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### **Recommended Citation**

Kim, Jihyun (2014). "Marriage-Immigrant Filipina Wives' Acculturation and Learning Experiences in South Korea," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/papers/41>

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# Marriage-Immigrant Filipina Wives' Acculturation and Learning Experiences in South Korea

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Keywords: marriage-immigrant women, acculturation, learning

**Abstract:** This paper discussed findings from a qualitative study based on interviews with 20 Filipinas who married a Korean husband and investigated their acculturation process of living in Korea. One strong theme presented in this paper was that marriage-immigrant women accepted the traditional oppressed position of daughter-in-law in traditional Korean patriarchy family model as genuine Korean culture.

## Background

Since the 1990s, international marriages, particularly between foreign women from third world countries in Asia and older Korean bachelors, have dramatically increased in South Korea. The ratio of international marriages compared to the total number of marriages in Korea peaked at 13.5% in 2005 and has continued to hold steady at approximately 10% since 2005, while the ratio was reported as 1.3% in 1992. Among this increased number of international marriages, 77.8% are marriages between Korean males and foreign brides, and a considerable number of these cases could be regarded as so-called *mail-order brides* who are located with the assistance of religious agencies or international marriage brokers.

## Relevant Literature

### Acculturation Theory

Acculturation, originally conceptualized in anthropology, refers to “the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of two or more cultures” (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013, para. 1); for example, after contact with European invaders, the Cherokee (a Native American tribe) underwent cultural changes. Later, the term was employed by psychological studies of immigrants (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1928), and the scope of change was modified from the socio-cultural level to the individual level.

Among various frameworks of psychological acculturation, the most well-known theory of acculturation is Berry's models of acculturation (1980, 1997). Unlike initial perspectives on acculturation which viewed acculturation as assimilation, Berry (1980, 1997) developed a multidimensional model of acculturation that explained different forms of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation/segregation, and marginalization, all of which depend on whether immigrants maintain their homeland identity and whether they build relationships with the host or larger society. Berry's theory of acculturation is the most cited theoretical framework in the field of psychological acculturation (Chirkov, 2009).

Acculturation studies in psychology, however, tend to focus only on immigrants or sometimes temporary residents. Little research has been done on marriage-immigrants whose home as well as the dominant society is a place of acculturation; instead, home still tends to be regarded as a place where family immigrants continue their native cultural practices. Also, Berry's acculturation model (1997) is based on the assumption that non-dominant groups,

marriage-immigrant women in this study, “have the freedom to choose how they want to acculturate” (p. 10). As described earlier in this paper, Korean society can be described as a “Pressure Cooker” (Berry, 1997), which forces non-dominant individuals to assimilate their cultural identity with the Korean identity. Additionally, in the case of marriage-immigrant women, the option of separation strategy is most likely not available because these immigrants must live with their Korean husbands.

An extended model of Berry’s theory is the Interactive Acculturation Model (IAM) (Bourhis, Moise, Perreault & Senecal, 1997). IAM considers both immigrants’ perspectives and strategies of acculturation and host culture individuals’ perspectives and attitudes toward immigration. IAM provides this study with a base for theorizing an integrative acculturation model of marriage-immigrant women’s experiences. However, due to the characteristics of Korean society, which can hardly be described as multicultural at this time, this study will consider these acculturation theories but will not limit the exploration or analysis to these acculturation models.

Previous research on acculturation in the United States typically focuses on family immigration because that process is the most common type of immigration in North America. In the case of family immigration, immigrants often continue their own cultural practices at home, and acculturation mainly occurs outside the home. In the case of marriage-immigrant women, acculturation occurs not only outside the home but also inside the home.

### **Marriage-Immigrant Women in South Korea**

According to the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, as of 2011, there were 111,796 marriage-immigrant women in Korea from Asian countries, such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. This marriage-immigrant population is a most pressing focus for researchers who work in a number of academic disciplines. Governmental efforts for Korean language education have been increasing because these marriage-immigrant women’s struggles with Korean language ability not only affects their own lives but also has a significant influence on their children’s development and school performance (Korean Women’s Development Institute & Korea Youth Policy Institute, 2007). The field of lifelong education pays increasing attention to these adults’ learning needs as they are emerging learners in Korean literacy education, and their cultural learning needs are often fulfilled by local lifelong education centers and community centers. Korean scholars have studied this population’s acculturation process in the Korean society with respect to its educational needs (Kwon, 2006) and factors that influence their social integration (Park, 2012) and the facilitation of marriage-immigrants’ social integration in local communities (Hwang, Moon, Yang, & Chung, 2009).

