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A Systematic Review of the Literature on Foreign Brides' Adaptation Experiences in Korea

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Abstract: This study synthesizes the literature on foreign brides in Korea to explore how they are represented in research studies and how sociocultural contexts shape their experiences and adjustment.

Keywords: foreign brides, Korea, systematic literature review

Introduction and Purpose

“Foreign brides”—women who migrate to marry native-born men—are part of the transnational migration engendered by globalization (Wang, 2007). Their presence is especially noticeable in South Korea (hereafter, Korea), where cross-border marriages have fueled an increasingly multicultural society. Researchers have sought to understand foreign brides’ adaptation experiences (Yun & Park, 2011). However, few studies focus on their educational needs and experiences or adopt an adult learner perspective, despite adult education’s emphasis on identifying and ameliorating the economic, social, and political conditions that affect disenfranchised groups (Sheared et al., 2010). To develop adult education interventions and facilitate integration for this population, we need to understand how studies position foreign brides and how sociocultural contexts shape their experiences. Thus, the purpose of this systematic review is to examine how foreign brides and their adjustment experiences are described in the existing literature, and to identify the theoretical perspectives that are employed and the educational implications for supporting these women’s agency and well-being.

Foreign Marriages and Brides in Korea: A Brief Background

Until recently, Korea was primarily an ethnically homogenous society. Transnational migration flows, however, have accelerated a dramatic rise in women’s migration for marriage, thus increasing Korea’s ethnic and sociocultural diversity. In 2015, there were 151,608 registered marriage migrants, 85% of whom were female (Statistics Korea, 2015). The Korean government introduced the term “multicultural families” in 2007, which mostly applies to these women. They are primarily from neighboring developing countries in Asia, including China (55%), Vietnam (22%), and the Philippines (5%; Kim, 2010). These marriages are disproportionately common in rural areas (Lee & Na, 2009). Various terms have been used to describe the distinctive situation of women who migrate to marry, including marriage migrants, female marriage immigrants, women immigrants, and foreign brides. The latter term is used throughout this paper.

Negative perceptions about foreign brides stigmatize them as poor and inferior outsiders in Korea. Because their marriages are often arranged by commercial agencies, they are considered “commodities” (Choo, 2013). Their Korean husbands tend to be older, have lower socioeconomic status, and work in less prestigious, lower-wage occupations (Oh & Lee, 2014). They often expect foreign brides to fulfill traditional patriarchal roles such as childrearing, housekeeping, and taking care of aging and ill family members (Park & Morash, 2016). Despite the absence of any education about Korean customs and language prior to marriage, foreign brides are expected to adjust quickly to the Korean cultural and linguistic context. In reality, they

have limited access to cultural activities and social support needed to understand Korean cultures and norms. For instance, Korean husbands typically do not support their wives' attainment of Korean citizenship and language and culture education because they are concerned that their wives may leave once they acquire stable legal status and language proficiency (Kim, 2009).

Methods

A qualitative systematic review was used in this study. First, studies were identified by searching eight international electronic databases (JSTOR, Project MUSE, Proquest, SAGE, Science Direct, Springer, Taylor and Francis, and Wiley) and one Korean electronic database (RISS). We searched titles, keywords, and abstracts using combinations of several key terms: immigrant women, immigrant bride(s), foreign bride(s), foreign wives, and marriage migration, combined with "Korea" and "education." We then used the following criteria to select articles for inclusion: (1) written in English or Korean, (2) published in a peer-reviewed journal, and (3) published between 2006 and 2016. (Research on foreign brides increased after the Korean Multicultural Family Support Act of 2007.) This yielded 164 articles (63 in English and 101 in Korean). Using a data extraction form, we identified and summarized the authors, publication year, study purpose, theoretical framework, research method, population (region and sample size), and main research findings. We then performed a thematic synthesis of the extracted articles. Recurring themes were identified, analyzed, and synthesized to draw conclusions.

Key Findings

Description of studies. Of the 164 articles, 39 (24%) were conceptual studies and the rest (76%) were empirical. Of the 125 empirical studies, 54 (43%) were qualitative, 64 (51%) were quantitative, and 7 (6%) used mixed methods. The majority (n=38, 70%) of the qualitative articles and all of the mixed-methods articles were written in Korean. The articles represented various disciplines, including language and multicultural education, child education and parenting, family relations, migration policies, and nursing and health. The latter studies were mostly published in international journals. By contrast, all of the articles that dealt Korean language education were written in Korean. Most of the empirical studies included women from multiple countries, except two focusing on Vietnamese brides. Except the studies that did not specify the region, the studies were conducted in various urban and rural Korean provinces.

