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A View of Identity as Developed by a Korean-American Teenager: Cultural Adaptation in a Korean Community in the United States [1]

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This study explores how a 17-year-old Korean American girl displays identity and cultural adaptation in a Korean community in the United States. Audio-taped interviews and ethnographic observations were used to answer three main questions: (1) To which cultural identity does the girl primarily orient herself? (2) With what communication style does she interact in the Korean community? (3) How does she adapt her communication style to the Korean culture? The main subject was a 17-year old Korean American girl living in a southeastern coastal city in the United States. In-depth interviews of both the informant and her mother revealed the girl's bicultural orientations. The girl considers herself both an American who is familiar with Korean culture and a Korean who is familiar with American culture. Her discourse, however, demonstrates the dominance of her American identity. Additional studies are needed to further our understanding of how such an identity is constructed in everyday interactions.

1. Introduction

"Identity is tied to a sense of belonging, a feeling that we are 'insiders or that we are not" (Miller 2000:72)

A most significant demographic development of the last few decades is the substantial increase in the number of Asian immigrants who have come to the United States (Oh and Koeske 2002). Koreans represent one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States. According to the Census Bureau in 2000, the Korean population numbered 1,076,872 people (Lee 2003). This number increased from 1990 when the Korean population numbered 799,000, over twice the 1980 figure of 354,529 (Kwon 1997; U.S. Census Bureau 1999).

As the number of Korean residents in the United States increases dramatically, they are starting to pay attention to fostering and maintaining good relationships with fellow Koreans, rather than focusing on their relationships with Americans. Additionally, with the gradual increase in the number of Korean companies in the United States and the growing demand for multicultural employees who are competent in English as well as Korean, many young Korean Americans now work with traditional Koreans. Therefore, communication research that examines the intercultural interaction among Korean Americans and traditional Koreans would be useful to understand how their relationships are affected by the identities they adopt.

There is little existing research that investigates how Korean Americans adapt to Korean culture or to the Korean community in the United States. Instead, most research that deals with Korean immigrants, or Korean Americans in the United States, has focused on how they

adapt to the majority American culture as a minority (Hurh 1977; Hurh and Kim 1984, 1990; Hurh, Kim, and Kim 1978; Kwon 1997).

Consequently, this study will fill the need for such research by exploring how a 17-year old Korean American girl develop her identity in a Korean community in the United States and what salient characteristics affect her cultural adaptation. The influence of culture is very important in this study because communication patterns are closely linked to cultural norms. Therefore, cultural difference can easily affect the development of identity.

In this paper, I first summarize what past research has to say about social or cultural identity. Then I state the methods used in this study, situating the informant in her community. Finally, I interpret the audio- taped interviews within this context.

2. Literature Review

The major theoretical concepts that inform this research include three main fields: (1) identity development; (2) language; and (3) cultural adaptation based on inter-cultural communication. In the following literature review, I will examine the three fields in order.

Identity Development

Identity is a bridge between culture and communication, and we communicate our identity to others within a culture. In turn we learn who we are. Antaki, Condor, and Levine wrote, "To speak of someone's social identity is to speak, at the very least, of what attaches them in virtue of their membership of a category" (1996:473). It is through interaction with our families, friends and others that we come to understand ourselves and form our identity (Martin & Nakayama 1996).

In addition, concepts of identity influence over peers, choices for responding to and initiating interactions, as well as a myriad of other social constructs are played out through everyday talk (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Goodwin 1981; Gumperz and Levinson 1996; McPherson 2002; Tracy 1988).

Collier and Thomas (1988) see possession of a particular cultural identity as the possession of communication competence within that culture. A person becomes a member of a culture only when he or she articulates and understands the symbols or follows the norms of that culture.

Hall (1996) stresses that identities function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to selectively exclude and include particular groups. Thus, the identities our cultures take to be unified and eternal can instead be thought of as the unique, historically specific, temporary stabilization or arbitrary culture of meaning (Barker and Galasinski 2001).

According to Hall (1992), no single identity can act as an overarching organizing core since identities shift according to how subjects are addressed or represented. We fractured multiple and contradictory identities which cross-cut or dislocate each other.