Despite the fact that increasing attention has been paid to marriage-immigrant women as immigrants and learners in recent years, research tends to focus on immigration policies and support systems (Kim, 2010; Lim, 2009), these women’s marriage satisfaction (Kim, Kim, & Oh, 2011; Kim, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2012), acculturative stress and health issues (Chung & Han, 2009), and Korean as a second language education (Lee, 2008), which assumes that the acculturation process for these women involves their one-way social integration into Korean traditional culture (Park, 2007).

What makes the present study different from the previous research that has been published in the western countries and in South Korea is: a) the population of the study will be women who immigrated to a new country independently and live with native Koreans; b) the country that immigrants need to acculturate to has a long history of ethnic homogeneity and a strong belief of Korean Oneness; c) the researcher, as another sojourner in a non-homeland

country, will not assume immigrants' integration as their acceptance of Korean values and belief or assimilation process; and d) this study understands the marriage-immigrant women's acculturation as a learning process.

More research on understanding their acculturation experiences, educational needs, and obstacles is required to improve the lives of these marriage-immigrant women in South Korea in order to build better immigration models.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of the marriage-immigrant women's acculturation process. Three kinds of gaps were found in the literature: a) marriage-immigrant women's own acculturation experience, which differs from that of an immigrant family, has not been adequately studied; b) efforts to understand the educational component of learning in the acculturation experience are missing (Rudmin, 2009); and c) previous research on marriage-immigrant women in South Korea paid little attention to encouraging factors and obstacles of these immigrants' education participation.

The literature did not present any single didactic framework that would be useful for the present study. Analysis of studies seemed to suggest that change process in acculturation can best be understood in terms of three broad areas as reflected by the following research questions. Specifically, the research questions that guided this study include the following:

1. What have marriage immigrant women experienced in terms of acculturation while being married and living in Korea?
2. What kinds of learning needs emerged during their acculturation process?
3. In what ways and why were these women's needs met or not met?

In short, this study focused on marriage immigrant women's acculturation experiences in South Korea after marriage and framed their acculturation process as a learning experience.

### **Research Design**

This study employed interview-based qualitative methodology; qualitative research methods were a good fit for this research because each marriage-immigrant woman has her own acculturation process, and each marriage-immigrant woman's unique experience of acculturation is worthy of research. Also, the number of the target population is not very large, and the population has not been thoroughly studied; therefore, in-depth interview data provided a rigorous understanding about marriage-immigrant adult learners.

### **Sample**

Marriage-immigrant wives are defined as non-Korean women who married a Korean husband and migrated to South Korea to live with their husband. For cultural and linguistic reasons, I purposely selected marriage-immigrant wives from the Philippines. Unlike ethnic Koreans from China or Chinese, Filipinas do not share the Northeast Asian Confucian culture, and many Filipinas are able to speak English because English is one of the official languages that are used by the government and the educational system in the Philippines. Marriage-immigrant women from other countries were excluded in order to focus on women from one cultural background, which may result in more meaningful outcomes in terms of interpretation and future utilization of research findings. According to a national report on families with multicultural backgrounds that was published by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2013), Filipinas are fourth largest population of total marriage-immigrant women in South Korea; marriage-

immigrant women are ethnic Koreans from China (31.5%), Chinese (24.1%), Vietnamese (22.1%), Filipinas (6.3%), and Japanese (4.6%).

### **Data Collection**

Participants were recruited by network sampling (Roulston, 2010). Through the researchers' personal network, a Filipino priest was introduced, and he helped the researcher to recruit research participants. Also, the first interviewee introduced a Facebook page to the researcher that was widely used by marriage-immigrant Filipinas in Korea; the researcher asked the page administrator to post a research flyer, and she posted the flyer twice on the page. Additionally, after each interview, participants were asked if they could recommend other Filipinas for my research, and they shared their friends' contact information upon gaining their friends' permission. Interviews were conducted in cafés, in participants' homes, and at a church.

