

# Korean Immigrant Women's Lived Experience of Childbirth in the United States

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To understand Korean immigrant women's common experiences and practices of utilizing health care services in the United States during childbirth.

**Design:** A qualitative interpretive phenomenological research design.

**Setting:** Recruitment was conducted through advertisement on the MissyUSA.com website, which is the largest online community for married Korean women who live in North America.

**Participants:** A purposive sample of 15 Korean immigrant women who experienced childbirth in the United States within the past 5 years was recruited.

**Methods:** Data were collected using semistructured telephone interviews and were analyzed using the Heideggerian hermeneutical methodology.

**Results:** During childbirth in the United States, participants faced multifaceted barriers in unfamiliar sociocultural contexts yet maintained their own cultural heritages. They navigated the unfamiliar health care system and developed their own strategies to overcome barriers to health care access. Korean immigrant women actively sought health information on the Internet and through social networking during childbirth.

**Conclusions:** Korean immigrant women selectively accepted new cultural beliefs with some modifications from their own cultural contexts and developed their own distinct birth cultures. Understanding a particular culture and respecting women's traditions, beliefs, and practices about their childbirth could help nurses to provide culturally sensitive care.

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The number of Asian Americans in the United States is continuously increasing due to immigration, a circumstance reflected in the relatively high proportions of the foreign born among this group (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). The number of foreign-born Asians in the United States has increased by 22 times over the past 50 years (Batalova, 2011), and Korean immigrants are a recent and fast-growing population. Of the 1.7 million Korean Americans in 2008, one million were Korean-born immigrants, two thirds were between ages 18 and 54, and 56% were women (Terrazas & Batog, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Almost all Koreans in the United States were from South Korea (Terrazas & Batog, 2010). Immigrants are more vulnerable to social marginalization, low socioeconomic status, lack of access to social resources, and poor access to health care services in the host country, potentially resulting in serious health consequences (Bollini, Pampallona,

Wanner, & Kupelnick, 2009; Derose, Bahney, Lurie, & Escarce, 2009). Therefore, ensuring access to health care services for immigrants is vital to improve their health status, and to protect public health.

Researchers have examined several barriers to immigrants' health care access such as language, cost, transportation, community awareness, and cultural sensitivity (Lee et al., 2010; Ou, Chen, Garrett, & Hillman, 2011). However, the heterogeneity of the Asian population poses challenges in the studies of racial and ethnic health disparities because Asians are sometimes categorized as a single group, and inter- and intragroup variation is ignored (Derose, Escarce, & Lurie, 2007; Kim & Keefe, 2010). Asian groups differ in their legal and socioeconomic status that influences their ability to obtain necessary health care (Derose et al., 2009). Therefore, to explore access and barriers

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**Despite the growing number of Korean immigrant women in the United States, their experiences regarding use of health care services during childbirth have rarely been studied.**

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to health care, it is important to understand the experiences from the perspective of the specific immigrant population.

### Background

Foreign-born women currently contribute more than one fifth of all live births in the United States. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2002). Ethnic disparities in birth outcomes are well documented among African Americans and Hispanics; however, the contribution of immigration to these disparities is not well understood. The literature has shown that associations between immigration and perinatal health outcomes are not always consistent and vary due to heterogeneity in nationalities (Qin & Gould, 2010; Urquia et al., 2010). Korean immigrant women and their birth outcomes have rarely been studied. It is uncertain to what extent women's foreign-born status influences birth outcomes and what factors or practices influences birth outcomes among Korean immigrants (Lim, Lee, Park, Sriram, & Lee, 2010; Yi, Schiff, & Boutain, 2012).

Childbirth occurs in a specific sociocultural matrix (Kaewsarn, Moyle, & Creedy, 2003). In most societies, people produce mutually dependent practices and beliefs related to childbirth in a particular cultural context. In Korean culture, for example, Taegyo and Sanhujori are the most common perinatal beliefs and practices (Lee, 2011). Taegyo is a set of regulations pregnant women must follow to control behavior and to maintain emotional stability during pregnancy, which is meant to provide the best environment for fetal development. Sanhujori is a practice of rigorous non-professional care during the postpartum period supporting a woman's recovery from childbirth. It is demonstrated when mothers provide postnatal care for daughters in the parents' home (Lee, 2010; Lee, 2011). Recently, Sanhujori-won (postpartum care facility) has taken the place of traditional practices of Sanhujori by mothers in Korean society.

Practices and beliefs related to childbirth vary across cultures (Dennis et al., 2007; Geçkil, Şahin, & Ege, 2009). The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of the U.S. population poses chal-

lenges to the delivery of maternal and child health services (CDC, 2002). Women's childbirth experiences and their perceptions are closely related to the beliefs, attitudes, and traditions of the women's own culture, which makes their experiences unique in each culture (Gallo, 2003). Therefore, experiencing childbirth in a foreign country could influence their childbirth experience and might be especially challenging when interacting with an unfamiliar healthcare system (Bollini et al., 2009; Kingston et al., 2011). Because culture influences the complexity of childbirth, it is important for health care providers to understand women's childbirth experiences and perspectives. Despite the rapid increase of Korean immigrant women in the United States, Korean immigrant women's experiences of health care service utilization during childbirth in the United States have rarely been studied.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Korean immigrant women using childbirth care in the United States through phenomenological interpretations of their narrative stories. The specific aims were to recognize the common meanings and shared practices of Korean immigrant women's access to health care related to childbirth in the United States and to explore Korean immigrant women's common resources used during the childbirth period and appreciate the value of available resources for health-seeking and social networking practices.

### Methods

The study was designed and guided by hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the average everydayness of humans' lived experience, which is understood within the cultural, social, and historical context in which they live (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). According to Heidegger (1927/1962), human beings are situated in their relationships with other people and things in the world, as being-in-the-world. Meaning exists in the context of these relationships. In addition, language or discourse is the vehicle to express and uncover one's perspective and understanding of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962).

### Sample and Setting

The purposive sample included Korean immigrant women living in the United States who were (a) Korean born and age 18 years or older, (b) married, and (c) experienced childbirth in the United States within the past 5 years. Recruitment was done

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