

## North Korean defectors: Their cultural adjustment to college life in South Korea

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**INTRODUCTION** The number of North Korean defectors entering South Korea in search of political freedom and economic opportunities has been increasing sharply since the 1990s. They have also become increasingly diverse in regard to their generation, gender, and social class (Yoon, 2000). In particular, youths in their 20s and 30s accounted for 61 percent of the total defector population (Ministry of Unification, 2009). Also, 72.3 percent of the young defectors admitted into South Korea in 2007 were in company with their family members (Cho, 2008). A majority of the young defectors turn for their education to South Korea's formal schools, where academic background is highly valued. For example, the Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights estimated that 450-600 North Korean new arrivals enrolled in college in 2009. However, their new academic careers require them to meet a variety of social expectations relevant to school life in South Korea, such as meeting their academic responsibilities and forming peer relationships.

In the adaptive process of young defectors to South Korean school life lurk many difficulties. First, young defectors while in North Korea experienced school education which did not function properly due to economic hardship (Cho, 2008). Second, they underwent a prolonged vacuum in education mainly because they had to stay in a third country for an extended period of time before they came into the educational system of South Korea (Cho, 2008). Third, differences between North and South Korea in political ideology and view of Korean history make it difficult for young defectors to follow in classes relevant to humanities and social sciences (Kim, 2004). Further, they have to struggle to understand hundreds of foreign words used in class and to be familiar with essay assignments and exams, which were not common in school life in North Korea (Park, 2009). All of these factors cause college students from North Korea to fall behind South Korean students in academic performance.

Despite the growing number of college students from North Korea and the range of problems they face in their school lives, studies of their adjustment to school in South Korea are quite few. The existing studies have focused on the issues these students face and factors that influence their lives in South Korean society and, thus, have failed to uncover the process of these students' cultural adaptation. Further, such studies have tended to examine how the immigrant students become accustomed to cultural and educational systems in South Korea, with no consideration of the North Korean culture they experienced previously. Given this status quo, my colleagues and I conducted two studies (Hu *et al*, submitted; Park & Jung, submitted) based mainly on in-depth interviews with

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undergraduates from North Korea, to delve into their experiences with adjusting to school and other adaptive aspects.

**INDIVIDUAL IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW STUDY** In one study (Park & Jung, submitted), we interviewed 26 undergraduates from North Korea, for an average of three hours each, on the topic of college life in South Korea. We asked them semi-structured questions such as “What caused you to enter college in the South?” “What kinds of experiences did you undergo in college life?” “How did you overcome academic and social difficulties you faced in the South?” “What do you think about your current life in the South?” and so forth. Our data analyses were conducted in line with the grounded theory suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

Our main findings were as follows. Among their reasons for entering college were the recommendations of significant acquaintances and the desire to fulfill social and psychological needs. With respect to phenomena, campus life participants experienced characteristics of emotional instability, social withering, a sense of differentness, and various other difficulties. Participants experienced such core phenomena in the contexts of fantasy and social comparison, differences in cultural backgrounds, the situation in the South being unfavorable to them, educational and political dissimilarity, and the Western-oriented South Korean culture. Among the conditions affecting phenomena and action strategies were individual resources, individual barriers, social resources, and social barriers. The students undertook action strategies including self/other acceptance or avoidance, active or passive problem-solving, and accepting or criticizing the majority culture. The consequences of their adaptation to campus life covered social adaptation versus mal-adaptation and presence or absence of the pursuit of self-growth.

In addition, we conducted a process analysis and identified four phases that participants went through in becoming accustomed to campus life in South Korea: *confusion* (when reality disillusioned them of their expectations for a romantic campus life), *withering* (upon experiencing discrimination and/or feeling isolated and inferior), *self-understanding* (when they recognized and accepted their position in South Korea), and *Southern culture acceptance* (when they internalized that South Korean cultural features were heterogeneous from North Korean culture). We also conducted a typological analysis, focusing on the consequences of the students’ adaptation to South Korea, and developed two dimensions: *adaptation/mal-adaptation* to South Korean culture and *pursuit/non-pursuit* of self-growth. Those two dimensions classified four adaptation types: *confusion* (mal-adaptive and not in pursuit of self-growth), *assimilation* (adaptive and not in pursuit of self-growth), *isolation* (mal-adaptive and in pursuit of self-growth), and *harmony* (adaptive and in pursuit of self-growth).

**INTERVIEW AND QUESTIONNAIRES STUDY** In another study (Hu *et al*, submitted), we interviewed 15 undergraduates from North Korea, for two or three hours each, about college life in South Korea, asking four semi-structured questions regarding their experiences in college life, interpersonal relationships, strategies for coping with difficulties in adjusting to school, and personal meaning of college life. They were also asked to complete the Complex PTSD (or C-PTSD) Scale developed by von der Kolk (2005), which uses a 5 point, Likert scale. We carried out data analyses on each question based on the participants’ C-PTSD scores.

These participants whose C-PTSD Scale scores ranged from 30 to 49 points seemed to be on the right track for adapting to school life in South Korea. They experienced difficulties in college life and human relationships, mainly due to discrepancies between expectations and realities and to cultural differences between the South and North. However, this group assigned positive meanings to their school life, possessed strong intentions to overcome those hardships in a constructive and adaptive way, and attempted to become what they want to be. They also possessed positive self-images and strong self-confidence in relation to their academic and social lives and tried to accept reality as it is. However, those scoring over 70 were in a state of quite serious dysfunction and mal-adaptation; they lived subject to serious stress and confusion, were quite skeptical regarding the reality they faced, and

devalued themselves in terms of their language and academic abilities. In addition, they tended to overestimate gaps between themselves and other South Korean students and to engage in personal relationships at a minimal level. This caused them to suffer from extremely isolated lives and sometimes conflicting interpersonal relationship as well. Worse, they adopted avoidance and disregard as strategies for their social conflicts. Finally, they were overall quite dissatisfied with their college life in South Korea.

**SUMMARY COMMENTS** These findings, described briefly above, suggest that immigrants' acculturation to South Korea, including that of undergraduates from North Korea, require handling in ways that consider the cultures of the mainstream society and of their original society together. The findings also imply these immigrants quite likely will face diverse problems in the process of adjusting to their new society and that those problems will vary as a function of their situation. This means considerable research which is down-to-earth and encompasses these students' present status in this society, is a prerequisite of the implementation of social measures addressing their adaptive life in South Korea.

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