



Limitations of Second-generation Korean Americans' Ethnic Options: Strategy, Labor, and Reward

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Abstract

According to a recent Pew study, Korean Americans are most likely to have a majority, if not all of their friends from the same ethnic heritage, when compared to other U.S. Asian groups. What explains their ethnically homogenous social networks? The existing studies on Korean Americans focus only on issues of acculturation, first generation immigrants, and the role of religion in these communities; research on other aspects of the Korean community in the United States has been neglected. This project shifts the focus away from traditional research on first-generation Koreans' affinity with the church and instead highlights the implications of their homogenous social relationships on our understanding of race and ethnicity in the United States, with a particular focus on young Korean-Americans. Through in-depth interviews with six second-generation Korean Americans in the Pacific Northwest, this research offers a deeper understanding of the decisions that these children of immigrants make to gain membership in either Korean or American communities. More specifically, the interviews reveal the work involved with and reward received through selective ethnic relationships and the limited but strategic "option" of adopting or accentuating one's Koreanness. My findings suggest that second-generation Korean Americans' ethnic identity management entails both burdensome labor and calls for a redefinition of Americanness.

In the Pew Research Study's (2012) report, "The Rise of Asian Americans," I found that Korean Americans were the most likely among Asians to have ethnically homogenous social groups. This study prompted questions about second-generation Korean Americans' social life and membership in ethnic communities. In my research, I hoped to access a broader narrative of how they navigate society as both Korean and American. The overarching questions were: under what circumstances do Korean Americans accept or forego disadvantages of participation in ethnic communities? Are Korean Americans especially tied

to their ethnicity? How does the strength of one's relationship with the Korean identity affect social life?

The six in-depth interviews converged at three key nodes: strategy, labor, and reward. In the interviews, second-generation Korean Americans in the Pacific Northwest revealed their attainment of and access to certain racial/ethnic groups with ease and minimal effort. Others exposed the labor and time required to craft their identity for inclusion in either the Korean or American community. These young adults were strategic about their participation in certain ethnic spaces. They based their identity performance on the potential rewards associated with their decision to either sustain their homogenous relationships or abandon the ethnic singularity for one that is more heterogeneous. For example, second-generation Korean Americans described the extensive career networking prospects that come from membership in Korean communities. Other times, the respondents highlighted the challenges of being perceived as "non-American" or foreign. Overall, the negotiation of their ethnic identity was ambiguous and indefinite, indicative of the need to re-evaluate the limitations of existing notions of race and ethnicity for children of immigrants.

The U.S. racial hierarchy considers some groups more superior than others based solely on their race. As such, these "racial boundaries reflect relations of power, in particular the ability of the dominant group to construct and impose definitions upon others" (Kibria 1998, 941). The black-white binary is one way of understanding racial stratification, and it is the framework most commonly used to understand race relations in the United States. However, various scholars have pointed to the limitations of binaries in our discussion of U.S. race and ethnic relations. For example, some scholars argue that the black-white binary excludes Asian Americans' and Latinos' experiences (Kim; Park and Park 1999). The inclusion of Latinos and Asian Americans, who are neither white nor black, into the black-white binary, obscures the particularities of their experience. The emerging transnational and global society establishes a foundation for a growing presence of non-whites in the United States, making crucial the reevaluation of our current notions of race and ethnicity.

Furthermore, the growing Asian and Latino populations in America complicate the previous racial dichotomy. Thus, scholars must locate the position of non-black, non-white Americans in race discussions today. The master narrative in the United States ascribes Asian Americans as the model minority—hardworking, successful, and obedient—and blacks as violent, threatening, and lazy (Cheung; Chou; Ecklund; Park 1996). White Americans, the dominant group, impose these characteristics, which consequently pit marginalized racial groups against each other (Cheung; Lee). These stereotypes sustain the black-white binary in ways that advantage whites and have mixed consequences for blacks and other racial or ethnic minorities.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2004) tri-racial stratification system attempts to incorporate these new Americans—Latinos and Asian Americans—in the

