

## ETHNIC ATTACHMENT AMONG KOREAN-AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS\*

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*This paper examines the level of ethnic attachment among Korean-American high school students as a typical example of descendants of the post-1965 immigrants in the United States. The data were collected through questionnaires administered to 170 Korean-American high school students in New York City. The respondents show a high level of assimilation to American culture and a low level of attachment to the Korean cultural tradition. However, in spite of their high acculturation, they are found to show a preference for Koreans as close friends and dating partners. Although the respondents' U.S. born status and length of residence in the U.S. have significantly reduced their level of cultural ethnic attachment, they do not have significant negative effects on their social ethnic attachment. These findings support Gordon's proposition that for some minority groups cultural assimilation does not automatically lead to social assimilation. The respondents show differential levels of attachment to Korean culture in three different social settings. They are found to depend upon the Korean language, Korean name, and Korean food most frequently at home, and more frequently in the ethnic church than in the school. Due to the nature of the sample, the findings have limitations in generalizability. Nevertheless, they provide important clues to assimilation and ethnic attachment patterns that other recent non-white immigrant groups might follow in the future.*

### INTRODUCTION

The 1965 Immigration Act that abolished discrimination based on national origin has helped many aliens from non-European countries to be admitted to the U.S. as legal immigrants. As a result of this liberal immigration act, many new Asian and Hispanic ethnics such as Koreans, Asian Indians, Haitians, and Jamaicans have emerged as major ethnic groups in the U.S. since the mid-1970s (Fawcett and Carino 1987; Foner 1987). It would be interesting to see to what extent these new ethnic groups maintain their ethnic subculture and ethnic identity. There are two factors that lead us to believe that these new, non-white ethnics maintain higher levels of ethnicity than traditional, white ethnic groups. First, these

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immigrant groups from Third World countries generally have more physical and cultural differences from the U.S. mainstream than the earlier white immigrant groups. Second, the transition in government policy from Anglo conformity to cultural pluralism since the early 1970s has encouraged minority ethnic groups to retain their cultural traditions.

This paper intends to examine ethnic attachment on the part of Korean-American high school students in New York City. Examining the patterns of Korean-American adolescents' ethnic attachment is of scholarly interest for two major reasons. First, major findings derived from a sample of Korean-American adolescents would provide important clues to the assimilation and ethnic attachment patterns that second-generation Americans of these Third-World immigrants might follow. Korean-Americans represent one of the major non-white, new immigrant groups that have emerged in the post-1965 era (Kim 1981; Yu *et al.* 1982; Hurh and Kim 1984; Min 1988). Research on recent immigrant groups has focused on the adjustment of first-generations, thus little is known about second-generation Americans for these new immigrant groups. As will be discussed in the next section, some ethnic groups in the United States with cultural and/or physical differences from white Americans followed the pattern characterized by high cultural assimilation but low social assimilation. It is particularly interesting to see whether the Korean group as a new ethnic group in the post-1965 era would follow this same patterns. Second, examining the patterns of ethnic attachment among Korean high school students is interesting because of the role of Korean ethnic churches in maintaining Korean youngsters' ethnic attachment. As will be shown in the next section, the majority of Korean immigrant families are affiliated with Korean churches, and it is interesting to see to what extent Korean churches help Korean young people to maintain their cultural tradition.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND DIRECTION OF INQUIRY

Gordon (1964, pp.70-71) made a distinction between cultural and social assimilation. Cultural assimilation refers to the degree to which immigrants and members of minority groups adopt the language, customs, food habits, and values of the host society. Social assimilation indicates the degree to which immigrants and minority members maintain social interactions with members of the dominant group through common social institutions, social organizations, and friendship networks. Gordon (1964, p.77) suggested that a minority group can achieve a high level of cultural assimilation, but such cultural assimilation does not guarantee a high level of social assimilation

(Gordon 1964, p.77). This social phenomenon of a great degree of cultural assimilation, but lack of significant social assimilation was observed in earlier Jewish and Japanese-Americans (Rosenthal 1960; Kitano 1976), although both groups have recently achieved a high level of social assimilation as reflected by high intermarriage rates (Kitano *et al.* 1984; Cohen 1985, pp.122-24).