Similarly, Gee (1996) shows how we shift our identity positions and discourses to express solidarity with particular groups, using language variation to manifest membership and demarcate particular social identities. This is a process in which we "take on a particular social role that others will recognize" (1996:127). Being recognized by other members is signals that we are insiders to that group. Gee points out that an "insider" of any group must get things "right"—say the right thing while being the right who and doing the right what. Gee states, "It's not just what you say or even how you say it, it's who you are and what you are doing while you say it" (1996:viii). Identity, Gee argues, is enacted through a three-way simultaneous interaction among (a) our social or cultural group memberships; (b) a particular social language or mixture of them; and (c) a particular context (1996:69).

Most recent attempts to come to grips with the notion of identity stress that identity is never fixed. Rather, it is always open to change, multifaceted in complex, contradictory ways, tied to social practice and interaction as a flexible and contextually contingent resource, and tied to processes of differentiation from other identified groups. That is, identity is established across differences. Therefore, knowledge of self emerges in relation to others (Miller, 2000).

Language

Language is commonly understood as a primary resource for enacting social identity and displaying membership of social groups (Miller, 2000). In other words, language is a central and constitutive feature of social life (Wood and Kroger 2000). We cannot ignore social and ideological concerns when assessing language acquisition and use (Miller, 2000).

Individuals learn the norms and rules of interaction through the language socialization process (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988). That is, language is more than a tool for description and a medium of communication (the conventional view); it is also a social practice, a way of doing things. Experts acknowledge that language use and identity cannot be considered in isolation from social practices and membership (Miller 2000). As Ochs (1986) observes, children obtain tacit knowledge of principles of social order and systems of belief (ethno-theories) through exposure to and participation in language-mediated interactions.

Furthermore, the particular language we use predisposes us to think in particular ways and not in others. Language, in Lippi-Green's (1997:5) terms is the "most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities." The way we combine verbal and nonverbal language is made unique within our own particular communication style. This metamessage conceptualizes how listeners are expected to accept and interpret our communication (Martin and Nakayama 1996).

A systematic comparison of communication across cultures requires a consideration of those aspects of communication that transcend the specific language being spoken. In general, we propose that these communication behaviors are logical extensions of the internalized values and norms of their respective cultures. That is culturally based rules govern the style, conventions, and practices of language use (Pekerti and Thomas 1998).

According to Allen (2004), we learn communication styles and rules based upon our membership in certain groups and we communicate with other people based upon how we have been socialized about ourselves and about them. In addition, it is clear that peer acceptance and the need to guarantee continuity and sameness are essential to the building of identity in the social context and are very significantly mediated by language (Kraemer et al. 1995).

Cultural Adaptation

The impact of culture in communication patterns is well accepted. According to Hall (1997), culture depends on its participants reaching meaningful interpretations about what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways. People are deeply influenced by the cultural values and norms they hold.

The most typical category is Western vs. Oriental culture. The Western cultural values, such as those of the United States, ascribe individualism and a low-context orientation while oriental cultural values, such as those of Korea, ascribe collectivism and a high–context orientation (Kim et al. 1998). Individualism–collectivism is a cultural-level variable referring to the extent to which members of a culture tend to have an independent versus interdependent construal of the self (Hofstede 1980).

Furthermore, high-context cultures are intuitive and contemplative, and tend to utilize indirect and ambiguous messages. Low-context cultures are analytical and action-oriented, and tend to use clearly articulated and spoken messages (Zaharna 1995). In collective and high context culture, group bonds and harmony are viewed as important; overly precise and analytic procedures and structures tend to be avoided. On the contrary, in individualistic and low-context cultures, explicit communication and clear procedures are preferred (Park and Jun 2002).

