Korea Journal, vol. 59, no. 1 (spring 2019): 188–211.

Culture, Race, and Perceived Mobility among Adult Children of Korean Immigrants in the United States

Inseo SON

Abstract

Existing literature reports that children of Korean immigrants in the United States have strong achievement-oriented values, which facilitates upward mobility and assimilation. However, researchers generally do not examine how their marginalized status as children of non-white immigrants shapes their perceptions of career motivations and success. Drawing upon in-depth interviews with 69 adult children of Korean immigrants in the United States, this study explores the situated meanings that they attribute to their mobility experiences. Findings reveal that participants verbally endorse the significance of group-specific cultural values, but they relate their perceptions of mobility to their disadvantaged status. They see their parents' struggles as immigrants as a motivation to seek upward mobility. Yet their status as children of non-white immigrants leads them to have an undervalued understanding of career motivations and individual skills. Findings suggest that race and immigration have an impact on the understanding of social mobility among children of non-white immigrants.

Keywords: Korean Americans, children of immigrants, race, ethnic culture, social mobility

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This study is developed from the author's PhD dissertation project (Son 2014), including his published article (Son 2015).

Inseo SON is a postdoctoral research fellow in Asiatic Research Institute at Korea University. E-mail: panopticon17@gmail.com

Introduction

Since mass migration of Koreans to the United States began with the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Hing 1993), the history of Korean America has reached over fifty years and the Korean-American community has undergone significant changes. Actual immigration from Korea has slowed and immigrants' children have been replacing the immigrants. First-generation Korean immigrants have achieved the so-called *American Dream* in that they have been economically successful as a group. Yet they have been segregated economically, socially, and culturally from the American mainstream. Their children, however, are experiencing marked integration into U.S. society, with a level of acculturation and education their parents never achieved.

Immigration scholarship has pointed out that strong cultural values prioritizing hard work and education in Asian communities have led to high educational aspiration and achievement orientation among the children of Asian immigrants, including Koreans (Kitano 1969; Portes and Zhou 1993). Immigrant parents bring the Confucian tradition from their home country (Kitano 1969), cultivate it in their community in the host society (Portes and Zhou 1993), and transmit it to their children, which produces an achievement-oriented culture. As a result, children of Asian immigrants generally succeed in educational and occupational achievements and successfully get ahead in American society.[1] In line with this research, the American media describes Asian Americans' achievement-oriented culture as showing the spirit of the American Dream, lauding the group as "model minority" (Petersen 1966; Chua and Rubenfeld 2014).

A number of researchers, however, claim that by emphasizing cultural values, the hardships experienced by the children of Asian immigrants in American society have been ignored. They argue that Asian cultural values are not the sole driving force of educational and occupational advancement, and that Asian American youths as people of color consider a variety of structural constraints in determining their careers, including insecure

1. For a review, see Sakamoto et al. 2009.

family finances, lack of social and cultural capital, and racial stereotypes and discrimination (Hirschman and Morrison 1984; Kao 1995; Sue and Okazaki 1990; Xie and Goyette 2003; Louie 2004b). Many empirical studies on ethnoracial inequality in social mobility mainly focus on the direct effect of structural factors; however, relatively little is known about whether and how these constraints shape Asian Americans' self-understanding of career motivations and success. Taking 1.5- and 2nd-generation Korean Americans as a case study, this paper explores their perceptions of social mobility in relation to their marginalized position in the United States: how do they understand their career motivations and success in relation to their cultural values and social status as children of non-white immigrants? Whether and how does their perceived marginality shape their perceptions of career motivations and success?

To answer these questions, this study draws upon in-depth interviews conducted with 69 adult children of Korean immigrants in the United States. Using grounded theory analysis (Charmaz 2006), this study examines the situated meanings that interviewees place on career motivations and success. This study finds that participants verbally endorse the existence and significance of group-specific cultural values, but that they attribute distinctive meanings and values to their mobility experiences that are deeply associated with their marginalized status as children of non-white immigrants.

