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Intercontinental differences in overweight of adopted Koreans in the United States and Europe

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ABSTRACT

A greater proportion of the United States (US) population is overweight or obese (with BMI over 25 kg/m²) relative to all Western European populations, and it might be expected that migrants to either the US or Western Europe would develop patterns of overweight and obesity that reflect this difference. This paper examines the effects of obesogenic environments on Asians by reporting differences in rates of overweight (which is taken to include obesity in this analysis) among 261 adult South Koreans, which had been adopted in early-life into white middle class families living in the US and in Western European Nations. Data collected during an international adoption survey carried out for the Korean government in 2008 were analyzed. The prevalence of overweight of adopted Koreans raised in the US significantly exceeds the level among adopted Koreans in Europe by 11.3%. These intercontinental differences are statistically significant after controlling for sex, current age, age of adoption, and education. This paper supports the view that life-style factors are more detrimental for the weight status of people in the US than in Western Europe.

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1. Introduction

Although there are high rates of overweight and obesity combined in many European countries, Pacific Island nations and the Middle East, the United States (US) has one of the highest rates of any nation with a large population (Komlos and Baur, 2004). National differences in the extent and nature of obesogenic environments may be one explanation for variation in rates of excess weight across countries (Swinburn et al., 1999). Differences in sedentary lifestyles such as television viewing (Jeffery and French, 1998), nutritional factors including larger portion sizes (Nielsen and Popkin, 2003) or consumption of fast food (Jeffery and French, 1998), as well as social inequality and access to health care (Komlos and Baur,

2004) are associated with higher weight status. These obesogenic environmental factors vary between the US and Western European nations for cultural reasons. For instance, about 30% of 11 year-old US-Americans watch television frequently (for more than four hours a day on weekdays) compared to only 12–18% of 11 year olds in Germany or France (Currie et al., 2004). A pilot study among college students in the US and one European country, Spain, found that on average 1.5% of the US students never bought fast food, while 23.5% of their Spanish peers never did (Bryant and Dundes, 2008). Unlike the US, Western European welfare states guarantee minimum subsistence income and health insurance coverage (Komlos and Baur, 2004), factors that contribute to healthier lifestyles. Furthermore, Western European nations have engaged more actively with counteracting the obesity epidemic through government campaigns than the US, which has largely adapted a market liberal response to this issue (Popkin, 2009).

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Previous biosocial studies of adoptees from South Korea have examined nutritional status and physical development (Lien et al., 1977; Winick et al., 1975) and risk of precocious puberty (Teilmann et al., 2006). This paper examines the extent to which different national environments contribute to overweight and obesity by investigating the weight status of adult South Koreans adopted in early life into white middle class families in the US and various Western European countries. As distinct from previous studies based on adult migrants (Gutierrez-Fisac et al., 2010; Oza-Frank and Narayan, 2010), intercultural migration biases such as eating patterns, geographic clustering of ethnic diaspora and socioeconomic status differences are minimized. Moreover, the Korean population is effectively more homogeneous than most, since the Korean peninsula has experienced little international migration across previous centuries (Savada and Shaw, 1992).

2. People and methods

Adoption of South Korean children to the West started a few years after the Korean War (1950–1953) as one way of finding parents for many of the children orphaned during that war and during the political formation of the two Koreas. Between 1958 and 2005, about 157,000 South Koreans were adopted into predominantly white, middle-class families living in the US and Western Europe, including France, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Luxembourg (Jung et al., 2008; Overseas Korea Foundation, 2006). A smaller number of children were adopted into Australian families. From the mid-1950s to the mid-1990s, South Korea had the highest rate of international adoption in the world (Schwekendiek, 2012). The South Korean government slowly phased-out overseas adoption after hosting the Olympic Games in 1988, largely because of international attention having been paid to its high rates of baby-export to adopting families in the West, and its low levels of welfare expenditure as a newly developed nation. In 2008, the South Korean Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs initiated the first worldwide survey of overseas-adopted Koreans aged 16 years and above. The main reason for this was to increase knowledge about the circumstances of adult overseas adoptees, whom by this time were returning to South Korea in increasing numbers. The number of return visits to South Korea by overseas adoptees and adoptive families increased from 1283 persons in 1995 to 2634 persons in 2000 and 3378 persons in 2005 (Overseas Korea Foundation, 2006). The 2008 survey forms the basis of the present analysis, and was designed to investigate well-being, with the aim of improving conditions for those returning to South Korea, through governmental programs such as motherland tours, summer schools and birth family search support (Jung et al., 2008).

Because of data protection issues concerning both adoptive and biological parents, the South Korean government did not make available the details of adoptive households to researchers. Instead, all known adoption networks both at home and abroad were contacted by the

corresponding author, and members who were adopted from South Korea were asked to participate in the survey on behalf of the South Korean Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs. No incentives were given to participate in the survey, and the sample was largely consistent with a previous survey of Korean adoptees that was randomly sampled. For example, 74% of the adoptees of the present study held a university degree (Jung et al., 2008) which corresponds closely with the sample in an earlier survey that found that 75% of adoptees had undertaken higher education (Wickes and Slate, 1996). Similarly, gender ratios and birth year ratios in the present survey were consistent with those of the overseas adoptee population (Jung et al., 2008).

The majority of respondents were female (68%) largely because more girls than boys were adopted by Western families. Girls are more discriminated against and abandoned in Confucian South Korean society, and adoptive parents more often request adoptive daughters, as adoption agencies view females as being able to assimilate more easily than males into Western societies.

About half of the respondents were adopted into US-American households (52%), most of the rest (44%) being raised in Western Europe. Of those going to Europe, 22% had been brought up in France and the BeNeLux nations (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg), while 17% of them had been brought up in the Scandinavian nations (Denmark, Sweden, Norway) and a further 5% in either Germany or Switzerland. Four percent of them were adopted into Australian families. Because the present analysis involved a Europe–US comparison, adoptees from Australia were excluded.

In the course of the survey, adoptees were asked to indicate their current weight and height, and whether these characteristics were measured or estimated by them. Individual heights and weights were used to calculate the body mass index (BMI), the most widely used measure of excess weight in populations (Shetty and James, 1994). The BMI is calculated by dividing weight, in kilograms, by height, in meters, squared. Differences in self-reported and actual height and weight data are a known problem in anthropometric research (Danubio et al., 2008; Strauss, 1999). Of the present sample, 80% of males and 82% of females reported their height as having been measured, and 78% of males and 70% of females reported that their weight had been measured (Jung et al., 2008). The bias created by self-reporting in this study is therefore likely to be low. More generally, respondents taking part in such surveys tend to under-report their weight and over-report their height, with males overestimating their height by an average of 2.1 cm and underestimating their weight by an average of 1.5 kg. For females, height is usually over-reported by an average of 2.8 cm and weight is over-reported by an average of 1.9 kg (Danubio et al., 2008). Thus, actual BMI may be higher than BMI calculated from self-reported heights and weights, in the range of 1.1 kg/m² for males and 1.5 kg/m² for females.

The survey ended in January 2009, when a total of 344 adoptees were seen. In addition to adoptees into Australia, adoptees below the age of 18 years were excluded, as were those that opted not to report their height, weight or both

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