Acculturative Stress and Coping: Gender Differences Among Korean and Korean American University Students

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Abstract

This study examined acculturative stress and coping among 86 university students of Korean heritage. Participants indicated their stress levels on 3 scales of cultural adaptation: discrimination, language and cultural ties, and social distance. Findings showed that Korean self-identified students displayed higher levels of acculturative stress than Korean Americans on most measures. In particular, Korean identified males experience the greatest amount of general acculturative stress overall, especially with regard to language and cultural ties and to discrimination. Gender differences showed that women used collectivistic responses in coping with acculturative stress. Case studies were also conducted with 5 participants to enrich the quantitative findings. Using quantitative and qualitative data from the case studies, we use cultural explanations of traditional gender roles to understand our findings. Implications for university counselors who work with international students from South Korea are addressed.

Keywords: acculturative stress, Korean heritage students, discrimination, international students, gender differences
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When individuals encounter a new host culture, they learn and adapt to that culture through a process called acculturation. For many newly arrived visitors and immigrants to the U.S., acculturation requires major psychological and behavioral adjustment. Some find themselves learning a new language, new values, and new social behaviors; others adjust to their new status as minorities and resulting changes in self-perception (Berry, 1995; Bornstein & Cote, 2010). Many individuals encounter at least some degree of stress as they adapt to a host culture that may differ from their home culture; this stress of cultural adjustment is called acculturative stress (Berry, 1995, 2006, 2006a, 2006b). As the number of South Korean immigrants and international students and workers to the U.S. continue to rise, with approximately 1.3 million Korean people living in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), researchers have taken more interest in examining cultural factors that predict their mental health.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the acculturative patterns of high-achieving men and women who self-identify as either Korean (KO) or Korean American (KA). Although each of these groups of students is studying in the U.S., the students are often marked by very distinct demographics. Most of the students who self-identified as Korean were international students or immigrants from South Korea, while the majority of self-identified Korean Americans were second-generation young adults. As such, KO and KA may struggle with different cultural stressors, be it language and cultural proficiency (Berry, 2003; Hovey, Kim, & Seligman, 2006) or cultural conflict (Ahn, Kim, & Park, 2008; Kang, Okazaki, Abelmann, Kim-Prieto, & Lan, 2010; Yeh et al., 2005). We ask two main research questions about these university students: 1) How do levels of acculturative stress compare among Korean-identified men (KOM), Korean-identified women
(KOW), Korean American-identified men (KAM), and Korean American-identified women (KAW)? and 2) How do members of each of these four groups cope with the stress of acculturation?

We used a quantitative as well as case study approach to demonstrate that KO and KA are challenged on a daily basis with acculturative stressors. The study contributes to the current literature by examining within group differences among young adults of Korean heritage and the intersection between one’s ethnic affiliation and gender in understanding individual responses to cultural adaptation. The findings furthermore challenge the model minority stereotype of Asian American ethnic minorities by looking at psychological outcomes associated with cultural stress.

**Model Minorities and Acculturative Stress**

Students of Korean heritage are one of the highest achieving groups in the U.S. (Kim & Park, 2000, 2003, 2005) and are often labeled "model minorities" who thrive in America without special difficulty. Current research, however, suggests that behind high test scores and good grades, high-achieving Korean and Korean American students face challenges comparable to those encountered by other ethnic groups, including poverty, discrimination, lack of resources, mental health problems, delinquency, and other barriers to academic success (Lew, 2003; Yeh, 2002). Furthermore, the discourse around the model minority stereotype becomes problematic when it attributes success and failure to individual merit and overlooks the resources that all youths need to support their overall well-being. In the past and even in the present, students of Korean heritage continue to struggle with structural barriers such as “pre- and post-immigration patterns, race and ethnic relations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and schooling contexts” (Lew, 2006, p. 14). In particular, acculturative stress, or “a response by people to life events that are rooted in intercultural contact” (Berry, 2006b), is becoming a serious issue among Korean heritage students in the U.S. Studies on acculturative stress have linked it to serious mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression (Berry, 2006b; Choi, 1997; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004). One study connected low academic self-concept
and spiritual struggle to poor psychological well-being (Park & Millora, 2010), suggesting that Korean and Korean American students’ mental health may depend on academic circumstance and other non-academic factors. Such studies demonstrate that academic well-being does not necessarily mean psychological well-being.

The process of acculturation involves changing attitudes toward host and home cultures. As individuals encounter contradicting expectations and values in their everyday lives, they may experience different levels of acculturative stress. Some may feel uneasy about getting by in the new country, while others may experience a grave sense of identity loss (Berry, 2006). Research also suggests that acculturation can vary on two dimensions—cultural conflict and cultural distance. Individuals can experience stress from cultural conflict when they feel torn between two cultures, as well as from cultural distance when they perceive the differences between their cultural identities (Haritatos & Benet-Martinez, 2002). Those who lack proficiency in multiple cultural ways of being often experience internal conflict when they feel the need to choose one culture over the other (Haritatos & Benet-Martinez, 2002). Fortunately, individuals can cope with the stress and anxiety of adapting to a new cultural environment by building a positive relationship to both cultures through an integrated model of biculturalism.