Literature Review

Immigration from Korea to the United States began in earnest in 1965 when immigration reform made Koreans eligible for mass immigration (Hing 1993). Early immigrants largely consisted of well-educated people with middle-class backgrounds, and most suffered downward mobility in the United States, working in ethnic enclaves due to their marginalized social positions (Yoon 1997). In contrast, second-generation Asian Americans including Korean Americans have shown far greater educational and occupational advancement than any other immigrant counterparts in the

United States, even controlled for sociodemographic factors (Kao and Tienda 1998). Prior literature generally attributes this achievement to the presence of strong achievement-oriented values within the culture of their families and communities. Empirical evidence shows relatively higher aspiration in education among Asian American youths than other ethnic and racial counterparts (Chen and Stevenson 1995; Zhou 1997).[2]

Race scholarship prioritizes structural factors, rather than cultural ones, to explain the motivations of upward mobility among the children of Asian immigrants. The immigrant families' class background from their home countries is found to be mainly responsible for the higher aspirations and academic performance of their children (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017; Wu 2002). Early immigrants from East Asia were disproportionately well-educated due to the U.S. immigration policy preference for professionals (Hing 1993). This skewed class composition in East Asian immigrant communities plays a crucial role in shaping their children's mobility.

Furthermore, studies stress a close association between motivations for upward mobility and perception of "marginality" among Asian Americans (Hirschman and Morrison 1984; Kao 1995; Sue and Okazaki 1990; Xie and Goyette 2003; Louie 2004b). As children of non-white immigrants, second-generation Asian Americans are disadvantaged regarding insecure family contexts, lack of social and cultural resources, and racial stereotypes and discrimination. These constraints not only directly limit or distort paths to mobility, but also shape perceptions of social mobility through their lived experiences. Many studies on Asian American families illustrate how marginalized immigrant family contexts, such as financially insecure family businesses and parents' experiences of racism, lead to high aspirations for success among their children (Louie 2004b; Park 2005). This tendency is also found in African-American families (Beasley 2011). In addition, perceptions of racism and stereotypes affect perceptions of mobility. Xie and Goyette (2003), for instance, suggest that Asian Americans' emphasis on education and professional careers is a product of their perception of the racialized labor market; they seek employment in particular areas because

2. For a review, see Sakamoto et al. 2009.

they believe those industries are less discriminatory. Studies also indicate that the racial stereotype of a so-called *model minority* that designates Asians as hardworking but not intelligent can shape motivations and perceptions of mobility (Zhou 2004; Chao et al. 2013; Chou and Feagin 2008).

Racial ideology also influences understanding of mobility among people of color. Contemporary color-blind ideology justifies and rationalizes racial inequality by idealizing social mobility as being solely determined by individual endeavor and fair competition (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin and Vera 1995). The liberal principles of *equal opportunity* and *free choice* generalize the experiences of middle-class white Americans, obscuring racial minorities' disadvantages in the labor market (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Hochschild 1995; Young 2004). Racial minorities as well as white Americans approve these ideological frames of a fair labor market, though in varying degrees (Hochschild 1995; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2001). Research illustrates that people of color endorse the liberal idea of mobility in spite of their disadvantaged experiences, which is an *adaptive response* to oppressive racial inequality, leading to its reproduction (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Pyke and Dang 2003). In particular, U.S. society treats Asian Americans as *honorary whites*, enjoying lower levels of discrimination than African Americans and Latino as they are more likely to accept the values and principles of the dominant society to distinguish themselves from other darker-skinned minority groups (O'Brien 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2002; Kim 1999).