Topics addressed. The studies focused on the difficulties foreign brides experience in adjusting to Korean society, which is complicated due to linguistic and cultural differences, discriminatory and hostile attitudes, and lack of support systems.

Psychological adaptation, acculturation, and health. Foreign brides' acculturation experiences are closely related to their psychological adjustment and health. Although acculturation can be positive (i.e., by enhancing life opportunities and health status), the experiences of foreign brides reported in the studies were mostly negative. This might be due to the inherently challenging conditions of change and adaptation to a new culture and social demands (Jun, Hong, & Yang, 2014). Women with higher acculturation stress showed greater anxiety, loneliness, and depression and lower life satisfaction (e.g., Choi, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2013). The extent of mental health problems experienced by foreign brides is serious, and may result in family conflicts and higher risk of domestic violence and sexual abuse (Choi, 2016). Yet, the studies mostly focused on exploring psychological adjustment at an individual level, rather than investigating how these problems affect the family and community.

The studies of foreign brides' psychological adjustment and mental health call for developing policies and strategies to document and mitigate their acculturative stress (e.g., Jun et al., 2014; Kim & Kim, 2013). In particular, Jun et al. (2014) argue that existing support systems focus on foreign brides' *sociocultural* adaptation (e.g., learning language, finding employment), but tend to disregard their *psychological* adjustment (e.g., emotions, stress) due to the perception that it can be handled by individuals' own will. To support women's mental health and well-being, programs also need to focus on the psychological dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation.

Family relations. Foreign brides' family relations were examined in terms of effects on their health, parenting effectiveness, and marital satisfaction, all of which are related to their psychological adjustment. Interpersonal stress was significantly associated with mental health, and marital relationships were at the core of their interpersonal interactions (Lee & Lee, 2014). However, strengthening marital relationships is challenges because foreign brides experience family conflicts rooted in different family values. For instance, Korean husbands tend to have a higher degree of family-centered beliefs – patriarchy, familism, and family responsibility – than foreign brides, although many come from the countries that share these values (Won & Kim, 2014). Adapting to Korean family values was often oppressive and stressful, even resulting in women's maltreatment. Being a good wife was understood as being submissive and obedient (Thao, 2016), and men restricted women's opportunities to socialize outside home (Jung, 2012).

Parenting was addressed because mothers' familial experience affects children's psychological and school adjustment (e.g., Chung & Lim, 2016). The studies found that lower levels of marital conflict among foreign brides are associated with positive outcomes for children. However, after the birth of a "multicultural child," many foreign brides experience parental stress due to social stigma and the Korean expectation that mothers are responsible for raising and educating children (Thao, 2016). Thus, the studies call for investments in foreign brides' parenting education that goes beyond transferring child-rearing knowledge and skills.

Korean language education. Especially among the articles published in Korea, many focused on developing and delivering better Korean language education. The studies explored participants' educational experiences and satisfaction and the shortcoming of the Korean language program (e.g., Kim, 2015), difficulties and needs for children's bilingual education (e.g., Cho & Kim, 2013), educational policy reform (e.g., Oh, 2016), and development of textbooks and teaching methods (e.g., Park & Park, 2015). Language was understood as the most fundamental foundation for supporting foreign brides' social integration, including education, family, politics, economy, and health (Kim, 2015; Oh, 2016). However, the authors pointed out that although Korean language education is widely available at regional institutions, it is not provided systematically because it is implemented as a short-term, supplementary support to ease their early settlement (Oh, 2016). Thus, the studies call for the critical review of the current situation of Korean language education, including its problems and shortcomings.

Social identity development. Several studies focused on foreign brides' struggle to negotiate, maintain, and develop identities and addressed the issue from contrasting perspectives. Foreign brides often question their social identities as they enter Korea and face multiple barriers due to their devalued social status and cultural differences (Kim, 2012). For instance, one study found that a negative social identity positioning foreign brides as needy and submissive discourages them from learning and adapting to Korean cultures (Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2015). Also, some authors argued that since foreign brides tend to come from countries with Asian (Confucian) values, embodying these values contributes to smoother acculturation (e.g., Oh &

Lee, 2014). Oh and Lee (2014) further argued that in an ethnically homogenous, nationalistic society like Korea, foreign brides face great pressure to adapt to the predominant values.