Following Gordon, this paper makes a distinction between cultural ethnic attachment and social ethnic attachment. Cultural ethnic attachment refers to the degree to which Korean-Americans are integrated into the Korean cultural tradition. Social ethnic attachment refers to the degree to which they are involved in Korean social networks. Given the theoretical view discussed above, Korean-American high school students are likely to have a low level of cultural ethnic attachment, but maintain a high level of social ethnic attachment. This paper will show whether this expected pattern is applicable to Korean-American high school students.

Many immigrant and ethnic groups have turned to their ethnic churches to preserve their identity and cultural tradition. As one writer says, "The church was the first line of defence behind which these immigrants could organized themselves and with which they could preserve their group, i.e., system, identity" (Warner and Srole 1945, p.160). The Italian Catholic parishes "functioned to maintain the ethnic personality by organizing the group around the familiar religious and cultural symbols and behavioral modes of the fatherland" (Tomasi and Engel 1970, p.186). The same is true of other white Catholic immigrant groups. Thus, different Catholic ethnic groups in the United States—French, Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics—modified the Catholic religion in such a way that religious life fits into each ethnic subculture. That is why Greeley argued that "the various nationality groups were, at least to some extent, quasi-denominations within American Catholicism" (Greeley 1972, p.119).

The vast majority of Korean immigrants (more than 70%) are affiliated with Korean churches (Min 1989; Huh and Kim 1990), and these Korean ethnic churches help Korean Americans to maintain their cultural tradition (I. Kim 1981; Min 1991a, 1992). The Korean ethnic church usually provides services for children separately, either in Korean or bilingually (Min 1992). The Korean ethnic church also provides Korean adolescents with ample opportunity for social interactions with co-ethnic friends through Saturday recreational and cultural programs, athletic activities, church picnics, summer retreats, etc. In addition, most Korean immigrant churches also have a Korean language program for Korean children (Min 1992). For these reasons, Korean American children are likely to use the Korean language

and observe Korean customs more frequently in the ethnic church than in school. We will examine the effects of Korean ethnic churches on Korean ethnic attachment.

Classical assimilationist scholars have emphasized that second-generation children will lose much of their parents' cultural tradition (Warner and Srole 1945; Park 1950; Handlin 1951). Although cultural pluralism has been emphasized as characterizing American life since the late 1960s, even proponents of cultural pluralism have found a significant reduction of ethnic subculture in second- and third-generation Americans (Fandeti and Gelfand 1983; O'Brien and Fugita 1983; Lieberman and Waters 1988). Both assimilationist and cultural pluralists also agree that length of residence is positively related to immigrants' assimilation (Park 1950; Weinstock 1964; Gordon 1964; Schaefer 1988, p.46). In view of these theoretical points, American-born Korean children are likely to show a lower level of ethnic attachment than Korean-born youngsters, and those Korean high school students who came to the United States in their early years are likely to maintain a lower level of ethnic attachment than the first-generation Korean youngsters who came at late ages. This paper will examine whether three subgroups of Korean high school students—U.S.-born Korean high school students, those who came from Korea at early ages, and those who came at late ages—have differential levels of ethnic attachment.

#### DATA SOURCES

This study is based on survey questionnaires completed by 170 Korean students attending two high schools in New York City. Eight Korean students distributed the questionnaire to 170 Korean students attending one high school and two students distributed the same questionnaire to another 80 Korean students at another high school in September 1990. The sample was selected from those whom the eight students had easy access to. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it to the senior author using a self-addressed envelope. One hundred and seventy-five students returned the completed questionnaire. One hundred twenty questionnaires were completed by Korean students from one high school (hereafter referred to as High School A), and the others were completed by students attending the other high school (hereafter referred to as High School B). Five of the questionnaires were eliminated from data analysis because of missing information on some important variables.

High School A, located in Manhattan, is the best public high school in New York City. Students have been admitted through a competitive

examination in the ninth and tenth grades. High school B is one of the few good public high schools in Queens. The two schools respectively have approximately 400 Korean students. Not many recently arrived Korean children can be admitted to High School A because of their language barrier, and many Korean old timers live in the community where High School B is located. Thus, the Korean students attending the two high schools seem to have been born in the U.S. in greater proportion and have lived in the U.S. for a longer period than New York City Korean high school students in general.