In short, the literature on second-generation Asian immigrants suggests that motivations of upward mobility and success are shaped not only by group-specific cultural values but also by their perceptions of their own disadvantaged social position as children of non-white immigrants and structural discrimination and racism. By examining how adult children of Korean immigrants understand their mobility experiences, this study aims to begin to reveal the impact of race and immigration on social mobility among immigrants of color.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N=69)

Characteristic		N	%
Residence	New York	28	40.6
	Washington D.C.	23	33.3
	North Carolina	18	26.1
Age	20–29	22	31.9
	30–39	28	40.6
	40–49	16	23.2
	50+	3	4.3
Gender	Male	34	49.3
	Female	35	50.7
Generation	Second (native-born or immigrated at age 0–4)	52	75.4
	1.5 (immigrated at age 5–12)	17	24.6
Education	BA (or currently in college)	44	63.8
	MA and Higher	25	36.2
Occupation	Management, Business, and Financial	28	40.6
	Computer, Engineering, and Science	2	2.9
	Education, Legal, Community Service, Arts, and Media	21	30.4
	Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	11	15.9
	Service	1	1.5
	Office and Administrative Support	3	4.4
	Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	1	1.5
	Military Specific	2	2.9

Note: Occupational categories follow the 2010 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system of the United States (https://www.bls.gov/soc/).

Data and Methods

The data for this research is drawn from a larger project on the economic integration and social exclusion of adult children of Korean immigrants. From January 2011 to December 2012, I conducted in-depth interviews with 69 second-generation Korean Americans who currently live in North Carolina or the metropolitan areas of either New York or Washington DC

(hereafter NC, NY, and DC). NY and DC have the second and third largest Korean populations in the United States after Los Angeles, CA, according to the 2000 census (Min 2006). NY has been one of the traditional destinations for Asian immigrants, second to Los Angeles, CA. DC is a relatively new destination for Korean Americans but immigration there is outpacing both Chicago and San Francisco. While NC is not an Asian-concentrated region, it has one of the fastest-growing Asian-American populations, next to Nevada and Arizona (APALC 2011). I consider NY and DC more traditional *Korea Towns* and included NC for comparison.

Respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. I began with local ethnic churches, sports associations, non-profit organizations, and my personal contacts, and interviewees provided referrals to additional interviewees. All participants were born in the United States or arrived in the United States before they were 13. That is, they are 2nd or 1.5 generation immigrants (Zhou 1999). The original project focused mainly on middle-class Korean Americans; all respondents hold a college degree or are currently enrolled in a degree program and have held a full-time job (Table 1). Most of them are in white-collar occupations.

All of the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. The semi-structured interview allows researchers to concentrate on specific topics, and, at the same time, discover unexpected patterns during the interviews. Interview questions focused upon how respondents' parents socialized them in terms of their education and careers, how they perceived their parents' mobility-related messages, how they perceived their parents' careers, what meanings they attach to their own educational and occupational trajectories, how they compare their careers with those of non-Korean peers, how they make sense of success and mobility, and how they evaluate their own merits and talents. Each interview was conducted face-to-face in public places, tape-recorded, and transcribed later by a professional service for analysis. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to three hours.

The data collected were coded primarily on the basis of a grounded theory approach, allowing the systematic discovery of unexpected patterns and concepts inducted from data, while still being motivated by prior assumptions (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The majority of

respondents attest that being Korean is generally responsible for their high aspirations and educational and career achievements. However, during the course of my analysis I found a difference between respondents' generalized attitudes toward mobility and their narratives of lived experiences. Respondents' accounts of their own mobility experiences have been coded into pieces, and later combined into several categories to make a consistent story (Charmaz 2006).

Findings

Upward Mobility as Familial Responsibility

Almost all respondents agreed that the Korean-American community has strong cultural values that stress hard work and education and that these values have influenced them. When asked about their motivations for their career choices and successes, almost every respondent associated upward mobility with familial success (Park 2005). Many described unquestioningly obeying their parents' direct and indirect pressure to study hard and get a professional career (Min 1998; Louie 2004a). While respondents did refer to strict childrearing practices stressing a child's obligation to his or her parents, they also attested that they had decided to choose the career that parents wanted for them, and that they strove for material success to pay back their parents' *sacrifice* to ensure they had better opportunities than they would have in Korea (Park 2005). Informants described the unstable economic conditions their families had experienced in small business sectors, including the high risk of bankruptcy, frequent changes of business, and frequent moves. Also, they witnessed their parents enduring harsh discrimination and racism while running businesses. Beyond community values, they developed a sense of familial responsibility from the parents' economic and social struggles. Joanne,[3] for example, a 26-year-old born in the United States, said:

