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## Research Article

## A Predictive Model on North Korean Refugees' Adaptation to South Korean Society: Resilience in Response to Psychological Trauma

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## SUMMARY

*Purpose:* This study investigated prediction of North Korean refugees' adaptation to the South Korean society and verified the goodness of fit between a hypothetical model and actual data in order to suggest the best model.*Methods:* This survey was conducted with 445 North Korean refugees living in a metropolitan area. Data were collected from September 1st to November 20th, 2012, and analyzed using SPSS Windows 18.0 and AMOS 17.0.*Results:* Traumatic experiences of North Korean refugees increased self-efficacy and psychological trauma. Acculturation stress decreased self-efficacy and increased passive coping. Self-efficacy affected active and passive coping, decreased psychological trauma, and increased resilience. Resilience is successful adaptation and refers to North Korean refugees' abilities to adapt effectively to stress. In particular, self-efficacy as the main parameter affecting resilience was confirmed.*Conclusions:* The results suggest that resilience can be improved through self-efficacy. It was the most significant factor decreasing psychological trauma and increasing resilience. Therefore, we need to develop programs for self-efficacy. The results also provide basic data for policy making for North Korean refugees.Copyright © 2016, Korean Society of Nursing Science. Published by Elsevier. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

## Introduction

Although the cumulative population of North Korean refugees residing in South Korea was a mere 641 until 1993, the number reached 23,000 by June 2011 as the defection rate accelerated after 2000 [1]. In addition, since over 100,000 North Korean refugees currently living in other countries, such as China, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Mongolia, and Russia, wish to immigrate to South Korea, the number of North Korean refugees in South Korea is expected to increase continuously [2]. North Korean refugees living in South Korea are assigned socially vulnerable group status due to exposure to discrimination in employment opportunities and socioeconomic activities due to language, culture, and customs differences [3]. Although the central and regional governments as well as private organizations provide support through various specific policies, including initial settlement support, residency protection,

and employment training support [1], most North Korean refugees fail to successfully adapt to the South Korean society. The adaptation difficulty is so severe for these refugees that some of them even consider leaving South Korea [1,3].

North Korean refugees experience relentless physical and emotional distress while being subjected to starvation, extreme violence, and torture (including forcible witness of public executions) in concentration camps and prisons prior to defection. They also endure additional psychological distress stemming from the fear of being caught while preparing for the harrowing trip itself. The refugees are exposed to a variety of traumatic experiences during the defection process, which range from severe hunger, thirst, cold, heat, and physical injuries to rape and sexual assault, deportation, separation from family members, death of family members, narrowly escaping death, and life in another country [4,5]. Furthermore, the acculturation process in South Korea exposes them to yet another kind of stress frequently observed in international students, immigrants, and refugees. At the root of this acculturation stress are fundamental differences between the two systems and ideologies, despite shared language, ethnicity, and

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history as Koreans. North Korean refugees experience a sense of loss while adjusting to their new surroundings through often abrupt and extreme changes. Discrimination, hostility, and fear experienced in the South Korean society, coupled with homesickness and guilt toward family members left in North Korea [4,5] often lead to fear, depression, alienation, high somatization, identity crisis, lethargy, and so forth, which disrupt effective adaptation [6]. North Korean refugees' healthy adaptation to their new surroundings is impeded by the traumatic events experienced in North Korea both before and during the defection process as well as the acculturation stress experienced in the South Korean society.

Adaptation is the ability to effectively cope with changes through acceptance and appropriate reactions. Successful adaptation of North Korean refugees means assimilating into the South Korean society without experiencing frustration or fear in everyday life [2]. From the integrative viewpoint, adaptation is seen as continuous change, which diverges into adaptation and maladaptation [7]. Resilience signifies successful adaptation to and acceptance of the new South Korean culture; it is a stress coping process whereby surrounding environmental factors influence successful adaptation of North Korean refugees. Degree of resilience is an indicator of comprehensive adaptation [8]. In contrast, North Korean refugees' maladaptation to the South Korean society manifests as posttraumatic stress disorder [4] from which half of the North Korean refugee population is reported to suffer [9].

