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Dream Psychology of North Korean Defectors in South Korea: Implicit Learning and Social Adjustment

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Abstract: This paper applies the theoretical framework of Fromm's humanistic psychology to examine the reported content of North Korean defectors' dreams during sleep and considers what the psychological data suggests about the defectors' past social experience in authoritarian North Korea and their present social situation as adults learning to adjust to a new life in neo-liberal South Korea.

Keywords: adult defectors, Erich Fromm, Korean peninsula, nightmares, sleep experiences, social psychology

Introduction and Purpose

In the last three decades, many scholars and practitioners have examined the connection between dreams and learning (Crick & Mitchison, 1983; de Vries, 2014; Vandekerckhove & Cluydts, 2010; Walker, 2017). Yet available studies have insufficiently investigated whether dream experiences are beneficial in explaining adult learning relevant to prior social experiences or whether analysis of dream content can enhance understanding of adult learners. Humanistic psychology, however, explains that the dreaming mind can reveal feelings and thoughts that are repressed during waking hours (Fromm, 1949).

By exploring common narrative elements in the dream reports of North Korean defectors in South Korea in particular, one identifies concerns, worries, and stresses they are experiencing as they adapt to their new surroundings. One such recurrent narrative in the data is the image of returning home to feed loved ones and then becoming trapped, unable to again leave the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

Through an examination of adult North Korean defectors' self-reports of their dreams and nightmares, as available in interviews recorded in broadcast and print media, this study explores dream content, dream emotions, and dreamer reactions to better describe implicit-learning lives associated with sleep experiences. What is apparent through the examination is that North Korean defectors' dream experiences have an effect on their

learning and adjustment to life in South Korea, with complex consequences.¹ The findings also reveal experienced social oppression, which appears to be shared among North Korean defectors, and knowledge thereof would enable social workers and volunteers to provide more effective and informed assistance to facilitate defectors' social integration in South Korea.

The purpose of this study is to explore North Korean defectors' learning and adjustment in a new cultural environment as relevant to the social psychology of their dream experiences. More specifically, the investigation connects North Korean defectors' unrepressed inner voices during sleep with their daily waking lives in South Korea. As such, the research questions for the study are threefold: (1) What are the contents of North Korean defectors' dreams about North Korea? (2) What feelings are presented through their dreams? (3) How do North Korean defectors react to their dreams?² Answers to these questions disclose what the adult defectors implicitly learn about their new lives in South Korea, from their own deep perspectives, and that knowledge helps expand the presently limited understanding of this marginalized social group.

North Korean Defectors in South Korea: A Brief Background

Although 31,062 North Korean defectors have entered South Korea since 1960 (Ministry of Unification, 2017), their social integration is incomplete. North Korean defectors are officially recognized as ethnic Koreans, and they receive financial and educational support for their adjustment to a new social-political system. Yet various statistics reveal complex and unresolved struggles in their integration process in the capitalist society, such as (1) the unemployment rate of six in ten defectors, (2) the suicide rate, which is three times that of the South Korean population, and (3) the high percentage of defector immigration from South Korea, including voluntary repatriation to North Korea (Evans, 2015; Ju, 2016; Kim, 2014; Lankov, 2016; Sung, 2014). What must be considered when examining the social integration of North Korean defectors is that they inevitably bring to their host country their past beliefs, experiences, and knowledge, factors which affect adjustment and learning (Illeris, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Presently, it is not well known how past social character and value formation influences North Korean defectors' social learning experience in South Korea, on the conscious and unconscious levels.

1. "[T]he psychology of [North Korean] defectors will adapt to the new social and political conditions [in South Korea], with corresponding changes in habit, character, and personality that are not reflective of the patterns of culture and thought in North Korea" (David-West, 2014, p. 591).

2. These questions are adapted from the first, fifth, and eighth "preliminary guiding questions" in David-West (2014, p. 590). The critical focus of the present study is aided by the ninth and tenth guiding questions: "What dreams are shared and typical?" and "How vivid and repetitive or frequent and severe are the dreams?"