discussion of the black-white binary. He theorizes about “honorary whites,” who include Latino, Asian, light-skinned, and assimilated immigrants (Bonilla-Silva 2004). His proposed racial system of white, honorary whites, and blacks, offers an alternative way to think about the U.S. racial stratification. In a similar way, Claire Jean Kim (1999) introduces the racial triangulation theory, in which Asians are positioned on a superior-inferior and foreign-non-foreign axis in relation to whites and blacks. Many scholars have adopted such alternative frameworks to understand Asians’ unstable and conditional position as “honorary white[s],” in which they are perceived as both American and foreign (Chou and Feagin 2015; Young 2009). These new ways of imagining the U.S. system are important because the idea of Asians as model minorities who embody the bootstrap myth pits people of color against one another while whiteness exists unquestioned (Kibria 1998).

Like Bonilla-Silva and Kim, Frank Bean and Jennifer Lee present another way to explain the position of Asians and Latinos. Bean and Lee (2007) theorize about the black and non-black binary, in which Asians and Latinos are positioned as closer to whiteness (579). Unlike the black-white binary, the black and non-black binary highlights how blackness and its associated meanings persist in the racial stratification system for as long as whiteness exists. They find that Latino and Asian multiracials have more fluid racial identities and that their ethnic identities are optional. Their experience differs from that of black multiracials, who are categorized black under the one drop rule—the idea that a person of any slight African ancestry is black (Kibria 2000; Lee 2007). The black-nonblack binary shows how whiteness has value only in relation to blackness, and how blackness is as fixed as whiteness (Bean et al. 2009).

Scholars have also indicated the need to study not only immigrants, but also children of immigrants. In particular, second generations’ race, ethnic identities, and relations reveal the value of whiteness in an increasingly diverse, multicultural society. Second-generation Americans engage in some degree of choice—to either preserve their ethnic identity or adopt a more “American” one, which will then “whiten” the following generations. According to Kasinitz et al. (2009), “transnational immigrants (or ‘trans/migrants’) and their children remain active in social networks that make it possible for them to live in more than one society at a time, perhaps never fully committing to either” (4). Their research suggests a potential relationship between transnationalism and the declining significance of the black-white binary. Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) description of the new mestiza’s “plural personality” and “pluralistic mode,” with which “she turns the ambivalence into something else” is applicable to the experience of children of immigrants and perhaps a prefiguration of a changing racial stratification system (101). In many ways, this ambiguity and multiplicity that Kasinitz et al. and Anzaldúa indicate also demonstrates a need to redefine “American.”

In one way, the suggested plural, in-between identities of these new Americans imply that they have more choice in their racial and ethnic identities. On the other hand, it questions why, when, and where they may be more inclined

to embrace their American identity, further complicating the existing notions of race and ethnicity. The suggestion that children of immigrants have more options in their ethnic identities goes against the biological notions of ethnicity (Waters 1990). Many scholars have argued that Asian and Latino identities are more optional and symbolic, mirroring the white ethnic optionality, and therefore less determinative or ascribed than those of blacks (Bean et al. 2009; Kibria 2000; Lee). In particular, Asian Americans are perceived to have more access to whiteness—the privilege of being able to “*feel ethnic without being ethnic ... without cost or consequence*” (Lee 11). The scholarly work on Asian Americans’ location in the U.S. racial taxonomy positions them as relatively privileged, both for being considered more white than black and also for their access to ethnic options. Through a case study of second-generation Korean Americans, this research challenges such positive nuances regarding ethnic options among children of immigrants, offering an alternative perspective that questions the homogeneous portrayal of these Americans as having an advantage of ethnic options as do whites.

Method

In the winter of 2015, I interviewed six second-generation Korean Americans, for whom I have given pseudonyms and excluded other specific details to protect their identity and confidentiality. All the participants were affiliated with a Korean church in the Pacific Northwest for at least one year. I used snowball sampling, which involved beginning with one informant and asking that person to help identify other informants thereafter, and gathering participants via Facebook. I was acquainted with the community as I was a member of the church during my adolescence, a fact that facilitated my contact with potential participants. This method does not involve a random selection, and I understand that it does not provide data that is necessarily generalizable; however, I chose this method for its feasibility and practicality.