Therefore, while some individuals encounter much “contradiction, tension, and social strain” in the acculturative process (Haritatos & Benet-Martinez, 2002), others are able to negotiate their multiple cultural identities successfully. Individuals who are able to elicit positive physical, psychological, academic, and occupational outcomes tend to maintain aspects of both their home and host cultures, using the integration strategy of acculturation (Berry, 2003, 2006a; Heine, 2008). Highly integrated, or bicultural, individuals are capable of knowing and understanding two different cultural ways of being, and thus, can appropriately adapt their behaviors to different contexts (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). They see their different cultural backgrounds as
compatible, adopting a “third” combined culture where both ethnic backgrounds are perceived to be complementary and fluid; this identity can easily be integrated into their daily lives.

According to literature, Korean and Korean American students struggle with different acculturative stress issues. On the one hand, Korean students’ struggles with basic social tools like language and cultural competency may cause high levels of stress because of their relations to current and future academic and occupational success (Berry, 2003; Hovey et al., 2006; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). Reynolds and Constantine (2007) conducted a study on international college students from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to confirm that higher levels of acculturative stress predicted lower career aspirations and expectations. On the other hand, Korean American students may struggle with cultural conflicts within their families (Ahn et al., 2008; Kang et al., 2010; Yeh et al., 2005). In one study conducted on 19 Korean American undergraduate students, researchers found that the participants often struggled with immigration-related hardships such as loneliness and emotional distance from parents; these issues were interpreted more sympathetically later on in life as students came to understand their parents’ cultural and economic struggles (Kang et al., 2010).

The current study examines how we might nurture this type of cultural continuity among KO and KA young adults studying in the U.S. by taking a cultural perspective in order to dissect the issue of acculturative stress.

**Acculturative Stress among Men and Women of Korean Heritage**

Stress can affect men and women in different ways depending on culturally ascribed roles and expectations. Traditionally, Korean culture ascribed different role expectations for men and women. In accordance with Confucian conceptions of complementary gender roles, the father represented the outer life (“rightness”) and the mother the inner (“human-heartedness”) (Kim & Park, 2000). In this way, the Korean man’s role was in the public domain, while the Korean woman’s role was in the domestic domain (Cho, 1998). Because Korean culture is highly collectivistic (Clark,
Koreans tend to prioritize collective over personal goals, or see them as one and the same (Triandis, 1989). Thus, once societal standards such as gender roles are set by community members, Koreans feel pressured to yield to these culturally ascribed roles in order to maintain social harmony. Such pressures to conform, however, can cause much anxiety when individuals do not act “properly” (Triandis, 1989).

Korean families are typically patriarchal, with men at the head of the household. Historically, the male’s value of filial piety was demonstrated by his “loyalty to lord and state” (Lee, 1998). The Korean man mobilized his family’s social status through his different functions outside of the house. Status mobility was also achieved by raising a son who would not only continue the family line, but also become a successful member of society. Men had three primary responsibilities: to ‘represent the family in society, supervise family members, and control family property’ (Lee, 1998; Kim & Park, 2000). Although traditional roles have evolved over the years, men still play a prominent role in the modern Korean family as the head of the household. The modern Korean man is still expected to secure his family’s social and financial well-being through his work outside of the home. Therefore, in most Korean families, “…the husband dedicates himself primarily to his work” and “as the breadwinner, he spends most of his time and energy outside the house” (Lee, 1998, p. 257).

Complementing the man’s role in the public domain, the Korean woman's place was traditionally in her "home and family" (Kim & Hurh, 1998). In the past, most women did not work outside of the home, or gave up their occupations after marriage to devote themselves to their families. Historical studies of ancient Korea during the Yi dynasty (1392–1910) reveal that only mothers and wives were given any type of power to exercise authority (Cho, 1998, p. 199), demonstrating the importance placed on the mother's relationship to her husband and children. These values are rooted in the Confucian ideology of filial piety, which commended women for "how
faithfully they performed the assigned roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law" (Cho, 1998, p. 194). Within the family, the mother was responsible for upholding family values and teaching them to their children. Cho states, "Women as "housewives"...have guarded familial values most faithfully and transmitted them to their children" (Cho, 1998, p. 202).

In recent years, however, Korean heritage women in both South Korea and the U.S. have gained an increasing presence in the job market (Kim, 1998; Kim & Hurh, 1998). In particular, as Korean women maintain their traditional roles of homemaker and caretaker, they are finding the need to balance work demands with household and childcare responsibilities (Kim & Hurh, 1998). Similarly, Korean American women also struggle with adapting to conflicting demands of their home and outside world. Women are expected to preserve their Korean cultural heritage and traditional values, while also adapting to the social changes of a new socio-cultural environment (Kim, 1998).

Much of the previous research specific to gender groups has focused on Korean and Korean American women’s acculturative processes and suggests that they are at more risk for problems due to acculturation than are men (Choi, Miller, Wilbur, 2007; Kim & Rew, 1994; Shin & Shin, 1999). Studies demonstrate that females are especially vulnerable to depression (Choi et al., 2009; Kim & Rew, 1994) and adjustment problems originating from the burden of multiple roles as the homemaker and provider (Shin & Shin, 1999). In one study that included males, Hurh and Kim (1990) found that Korean immigrant men were most susceptible to acculturative stress during their first few years in the U.S., and that job satisfaction had a significant influence on the relationship between their length of stay in the U.S. and mental health. These findings may imply that acculturative stress may be better understood in the context of the traditional view of the man as the “breadwinner” and the woman as the “homemaker.” Still, there is a dearth of literature on the adaptive processes of high-achieving Korean heritage men in the U.S. and how they might compare with Korean heritage women. Levels of acculturative stress can depend on personal characteristics (e.g., gender) and
circumstances (e.g., degree of acculturation). The first step to understanding how acculturative stress varies across different factors is to examine how it is affecting the smaller groups within the Korean community.