3. All names of participants in this study are pseudonyms.

> When I think about my parents, I really do see their coming to America as something that could really only benefit their kids. I mean, you know, what did they get out of it? I don't really know. But I think they sincerely came here for us. And they kind of get to live through us. Through our successes, you know, *if we're successful, then they will be successful too*. You know, I think at the end of their life, they'll be happy, even if they lose their money, lose their jobs, they go bankrupted if our jobs are safe. [Emphasis added]

Joanne has seen how much her parents "struggled" as immigrants in the United States. Both of her parents worked for long hours; but her family's finances were not stable. Growing up, Joanne developed a sense of family responsibility, which helped inform her career path.

Some respondents shared Joanne's sense of responsibility even though their parents had decent jobs. They described themselves as having had a middle-class childhood, but they experienced their family's class as lower than it actually was. They often compared their parents' situation as immigrants to those of their "native" peers; thus, they considered their family poorer than their classmates. This comparatively understood class position motivated respondents to pursue success. Chong, a 28-year-old pharmacist who immigrated at age 5, represents a typical example. Abandoning a stable job at a big company in South Korea, his father decided to come to the United States on a ministry mission. Soon after, his father started working as a dry cleaner while his mother worked as a nurse. Although his parents earned enough to pay Chong's college tuition, he perceived his class status to be relatively insecure, which served as a major motivation for his own success. He said that as a child he did not realize how poor his family was, and that this mother's training as a nurse always made it possible for his parents to have a steady income. But when he went to college he realized how much his parents were struggling to pay for his expenses, "So I think that's when I realized I need to pursue a good, a good-paying career." Chong is cognizant that he may need to provide for his parents someday in the future.

In keeping with their recognition of familial responsibility, informants

generally did not relate career choices to their own personal interests. Some informants emphasized parental pressure to achieve certain professional positions in their career decisions, while others stressed their own sense of responsibility. But either way they consider their personal interests to be easily disposable. Taehan, a professor aged 49, is a typical case. He immigrated at aged six with his parents and grew up in a Southern state. He acknowledges that he became a professor to please his parents and meet his obligations to his family. He said that his family's "happiness" is far more important than his own and that he would be willing "to do almost anything to make them happy." He recalled:

> They (my parents) wanted me to become a doctor, but I couldn't fulfill their wish of becoming a doctor because at that time, I was too young, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't study hard enough and so on. So later on, they said, "You're not going to become a doctor. At least become a PhD for us." So I said, "Okay, I think I can do that." So I applied to the PhD program and I got in.

Taehan found that realizing his parents' dream for him did not make him happy:

> Once I got in…I didn't like it at all. And if I didn't have my parents, I think I would have quit. I would not have finished my PhD program. I would have quit because I was really unhappy. But because they wanted me to get it, I stuck through it. Because I wanted to make them happy I wanted to do something that they wanted me to do.

Participants' accounts conflicted with the media portrayal of success-oriented values and attitudes as the sole driver of Asian American success. Rather, they showed that participants tie the family story of sacrifice to their marginalized status as children of non-white immigrants, as well as to their cultural heritage. The familial sense of success was a strong motivation found among respondents, often leading them to think of their personal goals as disposable and undesirable.