Theoretical Framework: Humanistic Psychology and Implicit Learning

Humanistic psychology as developed by Fromm (1949; 1979/2013) conceives of the dream as a symbolic language that expresses unrepressed feelings and thoughts that provide insights about one's situation or the personalities of others. Thereby, the researcher can make sense of the dream as a means to explore North Korean defectors' inner experiences of their past and present social world. In describing dreams as a symbolic language that awakens people to their true inner feelings and thoughts of self and society, Fromm (1949) emphasizes the mastering of dream literacy in order to develop the human powers of observation, intelligence, and reason. He adds that sleep, the physical state of rest that induces dreaming, offers a shelter from the propaganda and repressive noise of the outer social world. In sleep, the "genuine self" can express itself, whereas the "pseudo self" of waking experience is under the mesmeric influence of culture (Fromm, 1949, p. 46).

Because dreams are a resource of the inner life, the repetitive dream experiences of North Korean defectors can be connected to their implicit learning about the self and the social world. Implicit learning is a type of learning that occurs without conscious awareness (Reber, 1993; Cleeremans & Dienes, 2008). Often, the term refers to effortless, rapid, and unguided learning because of the repetitive experience of patterned regularities in daily life (Bransford et al., 2006). For instance, in waking life, people can learn social norms and language by watching films, news, and shows. Psychonomics scholars have emphasized the educational and evolutionary potentials in implicit learning, which facilitate and advance social adjustment in a new and changing environment because of their natural circumstances (Howard & Howard, 2001).

Context and Research Methods

While researching North Korean defector baristas at a café in Seoul from January to March 2017 for a dissertation pilot study, the author noticed a female barista (28) who had fled North Korea two years prior and suffered from repetitive nightmares. Although she refused to reveal the exact nightmare stories because they were too personal, she said she always left her light on at night. The author was able to observe how she constantly suffered from fatigue, headaches, and indigestion. These apparently psychogenic symptoms of defection trauma also included unsettled emotions encompassing vulnerability, presumably aggravated by irritation with coworkers. Moreover, her mental stress was compounded by a work requirement to provide emotional labor to her customers: smiling. Based on these ethnographic observations, the author began to inquire as to what North Korean defectors dream about, how dreams can affect them, and what the consequences are.

Dreams belong to a private realm of subjective experience that dreamers may not always be willing to disclose. Therefore, secondary data sources available through South Korean media outlets and publications were consulted. To explore dream patterns, dream emotions, and the dreamers' reactions to their dreams, data were collected from the YouTube channel *Bea-Na TV*.³ On *Bea-Na TV*, North Korean defector participants share information and unscripted personal narratives about their experiences in North Korea and South Korea. Visual recordings of defectors discussing nightmares they had after defection were examined. Many *Bea-Na TV* episodes include full or partial descriptions of nightmares. The data were analyzed along with a special episode about defectors' nightmares: "How Do You Feel When You Visit North Korea in Your Dreams?" Also analyzed were autobiographical novels, essays, Internet blog postings by North Korean defectors in their online community, interview articles, and popular books relevant to defectors' dreams. The data were collected between January 2017 and March 2018.

Table. 1. Sources used to collect and analyze dreams of North Korean defectors in South Korea.

Categorization	Visual recordings (<i>Bea-Na TV</i>)	Autobiographica l books	Interview articles	Internet blog postings
Volumes	3 (180 mins)	3	5	10

Guided by established qualitative research methods (Boyatzis, 1998; Patton, 1990), a coding scheme was classified and recurring themes were identified. The video transcripts and documents were analyzed to identify patterns and meanings. Simultaneously, underpinning ideas and concepts that interpretively shape the data were examined.

Key Findings

Through dream content analysis, patterns in the North Korean defectors' dreams emerge. A common dream sequence is that of the defectors' return to their hometowns, with a combination of their North Korean and South Korean experiences, and feelings of bewilderment, horror, terror, and yearning. Specifically, in the recurring dream narrative, when defectors revisit their family members in North Korea, they feed them thanks to the material prosperity they have gained in South Korea. After providing abundant food and money as symbolic expressions of filial care and devotion, the returned defectors are trapped by the North Korean state police and are unable to flee North Korea.

