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Social capital and assimilation of migrant workers and foreign wives in South Korea: The case of Wongok community

Hee-Jung Jun [a, *], Seong-Kyu Ha [b, 1]

[a] Department of Geography and Geology, Eastern Michigan University, 203 Strong Hall, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, USA
[b] Department of Urban Planning and Real Estate, Chung-Ang University, 84 Heukseok-Ro, Dongjak-Gu, Seoul, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the level of social capital of migrant workers and foreign wives in an ethnically diverse urban community in South Korea and compares the factors affecting differences in the level of social capital between the two groups. Through both quantitative and qualitative analyses, this study finds that bonding social capital is not strong for either group while bridging social capital is stronger for the foreign wives group. We find that higher bridging social capital in the foreign wives group is because of their permanent/longer residency in Korea, living in a Korean family, achieving language fluency, and motivations to interact with Koreans. This study also finds that bridging social capital is the major factor for facilitating social assimilation of migrants. Finally, we propose a framework to enhance social capital in Wongok, South Korea.

Introduction

Increasing ethnic diversity in South Korea (hereafter Korea) has been accelerated since the 1990s with an increase in the number of foreign laborers and foreign wives. As of 2011, the number of foreigners in Korea reached 1.4 million, which is three percent of the total population (Statistics Korea, 2013). As the traditional culture of Korea has embraced the idea of one ethnicity, increasing ethnic diversity has challenged Korean society in a variety of ways, such as the emergence of ethnic discrimination and social exclusion and a decline in social capital. To deal with the challenges posed by growing ethnic diversity, the Korean government has adopted multiculturalism as one of its leading policy paradigms for the coming decades.

Social capital is an important aspect of the social assimilation of migrants because high quality connections with others allow new arrivals to become a part of the host country (Dustmann, 1996; Iosifides, Lavrentiadou, Petracou, & Kontis, 2007). Social capital is also a critical factor for desirable economic, social, and political phenomena and so is the foundation of sustainable community development (Fukuyama, 1995; Grant, 2001; Ha, 2007; Knack & Keefer, 1997; La Porta, Lopez-de-Silanes, Shleifer, & Vishny, 1997; Putnam, 1993, 2000). Thus, it is important to examine that how social capital is accumulated among migrants to better understand their assimilation processes and to promote sustainable community development.

Park and Jung (2010) categorize foreigners in Korea into four different types: workers, wives, students, and professionals. Among these four groups, migrant workers and foreign wives account for more than 75% of the total foreign population (Park & Jung, 2010) and have led Korea in viewing itself as a multicultural country. The two groups require more attention from the Korean government because they are mostly from less developed countries, including China and other Southeast Asian countries, and thus are more vulnerable to discrimination.

Although there have been studies about the spatial distribution of the foreign population in Korea (e.g., Ha, Kang-Rae, & Ahn, 2011; Jeong, Ha, & Jun, 2011; Jun, Ha, & Jeong, 2013; Park & Jung, 2010), few studies have paid attention to social capital in ethnically diverse neighborhoods. More importantly, few studies have examined how different types of migrants develop social capital. Although coming from the same countries, migrant workers and foreign wives have different backgrounds in terms of family status, length of stay, and language skills, which are intimately related to the development of social capital.

This study aims to examine the level of social capital of migrant workers and foreign wives in an ethnically diverse urban

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 734 487 3419.
E-mail addresses: hjun1@emich.edu (H.-J. Jun), skha47@hanmail.net (S.-K. Ha).
[1] Tel.: +82 2 2025 9251.

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community in Korea and to find the factors affecting differences in the level of social capital between the two groups, which allows us to have a deeper understanding of migrants' assimilation processes. We use a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches by analyzing a survey dataset and in-depth interviews to explore the development of migrants' social capital.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to investigate social capital and the determinants of migrants' assimilation in an ethnically diverse urban community in Korea. This research is expected to have significant domestic policy implications for central and local governments, in terms of actions to improve the quality of life of the ethnic enclave, and comparative policy implications for other countries that have similar experiences.

Social capital and assimilation

Social capital is a measurement of the quality and traits of social relations among individuals and groups and is a critical factor for achieving collective goals that are socially desirable (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993). The major components of social capital generally include social network, generalized trust, and social norms: a social network is interconnectedness among people who share a common interest (Productivity Commission, 2003); generalized trust is the level of confidence indicating what others say is reliable, thereby eliminating mistrust; and social norms are informal rules that are socially desirable and expected to be followed.

