Redeeming Immigrant Parents: How Korean American Emerging Adults Reinterpret Their Childhood

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Abstract

Korean American youth experience immigration-related parent-child challenges including language barriers, parent-child conflicts, and generational cultural divides. Using grounded theory methods, this article examines the ways in which 18 Korean American college-enrolled emerging adults retrospectively made sense out of their experiences of immigrant family hardships. Of those who narrated childhood hardship, over half narrated positive change in which they reinterpreted their relationship to their parents and redeemed their immigrant parents either through their own maturation or through spirituality. This narrative strategy is consistent with cognitive change in emerging adults' view of their parents that have been documented in other studies (Arnett, 2004). Only a minority of participants did not narrate positive changes and remained distressed over their relationship to their parents. Findings suggest the possibility that narration of positive change is a culturally salient process by which many Korean American emerging adults come to terms with early family challenges.

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Keywords

Emerging adulthood is a period of life lasting from the late teens through the mid- to late 20s when young people explore various life possibilities prior to making enduring commitments and form identities independent from their parents (Arnett, 2000, 2006, Erikson, 1968). Emerging adulthood can be a pivotal period for intergenerational relations as young people and their parents renegotiate their relations in response to increased autonomy (Aquilino, 1997; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). Moreover, for emerging adults who depart for college, being away from home for the first time and experiencing decreased parental control may facilitate the reevaluation and reconstruction of past experiences (Hood, Riahinejad, & White, 1986). With changes in social cognition and an increasing capacity to take new perspectives on their families, emerging adults come to relate to their parents in a new way, with many gaining a new appreciation for their parents' perspective (Arnett, 2004).

Although the overarching psychological tasks of emerging adulthood in contemporary America—to achieve independence from parents and forge new relationships with them—may be similar for young people across various backgrounds, we are interested here in particular factors that shape the way in which these tasks are accomplished in immigrant communities. Research has documented multiple challenges in the parent-child relations of Korean immigrant families, including a considerable language barrier (Zhou, 2004), cultural divides between immigrant parents and their U.S.-raised children (Ahn, Kim, & Park, 2008; Lee & Liu, 2001), and discrepancies between children's ideals and actual parenting experiences (Pyke, 2000). What is particularly intriguing about Korean American families is that overall Korean American emerging adults express positive feelings toward their parents despite these parent-child challenges and prior conflicts with parents (Park, 2005). Together, these studies provide preliminary evidence for the transformation of Korean American emerging adults' perceived or actual relationships with their parents. It remains unknown, however, why and how this transformation occurs. Given the evidence of such transformation in the context of challenges and conflicts in parent-adolescent relations, we propose that understanding how Korean American emerging adults reinterpret their earlier family relations is a much-needed endeavor in the growing field of emerging adulthood research. Thus, in this study, we examine the narratives of Korean American college students in order to understand how they reevaluate and reinterpret their childhood and adolescent experiences of family. As such,

following Arnett (2004), this study examines the changes in cognition in emerging adulthood that bear both upon the ways in which they narrate family experience and the decrease in their distress with regard to their childhood in immigrant family households.

Korean American Immigrant Families and Their Children

Here we review demographic and ethnohistorical features of Korean America generally and of Chicagoland Korean America specifically as the research population of this study. Although Korean immigration to the United States began in the early 20th century, the vast majority of Korean Americans immigrated after the United States changed its immigration policy in 1965. The majority of the adult Korean immigrants were well educated, white-collar professionals prior to immigration, and many of these middle-class families immigrated in order to pursue better educational opportunities for their children than those that were available in South Korea (Yoon, 1997; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Many Korean American families appear to succeed in achieving the American dream of owning a home, often in suburbs with highly rated public schools. In Chicago, as with many other metropolitan cities with a sizable Korean American population, the overwhelming majority of Korean American families now live in the suburbs (Kim, Park, & Choi, 2005). Children of Korean immigrants appear to follow the path to accomplish this American dream by attending competitive universities and pursuing well-paying careers. Korean American youth have gained entrance to high quality universities in the United States in numbers disproportionate to the population, supported in part by a system of supplementary education within ethnic communities that aims to serve the educational needs of immigrant children as well as to maintain heritage, language, and culture (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Critical to these youth trajectories are parents' hard work and the particular features of immigrant families that may contribute to parent-child conflicts. The 1990 U.S. census data (cited in Yoon, 1997) indicated the self-employment rate of Korean Americans at 24.3%, highest ranked among U.S. ethnic groups. Typically, those Korean Americans who are self-employed tend to be small entrepreneurs who operate mom-and-pop shops that require long work hours. Moreover, these shops are often in low-income ethnic minority neighborhoods, thus requiring long-distance commuting from their homes and long hours spent away from their families. Parents' busy work life often means limited family time and lack of parental supervision, which may create

