



## Short communication

## Does socio-cultural and psychological adjustment influence physical health? The case of North Korean refugees in South Korea

Albert Kraeh<sup>a</sup>, Fabian Jintae Froese<sup>b,\*</sup>, Sin Gon Kim<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Chair of HRM, University of Bamberg, Feldkirchenstraße 21, 96052 Bamberg, Germany<sup>b</sup> Chair of HRM and Asian Business, University of Göttingen, Platz der Göttinger Sieben 5, 37073 Göttingen, Germany<sup>c</sup> Department of Internal Medicine, Korea University, College of Medicine, Anam-Dong 5-ga, Seongbuk-Gu, Seoul 136-70, South Korea

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 1 June 2015

Received in revised form 1 February 2016

Accepted 3 February 2016

Available online 16 February 2016

## Keywords:

Socio-cultural adjustment

Psychological adjustment

Physical health

Resting heart rate

South Korea

North Korean refugees

Inconsistent mediation

## ABSTRACT

While substantial intercultural research has investigated the antecedents of socio-cultural and psychological adjustment, we know comparatively less about the consequences, in particular, about physical health outcomes. We analyzed the data from surveys and medical examinations of 394 North Korean refugees adjusting to their new lives in South Korea to better understand the relationship among socio-cultural adjustment, psychological adjustment, and physical health. Specifically, we focused on resting heart rate, as an important indicator of physical health. Our results showed a positive association between socio-cultural adjustment and psychological adjustment. Furthermore, we detected a so called “inconsistent mediation” that socio-cultural adjustment had a positive direct effect and a negative indirect effect on resting heart rate via psychological adjustment. These findings imply a double-edged role of socio-cultural adjustment. On the one hand, socio-cultural adjustment to the fast-paced and stressful life in an industrialized country may reduce physical health; while on the other hand, it may improve mental health, which in turn results in better physical health. Additional results also revealed the direct and indirect influence of refugees’ employment status on resting heart rate, implying that refugees who work are better adjusted and have better health. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

The successful resettlement of migrants involves adjustment processes in different life domains (Birman, Simon, Chan, & Tran 2013; Ouarasse & van de Vijver, 2005). Various intercultural migration studies have particularly distinguished between socio-cultural and psychological adjustment (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Jarvis, 2007; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). The former is best described as an ability to “fit in” the new socio-cultural environment (Ward and Kennedy, 1999) and refers to behavioral competence (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013). In contrast, psychological adjustment is associated with perceived psychological comfort in association with the new living environment and includes a broad range of mental health outcomes (e.g., depression or anxiety) (Birman et al., 2013; Birman & Tran, 2008). A tremendous amount of intercultural research has

\* Corresponding author. Fax: +49 551 39 20492.

E-mail addresses: [albert.kraeh@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:albert.kraeh@uni-bamberg.de) (A. Kraeh), [ffroese@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:ffroese@uni-goettingen.de) (F.J. Froese), [k50367@korea.ac.kr](mailto:k50367@korea.ac.kr) (S.G. Kim).

been conducted on the antecedents of these two classic adjustment domains (Tonsing, 2013; Wilson, Ward, & Fischer, 2013; Zlobina, Basabe, Paez, & Furnham, 2006). However, we know comparatively less about the consequences of socio-cultural and psychological adjustment, in particular, their association with physical health.

We seek to contribute to the literature in the following ways. First, we analyze the relation among socio-cultural adjustment, psychological adjustment and physical health. As prior intercultural research has analysed physical health primarily via self-administered questionnaires (Kelahera, Williams, & Manderson, 2001; Rochelle & Shardlow, 2014), our study concentrates on objective measures of physical health by assessing resting heart rate, an emerging health indicator. It has been recently associated with diverse vascular and coronary diseases (Böhm, Reil, Deedwania, Kim, & Borer, 2015), and it has been found to predict longevity as well as mortality (Jensen, Suadicani, Hein, & Gyntelberg, 2013). In their meta-analysis, Zhang, Shen, and Qi (2015) suggested that the relative risk of all-cause and cardiovascular mortality increased by 9% and 8%, respectively, for every 10 beats/min increment of resting heart rate. Given the increasing significance of this central cardiac output, a stronger consideration of resting heart rate within social and intercultural research has been suggested (McCrory et al., 2014).