Conceptually, affinity for Korean cultural identity is comprised of relationships, close similarity, and connection or strong feeling of shared interests with traditional and typical Korean ceremonies, customs, manners, and practice (Moon 2003). In contrast, western cultural values describe how a person from an individualistic society fulfills his/her needs through a market system that emphasizes individualistic goals (Tse 1996).
Trubisky et al. (1991) found that Taiwanese Chinese are more obliging and avoiding than Americans. These findings have confirmed Ting-Toomey's (1985) proposition that members of low-context cultures are more likely to adopt non-confrontational styles than members of high-context cultures. Further support for these findings emerge in a study conducted by Tse, Francis, and Wallis (1994), who discovered that Chinese respondents were more likely to

avoid conflicts and were more concerned with maintaining interpersonal relationships than were Canadians (Zhou 2002). In another study of conflict resolution styles among Americans and Asians, Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) found that Americans adopted a more dominating style than did the Japanese and Koreans, and that the Chinese used more obliging and avoiding styles than Americans (Zhou 2002).

This study began with the following hypotheses, which are based on these literature reviews. First, the Korean American girl would encounter more difficulties in defining her Korean identity and fewer difficulties in defining her American identity. Second, this condition would result in tendencies towards rejection of her Korean identity in favor of her American identity. Third, this conflict between her two identities would emerge in her interactions within the Korean community. Three main research questions emerge from these assumptions:

> Q1. Which orientation does the Korean American girl have toward her identity? How does she express her identity?
> Q2. What communication style does the Korean American girl usually use in her interactions with Koreans?
> Q3. How does the Korean American girl perceive Korean culture? Does she adapt her communication style to fit into the Korean culture? If so, how?

3. METHODS

I came into the United States in January 2004 and a week after my arrival I went the Korean Baptist Church in the southeastern city of my residence. Because of the congregation's small size, I could get accustomed to most of church members without any problems. Around the middle of February, I noticed that a 17- year old Korean American girl (I'll call her by the pseudonym of "Su" in this paper) in the congregation showed an interesting communication style in her interactions with Koreans. I decided to conduct this research with her. On March 14, I initially had a research briefing and got permission from Su and her mother. Also we established a basic schedule for participant observation and in-depth interviews, the methods by which I gathered data for this study.

Participant observations were held every Sunday from March 11 to April 18 (11:00 am - 3:00 pm) at the Korean Baptist Church. Usually, most of the youth members shared one big table for lunch, so I could get a large amount of information through casual conversation with Su. On March 28, I conducted a one-hour interview with Su at church. I asked Su open-ended questions about her preferred culture, frustrations and discomforts communicating with Koreans.

Two weeks later, I interviewed Su's mother for three hours in my apartment. I decided to do this interview because I thought a mother is an important central influence on a teenager's identity formation, especially if the teenager is female. According to Kronqvist (1996), an adolescent's relationship with his or her parents is always a part of the identity formation process. In addition, Su attended my housewarming party on March 20 with several Korean

students, and I went a movie with Su and two other girls on April 9. Through these types of informal activities, I could get more in-depth and interesting information about her.

When my data collection was complete, I had accumulated 30 research hours and conducted two in-depth interviews that ranged from one to three hours long. I used a digital audio recorder during the interviews and then transcribed and analyzed the recordings on a computer. To help ensure the validity of this analytical conceptualization and its attendant claims, I crosschecked my interview data with my field notes and observations.

My primary study site, the Korean Baptist Church, was established 25 years ago. It is a small, vital congregation with only 50-60 parishioners; most are rather young, including the pastor. After the one-hour Sunday services, the members have a Korean style lunch together and share interests. Like other Korean churches in the United States, this church serves as a recreational center and church fellowship provides parishioners with spiritual guidance as well as a social outlet. The Korean church was, and still is, the main factor and dominating force in molding the life of the Korean community in the United States.

Interestingly, this church includes Korean people from four sociocultural backgrounds. First, there are several Korean couples who immigrated in the 1980s. They made their living by running small shops and they work together. They still preserve Korean customs, culture, and they speak to each other using more Korean than English. In contrast, their children were typically born and raised in the United States and are, therefore, familiar with American lifestyles. The subjects for this study, Su and her mother, came from this group. Su's parents run a beauty supplies shop and still preserve traditional Korean culture even though they immigrated to the United States 25 years ago.

The second group is composed of middle-aged females married to American men who brought them to the United States. They are familiar with American customs and use more English than Korean because of their husbands. Their children are of mixed blood and look like American (e.g. blue eyes, blonde hair).