The interviews were held at cafes and consisted of open-ended questions to guide the conversation (Appendix I). They typically lasted between 30 minutes to one hour and were recorded on an audio-recording device. Once I had completed the interviews and had the recordings on file, I used an online audio transcription service to have the interviews transcribed. I then began the interview coding process. First, I did a close reading of each transcript and highlighted key themes within each interview. I then returned to the transcripts and coded recurring ideas that appeared in some of the interviews. After several repetitions of coding and re-coding the interview transcripts, I made new documents with key moments in the interviews that signaled each of the themes that I wanted to analyze in detail. These interviews allowed me to understand second-generation Korean Americans’ ethnic performance and position in the racial taxonomy. Furthermore, I was able to examine how they weigh the costs and benefits of certain ethnic choices and

analyze what their experiences reveal about the changing racial landscape in the increasingly transnational 21st century.

Results

For all of the interviewees, language fluency was a key factor in their membership of both the Korean and American community. Fluency in language continues to be a marker of one's level of assimilation, integration, or "Americanness," and an indicator of one's Korean-ness otherwise. Language also serves as a mechanism of both inclusion and exclusion. Those who are less fluent in Korean appeared to identify as more American in certain situations. Some even took an offensive position and criticized Koreans who were less fluent in English. For example, James, who is not fluent in Korean, criticized those who spoke only in Korean or were not fluent in English. He remarks:

As for Korean younger people, I honestly don't give a shit if I speak Korean to them ... You're in America. Don't expect people to [speak Korean] ... That's a problem with international people in general, not from Asia. If I were traveling to an international country ... I would not expect them to speak to me in English.

He conveyed this idea of "when in America, speak English." James also distinguished between Korean internationals and Korean Americans. He expected people in America to speak English fluently, and drew a parallel to his responsibility as a foreigner to speak the language of other countries.

Elizabeth also noted language fluency as a key factor in one's inclusion in either community. She made an effort to improve her Korean to be a member of the latter group. When people mistakenly presumed that she is an international student, she accentuated her fluency in English to somehow prove her Americanness while distancing herself from her Koreanness. In contrast, her efforts to learn Korean demonstrate how she sought to emphasize her Koreanness when with Koreans. As a Korean-American, she was able to select which identity she wanted to adopt in a given situation or context, and used it to her advantage. Amy's fluency in both English and Korean allowed her to navigate both identities with much more ease and fluidity than the other respondents. Like Elizabeth, Amy also used her fluency in English as a way to uphold her American identity. When asked if she is offended when people assume that she is an international student, she claims:

It's not that I'm offended by it or anything. It's just like, do I really look like I can't speak English or something? ... I just let them know that I can speak English. They talk to me about American stuff. I know American TV shows, okay? I don't watch Korean dramas every night. That's not what I do. They assume that when they see me, I'm from Korea.

Although she insisted that she is not offended when people assume that she is not from the United States or that she is unable to speak English, the way she responded—the tone of her voice and facial expressions—suggested otherwise. She appeared to be bothered and offended when people thought that she was an international student. In fact, she listed both her linguistic and cultural knowledge of American society to distance herself from the stigmatized Korean foreigner identity.

Innate Ethnic Affinity

The people whom I interviewed claimed that Koreans have an inexplicable affinity towards one another due to the simple aspect of shared ethnicity. Several interviewees attributed their Korean social network to an inexplicable ethnic affinity among Koreans. From their perspective, a Korean-American's membership in the Korean community is natural and requires no actual work. Michael remarks, "Well, the fact that you're Korean, you already connect in some way. You don't have to connect with other interests and stuff. Just having that connection on its own is pretty important." This sentiment was evident across all six interviews. He and the other respondents experienced a lot of difficulty describing in detail this comfort or connection they felt with other Koreans. As a result, the language used to describe their experience is quite vague. Nonetheless, they all characterized ethnic affinity among Koreans as an inevitable bond that is based solely on their shared heritage. Elizabeth even described Koreans as her "own kind," revealing an assumed innate and unquestionable—almost biological—explanation for her membership in the Korean community.

