# Identity Formation among North Korean Defectors in South Korea: Implications from a Socio-Cultural Learning Theoretical Lens

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# Identity Formation among North Korean Defectors in South Korea: Implications from a Socio-Cultural Learning Theoretical Lens

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze the present situation of North Korean Defectors (NKDs)' adaptation in South Korea from the relationship between social adjustment and identity construction. By using a socio-cultural learning theoretical lens, it reveals structural barriers and tacit differentiations to hinder NKDs' participation and to disturb their identity formation.

## Problem and Purpose Statement

Due to an influx of North Korean defectors (NKDs), their social integration and adjustment in South Korean society has become a critical issue (Ministry of Unification [MOU], 2012). According to a report from MOU, 2,737 NKDs arrived in S. Korea in 2011, and the total number of defectors is 23,100 (MOU, 2012, p. 3). Upon entry, NKDs confront challenges from unfamiliar living environments, culture, and ideologies. For their adjustment, Korean government, hence, has implemented various supports that highlight providing educational opportunities through educational institutions (e.g. the Hanawon and Hana-center) to facilitate early social adjustment, financial aids for their settlement and work, work trainings, and a full tuition waiver and special admission opportunities for Higher Education (New Asia Research Institute [NARI], 2010). Such opportunities enable NKDs to integrate into S. Korean society while they construct a new identity as a S. Korean citizen.

Even though upon arrival NKDs automatically become citizens of S. Korea, such status falls short of conferring a full membership into S. Korean society. NKDs are often regarded as "strangers" (Yoon & Chae, 2010) and they often disguise their identity when trying to find jobs or meeting S. Koreans and introduce themselves as ethnic Koreans living in China (NARI, 2010). Given this situation, the identity construction of the NKDs has become a significant concern.

Identity is constructed in relation between self and society (Mead, 1962). According to Kim (2012), identity denotes "a sense of self that corresponds to external structures [such as] culture, politics, economy, nation, ethnicity, gender and is achieved through the ability to locate oneself in society of the sum of significant others" (Kim, 2012, p. 96). This means that it is necessary to thoroughly review the current conditions of NKDs' adjustment in Korean social practice in advance in order to examine how they form their identity.

By examining contemporary literature, this paper aims to analyze the present situation of NKDs' adjustment in S. Korea from the relationship between social adjustment and identity construction through a socio-cultural learning theoretical lens.

## Theoretical Framework

Building a healthy and stable identity plays a vital role in contributing to NKDs' adjustment as newcomers (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). The identity must fit into the larger society in order to reduce the unsuccessful outcomes of identity formation. These include "negative identity" based

on opposition to others' wishes (Erickson, 1968) or "identity diffusion" which makes it difficult to form a clear identity at all (Erikson, 1950).

Identity is formed through social participation and diverse interactions between social practice and the self. By participating in social practice, people come to know a society's norms, roles, and culture. They also identify their role and construct their identity within the socio-cultural practice by investing identity with intrinsic self-meanings (Smith & Taylor, 2010). Moreover, people derive their identity from where they belong, once in a social practice, and gain value and emotional significance from membership in their groups (Shanley & Correa, 1992). One develops one's identity through the relationship between the 'subject inner' and the 'societal outer' (Du Bois, 2007), and can be a social member, adapting to a social setting. In this respect, identity formation can be a socio-cultural learning process.

Socio-cultural learning theory argues that people learn through engagement with actions and interactions within socio-cultural and historical contexts (Wenger, 1998; Engeström, 2001). Participation "refers not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). During the learning process through participations, people are constantly asking and challenging who they are, what they are able to do, and what they will be, based on what they learn (Ligorio, 2010). As Wenger (1998) suggested, learning is an experience of identity because who we are and what we can do is transformed through participation in communities. The perspective of socio-cultural learning theory reveals that learning is not solely an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming through the participation in socio-cultural contexts.

## Research Design

This paper largely depends on public reports published by Ministry of Unification and national research institutes in S. Korea (MOU, 2011; MOU, 2012; NARI, 2010; Database Center for North Korean Human Rights [DCNKHR], 2013; North Korean Refugees Foundation [NKRF], 2012). The reports not only show the current conditions of NKDs with numerous data, but indicate structural systems to support them. With descriptive explanations about NKDs, the paper critically reviews the reports under the socio-cultural learning theoretical perspective.

## Findings

To be a functioning member of S. Korea with authentic identity, NKDs need to adopt S. Korean culture, norms, and roles through actively interacting with others and learning to understand diverse Korean socio-cultural matters such as norms, roles and values. However, there are several hidden causes hindering NKDs' participation in Korean social practice.