Both the two high schools and the respondents were selected by a non-probability sampling technique, and thus the sample has limitations. As previously indicated, selection of the two high schools resulted in a sample bias in terms of a higher proportion of U.S.-born children and a longer period of residence in the U.S. However, it was justified because having a significant proportion of 1.5- and 2nd-generation Korean high school students was necessary to examine the effects of generation on ethnic attachment. Although the data were collected using non-probability sampling they seem to be useful for understanding the overall patterns of ethnic attachment on the part of the Korean adolescents in the United States.

The questionnaire included 47 items, all closed-ended. Some questionnaire items were related to students' individual and family backgrounds. Most other items measured their ethnic attachment levels using Likert-type response categories. Language is probably the most salient aspect of ethnic subculture (Reitz 1980; Waters 1990, p.116). Thus, the frequency of speaking Korean vs. English in three different situations was used to measure Korean adolescents' cultural ethnic attachment. In addition, the questionnaire included items on frequency of using the Korean name vs. the American name and frequency of eating Korean food vs. American food.

Questions about the racial categories of the students' three most intimate friends were used to measure social ethnic attachment. Many high school students have experienced dating, and whether Korean high school students date Korean or non-Korean partners can be a good indicator of social ethnic attachment. Thus, the respondents were asked to identify the racial categories of their first, second, and current dating partners. In addition, questions were asked to measure the degree to which the respondents feel comfortable to make friends with or date Koreans. In order to measure Korean high school students' ethnic identity, the respondents were asked to identify themselves as: (1) an American, (2) an Asian American, (3) a Korean-American, or (4) a Korean. The questionnaire was

pretested using ten students not included in the sample. After the pretest, some questionnaire items were adjusted and made clearer based on comments by students involved in the pretest.

Simple frequency table were used for decriptive information on the respondents' levels of cultural and social ethnic attachment. Proportional t-test analysis was used to test the hypothesis that Korean-American adolescents differ in three different social situations in cultural ethnic attachment: (1) home, (2) ethnic church, and (3) school (Blalock 1979, pp. 195-98). Analysis of variance was also used to compare three groups in ethnic attachment: (1) U.S. born second-generation Korean students, (2) Korean-born 1.5-generation Korean students (those who came to the U.S. at the age of 12 or under), and (3) first-generation Korean students (those who came to the U.S. at the age of 13 or more).

## FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of the respondents who speak Korean vs. English at home, in the ethnic church, and in school. Forty-one percent speak Korean more often than English at home. This finding is not unexpected, given the fact that the vast majority of Korean adult immigrants use Korean at home (Hurh and Kim 1987, p.67). As expected, the respondents speak Korean less frequently in the ethnic church than at home and even less frequently at school than in the church. In using the Korean name (see Table 2), too, the respondents show the highest level of ethnic attachment at home and the lowest level at school. Many Korean immigrant children feel that their school life is too American whereas their family life is too Korean (Min 1991b). In the ethnic church, Korean children can speak English and use some American customs in their interactions with co-ethnic peers, but at the same time they can also speak Korean and follow Korean customs. Therefore, the ethnic church seems to moderate cultural conflicts that most Korean-American adolescents may experience between the family and school.

Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of the respondents who eat Korean food. For breakfast, 90% of the respondents usually eat American food. However, for dinner, 70% usually eat Korean food. In a survey of Korean adult immigrants, 63% of the respondents were found to usually eat American food for breakfast, whereas 93% usually eat Korean food for dinner (Hurh and Kim 1987, p.66). Although Korean children are more Americanized than their parents in food habits, their dependence upon Korean food for dinner is greater than expected. The vast majority of young

Koreans seem to depend upon Korean food for dinner mainly because parents cook Korean food at home. When Korean children leave their parents for a college education and for their own families, they are likely to turn to American food more often than they do at the present.