Dual Identities

Although the interviewees claimed to share a natural connection with other Koreans based on their shared ethnicity, they also demonstrated the salience of both the Korean and American identities. The interviewees moved within the spectrum of Korean, Korean-American, and American, and the prominence of a particular identity varied by context and situation. When asked, "Would you say it's easy to go back and forth between the identities?" Amy replied:

I would say it's not hard but it's just a hassle. It's kind of a hassle to do that. I feel it's not like you need to have complete different sides to... I am an American Amy or I am a Korean Amy ... You pick traits and you encompass it to make yourself whole as an individual.

Here, Amy's bi-cultural background allowed her to craft a unique identity that lies somewhere in the Korean-American spectrum. She continued and said that "being Korean American opens more doors to [her] than just being one thing." When asked about what kind of doors, she responds:

... in terms of work, I have the opportunity to maybe even work in Korea. It's possible because I'm fluent in it, I've family members there, I'm often there and, obviously, I opted to stay in the US because I'm an American. I feel like it's more beneficial to me that I am bilingual, I have two cultures, I'm Korean American rather than just being one thing.

She referred to her Korean American identity as an advantage with regards to access to opportunities. When she used the word “thing,” it was almost as if she exoticized her multicultural self. Amy made a conscious decision to accentuate or downplay her Koreanness—a decision that was based largely on how much effort she was willing to put in. Her answers also revealed some contradictory evidence: performing Koreanness was presented as both natural and requiring effort—a “hassle.”

Discussion

Labor

In the interviews, second-generation Koreans expressed contradicting responses regarding their innate connection with either the Korean or American community. At times, they described their ethnic affinity for other Koreans as natural, often supported by the inexplicable, unspoken mutual understandings that are exchanged among Koreans. However, they also described the burden or taxing work, such as language acquisition, associated in order to gain membership in these ethnically homogenous contexts and to push against the ascription of their foreignness. This contradiction between what second-generation Korean Americans claimed as an innate ethnic affinity versus what they did—engage varying levels of ethnic performance based on the potential rewards—reveals their involvement in some serious invisible labor, as they strategized the degree of their ethnic performance and membership in ethnic communities.

The performance of a symbolic and optional ethnicity was not necessarily natural or as innate as the interviewees claimed it to be. Rather, given that Asian Americans' “Americanness” is often questioned, there appeared to be limitations of their optional ethnic identities for second-generation Korean Americans, and Asian Americans more broadly (Kibria 2000; Song). Indeed, Asian Americans' experiences follow “not a color axis but a ‘foreigner axis’” (Kim 2405). The second-generation Korean Americans whom I interviewed did not have access to an infinite collection of ethnic options; rather, they adopted a pseudo-innate performance of symbolic and optional ethnicity as a way to resist, accentuate, and claim either of their identities.

When their Americanness is called into question, some of the interviewees expressed their inclination to distance themselves from their Korean identity by performing a hyper-American self. Here, Korean Americans, aware

of the implications associated with foreignness, felt the need to contradict and challenge white Americans' ascription of their racial identity (Kibria 2000). This often entailed demonstrating proficiency in English and American cultural cues and references. Their ability to maneuver between the Korean and American identities demonstrates how second-generation Korean Americans "negotiate among the different combinations of immigrant and native advantage and disadvantage to choose the best combination for themselves" depending on the context (Kasinitz et al. 20). The interviewees' responses reveal that rewards such as prospective career-networks, play a prominent role in shaping their choices; in fact, a majority of the interviewees attributed their ethnic performance to their desire to enhance career and networking opportunities. This makes sense given that the interviewees are mostly young adults or college students who are in the process of identifying career trajectories.