*Invisible wall: Structural contradictions to participation in the workplace*

For example, take a NKD who is a mother and has three family members. Even though she can participate in vocational education and find a full-time job through the S. Korean government support system, she refuses these opportunities and works as a part time worker at a restaurant. Why does she not to participate in the free vocational education and to find regular position? Is it from her lack of motivation to become involved in education and workplace of S. Korea?

One of the principal sites in forming identity is the workplace (Miller & Rose, 1995). When it comes to workplace participation, the government has implemented the employment support

system for NKDs so as to connect job seekers and job offers and thereby reinforce the competency of NKDs and fulfill the needs of the workplace (Cho, Kim, & Sun, 2012). In the employment support of NKDs, there are seven types of implementing systems: vocational education, vocational assistant officer program, settlement grant, accrediting system, social enterprise, and start-up assistance (MOU, 2012). If NKDs want to improve their employability, they can participate in vocational education and certification courses (MOU, 2011).

However, in reality, many defectors not only neglect to participate in vocational education but also fail to complete the program (MOU, 2011; NARI, 2010). Over the last six years, the average student dropout rate of the vocational education for NKDs is around 25%. Also, according to the report published by DCNKHR (2013), the rate of NKDs' unemployment is 19.9%. These are related to the problem of NKDs' low participation in working. Unless involved in social practice, NKDs cannot belong and position their identity as a member of the group, that is, of S. Korean society. What elements hinder NKDs' identity formation from the participation of working?

One turns out to be an invisible structural system. To NKDs having no jobs or working as irregular workers, the S. Korean government covers their minimum living expenses and the grant increases according to family size. When NKDs' income surpasses the minimum cost of living, however, their financial aid is cut off. According to the report (NKRF, 2012), the average income of regular employed NKDs is 1,527,000 KRW. Of course, it is significantly over the minimum cost of living per person, 572,168 KRW defined by Ministry of Health and Welfare in 2013. However, considered the family size of NKDs, there is one noteworthy point that the average wage of NKDs is approximately the minimum cost of living, a level the government determines as the payment standard. When the family size is three, the minimum cost of living becomes 1,260,315 KRW and the payment standard is increased to 1,546,399 KRW for four family members (MOU, 2013). From three family members, the amount is not far behind the minimum cost of living and no significant difference in monthly income separates the regular employed NKDs and the unemployed or irregular workers (Jeon, et al., 2009; DCNKHR, 2013). Hence, when working as a part-time worker and receiving a government subsidy for the minimum cost of living, NKDs can earn more than a full-time worker. When considering that 40.9% of NKDs' family have over three members (Song, 2011), most of NKDs could receive the grants and not work as regular employees in S. Korea. It explains why the woman who works at a restaurant refuses other educational opportunities of government aid. In fact, nearly half (48.0%) of NKDs are recipients of the government subsidy (DCNKHR, 2013). In other words, nearly half of NKDs are not regular workers. Moreover, another indicator that is evidence of the structural cause blocking their social participation is the high number of economically inactive NKDs. The 47.6% of economically inactive NKDs shows that many NKDs settle for the present social security system. This effectively contributes to blocking NKDs' participation in working practice as legitimate members.

As reflected in the NKDs' unemployment rate of 19.9%, NKDs have difficulty finding jobs that require professional or managerial backgrounds in S. Korea. The professional jobs of industrialized S. Korea require NKDs to have skills and knowledge that are often yet to be acquired. Most of NKDs' work consists of menial labor doing repetitive jobs. Of the employed NKDs, 40.8% are involved in unskilled labor such as machine operation. Moreover, most vocational education programs implemented by public or private institutes for NKDs consist of low-wage occupations such as bakery management, barista courses, beautician, car mechanic, florist, paperhanger, nurse aid, and so on (MOU, 2011). The type of NKDs' occupation is similar

to the low-income groups of S. Koreans (DCNKHR, 2013). This makes it difficult for those from the elite of N. Korea to settle into their middle-class status and identity in S. Korea. In addition, according to a government report (MOU, 2012), 70% of defectors obtained high school diplomas and 17% acquired a tertiary degree from N. Korea versus 39.7% of S. Koreans acquiring one. Even though almost all NKDs have more than high school degrees, the educational curriculum and industrial development level of the North are fundamentally different in N. Korea. Thus without reeducation in the South, NKDs inevitably hold a weak position in the S. Korean job market. However, the time or resources for education is insufficient for NKDs. NKDs are to this extent deprived the learning needed to form their new identity in the South.