**Coping with Acculturative Stress**

While comprehensive analyses taking gender into account in the Korean community have yet to be done, research demonstrates that length of stay in the U.S. is another important consideration for understanding how racial and ethnic minorities cope with difficulties. People engage in different coping strategies in order to deal with these challenging experiences to reach some form of adaptation (Berry, 2006b). In one study conducted by Mena, Padilla, and Maldonado (1987), researchers sought to understand how immigrants coped with the stress of acculturation by analyzing how coping responses varied by age of immigration as well as across generation. They found that the majority of older immigrants took an individualistic approach to coping with acculturative stress (i.e., taking planned action), while younger immigrants also relied upon social support (i.e., discussing the situation with others). Second and third generation individuals increasingly relied upon their social network to deal with their stress.

The results of later studies on Korean international students (Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004), Korean and Indian immigrant adolescents (Thomas & Choi, 2006), and Latino/a immigrants (Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado, & Garcia, 1998) demonstrate the importance of the social network in buffering them from the effects of acculturative stress. A study on Asian international students further demonstrates the importance of social support, social connectedness, and English proficiency in reducing levels of cultural stress (Yeh & Inose, 2003). To date, there is a scarcity of research on how Korean heritage students in the U.S. cope with stress. Through this study, we hope to examine how the different coping strategies manifest themselves in a culture that is highly collectivistic and gendered.
METHOD

Participants

Participants were 86 students enrolled in a West Coast university who self-identified as either Korean (n=43) or Korean American (n=43) with an average age of 25.5 years (24 undergraduates and 62 graduates). A total of 52 female and 34 male students participated in the study. According to the demographic information provided on an online survey (see Table 1), the majority of students who identified themselves as Korean were international students (92.1%), while those identifying as Korean American were mixed, with 51.2% indicating that they were U.S. citizens and another 32.6% stating that they were immigrants. Among the 86 participants, 54 students completed the English version of the questionnaire, while 32 completed the Korean version. In general, all students were performing well in school, reporting that their overall undergraduate grade was either an A or B. Students self-selected their socioeconomic status on one item in the demographic survey that gauged their family’s standard of living on a 5-point scale from low to very rich. Approximately 67.1% of the sample was from middle to low SES backgrounds, implying some economic adversity.

Five graduate students later participated in the interview phase of the study. Two of the interviewees self-identified as Korean (1 male, 1 female), while three self-identified as Korean American (1 male, 2 females). Graduate students were preferred over undergraduate students for the interviews because they were able to speak for both their undergraduate and graduate experiences. Participants ranged between 26 to 29 years of age, with an average age of 27.4. Interview participants came from families of “average” to “somewhat rich” standards of living. The purpose of the interview was to create 5 mini-case studies to understand how participants dealt with high adversity situations. Qualitative data from these mini-case studies were solely used to enrich our understanding of the quantitative data, and are by no means representative of the entire sample.
Procedure

The study proceeded with two major stages of recruitment. In the first stage of recruitment, Korean and Korean American undergraduate and graduate students were identified by their last names (e.g. Lee, Kim, Choi, etc.) using the school directory. Eligible students were 498 graduate students and 220 undergraduate students; each student received an email that briefly explained the project, its importance and relevance to them as Koreans, and requested their participation. The second recruitment phase utilized the two Korean Student Association listserves, as well as an Asian American Student Association email list to request the members' participation in the study. All students who agreed to participate in the project followed a link in their recruitment emails to complete an online questionnaire. The online survey was available in both English and Korean.

Based on answers to the open-ended section of the online questionnaire, students who indicated that their adversity experiences greatly affected their lives (i.e., “very much” or “much”) both before and after high school were later contacted to request their participation in the interview portion of the study. Twenty-three students were eligible for the interviews; potential interview participants were contacted separately in order to set up a convenient meeting time and place. The first 5 to agree to participate in the interview were selected for the study, while giving preference to diversifying the sample by ethnic affiliation and gender. At the actual interview session, participants were again fully informed about the project and their rights as informants, after which the interview session officially began.

Instruments

This online questionnaire was adapted from Padilla’s Societal, Academic, Familial, and Environmental (SAFE) Scale (Mena et al., 1987) and Kim’s demography measures (n.d.). Although the original stress scale included a total of 24 items, the final stress scale that we used for data analysis consisted of a total of 22 items following factor analysis (see below for an explanation).
Sample items from the SAFE scale were "I don't feel at home in this country (America)" and "It bothers me that family members I am close to do not understand my new values." Respondents rated the degree of stress that the indicated scenario had elicited in the past 6 months on a Likert scale that ranged from 1 = “Not stressful at all” to 5 = “Extremely stressful” (0 = “Doesn’t apply”).