Devaluation of Career Motivations

Respondents understand mobility and success not just in relation to their immigrant status, but also in comparison to non-Korean peers, in many cases, white Americans. While respondents stressed familial responsibility for their immigrant parents as their main motivation for success, they often compared their motivations with those of their non-Korean peers. During interviews, it was surprising that many respondents devalued their own motivations and choices, even though they currently have professional jobs. Many downplayed their own endeavors and achievements, whether or not they allowed their parents to direct their career choices. Their devaluation of career motivations and choices seems to reflect the racial stereotypes of Asian Americans, rather than their cultural heritage. Ashley, for example, a 37-year-old female who immigrated to the United States at the age of 5, currently works in the design industry. She said:

> American families, they pretty much let their kids find themselves first. They are very supportive of whatever little Tommy wants to do, like "Tommy wants to go play basketball, let him go play basketball. Let him do what he wants to do," you know. But for Korean Americans, it's more like, "Tommy Cho wants to play basketball? Oh, hell no. You know, he's going to study at home, do math, do science." Because like some of my friends or my friends' friends, my friends who were like here or whatever, I ask them "Do they want to do this?" and they said "No." You know. People want to be doctors, who are now doctors are like, "I didn't want to do this. It's because of my parents."

According to Ashley, her parents wanted her to "be in the science or social work," because they did not want her to "struggle." She did not follow her parents' wish and entered into the design industry that she personally desired. Nonetheless, Ashley downplayed her own achievement by contrasting the career motivations of Korean Americans as other-directed with those of "Americans" as self-motivated. Through this, Ashley seemed to accept the widespread stereotype of a model minority that sees Asians as

intelligent but passive and not creative (Chao et al. 2013). She continued to say that Asian kids are less "innovative" because their parents are "limiting their children." Ashley thus generalizes the mobility experiences of Korean Americans as parent-directed.

A number of respondents, like Ashley, idealized self-motivation and individualized mobility that they see as more common in "American families." Regardless of where they grew up, their references to American families seem to refer to white, middle-class families (Pyke 2000). This suggests that respondents' accounts do not just reflect their experiences with their peers but are influenced by the racial stereotype set by the dominant white majority. This ideological image further functions as a reference frame with which respondents compare their own experiences of mobility (Pyke 2000). Participants described the career choices of "Americans" as explorative, liberal, and self-oriented, while they thought of young Korean Americans' choices as passive, pre-determined, and passionless. Like Ashley, respondents did not reference individual examples, which suggests they see this pattern as reflecting a group difference. Through this, respondents devalued their experiences of mobility as being not normal in comparison to the ideological frame.

Some informants attributed the difference in motivations for success to racial differences in childrearing practices. They believe that childrearing styles determine children's motivations. The respondents said that their parents are authoritative and do not allow them to explore their potential talents and interests. They often ascribed this to Korean (Asian) traditional culture. This account, however, seems to ignore the experiences of their immigrant families. Many of their parents struggled with long hours at work, financial difficulty, and poor English skills; they did not have enough time to take care of and communicate with their children (Min 1996). In addition, this account reflects and reproduces one common prejudice relating to Asian American families—the so-called *Tiger Mom* label that depicts Asian parents as too authoritative and their children as too passive (Chua 2011; Wu 2002). Peter is a 27-year-old man born in the United States. He said of the difference in childrearing between Korean-American and American families:

> I think that, I think maybe in America that white parents give their children a little more liberty. They let their kids be a little more individualistic, which can be a good thing, it can be a good thing, but Asian-American parents are more cookie cutter. You know what I mean. They are more, they fit the mold. Be a doctor, be a lawyer, be a business owner kind of thing or something like that. Go to Harvard, go to Yale, very much like, like a picture. Very defined within boundaries and stuff and then like, white people are more like explore, go live your life. They say instead of be this picture, paint your own picture more like that. I could be wrong, but that is how I feel.

Peter's parents divorced when he was in junior high school and his mom raised him. His mother was so "Americanized" not urging him to go to "Harvard" or "Yale" and become a "doctor" or a "lawyer." Peter actually went to a state college and became a manager in a private company. Moreover, he grew up in an Asian-populated neighborhood in California where the Asian way of life is prevalent. Nonetheless, he considers "white parents" as a reference group and accepts the stereotyped image of "Tiger Mom" by saying that Asian parents raise their kids as "cookie cutter."