The researcher interviewed 20 Filipinas until no new ideas or themes emerged, which made the researcher consider saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was achieved. Most participants were interviewed once; however, four participants were interviewed twice. Each interview took 40 minutes to three hours. The participants first met their husband at work, through friends or relatives, Unification church, and international marriage brokers. The number of years staying in Korea ranged from six months to 20 years.

The interviews were primarily conducted in English; however, because they lived in Korea, many Korean proper nouns and Korean expressions were also used. For example, when they referred to their mother-in-law, they used the Korean word, "shee-uh-muh-nee" (mother-in-law in Korean). Interviews that were partially conducted in Korean were first transcribed in Korean and then translated into English.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. The constant comparative method guided the researcher to find reoccurring themes and code them accordingly. However, because the data collection was conducted in January and February 2014, this paper includes only preliminary findings and related discussions that were found during that portion of the data collection process.

## **Preliminary Findings and Discussions**

During the interviews, when participants were asked about the difficulties of living in Korea, most of them mentioned homesickness, weather, food, relationships with their husbands or in-laws, Korean language, and parenting. Participants experienced homesickness to some extent depending on their relationships with families both in the Philippines and in South Korea. The winters in Korea tended to be much colder than they expected, and Korean food was too spicy and included too many vegetables as Filipino food is based on meat. Matters such as these were often resolved as time passed. However, other struggles, such as relationships with husbands and in-laws, use of the Korean language, and parenting were not easily or naturally resolved.

### **Relationships with Husband and In-Laws**

Most research participants were living with their parents-in-law or had lived with them at one period. Even though living with parents after marriage was not very common in the Philippines, and even though living with husband's parents is a controversial among native Korean couples and it is less expected now than that was in the past, these Filipina immigrants accepted the fact that they needed to live with them for some reasons. For example, one participant who met her husband at work and had lived in Korea for three years told me that she

had to agree with her husband and parents-in-law's decision to live together for two years. In fact, the participant still lived with her parents-in-law when I interviewed her.

“My husband already told that we would live together [with his parents] for two years. So my *shee-uh-muh-nee* [mother-in-law] teaches me some Korean food or culture. [...] It's quite hard [to be a daughter-in-law in Korea]. People they never stand up to get plates, no. My *shee-uh-muh-nee* is traditional Korean style. So it was very difficult, really, I felt like I was [going to] cry. ‘I want to go back to Philippines.’ I [would] cry like that.”

While these women live with their in-laws, they also found that parent-in-law very often meddle in their marriage lives. For example, another participant who has been married for more than 10 years and has no child had received a small amount of allowance for years from her mother-in-law because her mother-in-law controlled her husband's finance. Also, she said,

“I got sick because my mother-in-law kept forcing me to go to the fertility clinic. And then ... they gave me shots. I had to take a lot of medications that I wasn't able to take. When I took it, suddenly, my liver was damaged. I was in the hospital for two weeks because I had stomach pains at the time.”

Mother-in-law's interference was made with the husband's collusion because in traditional Korean society children should obey their parents even after they become adults. Also, in traditional Korean society, daughter-in-law was contemptuously treated as imported labor and only their reproduction role was highlighted, which does not work in this era and is not expected among Koreans anymore. However, what these marriage-immigrant women experience in their homes, from the researcher's perspective, who is a married young Korean woman, is obsolete traditional Korean patriarchy. The problem is that because these immigrants do not have enough understanding about current Korean relationships with in-laws and because they had no external support network, they felt compelled to accept the oppressive form of family as a genuine Korean culture, which they believe they could not help but accept and learn as it is. Because all burdens were imposed on daughter-in-law in the traditional family form that many modern Korean women would reject, Korean women have resisted against the traditional norm and have tried to develop a better family model. However, when this oppressive position of traditional daughter-in-law is replaced with a foreign wife who naturally accepts the system as Korean culture, the other family members, in other words, parents and husband who had been benefit from the existing system can continue their prestigious positions in the family. This phenomenon can be better understood with a concept of cultural lag (Ogburn, 1966). The original concept of cultural lag describes a societal phenomenon that non-material culture cannot catch up with the changes of material culture due to the rapid development of technology. The concept also can be useful to describe a part of society has a delayed culture. For example, the Korean family culture that marriage-immigrant women experience is a lagged family culture that does not cope with native Koreans' current family norms.

*Due to the lack of space, other themes will be presented at the conference meeting.*

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