Students then selected an appropriate coping response to each situation out of 10 possible answer choices: 1) I try to actively find out more about the situation and I take some positive, planned action., 2) I talk with others about the problem (friends, relatives), 3) I don’t worry about it. Everything will probably work out fine., 4) I become involved in other activities in order to keep my mind off the problem (e.g., exercise, reading), 5) I pray and/or consult a priest or a minister., 6) I seek professional advice (physician, psychologist, or counselor), 7) I draw upon my past experiences; perhaps similar situations might help., 8) I seek support from members of my cultural group., 9) I try to reduce tension through drinking, drugs, or smoking., and 10) Doesn’t Apply. In order to adapt the coping responses in this study to a useful framework for the Korean heritage participants, the authors coded each coping response as either individualistic or collectivistic.

Coping responses were considered *individualistic* if the students took action on their own to deal with the situation (e.g., “I try to actively find out more about the situation and I take some positive, planned action”) and *collectivistic* if they relied on another person or social network (“I talk with others about the problem”). The survey was administered in both English and Korean. English questionnaires were translated into Korean by a bilingual translator, after which the Korean survey was double-checked for errors by a second translator.

Five participants then participated in a follow-up interview session during which they elaborated on their open-ended responses in the questionnaire. The first author of this study conducted all interviews and allowed participants to speak in the language of their choice. Four of the participants spoke primarily in English during the length of the interview, while one of the
participants spoke mostly in Korean. Participants were asked four questions that gauged adversity experiences that could have negatively impacted their schoolwork, people who had an important influence on their academic careers, and their understanding of their own cultural identities. Of particular interest was participants’ discussion of their beliefs on how their culture affected them as people and the way they lived their lives. Interviewees were asked in the following manner: “In your survey, you indicate that you are [Korean, Korean American]. How do you think your culture has affected you as a person? How has it affected the way you live?” On average, interview sessions lasted in between 45 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes. The interviewer took notes during the interviews, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

RESULTS

A factor analysis was carried out to determine whether the 24 items on Padilla’s SAFE Acculturative Stress Scale were appropriate for this particular cultural group. In addition, we wanted to discern possible subscales within the general acculturative stress scale that would allow us to investigate the specific kinds of acculturation issues that were prevalent among the participants. We then discuss our findings from the multivariate analysis of variance to determine differences on the General Acculturative Stress Scale by gender and ethnic identification. Next, we conduct a Pearson’s chi-squared analysis of independence to test for gender differences in coping styles (i.e., individualistic or collectivistic). Finally, we present the results from analyses of variance on the three subscales of General Acculturative Stress: Discrimination, Language and Cultural Ties, and Family and Friend Social Distance.

Factor Analysis

A total of 7 factors had eigenvalues over 1, but only 3 of these factors were extracted using a varimax rotation of the factor loading matrix. The three factor solution was preferred because of its theoretical basis, the ‘leveling off” of eigenvalues on the scree plot, and because it explained most of
the variance. Other factor solutions were discarded because they had an insufficient number of primary loadings and were difficult to interpret. For eligibility in the factor structure, the criterion was set at .40 to examine the factor loadings. Two items (item 6 “My family is very close and does not want me to move away but I would like to” and item 10 “I don’t have any close friends”) were excluded from the scale due to their ineligibility in the factor structure because their loadings fell below the criteria of .40. The rotated factor loading matrix for the final 22 items are presented in Table 2.

The general acculturative stress score was calculated by computing the mean of the final 22 items. The general acculturative stress scale was then divided into three subscales that were determined by the results of the factor analysis. Negative feelings arising from experiences of discrimination or prejudice while living in the U.S. were explained by 7 items in the discrimination subscale (e.g., "People look down on me if I practice customs of my home culture."). The subscale language and cultural ties, on the other hand, consisted of 8 items that described stress originating from language and cultural differences (e.g., "I have trouble understanding others when they speak."). Finally, the stress of feeling alienated or different from family and friends because of one's cultural background was defined by 7 items in the family and friend social distance subscale (e.g., "It is hard to express to my friends how I really feel.").

A reliability check on the SAFE acculturative stress scale (i.e., General Acculturative Stress Scale) demonstrated high internal consistency for all 22 items ($\alpha=.88$). The 3 subscales within the SAFE Scale were also internally consistent, with $\alpha=.82$ for the Discrimination Scale, $\alpha=.87$ for the Language and Cultural Ties Scale, and $\alpha=.75$ for the Family and Friend Social Distance Scale.

**Acculturative Stress**

**General acculturative stress.** We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to explore the interactions between gender and ethnic affiliation on measures of acculturative stress. Results
showed that Koreans ($\mu=1.68, \sigma=.72$) had higher levels of general acculturative stress than Korean Americans ($\mu=1.33, \sigma=.70$) and that these differences were significant, $F(1, 68)=5.82, p=.019$. Korean males especially experienced significantly more stress than all other gender and ethnic subgroups for general acculturative stress (see Figure 1). While the main effect of gender on stress levels was not significant, the interaction effect of gender and ethnic identification was marginally significant with $F(3, 68) = 3.70, p=.059$. Korean males demonstrated a mean stress level of 1.93 ($\sigma=.67$), while the other subgroups had an average level of 1.48 at most. Among those who identified themselves as Korean American, females ($\mu=1.40, \sigma=.78$) had higher levels of acculturative stress than males ($\mu=1.19, \sigma=.48$).

**Stress of discrimination.** The stress of discrimination, on the other hand, was most salient among Korean males ($\mu=1.59, \sigma=.67$) and Korean American females ($\mu=1.24, \sigma=.96$; see Figure 3). The interaction effect of gender on ethnic affiliation was again significant at the $\alpha=.05$ level, $F(3, 68) = 4.54, p=.037$, but the main effects were not.