In addition, some informants felt that Korean Americans emphasize success over career motivation, and some of them think they are unsuccessful even if they have a full-time white-collar job. The informants often compare their own success with their "high-achieving" co-ethnic peers, rather than with non-Asian ones (Zhou and Lee 2007). Yet they also devalue their success in comparison with "Americans"—middle-class, white Americans—because they see pursuing success for their families instead of themselves in a negative light. Although her parents wanted her to be a pharmacist, for example, Joanne chose to become a secondary school teacher. She criticized what she saw as Korean-American culture, saying that for them success means,

> Making a lot of money and being able to support their parents. Yeah, maybe different for girls and guys. For a girl, it could be marrying someone who makes a lot of money and taking care of your parents. [She laughed.] You know like, there totally has to be an outward evidence of

> success, you know, making lots of money, having a nice car, nice house, I think Americans define lots of internal success—are you really content? Are you happy? Are you pleased? Whereas for Koreans, I need to see something.

The perception that Korean Americans prioritize material success and familial support over what Joanne calls "internal success" resonates with their conception of career motivation as being family-directed. At the same time, Joanne sees Korean-American culture as still traditional and not normal compared to the American standard; it perpetuates the stereotypical image of Asian Americans as "forever foreigners" (Tuan 1998). This image is further strengthened by her perceived gendered obligation to support her parents; it becomes an additional burden for her to undervalue their willingness to succeed.

Respondents' self-understanding of success and mobility, in short, illustrates that by comparison with "Americans," they often devalue their own motivation and perceived success. They conceive that their career paths are other-directed and lack self-interest and believe that their cultural heritage is mainly responsible for that. However, analysis reveals that participants' devaluation of their career motivation perpetuates the stereotype of Asian Americans imposed by the mainstream race. By relying on stereotypical reasoning in explaining the differences between Korean Americans and "Americans," they traumatize their career motivations and choices as being inferior to (white) Americans.

Perceived Disadvantage in Individual Skills

In addition to their perceived motivations towards success, informants often devalued their abilities and skills in the labor market. Even though many of them did well in school and in the labor market, many informants say that Korean Americans in general are deficient in the "social" merits—communicative skills and assertiveness—compared with their non-Korean peers, which becomes an obstacle for them to perform better in the labor market. Moreover, some believe that they still lack these skills. While they

verbally ascribe their lack in merit to their family and culture, their accounts propose that the racial prejudice and discrimination that they experienced in school and in the labor market are mainly responsible (Steele 1997; Lin et al. 2005).

Phillip is a 27-year-old man born in the United States and working as a management consultant. He attests that people with an "Asian background…undervalue the communication aspect and we emphasize the academic aspect. And…you need both to be very successful, at least in my industry." He described communication as including the skills of debating issues, expressing opinions, performing assertive behaviors, and networking. Phillip describes upbringing practices that do not support the development of certain skills (Dhingra 2007; Kibria 2002). He explained:

> With our family structure, so we learn to be more docile and more submissive, or compliant with our elders or more experienced people. So at work when my supervisor and my manager, if someone tells me to do something I'm going be like, "Ok I'll do it," You know? I might disagree with or, I might not think it's a good idea, but in our culture, we're taught to go along with it and not be expressive [of] our disagreement with it, right? Now I think, you know, the white society or the American culture, that's actually very different. I think they're taught to be more expressive and more open about their personal feelings and sometimes like, if they don't think it's right, they'll say like, "This is not right." And they'll disagree with the management without the fear of, like, the consequences. Now I think a lot of times the management, in, a group like us especially,…they actually prefer us to be more expressive.

Phillip says that he would be more successful if he expressed his opinion more openly but found it difficult because of his upbringing. He describes "culture" as an essential trait shaping the upbringing and behavior of Asian Americans as a whole. This cultural understanding allows Phillip and other respondents to ignore any internal variations in merit among Asian Americans (Pyke 2000). Also, Phillip's account reflects the racial segregation of the labor market where Asian Americans are concentrated

on STEM[4]– and healthcare–related fields (Xie and Goyette 2004; Min and Jang 2014). This occupational concentration contributes to, and reflects, the reproduction of the model minority that racializes Asian Americans as naturally merited in technical skills. This stereotype in part influences Phillip's self-understanding of his own skills.