The third group is composed of young Korean couples who came here for business or for jobs. Some of these husbands work in Korean-associated companies or multinational companies and some of them are professors. They are highly educated and very concerned about their children's cultural adaptation, socialization, and language education. Generally, their children can speak both Korean and English at 3-4 years old because they use English in kindergarten and Korean at home.

The fourth is the group of students who, like me, came to the United States to study. They are not familiar with American culture yet and some of them communicate with Korean Americans to improve their conversational English.

Each group has a different cultural identity and point of view toward Korean culture and American culture even though all of them are Korean. In other words, they are all Koreans,

but exhibit and view Korean culture differently. Also, these groups interact with Su and influence her identity.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Development

According to her mother, Su strongly believed that she was American when she was young. However, as time passed, Su experienced a change in her identity. Her mother's consistent efforts and social interactions appear to have influenced this change. The following is an example of the data that reflects Su's mother's perception.

```
01      Mom :   When she was 5 or 6 years old, Su told me I'm
02              American! Yes, she thought she was American.
03              From there, I kept talk to her let's go and see mirror.
04              Who do you look like? You look like me, I look like you.
05              When people look at us, at first impression, they don't
06              think we are Americans. You are Korean American. Your
07              parents came from the Korea. You can't change it you like
08              or not. Yes, growing time she was really confused about
09              her identity, but not too long. Now, I don't have any doubt
10              about she knew who she is.
```

Lines 01 and 02 show Su's past belief, and lines 03 to line 08 show Su's mother's efforts to influence a Korean identity in Su. As I mentioned earlier, girl's relationship to her mother is one of the most important parts of the identity formation process. Similarly, Su's identity construction process is strongly affected by her mother.

In the following example, Su's mother relates an account of Su's identity evolution:

```
11      Mom:    I took her Soccer game at Birmingham in Alabama. I think
12              she was 8 or 9 year old at that time. All of them in stadium,
13              Korean people, Korean flags just like her, just like us.
14              From there she knew who she was.
```

People align their actions based on shared meanings for symbols, and also on perceived differences. Using significant symbols involves more than signaling our internal state to others; it also evokes in us the anticipated response of the other. In this experience (also known as: taking the role of the other), we momentarily imagine how we are seen (Lindlof and Taylor 2002). In the case of Su's experience at the soccer game, the Korean flags, as a symbol of nationality and ethnicity, played a key role in Su's evolving identity.

Furthermore, people express their ethnic identities by participating in cultural activities such as folk dancing, folk singing, ethnic festivals, or the consumption of ethnic foods (Lee 2003). According to Mhloyi (1998), food can also be used as a proxy for identity. In lines 17 and 18, Su expresses her Korean identity in her discussion of Korean food.

15	Interviewer	When do you feel you are American and when do
16		you think you are Korean?
17	Su	I like **Korean food, and that makes me relate to**
18		**Korean people better** and I understand it , some of
19		Korean customs, different stuff for me.

However, during the interview Su used "I don't know" often, showing identity ambiguity. It means that Su still has mixed feelings, or a little confusion about her identity and her perception of Korean culture. The following excerpt demonstrates this:

20	Interviewer	Do you believe you are American?
21	Su	Not really. I mean, **I don't know.** It's just different.
22		**Korean I don't know. I'm an American, but I'm not.**
23		**don't know**…

In addition, Su's mother thought that Su never really considered herself as Korean; more precisely, she does not want to be Korean. From lines 24 to 27, her mother discusses Su's identity conflict.

24	Mom	Su used to say I'm Korean but I'm not just like people
25		in Korea. I'm a just Korean American. Ok, mom?
26		Don't expect Korean from me. I know who I am but I don't
27		want to be Korean.

According to this perception, Su understands that she is physically Korean and has to keep up with Korean cultures and norms, but she does not want be Korean. She wants to be a Korean American, someone who is familiar with both cultures. This example reveals that Su slightly rejects being Korean and/or she is not comfortable with a Korean identity.

Language

One of the indicators of cultural identity is language usage and communication style. In these observations as well as in the interviews, I listened for these indicators and found several elements that point to Su's identification with American culture.