3. The channel title refers to learning and sharing. *Bea-Na TV* aims at broadcasting the lives of North Korean defectors in South Korea and abroad. Without receiving any financial subsidies from the South Korean government or commercial institutions, *Bea-Na TV* has established its financial and political independence through its mass viewership since 2014.

Dream contents: Combination of North Korean and South Korean experiences

Data elicited from the dream contents show a combination of North Korean defectors' experiences from the two Koreas. In their dreams, defectors revisit past memories, including memories of family members in their hometowns, and deliver groceries and cash obtained while in South Korea. For example, one female defector (40-45) says,

My parents were still alive in my dream, and I shared what I had gathered in South Korea. I brought money and foods like pork, instant noodles, and white rice. I was proud of the material wealth I had acquired in South Korea. (Video 3, March 2016)

With an eagerness to care for her now-dead father and mother in North Korea, the female defector brings a most valuable food—pork, which is consumed only during special celebrations in North Korea. At the same time, the defector provides South Korean instant noodles and money to feed her starving family.

She continues to describe her dream experience like watching a reality television show, recounting, “For about five years after defection, I had dreams very frequently. I could see my dear parents and happily fed them with delicacies.” What is retained in the defector's mind are the experience of famine (Arduous March, 1994-1998) and nostalgia for family. Yet in the dream, she achieves what she desires by bringing the material wealth she secured in South Korea. With the combination of social experiences of famine and starvation (representing North Korean poverty) and food and financial security (representing South Korean prosperity), these recurring dream images express the mental burden of anxiety and powerlessness over unrealized hopes and desires, which the defectors' dreams attempt to resolve.

Feelings expressed in dreams: Yearning for family and terror of being arrested

North Korean defectors in the examined data set report a strong sense of longing for their families as well as negative emotions because of their families' inability to defect to South Korea. Meeting family members in dreams brings joy and tears to the defectors in waking life because the dead are alive in the dream world, and there, the defectors can have a chance to feed and save them. Yet the dreamers soon encounter hardships in returning to South Korea, and the dream releases their deeply stored horrors and fears of the defection experience. One female defector (45-50) reveals her emotions during sleep as follows:

In my dream, I tried to cross the Tumen River yet always failed because of the high level of [North Korean] security. At that very moment, I went through similar emotional patterns that I encountered during defection, like feeling threatened, fear,

anxiety, and terror. Always, I need to survive by escaping all these disastrous situations. (Video 3, March 2016)

Until today, the awful nightmare of stepping on a mine in the middle of the demilitarized zone continues to follow [me]. (Ju, 2016)

Because of dreams of failed defection, some defectors report suffering from nyctophobia. The traumatic experience of defection, along with living a hidden life in China and being kidnapped and raped, create prolonged emotional turmoil that affects defectors' mental and physical health in South Korea. An autobiographical book (Kim, 2012) by a female North Korean defector, *Love Song of Youth* (Ch'öngch'un yönga), begins with the defector's nightmare that involves vivid memories of being sexually violated. Such traumatic memories, which are retained in the unconscious, make another female defector "fear night and deny sleep" (Lee, 2007) regardless of her more secure situation in South Korea. Indeed, several books and testimonies, including those of the author's pilot study participants at a café in Seoul, say, "I keep the light on even at night." Prior experiences still haunting some defectors are recalled while they sleep and recreate the original feelings of fear during defection from North Korea. Consequently, defectors may become emotionally confused between dream (sleep experience) and reality (waking experience).