One case study Korean male expressed the alienation he felt when Korean Americans made isolating comments about his cultural background:

I didn’t like it when people like my American-born cousins would say, “that’s so Korean.” I thought that things like these could upset foreigners and it could just be that there are differences. So because of these things, even though I am a Korean and as a Korean living in America, I thought a lot about how it wasn’t good to say those kinds of things. Those kinds of things really bothered me in the beginning.

For this individual, being an international student was difficult in and of itself, but he felt further alienation because of discriminatory comments made by his Korean American cousin.
Language and culture stress. Differences between Koreans and Korean Americans in stress level were even more evident on issues of language and culture, $F(1, 68) = 32.06, p=.000$. The highest levels of acculturative stress again appeared among Korean males, with an average of 2.48 ($\sigma=.98$) (see Figure 3). This mean differs in other groups, which have means ranging from .80 to 1.65. Although the difference in acculturative stress by gender was not significant, the interaction effect of gender and ethnic affiliation was significant, $F(3, 68) = 5.01, p=.028$.

In one interview account, a Korean male described his experiences with language and cultural differences as he sought to adapt to an unfamiliar American culture. He explained:

I’m Korean and it’s not like I came here [America] early, but I came here late. English is my second language, so whether or not I’m good at it, whenever I speak the language, I just speak it. And if they [Americans] can’t understand it, I say it in a different way. I felt so limited at first that it just ended up having to be that way. I had no other choice but to do that.

In many ways, for this Korean male and many other international students and immigrants living in America, language was critical for survival. Even if they did not receive the proper support to reach English proficiency, they had to use what they knew in order to communicate with others and improve their language abilities in the process. But as the above comment from our Korean male informant illustrates, language troubles often led to significant levels of stress. For this participant in particular, the key to coping with the problem was accepting his own identity and trying his best to adapt. As he clarified:

Language is a tool, and since I am not a native, I can’t do it well. So when it comes to speaking, when it comes to hanging out with others, I just accept that I am a foreigner and try it.

Social distance stress. The only subscale in which both Korean American males and females
show higher levels of acculturative stress than Korean students was the social distance subscale. Issues of social distance were most salient for Korean American female students ($\mu=2.10$, $\sigma=1.12$), followed by Korean American male students ($\mu=1.87$, $\sigma=.61$). Females displayed more stress than males across both ethnic subgroups (see Figure 4); however, main and interaction effects of gender and ethnic identification on acculturative stress levels were not significant.

Another case study participant, a Korean American female who was born in the States but who spent a substantial part of her childhood living in Korea, described her experience of losing touch with her cultural and familial roots in Korea. She felt this most strongly when she returned to the United States and began associating with non-Koreans. She explained:

So, we [my family and I] really wanted to return [to South Korea], but we didn’t get a chance to go back. We were really close to our family in Korea, but after we came back, we kinda got derooted, I guess. Not really as close to our family and all this stuff. So, I just didn’t really feel that Korean. But, I spoke Korean to people at church, my mom’s friends that came over, but with my friends, I rarely spoke Korean.

When she came to the U.S. to stay, this student not only realized that she and her family were losing touch with her family in Korea, but also, that there were vast differences between the way things were done in her culture and the way she related to her friends (who were mostly Asians). As she came to terms with her dual identity, she also learned that she was very different from her fellow Korean Americans. In some ways, these were the people she disassociated with the most. She admitted:

So, the Asian Asian group that was really into their Asianness, I wasn’t that close to. I kinda didn’t like being associated with them that much.

She wanted to disaffiliate herself from her ethnic group because she was averse to the negative
behaviors the “Asian pride” identity was often associated with—like cheating and calling fights with other ethnic groups. Only after her extended stay in Korea was she able to consolidate her multiple identities. She described:

I made a lot of good friends, and I realized that Korean Americans are not anything like Korean people. I feel like Korean people are a completely different species, and they’re great. So I was like, oh I love Korean people. So I came back and I think I am kinda more this now—Korean American.

For this participant, it took time living in America to realize the type of Korean she was not, and a stay in Korea to gain a better understanding of the type of Korean that she could accept for herself. Her experiences brought her to a new appreciation of her cultural identity:

I think I appreciate what having this Korean heritage has given me. And the fact that I’m bilingual. And I appreciate where my mom comes from now and why she had the ideas that she had, and I think that kind of stuff just made more sense to me because I went to Korea and I hung out with my uncles, and I just kinda saw, and my cousins would explain to me.

This participant’s time in Korea taught her the value of her heritage and helped her to understand why her family behaved the way they did.

Another participant who identified herself as a Korean American female further expressed the discomfort she felt in the Korean American community. She stated:

I was very proud of being Korean in the sense that I speak the language, I think, pretty well because I grew up with my grandmother, I learned Korean at home...But I think it had to do with the way I related with other Korean American kids in the community and the adults. I didn't like the community that much. I felt very stifled in it.

She, too, was frustrated with the ethnic homogeneity of the Korean social group and their exaggerated Asian identity expressed by the way that they talked or behaved. In addition, as her
religious identity as a Christian became more prominent in her life, she experienced a high level of stressed because of the differences between her church culture and ethnic culture. She stated:

...there was hardly any inter mixing [in high school], which really upset me....I felt like I was always trying to get people to make those connections because I felt like most of my friends only knew their own people and they were not willing to branch out....I feel like Korean culture, more than other Asian cultures, is very insular.