First, I noticed that Su used the words "my" and "I," and never used the words "our" and "we." Because Korean culture is a collective one, Koreans generally avoid using the former and use the later. For example, Koreans say: "Our family members are six altogether" or "Our hometown is Seoul." Su's word usage in this regard indicates an American cultural orientation based on individualism.

I also noticed that, like her American friends, Su used a typical American teenager's communication style. According to Kraemer et al. (1995), adolescents perceive that their ability to participate in a serious and meaningful way in peer society is contingent on being able to express feelings and ideas in a clear and acceptable manner. To express herself during an interview, Su used typical teenager's slang as an acceptable conversational style to be a peer in the American teenage community. The following excerpt includes examples of this style.

28	Interviewer	Is there any difference in communication style
29		between American friends and Korean friends?
30	Su	**Korean people** are more formal between guys and
31		girls, unless they are very close, **you know, like**
32		you meet people for the first time, you're kind of
33		formal, and **you know,** everything is really formal.
34		When you talk to people you don't know, but it's
35		really different, **I don't know**, **they are more, not**
36		**more friendly.** They **just** like to stay with people
37		they know.
38	Interviewer	What about American friends?
39	Su	It's **just,** you can talk about anything, **just** joke
40		around, when you meet a new person, you don't
41		talk about stuff, you are **just** basically polite.
42		**I don't know,** with American people it's different.

Generally speaking, "you know," and "like" in lines 31 and 33, and "just" in lines 36, 39, and 41 are American style slang among teenagers. In lines 35 and 42, "I don't know" doesn't mean that she really doesn't know but it is also filler without concrete meaning.

I also found that Su referred to Korea and things related to Korea impersonally, using "Korea" or "Korean" instead of "our country" or "we." This can be seen line 30 above. This use of language is a sign that Su distances herself from a Korean identity and Korean culture.

In addition, Su showed a preference for the American communication style in comparison with the Korean communication style. More precisely, Su didn't understand the Korean's unique communication style. In lines 35 and 36, Su said "Koreans are not more friendly." This perception probably stems from her misunderstanding of Korean culture and its communication style.

High-context cultures like Korean culture are intuitive, contemplative, and tend to utilize indirect, ambiguous messages. Therefore, Koreans hardly express their feelings directly even though they have a friendly feeling toward a new person. To a person from a low-context culture, this Korean communication style may be misunderstood.

During the field observations and interviews, Su hardly ever spoke Korean. I learned that, although she understands most Korean, she can not speak or write Korean. It is also difficult for her to read Korean books or communicate in Korean in her daily life. Therefore, Su is usually a person of few words in Korean groups, and Korean students usually speak English when they want to talk to her. From time to time, she used a strange Korean vocabulary that confused or amused us.

On the other hand, Su speaks English very well. She is accustomed to American culture and seems to have no problem communicating with her American friends. Su's command of English shows identification with the dominant American culture. An example of this occurred when Su and I went to see an American movie. She very much enjoyed this movie because she could wholly understand English and could identify with the cultural identifier. In contrast, Su did not enjoy Korean dramas.

Also, when Su had the chance to talk to a native Korean, she decided to talk only to another Korean American girl. It was also evident that she could not participate actively in the conversation when she attended my housewarming party because most of my Korean friends are not good at English yet and it must have made her feel uncomfortable.

This may be because speaking English is key to acculturation (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: Coleman 1990) in the United States. In other words, English is the dominant language, associated with prestige. As expressed by Suarez-Orozoo and Suarez- Orozoo (2001), learning to speak Standard English is not only a way of communicating, it also becomes an important symbolic act of identifying with the dominant culture.

Cultural Adaptation

Obviously Su is more familiar with American culture than with Korean culture. During the field observations, I found that Su enjoys a different fashion style than girls who identify with Korean culture. For example, Su usually wears mini-skirts, sleeveless one pieces and very bright shirts in church; and she was the only girl who wore a bikini when all of Korean students in my church went to the beach to swim. Most Koreans are still rather conservative; therefore, girls do not expose their bodies in public. Moreover, girls who do so easily become the target of criticism in Korean society. However, Su does not subscribe to this

Korean conservatism; she does not think about it. The interview with her mother supports this interpretation.