On the other hand, some authors argued against assimilation and for integration based on mutual respect for others' historical and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Jung, 2012; Kim, 2012). These studies criticized the dominant atmosphere in Korean society that promotes the one-way adaptation of foreign brides and discourages maintaining their ethnic identity and cultural heritage. In particular, Jung (2012) showed how foreign brides exercise agency in negotiating their identities within a power hierarchy. For example, by establishing friendships with each other, foreign brides fought to gain recognition and challenged the notion that they are passive.

Theoretical frameworks. Overall, the studies lacked an explicit theoretical framework. The quantitative studies did not use theoretical lenses to guide analyses and discussion. By contrast, the qualitative studies either explicitly included a theoretical framework or had an implied (but not directly stated) framework. Of the studies that had an explicit or tacit theoretical framework, acculturation, feminist, and human capital perspectives were most prominent.

Acculturation. Acculturation, referring to adoption of cultural values and norms, is often seen as the first step in immigrants' social adjustment. One-way acculturation or assimilation has been criticized in the recent immigrant studies, but Oh and Lee (2014) argued that in an ethnically homogenous, nationalistic society like Korea, foreign brides' assimilation is needed to develop a sense of identification and emotional affinity with Korea. By contrast, other authors argued that acculturation efforts should acknowledge foreign brides' cultural assets. For instance, Kim (2015) criticized the unilateral transfer of Korean language and culture that is prevalent in multicultural education, and argued for curriculum reform that incorporates classroom activities that foster mutual cultural exchange and respect each other's cultural backgrounds.

Feminism. The studies embracing gender and feminist perspective investigated how foreign brides' gender is constructed and how they challenge imposed gender roles. These studies reveal that foreign brides' gender is primarily by the traditional concept of femininity emphasizing reproduction and obedience to the patriarchal system (Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2015). That is, foreign brides are pushed to become mothers within a short period after their marriages and they gain a position in the family after giving birth. However, as Lee and colleagues' (2015) study showed, foreign brides do not passively accept prevailing gender norms and cultural values; rather, some women, using their outsider status, developed their own critiques of Korean society, including what they deemed an excessive focus on mothering and children's education.

Meanwhile, some studies criticized feminist rhetoric about foreign brides. Choo (2013) proposed the concept of "the cost of rights," highlighting how feminist groups who advocate for human rights rely on the discourses of victimization, thus framing foreign brides as vulnerable beings. That is, despite feminist groups' good intention to "help" foreign brides, the current approaches tend to further marginalize these women by labeling their public images as incapable, passive, poor, and undereducated "others" (Jung, 2012).

Human capital. Studies based on this perspective emphasized foreign brides' skill and knowledge development and considered them as human resources. There is a practical necessity to support their career development and job training because about 85% of them are eager to have jobs (Algirmaa, Kim, & Park, 2015). Also, beyond providing economic self-efficacy, having jobs promotes foreign brides to establish belongingness in Korea, empower positively which enable them to lead their lives, therefore fastening social integration (Kang, Callahan, & Mrudula, 2015; Won & Yi, 2015). However, in reality, most of foreign brides face obstacles in transferring prior job experiences and skills in the Korean context and are also challenged by

communication and cultural barriers. In further, the studies stressed the necessity of considering their backgrounds – gender, marital status, race, ethnicity, and immigrant status – and their intersectionality because these components are essential in designing their career development interventions (Algirmaa et al., 2015; Kang et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The findings elucidate how foreign brides in Korea have been positioned and discussed in recent research, the issues that they face, and the theoretical frameworks that guide research in this area. Although the studies explored various topics, they all tried to contribute to enhancing foreign brides' integration into Korean society. However, the studies tended to emphasize foreign brides' vulnerability vis-à-vis language, discrimination, and under-representativeness, a view that foregrounds their neediness and dependence on social services. Although these problems are real, studies documenting these women's positive marital and integration experiences and actions to resist stigmatized identities are also needed. Also, foreign brides were collectively addressed as a homogenous, needy population, disregarding differences in their characteristics and experiences.

These findings can inform adult education efforts to engage these women and help them improve their lives. For example, current adult education offerings for this group primarily focus on Korean language; however, the research reviewed here suggests that adult education could cover other vital topics such as parenting, cross-cultural relationships, gender roles, coping with stress, and navigating schools and other institutions. Future research should investigate the accessibility and availability of adult education programs for foreign brides and how these programs have been useful in promoting women's well-being and integration. In particular, researchers should explore whether and how adult education programs convey respect for foreign brides' cultural identities and their capacity for effecting change, rather than viewing them as passive recipients of information about Korean language and culture (i.e., assimilation). Another topic for future inquiry is to identify how acculturation is defined in these programs and to what extent educators are equipped to promote *mutual* cross-cultural learning and respect.

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