She would often find herself distancing herself from other Koreans her age because she felt that they were always gauging whether or not she was like them and expected special treatment from those in their same cultural group.

In discussing her graduate school years in the States, on the other hand, one Korean female described a very different social experience. She benefited from the social network and support that being a part of the Korean community brought to her graduate life:

But here, since I have a lot of people from my college, my high school and there are hundreds of Koreans on this campus, and usually, they are nice towards you since a lot of times, you have some similar backgrounds. So, I did get a lot of help.

For this case study participant, the Korean community served to ease her transition into a new cultural and social setting through the social network and practical help that fellow Koreans provided her.

The stress of acculturation in the social setting is also evident among Korean American men, although Korean American males reported lower social distance stress scores than their Korean American female counterparts on the surveys. One Korean American male describes his experiences of being torn between two different cultures as he encountered different social settings. When he was among his Korean friends, he did not completely agree with all of their ways of thinking and behaving. He explained:
I don’t like going around in packs or groups. You know Koreans do this, if you go around campus, they always move around in like 4 to 6 to 10 people…You know they’re Korean by the way they’re going around, and I don’t do that a lot.

Another Korean male case study participant reiterated his disagreement of the exclusiveness of his cultural group. He explained, “…the Korean circle is too strong especially among Koreans. I tried really hard not to conform to that…” This student wanted to open himself up to American culture because he wanted to meet different types of people and make time for himself apart from the Korean circle. But, it was difficult for him to pull away from the tight Korean circle to explore other cultural circles.

At the same time, not all Korean American men felt completely comfortable following the American way of doing things in the workplace as exemplified by one of our case study informants. According to the informant, American culture did not lend itself to the social interaction he wanted to have with his fellow co-workers and the social interaction he felt he needed to successfully complete different projects. It was difficult for him to get to know his fellow American co-workers on a more personal level because they would go home after work hours and place boundaries around their personal and work lives. He explained, “…like the Korean way would be like even if it’s the first quarter, then you want to get acquainted with that person.” When asked whether he expected this at his workplace, he went onto say:

It makes me feel easier. It gets tension off because…when you start to know a person, then you know what you could do, you know what they want…So I guess that was a bit difficult.

As a Korean American male, this student internalized different aspects of the American and Korean cultures into the core of his identity. As such, he experienced distress when either of the two cultures clashed with his own self-definition.
Coping with the Stress of Acculturation

A chi-square analysis revealed significant gender differences in coping in 1 out of the 8 items in the language and cultural ties subscale of acculturative stress—item 15 (“It bothers me when people pressure me to assimilate”). On this measure, females were more prone to using collectivistic coping responses than males ($\chi^2(1, 49)=4.36, p=.037$). Gender differences were also apparent in coping responses on 2 out of the 7 items on the family and friend social distance subscale of acculturative stress. On both item 3 (“It bothers me that family members I am close to do not understand my new values”; $\chi^2(1, 58)=12.62, p=.000$) and item 8 (“It bothers me that I cannot be with my family”; $\chi^2(1, 68)=7.66, p=.006$), females were significantly more likely to respond to their stress more collectivistically than males. There were no significant differences across gender for discriminatory stress.

DISCUSSION

Acculturative stress is a very real phenomenon among Korean heritage students on university campuses and can have significant implications for their adaptation to campus life. Previous literature draws connections from acculturative stress to major mental health problems such as depression in the Korean community (Choi, 1997; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004). Research continues to uncover increasing cases of poor mental health among Koreans living in the U.S. (Atkinson & Gim, 1989; Kim & Rew, 1994; Kim, Kasser, & Lee, 2003; Lin & Cheung, 1999). Yet, Koreans’ strong academic performance leads many educators to wrongly assume that students are not affected by acculturative stress.

While previous studies have largely generalized the acculturative experiences of the Korean population as a whole or have focused on Korean women in particular, there is a scarcity of research that captures the experiences of different groups within the community. The current study conducts a finer grained analysis of the different types of Koreans residing in the U.S. and seeks to understand
the cultural lives of the following four groups: Korean men (KOM), Korean women (KOW), Korean American men (KAM), and Korean American women (KAW) on a major university campus. Participants in each of these four groups reported on their general acculturative stress, discrimination, language and cultural ties, and social distance from family, friends, and student peers.

Of the four groups that were studied, quantitative findings showed that KOM experienced the highest degree of acculturative stress, especially when dealing with language and cultural differences. Our case study interview suggested that Korean men may have come to terms with being international students in this country and perceive it to be a place that accepts diverse cultural ways. Still, Korean men may see that confining one’s culture to the exclusion of knowing American culture will not necessarily lead to higher social status and integration. Success in America requires language and social competencies that Koreans often feel they lack because of the social support, as well as the sense of isolation created by identifying and associating with other Koreans on the college campus. Yet, effective functioning in these areas is often necessary for employment, which is also related to well-being (Balls Organista, Organista & Kurasaki, 2003).

High stress levels among Korean males in these areas of cultural adaptation suggest that Korean men may still be internalizing traditional expectations for the male to provide for the family (Hovey et al., 2006). Many highly successful Korean men choose to study overseas at prestigious American universities in order to gain a competitive edge over their peers in the Korean job market. Still, others who wish to find employment in the U.S. and to compete with American peers who start off with greater social and cultural capital. When their expectations are not met, however, Korean men can experience enormous amounts of stress (Berry, 2003). Berry (2003) discusses this issue further when he says:

…credentials (education and work experience) are frequently devalued on arrival…sometimes
this is due to real differences in qualifications, but it may also be due to ignorance and/or prejudice in the society of settlement, leading to status loss, and the risk of stress.