Some informants have further conceived of their social skills as inferior to white school peers. They attest that while they often outperformed other non-Korean peers in school, they felt that they had fallen behind in communicative skills. Although they identified their families and culture as mainly responsible for this, their narratives suggest that their earlier experiences as children of non-white immigrants partly shaped their perceptions of their own skills. Many respondents shared that they had considerable difficulties during the early years of school because of their race and, in particular for those in the 1.5 generation, their poor English skills. They experienced ignorance, isolation, or even bullying and discrimination because they were "different" from others, regardless of where they grew up. The respondents often raised a "sense of shame" as a minority race, which continued to shape their behavior and attitudes in social interactions (Trieu and Lee 2018, 68). Catherine, a 32-year-old nurse, was born in the United States. While she grew up in New York where Asians are common, she had difficulty adjusting to "American education," as well as American workplaces:

> As a Korean American, I felt different in the class, meaning it was hard for me to participate. They, a lot of the American education encourages discussion and more assertive behavior that I had difficulty doing. So I never raised my hand. I just did my homework. But I had difficulty adjusting to, like even if I read the English homework, for example, it's hard to talk about what I thought because I wasn't used to raising my hand and saying my opinion. And I think that's a Korean thing, honestly, because I had trouble in college too. I was a history major so we should talk a lot in groups. I had nothing to say! I did all my homework but I'm not kind of [pause] I wish that was more. I wish in retrospect, in my

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> family, we kind of encouraged more proactive behavior because I find myself very reluctant as a person and as an adult to say something. Even though I could be thinking ten thousand things….I think I could have done better in school if I talked a little more.

Catherine graduated from a good college and has steady work as a nurse but continued to say that she still feels communication is difficult for her. While she was born and raised in a racially diverse neighborhood in NY, she attended schools where white peers were dominant. Catherine "felt different" in school because of her race, which in part shaped her negative perception of her own abilities and skills. However, she only blames herself, and her family and culture, for her poor communication skills.

Of course, some respondents felt they have good communication skills. Jun, a 49-year-old man who immigrated at age 10, is one example. Jun said:

> When you're an analyst there is none of that [communication]. There's no coincidence even in another avenue of looking at it, that so many Asians are analysts because there is no, you're just doing your job and you just go home. There is no conflict interaction. There is [none of] that difficult conversation that you have constantly in my position where—and in that position, in the analyst position, you just do your job, you know somebody asks you to do, crunch some numbers, you crunch numbers and that's it. So, yeah, I think in, you know, in some ways the Asian personality is a disadvantage in some fields where you have to have a lot of communication.

Jun works as a finance advisor in a private bank and feels that he himself is a good communicator. Growing up in a Midwestern state, he believed in the stereotype that Asians are naturally hardworking but do not communicate well. Thus, he believes this is why they are overrepresented in "analyst positions," where there is no "conflict interaction." This point of view, through which he describes himself as an exception, allows Jun to distance himself from the stereotype and maintain his belief in the meritocracy that facilitated his upward mobility (Schwalbe et al. 2000; Pyke and Dang 2003). By relying on the term "Asian personality," Jun nonetheless attributes

individual differences in skills and talents to cultural differences between Asia and America, considering the former a traditional culture that does not conform to "rational" organizational values and the latter a culture that fosters equality and mutual communication.

In short, respondents believe that their Asian background is a disadvantage in social and communicative skills that becomes an issue both in the workplace and at school. However, their accounts suggest that their racial experiences, in tandem with racial stereotypes, plays a significant role in shaping their perceived skills by raising their sense of shame as a minority race. Moreover, racial stereotypes of Asian Americans often strengthen their belief that Korean culture is responsible for poor social and communicative skills among Korean Americans. The undervalued understanding of social merits among participants illustrates the strong but tacit influence of racial stereotypes and discrimination.

