norm in an American university by conforming to its institutional culture and academic expectations. They also emphasized that the institutions themselves should adapt to accommodate international students' needs. Korean students' overwhelming responses point out that international student adaptation is influenced by individuals' perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued on American college campuses as well as how differences between their cultural origin and the host culture are bridged by institutional agents. This point is illustrated by Alicia's response:

> I felt that as [sic] I have come from all together a different culture, so I need more time to adjust with this change, so there should be some workshop telling how to adjust with the culture of here. Maybe, having a culture feast and fellow students have to be more aware of international students and the type of questions to ask.

Overall, Korean students struggled to negotiate the academic systems of the host university, and their experiences were often intensified by their perceptions of "not belonging" to the institution. They had limited interactions with faculty and institutional staff in various on-campus contexts. Their experiences repeatedly confirmed their perception of being "outsiders" which contributed to intense emotional stress. Sandra shared her sense of frustration, which stemmed from incidents where her professors failed to recognize her cultural value of maintaining silence to show respect to professors.

I feel isolated in class discussion. My professors didn't recognize that I needed a little more time to get up to speed for class participation. It is not just about language barriers. My professors treated me just like American students and expected me to adjust as fast as they can and as actively participating in class discussion as American students do. I tend to listen to what my peers say rather than doing all the talk. I often feel I get left out in classroom discussions because I tend to be quiet during discussion. In my biology class, when my professor asked me a question, I didn't answer right away. He jumped to the conclusion that I didn't do the reading for that week. I felt so embarrassed but I couldn't tell him that in fact I did the reading.

She further commented that even though she did the reading, the professor assumed that she did not understand the material because she did not immediately answer the question. Many Korean students chose to disengage in different contexts, both in and out of the classroom. They did not participate in organized activities such as student clubs, study groups, or campus events for international students but instead "chilled" in their dormitory rooms.

This finding raises questions about the ways in which faculty members can facilitate learning by increasing their understanding of Korean international students' particular approaches to preparing for coursework and learning course material. The finding further suggests that both faculty and Korean students must understand each other's expectations in class, in order to promote student learning. It is also vitally important for academic advisors and international offices to provide Korean international students with the necessary opportunities to participate in more structured, common learning experiences, which foster student engagement and socialization on campus.

Discussion/Implication

Despite the challenges associated with adjusting to their new academic and sociocultural environment in the U.S., the Korean participants seemed to find and enjoy academic enrichment during their experiences in U.S. higher education. New experiences provided Korean students with the opportunity to reflect on their previous

social and academic experiences in Korea and helped them to appreciate the opportunity to learn in the U.S. They had a variety of expectations for their time in the U.S., and they made efforts to achieve their goals. In a new environment far from their family and friends, they were learning to live their own lives and "becoming a real person as an adult," as Katherine put it.

The findings of the study suggest that possessing a sense of self in cultural, social, and historical contexts and negotiating a positive sense of self in the host culture are critical aspects of Korean students' adjustment experiences when studying abroad. These attributes are concerned with how individuals relate and respond to their familial and cultural environments. Exploring the sense of self of international students in sociocultural contexts different from their own also requires consideration of their new living and learning contexts (Tseng and Newton 2002).

Forming new social networks is critical to the cross-cultural adjustment of Korean international students (Sato and Hodge 2009; Seo and Koro-Ljungberg 2005). Their social network is often delimited by language, cultural traits, territorial contiguity, length of stay, and international student status. As Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) found, strong conational identification was related to greater psychosocial adaptation for Asian international students. In this study, Korean students utilized conational networks that provided emotional and social support. Similar to previous research (e.g., Abe et al. 1998; Heggins and Jackson 2003), this study points to the importance of meaningful interactions between international students and American students.

The literature has consistently found limited English proficiency to be a stress factor for many international students (Lin and Yi 1997; Yeh and Inose 2003; Yen and Steven 2004). Their lack of language skills undermines their self-esteem, discourages them from participating in and outside the classroom, and limits their socialization with students outside their own ethnic peer group (Heggins and Jackson 2003; Lee and Rice 2007). Almost every respondent expressed some level of discomfort with their ability to communicate effectively in English, and in most cases, this had a negative impact on the individual's perception of their academic strengths as well as in their establishment of relationships with other multicultural groups. The majority of respondents gravitated toward peer groups who spoke the same native language and/or came from the same or a similar cultural environment.