Korean men who experience status loss and limitations in status mobility are especially susceptible to acculturative stress and related mental health problems. This is also true of other immigrant cultures that uphold traditional gender roles and can be found among Latino men (Salgado de Snyder, Cervantes, Padilla, 1990).

Korean men also experience stress due to prejudice and discrimination, as they navigate dual cultural worlds. For example, case study interviews showed that international students reported discrimination not only from non-Koreans, but also from Korean Americans whom they felt ought to be more supportive of their status as international students. Although the quantitative data did not capture whom participants were referencing when they reported being discriminated against, our qualitative data demonstrated that college counselors and other supportive personnel ought to make this important distinction. In interviews, Koreans were not always referencing intergroup discrimination, but they were sometimes referring to intragroup discrimination coming from their Korean American student counterparts. Future studies ought to investigate how and why Koreans are feeling marginalized on university campuses by the more acculturated Koreans, and how this might influence their adaptive processes. Importantly, the psychological stress international students experienced from feeling culturally disconnected from family and friends appeared to have minimal effects, however, on their academic ability to function effectively in an institution of higher education.

KOW painted a different picture of what it is like to live as an ethnic minority in the U.S. On average, they experienced some stress from dealing with issues of language and culture, as expected for international students whose first language is not English. They experienced very little stress in the areas of general acculturation and cultural alienation from family and friends, and even less so for
discrimination. This finding is supported by literature that suggests that non-Koreans generally have more favorable impressions of Korean women than Korean men (Kim, 2010). In other words, Korean women have a positive identity in the U.S. on many fronts, including academic achievement and social status.

We were able to see the other side of the story, however, when we examined the lives of Korean Americans who had mostly spent a substantial portion of their lives in the U.S. and were often here to stay. Our findings showed that Korean Americans did not have strong indications of stress on measures of general acculturation, language and cultural ties, and discrimination as reported by Korean international students. However, stress levels dramatically increased when Korean Americans experienced cultural differences when interacting with close family members and friends.

These results highlight Korean Americans’ lived experience of cultural conflict as they negotiated their dual ethnic identities in multiple social worlds (Yeh et al., 2005). The finding that our KAW demonstrated higher levels of stress than males on all acculturative measures suggests a stronger presence of cultural conflict in their lives that has not been reported previously. Existing literature describes the Korean woman’s role as the nurturer, educator, and culture-carrier in the modern nuclear family (Kim & Park, 2000). Young, educated Korean and Korean American women may not be consciously aware of gendered responsibilities to pass their culture onto their children. However, they may have internalized these expectations through the way in which they were socialized by their parents, as well as various cultural practices that communicate the importance of faithfully stewarding the Korean culture.

Yet, the reason why these cultural expectations might be more stressful for Korean American women on university campuses than for their counterpart Korean female international students is that Korean American women also have strong affiliations to the American part of their identity. Since both cultures are salient to the people that they are, Korean American women may feel torn
between two different worlds and may find it difficult to fully embrace either. Engaging with their new country (America) and its cultural practices may alienate them from members of their home culture (Korea); at the same time, engaging with their home culture (Korea) may simultaneously marginalize them from members of their host country (America). This inability to fully relate to people who do not share in their dual cultural identity becomes a critical issue especially for women in higher education who come from collectivistic cultures and have a need to belong (Kashima et al., 1995).

Our study confirms that cultural alienation from family and friends is an issue among university Korean American female students, who had the highest average score on measures of cultural alienation from family and friends (e.g., “It bothers me that family members I am close to do not understand my new values.”). Further investigation via interviews revealed that Korean American women were often troubled by losing touch with their cultural and familial roots after exposure to the Korean culture either through their home lives or through visits to Korea. As one female participant explained, “We were really close to our family in Korea, but after we came back, we kinda got derooted…” Yet, at the same time, Korean American women generally found it difficult to embrace their more acculturated Asian American identity and community because they found that it was sometimes associated with social exclusivity and other unfavorable behaviors. University KAM demonstrated parallel results, although they displayed lower levels of stress than their female counterparts. Less acculturated Korean American men expressed dislike towards Korean homogeneity and insularity, but found it difficult to separate from Korean ways of thinking when they approached social relationships in their work lives.

Finally, gender differences in coping responses reinforce prior research on women’s relational emphasis (Kim & Park, 2000). A woman’s sense of self may be built around being able to relate to others and maintain those connections with them. The findings of the present study in the context of
prior research on women suggest that high-achieving university Korean and Korean American female students are still bound by cultural perceptions of the woman's role in Korean society, even though they display acculturation into American culture. While university educated Korean American women displayed bicultural competence in knowing their culturally conflicting roles, they moved in the direction of their cultural selves when dealing with these acculturative processes.