Second, we tested our hypotheses on a unique sample, that is North Korean refugee (NKR) adapting to their new lives in South Korea, where they experience a vastly different socio-cultural environment. The migrant group of NKR is particularly noteworthy, as they indeed have ethnic and genetic characteristics that are very similar to those of South Koreans, but they have been “exposed to two-step changes, a different environment due to the division of two Koreas and then also resettlement in South Korea” (Lee et al., 2012, p. 5).

## 2. The North Korean refugee context and hypotheses

Originally a unified country, South Korea and North Korea have endured differing and often starkly contrasting economic, political and socio-cultural developments in the aftermath of their division in 1948. South Korea has made its way from an impoverished, war-torn nation to a rapidly developed, industrialized and westernized society (Cumings, 2005). Nowadays, high quality healthcare systems, high educational levels, as well as relative high security standards and western urbanized leisure values are available and practiced in South Korea. In contrast, North Korea is still a poor country with a regime that is rooted in communism and a planned economy. After the collapse of the communist bloc in the 1990s, North Korea was afflicted with several natural disasters, a persistent economic downturn and a great famine known as The Arduous March (Haggard & Noland, 2009). In fact, food shortages, public health problems, political repression and ongoing human rights violations of the regime resulted in adverse living conditions for many North Koreans (Bjertness & Madar, 2014). Thus, even though NKRs cannot freely leave their country, the number of NKRs entering South Korea has increased significantly in the last 15 years. It exceeded 1000 for the first time in 2001 and averaged over 2000 annually between 2006 and 2011. In 2014, an estimated 26,717 refugees officially resettled in South Korea (Korean Ministry of Unification, 2014). As a result of this increased number of NKR, health related issues occurring throughout the process of resettlement to South Korea are ever more important given the often reported poor mental and physical health of many refugees upon arrival. So far, studies of NKRs have predominantly focused on mental health diseases, e.g., posttraumatic stress syndrome (Min, 2008), which are due to several traumatizing experiences, including several forms of torture and sexual violence as well as witnessing the death of others (Lee, Lee, Chun, Lee, & Yoon, 2001). A further stream of research has highlighted malnutrition and the limited physical growth of NKRs compared to South Koreans (Schwekendiek, 2009). In fact, most of the examined NKRs' health problems have been found to be caused by various experiences in North Korea as well as by their experiences in the transit country China.

In contrast, we still know little about how socio-cultural adjustment to the new living environment in South Korea contributes to the health of NKRs (Lee et al., 2012). However, this is particularly important, as North and South Koreans belong to the same ethnicity, similar to former East German refugees escaping to West Germany (Van Hoorn & Maseland, 2010), but they have been raised in culturally different environments. Although we are not aware of any survey research comparing the cultural values of South and North Korea (due to the closeness of North Korea), the cultural differences are expected to be even more pronounced than in the formerly divided Germany because of a longer time period of separation, more pronounced economic differences, and the isolation of North Korea. Thus, prior studies reported the difficulties North Koreans face when transitioning to South Korea (Jeon, 2000). In fact, some North Koreans were so overwhelmed by the modern and westernized life in South Korea that they believed it was staged (Jeon, Min, Lee, & Lee, 1997). Min (2008) explained that “most North Koreans have lived a very simple life: in North Korea, they have few material possessions, live in small houses or apartments with little privacy, eat simple food, travel infrequently, and have very chaste lifestyles. The high-rise buildings, brilliant lights, many cars and geographical complexity of Seoul are often alarming to defectors” (p. 4).

Prior intercultural research has suggested that socio-cultural adjustment is strongly related to psychological adjustment, particularly during the first years of resettlement (Ward et al., 2001). Developing culturally relevant skills to help migrants function and fit in the new cultural environment can positively influence their psychological adjustment to the new environment (Wilson et al., 2013). Thus, transferred to the context of NKRs, we assume that gaining behavioral competence in the westernized environment of South Korea would be associated with improved mental health of NKRs, as they would be more familiar and confident with how to manage their everyday lives. Thus, we hypothesize:

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7323728>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7323728>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)