Awakening from dreams

Because of repeated dreams of returning to North Korea, some defectors report being disoriented and not knowing where they are when they awaken. Terrified of repatriation, a number of defectors state that they wake up looking around their rooms to reassure themselves of where they are. Seeing the material artifacts around the room, such as a table and a television, they confirm their current location in South Korea. But even after awakening from the dream, several defectors remain confused about their location because of the vivid experiences and extreme emotions during their dreams. A male defector (38) says,

I got a phone call from a fellow defector early in the morning, saying she needed money to defect from North Korea. In her dream, she was accused by the North Korean police because of her dyed hair [her current appearance in South Korea—JC] and needed money to find a broker. (Video 3, March 2016)

Not only the sense of fear is retained in the minds of the defectors. Because of frequent dream encounters with parents who passed away long ago in North Korea, some defectors yearn for their deceased loved ones and suffer depressive states of loneliness. Confronted with repeated and confusing dreams about North Korea, one male defector (46) confesses that "North Korea is still in my life" (Ju, 2016). Similarly, defector Kim (2012) admits that "half of [my] self is still embodied in North Korea." Because their characters, habits, and personalities are originally formed in North Korea, some adult defectors learn implicitly,

through recurrent dreams, that they cannot completely separate their new lives and selves in South Korea from their past in North Korea, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Discussion

The findings indicate that dream experiences associated with prior social experiences affect implicit learning in North Korean defectors' lives in a new environment. As the theoretical framework, the humanistic psychological conception of the dream provides a tool to make sense of unrepressed feelings and thoughts that need to be contextualized and interpreted for the benefit of psychologically vulnerable members of the defector population. Dreams have an effect on the self-interpretation and daily routines of defectors' lives by unconsciously expressing what is important, painful, or unforgettable.

The analysis of the present study is relevant since refugee groups are known to suffer from nightmares as a consequence of their prior life circumstances (Weaver & Burns, 2001). Represented as “shouts with fear at night” (Weaver & Burns, 2001, p. 147), which might go unnoticed by others, the nightmares of refugees are a fact that social workers and helping professionals ought to recognize and sensitize. Although North Korean defectors' traumatic experiences have strong parallels to other refugee populations (Kim & Choi, 2013; Noh, Kim, Kim, Park, & Woo, 2016), their dream and nightmare experiences in relation to their daily social lives are underexplored. By demonstrating that dream experiences correlate to implicit learning about the self and social world—as seen in the mental embodiment of North Korea even when defectors live in South Korea—this study maintains that dreams are a psychological fact that can influence defectors' cognitive adjustment on the social, functional, and interpersonal levels. Acknowledgment of North Korean defectors' dream psychology and the knowledge of its influence during their adjustment is necessary, especially when the majority of professional and scholarly discussions on problems of defector adjustment is narrowly confined to instrumental training, economic adjustment. Notably, findings from the analysis of dream content provide clues that help explain the reverse defection of North Korean defectors from South Korea to North Korea, such as missing their family members and accepting their North Korean identity with South Korean citizenship. Recognizing sleep experiences and dream psychology as integral to a rounded understanding of North Korean defectors lives, the present study calls for deep sociopsychological analysis in order to shed more light on a social group whose internalized prior experiences differ greatly from the non-defector South Korean population.

Conclusions and Limitations

This study opens discussion in a neglected area of dream psychology and implicit learning in a subfield of adult educational psychology. The findings reveal that shared experiences in the past lives of adult North Korean defectors affect their dream content on the unconscious level, which in turn affects their waking thoughts and emotions on the conscious level. Considering the complex nature of North Korean defectors' subjective states, exploration of dream content adds to a more comprehensive understanding of the defectors' learning lives and social characteristics in South Korea. Thus, the study contributes to adult learning literature and social psychological literature to enhance the current understanding of implicit learning in an oppressed and marginalized population and how socially conditioned mental states influence social adjustment and learning in a new environment. This reality requires the careful attention of social workers in order to provide more informed assistance in the social integration of defectors. Hopefully, the knowledge obtained from the study can be used as a stepping stone in that direction.

The study, however, is limited by its exclusive reliance on secondary data available through the Internet. Therefore, caution must be taken against overgeneralizing the findings from the investigation onto all North Korean defector groups, considering their divergent defection experiences and social situations.

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