One of the limitations of the study is that it was conducted on a sample of high-achieving Korean heritage university students and the findings, therefore, may not be generalizable to all Korean heritage individuals of similar age. For example, it would be interesting to investigate how acculturative stress manifests itself among Koreans heritage students who are struggling academically. Furthermore, while the quantitative data do not distinguish the different perceptions of Koreans about being discriminated against by white Americans and their more acculturated Korean American peers, our case studies only begin to highlight them. So far, no such study could be found, warranting more work on intragroup discrimination among Korean heritage students. Finally, our study’s sample included and combined the experiences of both undergraduate and graduate students for the purposes of understanding the overall experiences of Korean heritage students in higher education. Future studies can elaborate on the differences in the experiences of the groups by year of study.

This study contributes to existing literature on ethnic heritage students on university campuses in a number of ways and has important implications for educators, guidance counselors, and school psychologists. First, our study suggests that Korean heritage students may be experiencing structural and institutional barriers to their well-being that manifest themselves within the students in the form of cultural stress. Educators and school practitioners should be aware that while these students may be experiencing acculturative stress in school, they may neither be getting the support that they need, nor seeking out help in light of the model minority stereotype. Second, the study examined nuanced
group differences among one particular group of Asian Americans (ethnically Korean people are not all the same), demonstrating the need for school counselors and psychologists to support Korean males in particular. We found that although women did experience some adaptive stress, Korean-identified males experienced the greatest amount of general acculturative stress. Third, even though the main effects of ethnic affiliation and gender were not always significant, we found significant interaction effects for language and culture stress, as well as for discriminatory stress. Therefore, we believe that the intersection between ethnic affiliation and gender is an important place for educators and school practitioners to look into in order to gain a fuller understanding of group differences. We found that gender matters, moderating the relationship between ethnic identification and acculturative stress levels; in other words, being male or being female ultimately predicted how stressed out Koreans would be in areas of cultural adjustment. Therefore, our results support the notion that it is important for school counselors and psychologists to take a cultural perspective on traditional gender roles in understanding the underlying processes behind Korean heritage students’ acculturative stress. We expect that Korean males are especially stressed in both areas because mastering bicultural skills is necessary for educational and occupational advancement. This becomes important for them when they view their roles as men through a traditional cultural lens as the chief “breadwinner” of the family whose responsibility it is to put food and money on the table.

REFERENCES


Yeh, C. J., Ma, P. W., Madan-Bahel, A., Hunter, C. D., Jung, S., Kim, A. B., Akitaya, K., & Sasaki,

Table 1: Demographic Information by Ethnic and Gender Subgroups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>KOREAN</th>
<th></th>
<th>KOREAN AMERICAN</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MALE (n=18)</td>
<td>FEMALE (n=25)</td>
<td>MALE (n=16)</td>
<td>FEMALE (n=27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHILD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Level% Undergraduate</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Graduate</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace% South Korea</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% U.S.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Students μ</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in U.S. (in years)</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant Students μ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at Immigration(in years)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired Academic Degree % Doctoral/Professional</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Masters</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% B.A. or B.S.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Ranking% 0-10%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 11-25%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 26-50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 51-75%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% 76-100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Undergraduate Grade% A</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% B</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% C or Below</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FAMILY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Education% completed graduate school</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed university</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed high school</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed middle school</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed elementary school</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Education% completed graduate school</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed university</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed high school</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed middle school</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% completed elementary school</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family's Standard of Living% Low</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Below Average</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Average</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Somewhat Rich</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Very Rich</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Rotated factor loadings based on a principle component analysis using a varimax rotation of 22 items from the SAFE scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Discrimination</th>
<th>Language and Cultural Ties</th>
<th>Family and Friend Social Distance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14: I often feel that people actively try to stop me from advancing.</td>
<td>.765</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Because I am different I do not get enough credit for the work I do.</td>
<td>.760</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21: Because of my ethnic or racial background, I feel that others exclude me from participating in their activities.</td>
<td>.744</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16: I often feel ignored by people who are supposed to assist me.</td>
<td>.660</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23: People look down on me if I practice customs of my home culture.</td>
<td>.637</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22: It is difficult for me to &quot;show off&quot; my family.</td>
<td>.620</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: I have more barriers to overcome than most people.</td>
<td>.576</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: I don’t feel at home in this country (America).</td>
<td></td>
<td>.762</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19: Losing ties with my country is difficult.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.741</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18: It bothers me that I have an accent.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.706</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24: I have trouble understanding others when they speak.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.706</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: People think I am unsociable when in fact I have trouble communicating in English.</td>
<td>.690</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: In looking for a good job, I sometimes feel that my ethnicity or race is a limitation.</td>
<td>.623</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15: It bothers me when people pressure me to assimilate.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.582</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20: I often think about my cultural background.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.573</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: It is hard to express to my friends how I really feel.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.422</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8: It bothers me that I cannot be with my family.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.482</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: I feel uncomfortable when others make jokes about or put down people of my same background.</td>
<td>.633</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Many people have stereotypes about my culture, ethnic group, or race and treat me as if they are true.</td>
<td>.627</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: It bothers me that family members I am close to do not understand my new values.</td>
<td>.626</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Close family members and I have conflicting expectations about my future.</td>
<td>.624</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: It bothers me to think that so many people use drugs.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.588</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Factor loadings <.4 are suppressed.
Figure 1: General acculturative stress by gender, for Koreans and Korean Americans

Figure 2: Discrimination stress by gender, for Koreans and Korean Americans

Figure 3: Language and cultural ties stress by gender, for Koreans and Korean Americans

Figure 4: Social distance stress by gender, for Koreans and Korean Americans