The interviewees' experiences with micro-aggressions and the need to prove their English proficiency also demonstrate how second-generation Korean Americans are frequently denied their "Americanness." The individuals whom I interviewed all shared their language competency—or lack thereof—as a key factor in their ability to navigate and manipulate this ethnic spectrum. Membership is required to join the Korean community, and it is ethnically exclusive. Within these contexts, second-generation Korean Americans must be Korean and perform Koreanness for their Korean peers and audience. According to the interviewees' reports, they do not necessarily exist in a Korean-American dichotomy. This, too, is a spectrum. More importantly, the definition of "Korean" varies across generations.

What is considered a good performance of a first-generation Korean American does not guarantee its relevance or application to that of a second-generation. Kasinitz et al.'s (2009) framing of the "second generation advantage" to describe the benefits of having a multicultural identity is supported by what I list as rewards of membership in the Korean community. It is important to consider the potential burden of such in-between, neither-that-nor-this, identity. This research shows that second-generation Korean Americans face the challenge of moderating and controlling the degree or level of Koreanness depending on the type of Korean community, ranging from Korean international students to other second-generation Koreans. This denial of not only an American, but also a Korean identity uncovers the complex notions of ethnic identity and ethnic options for children of immigrants. The interviews also reveal how second-generation Americans not only struggle with Koreanness, but also Americanness, highlighting how they are constantly working and negotiating their ethnic performance, as neither their Korean nor their American identity is in fact "natural" or "easy."

Rewards

Despite the interviewees' claims that their Korean identity was natural,

second-generation Korean Americans in the study appeared to be doing much more work in constructing their identity and gaining membership in the Korean community. This made me wonder, then, *when* second-generation Korean Americans decide to adopt one identity over the other. In certain contexts, the Korean ethnicity was the preferred identity—something that occasionally was added for flavor, and thus, optional (Waters). The interviewees all had different levels of interaction and membership in Korean communities. The situational variation in identification with either the Korean or American identity revealed second-generation Korean Americans' awareness of "the possibility that [they] might improve their prospects for upward mobility by *retaining* their immigrant culture" (Kasinitz et al. 7). Depending on the context with its risks, benefits, and rewards, these second-generation Korean Americans maneuvered the Korean-American spectrum to their taste. As Amy remarks, over time, many of these Korean-Americans "learned that embracing both cultures was more beneficial to [them]."

Past work on second-generation Chinese Americans in New York revealed how "the Chinese ethnic enclave functions more like a safety net than a springboard" (Kasinitz et al. 203). Similarly, the Korean community serves as a safety net for many interviewees. James points out about the Korean community that "It's also some place that you can fall back on, in case something else happens." For James, the Korean community was one that would always exist and support him. There is a similar confidence among other interviewees, as they consider and treat their Korean affiliation as one that guarantees some level of membership based on their shared ethnicity, as well as certain rewards that follow, such as networking and career opportunities. However, interview responses also suggested that second-generation Korean Americans' membership with either the Korean or American community was based on their desire and willingness to work towards proving their "Koreanness" or "Americanness," and was influenced by the material issues at stake—often times, their career.

In contrast to the finding about second-generation Chinese-Americans, the Korean community has multiple purposes not just as a "safety net," but also as a "springboard" for second-generation Korean Americans. Sam remarks:

Another advantage, I feel like this is sort of racist in a way, but people who are in their own ethnic group or race they start to identify themselves more, so they give more advantage to them. For example, if I knew a Korean American who is older than me, then he's more likely to give me an internship just because I'm Korean ... We also have some events where we try to have Korean Americans who are mentors. So people who are in the career right now, and they try to help the UW students. So it's like a mentorship program, and we try to do that as well. Because of that, we have a lot of connection with the Korean community as well.

Here, Sam expressed his assumption that shared Korean heritage

guarantees membership in the Korean community, and this membership immediately positions him as superior than non-Koreans. He appeared to be fully aware of potential benefits that he could reap as a result of his “ethnic capital” and the rewards of being a member of the Korean community—career opportunities (Kibria 2000: 92). It is interesting how he phrased this advantage as being “racist.” This framing of career advantage due to his Korean networks as racist almost insinuated that he was cheating the system in doing so. He seemed to be aware of ethnic affinity, but also appeared to assume its power or influence perhaps a bit too much. This response regarding material rewards was consistent with the “second-generation advantage,” which is a positive outlook on multicultural identities of children of immigrants, and how children of immigrants in some ways possess “ethnic capital” that serves as a stepping stone in achieving upward social mobility. However, as discussed earlier, there was a contradiction between what interviewees claim as a natural connection and the reality in which they actually must perform a certain type of Koreanness and work to foster relationships with other Koreans.