Self-efficacy and an effective coping style are considered major factors of successful adaptation [6,7,10–17]. Self-efficacy is personal faith in one's ability to perform a task successfully to obtain a desired result [10]. It is an important contributor to successful adaptation because refugees renew their self-confidence by testing their abilities and gaining experience [9,12]. In other words, high self-efficacy in North Korean refugees indicates that they will likely adjust to the new environment effectively by being open to challenging new tasks and being committed to success. Coping styles refer to behaviors engaged in to escape from stress and adjust to changes or an active process of responding to dangers to resolve stress. Adaptation levels vary among people depending on the coping style they use under the same circumstances [12]. This means that while those who use effective coping styles can overcome severe stress with minimal effects on mental health, those who use ineffective coping styles may develop psychological symptoms from a less stressful event [13,16,17]. Although not quite sufficient, previous studies on coping styles conducted on North Korean refugees suggest that successful adaptation of North Korean refugees to the South Korean society is dependent on whether they choose an active coping style to solve problems or a passive coping style to avoid or defend against problems.

Previous studies conducted in the West have focused on the causal relationship leading to a comprehensive adaptation process based on a resilience model in response to psychological trauma in refugees and people with traumatic experiences; they have examined the association between adaptation and various variables, such as self-help strategies and response strategies [7,14,15,18–20]. However, existing studies on North Korean refugees are limited to social adaptation status surveys [2,3,5,21], comparative studies on adaptation status and characteristic problems [11,22], and the correlation between some of the variables affecting adaptation [4,6,9,11,16,17,23]. Thus, integrative studies on the adaptation process itself are sorely lacking. As effective adaptation is currently an important international issue, it is necessary to present an adaptation model for North Korean refugees in the South Korean society based on an analysis of successful stress response strategies and verification of other factors contributing to their effective adaptation.

Against this background, this study examined the causal relationship and process by which traumatic experiences and acculturation stress of North Korean refugees influence their adaptation as mediated by self-efficacy and coping styles. This study aimed to find a clearer picture of North Korean refugees' adaptation in the South Korean society and provide the basic data required to develop effective programs and policies with which to aid their successful assimilation to the South Korean society.

#### *Conceptual framework and hypothetical model*

This study aimed to identify the causal relationship among the factors influencing the adaptation of North Korean refugees in the South Korean society as well as the influence level of each factor. Analyses of previous studies and a literature review were performed on the basis of the model of resilience in response to psychological trauma. The model of resilience in response to psychological trauma explained the major variables determining a person's resilience from traumatic life events, and consisted of stress recognition, coping process, and adaptation process [4]. In other words, the model explained how a person recovered from psychological or physical traumas, and which factors were associated with effective coping and adaptation [20]. The recovery process was clarified and the process through which a traumatic event exerted its influence was specified upon examination of the interactions between the variables associated with adaptation. Application of the integrative model was particularly necessary since the process itself was crucial in North Korean refugees' acceptance of South Korean culture and their ultimate adaptation. The major variables determining one's resilience from a traumatic life event in the model of resilience in response to psychological trauma were recognition of traumatic life event, coping process, and adaptation. From the integrative viewpoint of adaptation where it was seen as a continuous process of change, adaptation was divided into maladaptation, psychological trauma, and resilience [4]. A traumatic life event is defined by its duration, severity, type, and subjective experience on the traumatic stress source [4], and traumatic experience and acculturation stress were specified for this study. The traumatic life events of North Korean refugees included both the traumatic experiences before migrating to South Korea and the acculturation stress experienced upon migration. Previous studies have shown that each had a different effect [6,23,24]. The ego process in the coping processes concerned the state of the ego, identity, and cognitive structure of the ego [4]. Self-efficacy was selected for this study since it too concerned the ego state, identity, and cognitive structure of ego [4].

Coping styles, distinguished into active and passive coping styles in the stress coping model [12], were verified to affect adaptation within a study conducted on North Korean defectors [16,17,25], refugees [15], and minorities [14,26,27]. Adaptation, the dependent variable, was composed of resilience and psychological trauma in the model of resilience in response to psychological trauma [4]. In this study, therefore, stress situations were categorized into traumatic experience and acculturation stress; the coping process was divided into self-efficacy and coping styles (active and passive); adaptation was categorized into resilience (positive) and psychological trauma (negative). Therefore, this study's hypothetical model was created with two exogenous variables, three parameters (mediation variables), and two dependent variables based on the abovementioned studies. The exogenous variables include traumatic experience and acculturation stress, parameters include self-efficacy and coping styles (active coping and passive coping), and dependent variables include psychological trauma and resilience (Figure 1).

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