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Immigration, threat perception, and national identity: Evidence from South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how perceived threats from immigration are associated with individuals' definition of national identity. Using a nationally representative, face-to-face survey conducted in South Korea, we find that people's reactions to immigration are basically cultural: those who believe immigrants undermine the longstanding cultural unity of South Korea are likely to embrace more exclusive definitions of national in-group, whereas threats regarding the national economy are not necessarily associated with nationalist sentiments. Concerns about public safety due to immigrants also turn out to affect South Koreans' sense of belonging to the nation. Additional analysis reveals that perceived cultural threats—neither economic nor social concerns—predict lower levels of national pride among South Koreans. The results suggest that increasing levels of racial and ethnic diversity correspond to an ethnocentric response by heightening non-economic concerns. Implications are discussed, referring to the unique socio-cultural context of South Korea.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have long given attention to the determinants of national identity and its consequences, reflecting a tradition of exploring identity formation and group relations in social psychology (e.g., Brown, 1995; Tajfel, 1981). Recent scholarly interest in national identity is particularly notable because it is rooted in the fact that a massive flow of immigrants has blurred national boundaries across many developed democracies. A growing number of studies now report a significant association between national identity and public attitudes toward immigration (e.g., Esses, Wagner, Wolf, Preiser, & Wilbur, 2006; Maddens, Billiet, & Beerten, 2000; Wright, 2011), opinions on redistributive policies and economic inequality (e.g., Johnston, Banting, Kymlicka, & Soroka, 2010; Solt, 2011), political involvement (e.g., Huddy & Khatib, 2007), and even subjective well-being (e.g., Ha & Jang, in press; Morrison, Tay, & Diener, 2011).

Following the strong interest scholars profess in the topic of national identity, the present study examines the relationship between perceived threats from immigration and South Koreans' national identity, i.e., subjective definition of national in-group. Our paper contributes to the literature by adding evidence from a country that provides a unique context for the study of national identity. South Koreans have traditionally considered themselves as a racially and ethnically homogeneous nation that shares a common bloodline and culture. Such an alleged ethnic and cultural homogeneity is arguably at the core of South Korean nationalism (Shin, 2006), which has often entailed xenophobic reactions to a recent influx of immigrants who now

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comprise about 1% of the population (Kim, 2011). In this regard, it is very intriguing to examine how firmly rooted national identity manifests and transforms itself with respect to immigration in South Korea. Acknowledging that national identity is not fixed but somewhat malleable depending on social changes (Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009), perceived threats from immigration are expected to modify one's definition of national in-group, presumably by making it more exclusive. That being said, in this paper, we assume that threats from immigrants determine national identity. The directional relationship from perceived threats to national identity makes sense in an ethnically and racially homogeneous nation like South Korea, where nationalistic sentiments have been stable, having only recently been challenged by demographic changes due to immigration. Though untangling the causal relationship between threats from immigrants and national identity is beyond the scope of the present study, our paper clearly distinguishes itself from some previous studies examining the opposite directional relationship, i.e., from national identity to attitudes toward immigrants (e.g., Esses et al., 2006).

Threats from immigration are not unidimensional (Berry, 2008; Berry & Sabatier, 2010). Most scholars of public opinion on immigration often articulate two different types of threat: economic (or realistic) threat and cultural (or symbolic) threat (Harrell, Soroka, Iyengar, & Valentino, 2012; Hjerm & Nagayashi, 2011; Stephan et al., 2002). Another body of research focuses on the third dimension of threat (say, social threat), which is primarily related to crime and public safety (Fitzgerald, Curtis, & Corliss, 2012; Wang, 2012). Economic threat comes from a belief that immigrants intensify competition in job market and impose a large amount of financial burden on social services and the welfare system. Cultural threat is based on a perception that immigrants—often using different languages and coming from different cultural background—are unwilling and unable to be fully incorporated in the host society, and therefore undermine its cultural identity. Finally, social threat reflects a belief that immigrants—particularly those who reside illegally—are prone to criminal activities that jeopardize social order. As social identity theory suggests, threats are usually based on a specific form of distinction between in-group (native-born citizens) and out-group (immigrants). Thus, it is safe to assume that as perceived threats increase, the boundaries that define one's in-group will become narrower. Likewise, we can expect a similar relationship between perceived threats and national pride—an affective attachment to one's own country (Smith & Kim, 2006)—which is conceptually different from national identity that sets cognitive, normative boundaries of the membership.

We rely on the widely used dichotomous conceptualization of national identity that demarcates normative boundaries of a nation (Jones & Smith, 2001; Kunovich, 2009; Shulman, 2002; Wright, 2011). The main hypothesis is that perceived threats from immigration are positively associated with a greater sense of “ethnic”—nationalistic and exclusive—identity, at the same time being negatively associated with or unrelated to “civic”—inclusive—identity. In a similar vein, threats from immigration are expected to be negatively associated with national pride. Specifically, considering the fact that South Korea has been a culturally homogeneous nation for a long time, the effect of cultural threat is expected to be more salient than that of economic threat and concerns about domestic security. We test these hypotheses, using a nationally representative, face-to-face survey fielded in 2010.

1.1. *Background: immigrants in South Korea*

At first glance, South Korea does not seem to be a fertile ground for assessing public views on immigration. South Korea is a country where deep-seated nationalistic sentiments have been forged by an alleged ethnic and cultural homogeneity (Shin, 2006). Immigration policies in South Korea used to be very exclusive. Since the early 1990s, however, South Korean government has gradually—yet very slowly—opened the borders to the foreigners. Not surprisingly, immigration policies of South Korea have been based on preferential treatments of ethnic Koreans abroad over other non-coethnic foreigners (Kim, 2008). Nevertheless, a variety of immigrants have recently come to South Korea, and they can now be categorized in three groups: North Korean defectors, Korean Chinese, and other immigrants of different ethnicities, including, but not limited to Indonesians, Vietnamese, Mongolians, Pakistani, and Bangladeshis.

Since the famine in the late 1990s, many North Koreans have left the country. More than 1000 North Korean defectors have been admitted in South Korea each year. As of 2012, the total number of North Korean defectors in South Korea is approximately 25,000, which is still relatively small in size. North Korean defectors are evidently viewed as political asylum seekers into South Korea. Based on the constitutional reason, however, North Koreans are not legally recognized as “refugees” in South Korea because they are not considered fleeing out of the country of origin. The South Korean Constitution declares that the territory of the Republic of Korea (ROK) includes the Korean peninsula and surrounding islands, and thereby North Korean defectors are, in principle, moving within the territory of ROK. Nevertheless, the social support and settlement policies regarding the North Korean defectors in South Korea are very much similar to those refugee support systems in other developed countries. In parallel with concerns over the human rights situation in North Korea, public attention to the migrants from North Korea has noticeably grown, and how to treat North Korean defectors has now become one of the most salient political issues in South Korea.

Korean Chinese are the largest—as of 2012, they are approximately 320,000—immigrant group in South Korea. Mostly from Northeastern part of China (Manchuria), they once entered South Korea for the purpose of visiting relatives or family members in the mid-1980s with the travel permits. Due to the limitation of opportunity based on the status as a minority ethnic group in China, however, the desires of upward mobility in socio-economic ladder have led to a large-scale emigration to South Korea since 1990s, even though most of the jobs available to them are low-paying, simple work such as construction, dish-cleaning, and house-keeping. Korean Chinese also stand out as one of the largest groups among marriage migrants in South Korea, consisting approximately 19% of the total international marriage migrants in 2012 (Kim, 2009).

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