Some Korean students were not initially confident nor comfortable socializing with the people around them. They felt that they were "not involved with many mainstream things except focusing on my study." The findings of this study suggest that most Korean students mainly socialized with other Korean students during their leisure time, and this seemed to be an important part of their social lives. Given that traditional Korean values are characterized by respect for social harmony as well as order and hierarchy, Korean students talked about the discomfort and struggle they experienced during their stay in the U.S. where individualism, personal uniqueness, freedom, independence, and creativity are valued. These Korean students experienced confusion and uncertainty about how to deal with challenges in this new and different environment. They expressed an understanding of new social and cultural values, but this did not mean that they accepted these values without reservation. Bennett (1999) and LeVine (1986) argued that personal experiences and social and

cultural differences helped learners to be more open-minded, receptive, and tolerant of different ways of life. Similarly, in this study, Korean students commented on the open and diverse social environment of the U.S. They suggested that people learned to appreciate different ideas and concepts in a diverse environment, and they tended to be more open-minded in their academic journey.

Studying overseas is a critical period during which international students strive to achieve their academic and career aspirations, reexamine who they are, grapple with new learning and living environments, and attempt to strike a balance between American culture and their indigenous culture. Although there are international student-oriented programs, such as the international buddy system, that aim to promote on-campus cross-cultural understanding and communication, awareness and utilization of student services appear to differ by student subgroup. Institutional administrators and faculty should be aware of the different needs and shared concerns of international students in order to help them adjust to their new educational environment. The findings of this study indicate that family influences play a central role in helping international students maintain their sense of self as an international student. Therefore, university administrators and faculty should consider ways in which the Korean international students' psychosocial well-being can be enhanced by communicating with their families in Korea. In many cases, these students feel pressured to assimilate to an American culture in which domestic students express and/or display a lack of cultural awareness or even an ethnocentric attitude. Therefore, in conjunction with the Asian-American culture center on campus, the international student office and programs should make an effort to hire multicultural and bilingual staff to work more closely with Korean international students. Faculty and administrators as institutional agents should be more sensitive to international students from various countries and cultures and help them to recognize and successfully negotiate the academic and cultural dissonance they experience.

While many American higher education institutions have invested considerable attention and effort in recruiting international students, their work tends to cease once these students are enrolled in their institutions; international students are held almost solely accountable for their own success in the American college system. As American colleges and universities develop strategies to attract international students, they cannot simply admit foreign students and expect them to adjust to a new learning and living environment without providing adequate support services and programming (Andrade 2006). Peterson et al. (1999) argue, "higher education institutions take international students for granted, as cash cows, do so at their peril" (p. 69). In order to help international students have positive experiences and fulfill their educational goals, higher education administrators, faculty, and practitioners should assume responsibility in supporting, facilitating, and enhancing cross-cultural interaction. They should view foreign students not only as learners who need to make appropriate adjustments but also as learning sources for domestic students and cultural diplomats (Spencer-Rodgers 2001). Rather than framing the issues of international students' adjustment as a lack of coping skills or an inability to adapt, additional attention should be paid to critically examine the lack of accountability on the part of colleges and the inadequate services provided by these

host institutions, which might exacerbate the difficulties international students face (Lee 2015; Lee and Rice 2007). Most of the existing literature examining international students' adjustment experiences has been based on the underlying assumption that international students must adopt the values and norms of the dominant American college environment in order to succeed and has thus neglected these students' inherent abilities to function in both their own and American cultures. This study is significant in that it not only offers an understanding of Korean international students' experiences but also considers how accountable American higher education institutions must be when it comes to helping these students adjust to their new learning environment and in fostering positive and meaningful relationships between students and their host institutions. Thus, moving away from the assumption that conformity is a prerequisite for success would help educators more adequately address the multifaceted and heterogeneous international students' "adjustment experiences."

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