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The impact of social capital in ethnic religious communication networks on Korean immigrant's intercultural development

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the structural composition of the communication networks of Korean immigrants' ethnic church community, which became the main sources of their social capital. The study measured the effect of their network characteristics (i.e., size, diversity, and centrality) on individuals' monocultural and intercultural orientations. A total of seven hypotheses, drawn from Smith's (1999) theoretical propositions on intercultural communication networks, were tested. An organizational member survey ($N = 178$) of a Korean immigrant church was used to construct the whole network of the organization. Additionally, the relationships between major constructs (i.e., social capital and intercultural development) were analyzed with hierarchical regression modeling. Results suggested that network diversity had a positive influence on intercultural orientation while network centrality had a positive influence on monocultural orientation among Korean immigrant church members. Network size was positively associated with network diversity after controlling for the effect of English proficiency. Among the three groups of Korean immigrant occupations (i.e., professional, unskilled labor, unemployed), the professional group and the unskilled group showed a significant difference in their intercultural orientation. The research findings suggest that regardless of an individual immigrant's will, over-embeddedness in intra-cultural communication networks can increase one's ethnocentric cultural attitudes and beliefs.

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1. Introduction

Asians recently surpassed Hispanics as the fastest-growing new immigrants in the U.S. (Census, 2010¹; Pew Research Center, 2012). Korean immigrants are the fifth largest Asian ethnic group after Chinese, Indian, Filipino, and Vietnamese (Min, 2012), and there are more than 1.4 million Koreans in the United States. The first generation of Korean immigrants

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¹ According to the 2010 Census report, the Asian population grew faster than any other race group in the United States between 2000 and 2010. This was observed for the population who reported Asian alone (increased 43%), as well as for the population who reported Asian in combination with another race (increased 46%).

started migrating to the U.S. in 1903; they and their descendants are known for their cohesive ethnic community and relatively strong preference for interacting with coethnics (Bates, 1994; Min, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2012; Yoo, 2000). Eighty-three percent of all Korean Americans live in the 15 largest Korean-population states,² indicating a high residential concentration of Korean Americans (Min, 2012).

Many studies on Korean immigrants point out that readily accessible immigrant churches, especially Protestant churches for Koreans provide space and opportunities for social networking as well as pre-established networks (Hurh & Kim, 1984; Kwon, Kim, & Warner, 2001; Min, 1992; Park, 1997). Gathering with fellow coethnic immigrants to exchange information, emotional support, and help with one another is a common phenomenon in many immigrant communities. On the whole, this process of social networking generates unique forms of social capital for immigrant communities (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). The community members are “forced to trust” each other based on their membership of the community and repeated social interactions, and the solidarity among community members are “bounded” only within the community (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). The social and cultural consequences of such intensive networking processes revolving around a certain cultural institution (i.e., ethnic church organizations for Koreans) are worth examining because those immigrant organizations not only help immigrants adapt to the new environment by providing various resources, but also become their own sustained communities that influence individual members’ social actions, cultural beliefs and norms. Depending on the frequency and patterns of social interactions within and across various immigrant communities, the extent of knowledge and understanding about diverse cultures other than one’s own will vary.

Against this backdrop, the current study examined a Korean immigrant church from the standpoint of organizational communication networks, examining how the organization as a cultural institution for Korean immigrants is structured, and how it shapes individual immigrants’ intercultural sensitivity within the larger U.S. society. The fact that more than 80% of Korean immigrants in the U.S. are affiliated with Protestant church organizations (Zhou & Kim, 2006) affirms that studying their ethnic religious communication networks is an efficient way to reveal important aspects of their social lives. For many immigrants, including Koreans, the church serves as a “microcosm” of their social lives (Chai, 1998).

Previous studies analyzed immigrant social networks at an individual- or a family-level (Palloni, Massey, Ceballos, Espinosa, & Spittel, 2001; Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002) and mostly adopted an ego-network approach that visualizes the construction of social networks based on an individual’s perception of his or her own social world.³ However, research suggests that an examination of the organizational networks in which immigrants are embedded gives better insight for observing a broader and more detailed structure of their social networks. Such research will be able to demonstrate how the structure of social networks enhances and/or limits individual immigrants’ actions. Pre-established immigrant organizations such as ethnic churches and small businesses can enact relatively clear membership boundaries. Thus, studying those organizations offers a chance to adopt a whole-network approach in assessing structural configurations and their impact on individual members. Based on a review of immigrant social networks research and the literature on immigrant cultural adaptation, a new conceptualization of immigrant social networks from a communicative perspective is proposed in this study. The current research poses an overarching question about how Korean immigrants’ structural positions in their ethnic religious organizational communication networks influence their development of intercultural sensitivity.

2. Literature review

Upon reviewing previous immigrant social network studies, social capital emerged as a major theoretical concept and is a common thread in understanding the dynamics of international migration, from initiation to settlement and success in host countries (Massey et al., 1998; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Sanders & Nee, 1996). Many researchers have equated social capital theory with a social networks approach. However, there was no consistent definition of social capital used across studies. The lack of consistent definition was explained by the fact that the concept of social capital may indicate a specific type of resource or a social tie or both, or the fact that an immigrant works within an ethnic enclave. Thereby, it became difficult to associate the term, social capital, to only one element. What was relatively clear from the past 30 years of research and its varying conceptions of social capital was that the concept is a multi-level construct including a dimension of social relationships and/or networks of relationships (see Adler & Kwon, 2002 for a comprehensive review on conceptualizing social capital). Still, social capital can be defined as “a *web* of cooperative and trusting *social relationships* [emphasis added] that provide individuals with emotional and/or material support and opportunities and help to coordinate joint activities” (Brehm & Rhan, 1997; cited in McLean, 2007, p. 8). In a similar vein, Lin (1999) argued that “social capital is captured from embedded resources in social networks” (p. 28).

Coleman’s (1990) discussion of social capital centers on its conception as “generalized reciprocity” referring to “mutual trust and commitment among interrelated actors that are independent of any specific transaction,” which may result either from cultural values backed by effective norms or from repeated interactions among the same actors over time (Sandefur & Laumann, 1998; Peng, 2004, p. 1051). While criticizing Coleman’s vague and overly positive conception of social capital,

² That is, states with Korean populations of 20,000 or more such as New York, New Jersey, California, Illinois, and Georgia.

³ The ego-network approach allows one to report to whom each person is connected, but the connections among those people within one’s social network are not known or reported by themselves.

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