The term, assimilation, is often used with regard to immigrants and various ethnic groups who have settled in a new land. It is a form and process of migrants entering and becoming a part of a host society (Castles, Korac, Vasta, & Vertovec, 2002; Hatziprokopiou, 2006). A strong social network, a high level of generalized trust for others, and a high degree of adherence to social norms are critical for becoming a part of the host society. Therefore, we can better understand the social assimilation of migrants by examining their perceptions and experiences through the major components of social capital.

Putnam (2000) distinguishes between *bonding social capital* and *bridging social capital*. Bonding social capital refers to social relations among members of a relatively homogenous social group such as a family or people in the same ethnic group. Bridging social capital refers to relations among heterogenous social groups such as people of different ethnic groups. An additional type of social capital is *linking social capital*, which is a refinement to Putnam's work (Cheong, Edwards, Goulbourne, & Solomos, 2007). Linking social capital concerns connections between individuals and groups who occupy different social positions (e.g., relationships between individuals and the police) (Judge, 2003; Productivity Commission, 2003).

Bonding social capital is often considered a critical factor for successful assimilation as it provides social and psychological support that enhances reciprocity and solidarity among homogenous people (Iosifides et al., 2007; Putnam, 2000). Studies find high bonding social capital among migrants, especially newly arrived ones (e.g., Iosifides et al., 2007; Ryan, Sales, Tilki, & Siara, 2008). However, high bonding social capital can also come at a cost. By creating strong in-group social ties, bonding social capital may establish strong out-group antagonism (Putnam, 2000). Also, strong ties only with co-ethnics may lead to socially disadvantageous outcomes and may foster slumming (Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter, 2005).

Scholars also address the benefits of bridging social capital for assimilation and sustainable community development. Social capital between different racial/ethnic groups can reduce inequality and lead to more successful assimilation by improving migrants' access to information, recommendations, mentoring, preparation, and other keys from out-group people in the host country (Dickens, 1999; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000). In addition, as racial/ethnic diversity often leads to more dissenting views and conflicts, thereby hindering agreement on community improvements, bridging social capital is also indispensable for sustainable community development (Alesina, Baqir, & Easterly, 1999; Boix & Posner, 1998; Boss, 2008; Cheung & Leung, 2011; Knack, 2002; Putnam, 2007). As a strategy for promoting bridging social capital, proponents of the contact hypothesis argue that contact between different ethnic group members reduces prejudice toward each other, thereby overcoming the negative effects of ethnic diversity and enhancing bridging social capital (Gordon, 1954; Hughes, Campbell, & Jenkins, 2011; Paolini, Hewstone, Cairns, & Voci, 2004; Stolle, Soroka, & Johnston, 2008).

To the viewpoint that bonding and bridging social capital is inversely related, Putnam (2000, 2007) proposes a hypothesis that high bonding social capital can co-exist with high bridging social capital. In relation to migrants in Korea, Putnam's hypothesis suggests a condition that migrants who have many co-ethnic friends can also have many friends of different ethnicities, such as Koreans. This hypothesis is supported by Ryan et al.'s (2008) study finding that some Poles in the UK maintained close relationships with co-ethnics but also established friendships with out-group people. That is, bonding and bridging social capital can be combined and co-exist.

Growth of migrant workers and foreign wives in Korea

Migrant workers

The growth of migrant workers began with economic growth in Korea in the late 1980s. With a significant increase in educational levels among native Koreans, Koreans have tended to avoid working in so-called 3-D (difficult, dirty, and dangerous) manual jobs. This tendency of aversion toward manual jobs has caused serious labor shortages for small- and mid-sized manufacturing firms. To mitigate the labor shortages in the 3-D manual jobs, the Korean government adopted policies to recruit foreign laborers in the 1990s and this policy scheme has led to the influx of migrant workers. At the beginning, migrant workers mostly came from China (mostly ethnic Koreans), Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, and more recently they have come from Russia, Pakistan, India, and Uzbekistan and even from far-off countries like Brazil and Nigeria (Kim, 2009).

Migrant workers can be roughly categorized into those who hold an E-9 (Non-professional employment) visa and those who hold an H-2 (Working-visit) visa. Migrant workers holding an E-9 visa are from 17 countries that have signed a bilateral agreement with Korea; these workers can stay up to five years. Those holding an H-2 visa are ethnic Koreans who are mostly from China and the former Soviet Union states and can stay for three years after the first entry and for another five years after reentry to Korea.

Dustmann (2000) argues that short-term working contracts prevent migrant workers from investing into human and social capital such as learning the language or making non-working relationships with other people (e.g., friendships) in the host country. This is because such investments as learning language will not pay off and leisure time is relatively more expensive in the host country than in their home countries. His arguments suggest that migrant workers who stay for a short time in Korea are less likely to make relationships with others and to invest in learning the Korean language and culture. These conditions also suggest that the level of