    43   Mom   For my daughter, I used to say that Koreans don't like your
    44   styles. You should wear more plain things. But, Su didn't
    45   agree with it, and she said **it's my style** and it's time to
    46   wear those kinds of dresses.

Particularly, in collectivistic nations like Korea, interdependent self-concepts, and extrinsic values are more focused on others and on making sure that one's behaviors, expressions, and desires fit into what is acceptable to the whole group (Zaharna 1995). However, Su does not consider the views and judgments of others regarding her attitude and style. "It's my style" in line 45 illustrates this attitude.

Another example demonstrates Su's dominant American identity. If Su were raised in Korea, she would follow the majority when it came to supporting a sports team. Nevertheless, according to her mother, when Su goes to soccer games, she always cheers her own team, even when everybody else is cheering for another team. This would never happen in the Korean collectivist culture.

The independent construction of the self, which is dominant in Western cultures, is rooted in the belief that distinct individuals are inherently separate (Wong and Ahuvia 1998). Since Su was born and grew up under these Western cultural values, she expressed a highly independent construction of the self. For example, in contrast to most Korean students who follow their parents' choice of university, Su chose her own university. This can be seen in her conversation with her mother in the following excerpt.

    47   Mom   What about going to this university instead of your choice?
    48   Su   Mommy, you are not gonna go to school. **I'm gonna go to**
    49   **school**. You can't make me go to a certain university.
    50   Mom   As long as I pay for it, you should go to the university that I
    51   want.
    52   Su   Mommy, you are not gonna study my major for my school
    53   education. **I'm gonna study for my major in**
    54   **photography at my school,** not you at your school
    55   Mommy, you are not gonna make me whatever.

In lines 48, 49, 53, and 54, "I'm gonna go to school", "I'm gonna study for my major in photography at my school" illustrates Su's independence and strong will, which are individualist characteristics not typical of a Korean cultural identity.

According to my field observations, Su is not accustomed to Korean culture and customs. Su is clumsy with chopsticks, poor at Korean manners, doesn't like Kimch (Kimch is one of the most popular and traditional Korean foods), and she isn't interested in Korean music or traditional instruments. In fact, she hesitated to assist making Korean foods and preparing a

typical Korean party at my house. Conversely, Su possessed the skills needed for setting the table for the American party, and really enjoyed helping do so.

What is more, Su rejects perceived characteristics of Korean culture, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

56	Interviewer	What kinds of Korean characteristics do you
57		dislike?
58	Su	Too polite**, I don't like it. I wouldn't live there, I**
59		**don't think, I'm not like that, like I'm not.** I'll
60		say what I want to say, or whatever, **just because**
61		**you're older doesn't mean you are always right,**
62		**just because respecting the elders is a good**
63		**thing, to some extent, but not always, Just**
64		**because you're older. I want to be somebody I**
65		**want,** but Korean people, the parents make them.
66		For example, even though they don't want to play
67		piano, but their parents demand that they do it.
68		In America, You want to do it. But Korean people
69		are more like you have to do.

In lines 58 and 59, Su strongly expresses her negative attitude toward central characteristics of Korean culture. In particular, in lines 60 through 64, Su rejects one of the most important traditions, respect for elders in Korean society, "just because of you're older doesn't mean you're right." Also, in lines 64 and 65, Su reveals a salient difference with traditional Korean in mentioning "I want to be somebody I want." Such expressions demonstrate independence and index an American cultural identity.

Su actually expressed identification with being American, as shown in the following excerpt:

70	Interviewer	I think you would have some difficulties in real
71		world after you graduate from university because
72		Koreans are minority group in the United States.
73	Su	**Absolutely will not.**

Her response (line 73) to my observation illustrates that Su strongly rejects being a minority in the United States and at the same time, it means that she still claims an identity as American.

Su's mother believes that she's going to become familiar with Korean cultures sooner or later. Supporting her mother's beliefs, Su listened very carefully and from time to time participated with interest when we talked about Korean dramas. Also, I noticed that she had no trouble playing sports with other Korean students during a picnic.