Conclusion

This project explored the various strategies, labor, and rewards associated with second-generation Korean Americans’ membership in an ethnically homogeneous Korean community. In the three nodes that I identified, there was the underlying assumption of ethnic performance. Second-generation Korean Americans’ ethnic identity was one that required a decisive, active performance rather than one that was effortless. The second-generation Korean Americans whom I interviewed constantly shifted between their Korean and American identities, and contrary to their claim to innate affinity, their relationship with the Korean community was anything but natural. The findings suggest that children of immigrants must perform and enact their Korean identity unlike their precedents who immediately were ascribed their immigrant, marginalized, and inferior status. In some ways, children of immigrants’ active pursuit and claim of their Korean identity suggest that they have more control, options, and agency over their racialized selves. Their ethnic identity is not necessarily stagnant or permanent; rather, it becomes an ethnic performance. Even more, their ethnic performance is based not on the black-white binary, but a range of ethnic choices from which they could draw on. However, as already mentioned, there are limitations to second-generation Americans’ ethnic options as these new Americans are in many ways burdened with the unclear boundaries of membership in ethnic communities.

This project on second-generation Korean Americans offers an insight on second-generation Americans more broadly. The interviews demonstrate how “new Americans” have no easy site or way to locate themselves in the U.S. racial or ethnic categorizations. Instead, they face the burdens of identity work as they navigate the dichotomies of Korean-American, foreign-non-foreign,

assimilated-not assimilated, or even black-white. We must not assume that having this ethnic option positions Korean Americans, and immigrants more broadly, as more privileged. Given the ethnic impermanence and variability among second-generation Korean Americans, it is essential to re-imagine the racial and ethnic landscape in the increasingly transnational, global society. Furthermore, the growing presence of immigrants in the United States demands a reevaluation of the implications of whiteness and Americanness. In fact, the interviewees' pseudo-innate performance of their ethnic identity signals new Americans' shifting racial/ethnic boundaries and manifold identities as they resist current understandings of assimilation and redefine "American."

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Project Questions

1. Under what circumstances do Koreans accept and forego disadvantages of participation in ethnic communities?
2. Are Korean Americans especially tied to their ethnicity? How does the

strength of one's relationship with the Korean identity affect social life?

Interview Questions

1. What is your relationship with the Korean community? In what contexts do you socialize with them?
 - a. What does it mean to be Korean/American in your community?
 - b. Is it important for you to be a member of the Korean community? If so, why?
 - c. What are the benefits of being a member of this community?
 - d. What are the downsides of being a member of this community?
2. What does it mean to be Korean/American to you?
 - a. Do you feel more Korean or American? What makes you feel in this way?
 - b. Do you identify as Korean or Korean American? Under what contexts?
 - c. Has your race/ethnicity benefited you? If so, how?
 - d. Has your racial/ethnic identification changed throughout the years? If so, how?
 - e. Has your race/ethnicity limited you? If so, how?
3. What is your perception of Blacks/Latinos/Whites?
 - a. Do you have a racially diverse group of friends?
 - b. Have your parents commented on the race or ethnicity of your friends?
 - c. Do you ever wish you had different friends? What would your ideal friend group look like?
4. Do your parents support either the Korean or American identity more? Is there an identity that they want you to adopt?
 - a. What is your relationship with the Korean language or culture?
5. Do you consider racial discrimination against Koreans or Asians to be an issue?
 - a. What is your definition of racial discrimination?
 - b. Have you faced or do you face racial discrimination or aggression? When? How? Where? Could you describe the context? How did you deal or cope with the situation?