*Tacit differentiation: Rejected to be a real member*

The following example of a NKD, now a senior at a university, illustrates this point. When she arrived in S. Korea six years ago, she saw the necessity of becoming a member of a club. However, if one joins out of a sense of obligation, rather than being interested in the club and its activities, the sense of isolation, of not belonging, of being an outsider, remains. She also spent a great deal of time watching the very popular Korean dramas on television and in this way learned the dominant (S. Korean) form of the language. However, watching television further isolated her and reinforces the sense of isolation and hindered her involvement in social life, a factor that is crucial in S. Korean society.

Group membership within a social network is a primary basis for social interaction and adjustment to social practice. To be a participant of social practices, people have to know the culture, norms, role, rules, and values that inform the practice. Such knowledge is gained through social practice and helps a person to participate completely in a social setting. In particular, knowledge that is inventive and entwined with doing is born from relationships with others. It can be a key feature to understanding social practices that construct identity as a member of social practices. Interaction with other members in S. Korean social practices plays a pivotal role in constructing NKDs' identity. Namely, NKDs have to develop relationships with others in S. Korean social practice.

However, in reality, this is another reason that NKDs' identity formation is difficult. S. Korean society is made up of a considerably social network-based practice. S. Korean social practice, based as it is upon such backgrounds as alumni connections, regional origins, and family ties, automatically produces outside groups (Lee, 2000). NKDs who have different backgrounds are unable to build numerous, important, and powerful social networks with S. Koreans (Information Center for North Korean Rights [ICNKR], 2005; NARI, 2010; Cho, 2010). NKDs without a proper social network are categorized as strangers or "others". Actually 21.7% of NKD respondents reveal the problems associated with "loneliness and difficulties in becoming acquainted with others" and "tendency not to live together in groups" (ICNKR, 2005). In addition, of the respondents who said they have close friends (except for their family members in the South), 67.8% people point out the closed people are also N. Koreans (Song, 2011). It shows that most of NKDs have difficulties to make friendship with S. Koreans and just have intimate relationship with N. Koreans. NKDs having a weak social network with native S. Koreans cannot help but face difficulties acquiring a membership identity in S. Korea.

Another cause blocking participation of NKDs is language. Farrell (2001) mentioned that knowledge is embedded in communication which is shaped from interactions between participants of practice. Language could be a mediator reflecting values, norms and culture of social practice through interactions between constituents (Farrell, 2001; NARI, 2010; Yoon &

Chae, 2012). However, NKDs face difficulties of communication with S. Koreans. S. Korea uses English quite often in formal settings such as business, education, and media. Also, many borrowed foreign words are used in everyday conversation. NKDs not fully comprehending S. Korean speech are, in social practice, regarded as functional illiterates. Considered as such, NKDs lose confidence about becoming actively integrated into social setting of S. Korea. This naturally leads to their losing opportunities to learn the country's values, norms, and culture.

## Conclusions and Implications

Considering S. Korea's conditions of NKDs' social participation and interaction, this paper reveals that NKDs are struggling to participate in Korean social practice. There are also hidden factors hindering NKDs identity formation and social adjustment within a socio-cultural learning framework. First of all, in the participation issue, NKDs face an invisible social structural wall. Despite the S. Korean government providing diverse opportunities and places in which NKDs could get involved in the workplace, NKDs are unable to participate because of other structural factors. These factors lead them to settle for the status quo rather than become actively involved in a new social practice. In addition, even though identity can be developed from interaction with others through sharing norms, roles, and values of the context, it is difficult for NKDs to make broad or strong relationships with others in the S. Korean society where the practice is based on an existing social network. Moreover, language differences, stemming from the prolonged period of division, also impede interaction between NKDs and S. Koreans. Their lack of interaction with other S. Koreans hampers NKDs from realizing the context of S. Korea and this affects the process of identity formation for them.

From the critical interpretation of the present conditions of NKDs through a socio-cultural learning lens, this study not only overcomes the lack in the academic understanding about NKDs' identity formation and social adjustment but also suggests practical and academic implications for adult learning. A socio-cultural learning perspective can lead to overcoming the limitations of existing adult learning theories in understanding identity construction. This perspective allows the process of constructing identity to be regarded as a process of becoming, not knowledge and skill accumulation. Given that many theoretical approaches to adult learning primarily focus on individuals' characteristics, cognitive change/development, or formalized/formal education/learning, this lens provides new insight that people construct their identity as learning through participation in everyday social practices.

Furthermore, this study shows that it is necessary for policymakers to understand what can be the most influential ways to integrate NKDs into the S. Korean social practice as actual identical citizens beyond merely providing short-term prescriptions. This approach could contribute to NKDs becoming active social members with stable identities.

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