5. CONCLUSION

In traditional societies, one's identity is fixed, solid and stable. Identity is a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths that provide orientation and religious sanctions that dictate one's place in the world and rigorously circumscribe one's realm of thoughts and behaviors. However, in modernity, identity has become more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflective and subject to change. The individual in a modern, complex world has to choose between many commitments and identities (Kronqvist 1996).

Supporting this view, ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews of both the informant and her mother revealed that Su experienced a change in her identity according to social and situational needs. Su had tendencies towards rejection of her Korean identity in favor of her American identity when she was young but now she shows bicultural identity orientation. Su considers herself both an American who is familiar with Korean culture and a Korean who is familiar with American culture. Her discourse, however, demonstrates that Su still has mixed feelings, or a little confusion, about her identity. Su's identity construction and evolution are strongly affected by her mother, supporting Kronqvist's (1996) proposition that an adolescent's relationship to his or her parents is always a part of the identity formation process.

Regarding language usage, Su shows a preference for the American communication style in comparison with the Korean communication style. Su's word usage indicates an American cultural orientation based on individualism and is a sign that she still distances herself from a Korean identity. Also, Su's command of the English language shows identification with the dominant American culture. Su is poor at Korean and she didn't understand Koreans' communication style yet. As a result, Su feels difficulties being a member of the Korean community even though she has learned Korean manners and culture from her parents, and use to eat Korean foods everyday. It shows how important language is in identity construction and cultural adaptation.

In terms of cultural adaptation, Su's discourse displays acknowledgement that Su is more familiar with American culture than with Korean culture. Su expresses a highly independent construction of the self and strong will, which are individualist characteristics not typical of a Korean cultural identity. What is more, Su expresses her negative attitude toward central characteristics of Korean culture. This probably stems from her misunderstanding of Korean culture and customs.

In this study, Su's mother had a traditional Korean orientation and she wants to maintain and share it with Su. Nevertheless, Su lives at an intersection between American and Korean cultures and seems to construct primarily an American cultural identity. Yet there were no significant conflicts between Su and her mother because both try to accept two cultures and choose good things from both. According to Kronqvist (1996), the members of modern societies no longer develop a uniform outlook on life. Rather, they learn situational ways of solving problems and have to rely more on communicative and social skills than on rigid principles.

This study contributes to our understanding of identity ambiguity in bicultural Americans. Interviews combined with field observations provided empirical evidence of bicultural tensions. However, additional studies are needed to further our understanding of how such an identity is constructed in everyday interactions. For instance, the subject in this study cannot be generalized to account for all Korean American youth. This study should be followed by a study based on naturally occurring interactions in the target community. It might also be good to conduct time- serial research with the same girl (Su) several years later because Su's identity would evolve dramatically during her college life. Last, there could be gender differences in identity development. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct studies with Korean American male teenagers and compare them with this study.

6. NOTES

1. This paper was awarded the student prize at the 34th annual conference of Cross-Cultural Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico on February 23-27, 2005.

2. A more recent meta-analysis on individualism-collectivism, however, suggests that westernization has shifted the social orientation of Japan and Korea towards individualism even more so than in China (Oyserman et al. 2002) and the United States in the case of Japan (Matsumoto 1999). However, most cross-cultural studies on individualism-collectivism rely on measures of attitudes. Attitudes associated with individualism-collectivism, however, are probably more subject to influences of recent cultural trends and therefore can vary more by individual than by culture (Matsumoto 1999). Cultural psychologists who rely more on experimental procedures than on attitudinal measures, however, suggest that attitudinal measures do not correspond well with automatic on-line responses and implicit attitudes, both of which are more stable and consistent with traditional cultural values (Kitayama 2002).

3. Instead of $500, Chinese participants were asked to donate an amount of 2000 Renminbi (or 2000 Yuan) which is not economically but psychologically and culturally equivalent to the USA amount.

4. We use "outgroup" loosely, which may have different meanings. For example, the meaning of the axis of evil (e.g., Iran, Iraq, North Korea) as outgroup members is not the same as that of the aliens as outgroup members. However, we use the concept to illustrate the point that American participants were less like to include others.

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