Discussion

Drawing upon the 69 narratives of 1.5- and 2nd-generation Korean Americans about their mobility experiences, this study identifies the situated meanings respondents place on their career motivations and success. Findings reveal that respondents' understanding of upward mobility and success are deeply associated with their social status as children of non-white immigrants, as well as a collective culture that values hard work and education. In determining their own career paths, respondents put primary emphasis on their sense of responsibility for their immigrant family, who they see as marginalized in U.S. society.

Furthermore, findings show that respondents have an undervalued self-understanding of their own career motivations and success. In comparison with their white counterparts, respondents saw their own career motivations as other-directed and money-oriented, while they believe that "Americans" are self-motivated and passion-oriented. Despite relatively strong educational credentials and occupational success, respondents consider their skills and abilities to be inferior to those of their white counterparts,

particularly in relation to "social skills" like communicative skills and assertiveness. Although many respondents attributed their lack of self-determination and social skills to their own culture, findings suggest the ongoing influence of a marginalized social position as immigrants of color.

This study highlights how social mobility is experienced among racial minorities. The existing literature pays much attention to parental influences on children's mobility, through which it stresses the roles of socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural heritage (Son 2014 and 2015)[5]. Findings further suggest that racial minorities consider a variety of structural constraints in determining their careers, including insecure family finances, racial stereotypes, lack of social networks, and discrimination. Prior research points out that these restrictions also apply to middle-class racial minorities who have high aspirations and motivations (Louie 2004b; Beasley 2011). Respondents' accounts presented here confirm the role of race and immigration in career choices and mobility. Findings thus provide a better understanding of the career experiences of Korean Americans by revealing the subtle but ongoing effects of race among upwardly-mobile racial minorities. This corresponds with the *racialized assimilation* perspective which proposes that Asian Americans are achieving socioeconomic advancement, but that racism continues to affect their opportunities (Lee and Kye 2016). Based on this finding, future research might investigate how assimilation and racialization occur simultaneously among Asian American groups in various social domains.

Findings also illustrate how racial stereotypes and prejudices shape racial minorities' understandings of their own mobility and success. While much research demonstrates how white Americans utilize stereotypes and prejudices to racialize minority populations, less research has addressed how minorities themselves internalize them (exceptions include Pyke 2010; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Findings here suggest the subtle but detrimental effect of racial stereotypes on Asian Americans, specifically 1.5- and 2nd-generation Korean Americans, regarding their career experiences. Further research might explore how racial stereotypes shape the lived experiences of

5. For a review, see Sakamoto and Xie 2006.

other racial minority groups.

Such research might utilize a sample of Asian Americans with different experiences than those of the sample of highly acculturated, upwardly-mobile Korean Americans who participated in this study. These respondents might have been more exposed than lower-class Asian American groups to middle-class white Americans who maintain a strong belief in racial ideology and meritocracy. Frequent contact with the dominant racial ideology is more likely to internalize, and thus stigmatize, their conception of their own career experiences. In the United States, in addition, meritocracy has been a dominant discourse among middle-class white Americans to justify their class status, as well as their racial superiority (McNamee and Miller 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2006). Respondents in this study, many of them identifying as middle class, might be more likely to accept the dominant ideology than lower-class minorities. In this sense, class interacts with race in shaping mobility experiences among respondents (Louie 2004b). Future research might compare their experiences with differently-situated people to investigate how levels of acculturation and socioeconomic status might mediate the cultural construction of mobility.

This study draws upon retrospective narratives of the adult children of Korean immigrants. Further research might examine what values and meanings Asian-American children and adolescents bring to school and college. Rather than focusing on the formal level of aspirations in education and occupations, researchers might investigate how the career prospects of children and adolescents of non-white immigrants are shaped in ongoing interactions with their native counterparts in school settings.

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