Tables 4 and 5 provide data that shed light on the respondents' ethnic attachment in social interactions. The respondents were asked to choose the racial categories of their three most intimate friends. As shown in Table 4, the majority of the respondents chose Koreans as their first and second best

**TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF LANGUAGE USAGE BY SOCIAL SITUATION**

	Home	Church	School
(1) English Always, Predominantly or More Often	25.9	69.5	75.3
(2) English and Korean Equally	32.9	15.6	16.5
(3) Korean Always, Predominantly or More Often	41.2	14.9	8.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	170	140	170

Notes: T-test for the difference between Home and Church in % of those who speak Korean always, predominantly or more often:  $t = 5.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

T-test for the difference between Church and School in % of those who speak Korean always, predominantly or more often:  $t = 0.18$ ,  $p > 0.1$ .

**TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF NAME USAGE BY SOCIAL SITUATION**

	Home	Church	School
(1) American Name Always, Most of the Time or More Often	30.2	47.9	62.7
(2) American and Korean Names Equally	10.6	9.87	7.1
(3) Korean Name Always, Most of the Time or More Often	59.2	42.3	30.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	169	144	169

Notes: T-test for the difference between Home and Church in % of those who use Korean name always, most of the time or more often:  $t = 2.98$ ,  $p < 0.01$ .

T-test for the difference between Church and School in % of those who use Korean name always, most of the time or more often:  $t = 2.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

**TABLE 3. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF EATING KOREAN FOOD FOR BREAKFAST AND DINNER**

	Breakfast	Dinner
(1) 2-3 Times a Week or Less Frequently	90.0	10.6
(2) 4-5 Times a Week	4.7	19.4
(3) 6-7 Times a week	5.3	70.0
Total	100.0	100.0
N	170	170

friends, and 47% chose a Korean as their third best friend. The vast majority of those who chose Koreans as their close friends seem to have made Korean friends in their church or school. The two schools from which the sample was drawn have a large number of Korean students. More than 80% of the respondents are affiliated with a Korean ethnic church.

Nearly 20% of the respondents chose a non-Korean Asian as their best friend, and approximately one-fourth reported that a non-Korean Asian is their second and third best friend respectively. Most of these Asian friends seem to be Chinese students. This speculation is based on two observations. First, the two high schools have a large number of Chinese students. Second and more important, Koreans and Chinese are similar in physical and cultural characteristics.

Sixty-two percent of the respondents reported that they had dated opposite sex partners, and 29% were found to be regularly dating at the time of the survey. Table 5 shows the racial categories of the respondents' dating partners. The majority of the respondents chose Koreans as their first, second, and current dating partners respectively. Young Koreans seem to prefer other Koreans, not only as their close friends, but also as their dating partners. A significant proportion of the respondents were found to

**TABLE 4. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RACIAL COMPOSITIONS OF CLOSE FRIENDS**

Race	Most Intimated Friend	Second Most Intimate Friend	Third Most Intimate Friend
Korean	59.7	57.4	47.3
Other Asian	19.5	24.8	25.4
White	12.4	12.4	19.5
Black	3.6	3.6	3.6
Hispanic	3.0	0.6	2.4
Other	1.8	1.2	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	169	169	169

**TABLE 5. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF RACIAL COMPOSITIONS OF DATING PARTNERS**

Race	First Partner	Second Partner	Current Partner
Korean	56.6	50.0	58.0
Other Asian	17.9	21.2	8.0
White	17.9	21.2	28.0
Black	0.0	4.0	2.0
Hispanic	2.8	1.3	2.0
Other	4.7	2.5	2.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	106	80	50

have dated in the past or to be dating white partners. A higher proportion of female respondents than male respondents reported to have dated white partners. This finding is consistent with the general tendency that a much larger proportion of Korean-American women than Korean American men have married white partners (Jiobu 1988, p.161; Kitano *et al.* 1984; Min 1993). Many Korean American women seem to switch to white male partners mainly because they are more liberal in gender role orientation than Korean American men. Many Korean-American high school girls seem to feel comfortable dating white male partners for the same reason.

The respondents were asked to identify themselves as one of the following four categories: (1) American, (2) Asian American, (3) Korean-American, and (4) Korean. Only five respondents (2.9%) identified themselves as American, whereas 26% identified themselves as Korean. The majority (58%) considered themselves Korean-American. This finding suggests that Korean-American youngsters are strongly attached to Korean ethnicity in terms of their subjective identification.

Table 6 compares three subgroups—U.S.-born 2nd-generation respondents, Korean-born 1.5-generation respondents (those who have been in the U.S. for more than 7 years), and Korean-born immigrant respondents (those who have been here for 7 years or less) in a number of ethnic

TABLE 6. ETHNIC ATTACHMENT BY GENERATION

Ethnic Attachment Variables	2nd-Generation Respondents (N = 56)		1.5-Generation Respondents (N = 68)		1st-Generation Respondents (N = 46)		Significance of F-Ratio
	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	$\bar{X}$	(SD)	
Korean Language Ability	7.57	(2.47)	9.12	(2.86)	12.65	(2.34)	p < 0.001
Frequency of Speaking Korean	8.85	(3.50)	9.16	(3.22)	13.95	(3.97)	p < 0.001
Frequency of Using Korean Name	8.16	(5.49)	13.33	(6.52)	15.20	(5.92)	p < 0.001
Frequency of Eating Korean Food	6.09	(1.35)	6.47	(1.56)	6.48	(1.50)	N.S.
Korean Identity	2.86	(0.69)	2.96	(0.68)	3.48	(0.62)	p < 0.001
Having Korean Friends or Partner	8.73	(1.67)	8.09	(2.15)	8.43	(1.57)	N.S.
Feeling Comfortable with Making Korean Friends	4.21	(1.61)	4.32	(1.47)	4.39	(1.45)	N.S.
Importance of Dating a Korean Partner	2.93	(1.15)	2.79	(1.48)	3.10	(1.19)	N.S.

attachment variables. One-way analysis shows, as hypothesized, that Korean immigrant respondents show the highest level of attachment for the three cultural ethnic attachment and the ethnic identification variables included, whereas U.S.-born respondents show the lowest level. The three groups significantly differ in their cultural ethnic attachment and ethnic identification. However, they do not significantly differ in frequency of eating Korean food, maintaining social interactions with other Korean, and in their preference for making Korean friends. The three groups do not differ in social interaction patterns because Korean-American children, whether Korean born or U.S. born, maintain social interactions mainly with co-ethnics. This supports the view that Korean-American youngsters, regardless of their generation, have achieved a high level of cultural assimilation, but maintain strong social ethnic attachment.

## CONCLUSION

One major finding of this study is that Korean adolescents show a high level of cultural assimilation, but that their cultural assimilation and loss of ethnic subculture have not significantly reduced their involvement in Korean social networks. The vast majority of Korean high school students prefer other Koreans as close friends and dating partners. Moreover, the vast majority of them show strong psychological ethnic attachment by identifying themselves as a Korean or a Korean-American rather than an American. These findings are consistent with the theoretical view that cultural assimilation does not automatically lead to identificational or social assimilation for some minority groups. Young Koreans' strong ethnic identity and preference for Korean friendship networks are likely to increase as they grow older and encounter social barriers at college and at the work place.

Due to the nature of the sample, the findings have limitations in *generalizability*. Nevertheless, they seem to provide important clues to the assimilation and ethnic attachment patterns that 1.5- and 2nd-generation Americans among these post-1965 immigrant groups might follow. By virtue of their high educational levels, second-generation Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Iranian Americans are likely to achieve high levels of cultural assimilation. However, like the Korean sample in this study, they may maintain strong ethnic identity and social interactions mainly with co-ethnic members because of the physical and cultural distinctiveness of the groups and the social barriers they face.

Another important finding of this study is that the Korean ethnic church

plays an intermediary role for Korean American high school students between two radically different social environments: home and school. Korean American adolescents are encouraged to speak Korean and follow Korean customs at home, whereas they are supposed to speak English and follow American customs in school. Many Korean American high school students feel conflicts between what they learn at home and in school. The Korean ethnic church becomes a buffer for Korean adolescents by providing them with an opportunity for bilingual and bicultural social settings. Only a small proportion of Chinese immigrants are affiliated with their ethnic churches (Kim 1978). Although more than 80% of Filipino immigrants are Catholics, most of them attend American Catholic churches (Mangiafico 1988, p.174). The youngsters of these and other immigrant groups do not have the cultural buffer that Korean youngsters have.

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