challenges in terms of parent-child relationships. Research on nonimmigrant families shows that lower levels of family time are associated with poorer parent-child relationships and symptoms of psychological distress in children (Crouter, Head, McHale, & Tucker, 2004; Davis, Crouter, & McHale, 2006). The time-consuming work lives and struggle of the parents as immigrants in this study group emerge as relevant to the analysis of this article.

Parents' lack of English fluency is another challenge affecting Korean American youth's experiences with their parents. According to Zhou (2004), 31% of Korean American children experience language barriers in their families, a proportion higher than Japanese, Asian Indian, and Filipino Americans although slightly lower than Chinese Americans. Tseng and Fuligni (2000) found that adolescents of immigrant parents who spoke in different languages with their parents reported less family cohesion and fewer discussions with their parents than did adolescents who spoke with their parents in their parents' native language.

Retrospective Narratives, Reinterpretation of the Past, and Social Cognitive Change

Emerging adults appraise and reinterpret their pasts in the process of identity exploration (Erikson, 1959). McAdams (1993) suggests that this process of identity exploration involves reformulating the narratives of individual's prior experiences through which they selectively reconstruct the past. He argued that, particularly in contemporary societies where identities are typically open and fluid, people develop and maintain a sense of self through an individual's life story (McAdams, 1996). Life stories speak to how a person integrates his or her experiences and extract meaning by retelling, ultimately expressing the person's narrative identity (McAdams et al., 2006; Singer, 2004). It is worthwhile to note that the stories individuals create draw from the existing repertoire of cultural narratives that shape the meaning-making process (Singer, 2004).

According to McAdams and colleagues (1993, 2006), life stories function as a vehicle for defining one's identity by making meaning out of one's past, present, and anticipated future in such a way to provide a life with an overall sense of coherence and purpose. Indeed, emerging adulthood is a critical developmental stage in which life stories are forged (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Important social cognitive change during adolescence and emerging adulthood include perspective taking, the ability to recognize and articulate others' perspective (Marsh, Serafica, & Barenboim, 1981; McLean & Thorne, 2003). Perspective taking requires the ability to appreciate another person's

intentions or beliefs (Choudhury, Blakemore, & Charman, 2006). Further, the ability to take other's perspectives may facilitate the ability to understand another person's feelings (Humphrey, 1976). Arnett (2004) related these social cognitive changes, often triggered by physical distance from parents, to improvement in the parent-child relationship as well as a shift of the relationship to near equals during emerging adulthood. These cognitive and relational changes were described as aspects of a normative developmental process—most common among White families—that follows a typically more conflictual parent-adolescent relationship in which the adolescents felt their parents to be controlling and intrusive (Arnett, 2004).

However, the question remains as to whether these apparently normative cognitive and relational change take hold among Korean American emerging adults given the intergenerational cultural distance and conflict that frequently characterize Asian American families (Lee & Liu, 2001; Pyke, 2000). In general, there is a lack of research on how Korean American youth interpret their family experiences. While one ethnographic study (Park, 2005) presents retrospective narratives of Korean American youth's family experience, its focus is not on parent-child relations. Some ethnographic and qualitative research on the school behavior of Korean American youth shed light on their family experience (e.g., Lee, 1996; Lew, 2006; Suh & Satcher, 2005), but their narratives focus overwhelmingly on parental pressure for educational achievement. While these studies point to important aspects of Korean American family life, they do not tell us how these youth reinterpret and make meaning out of their immigration-related parent-child challenges. In our attempt to answer this question, we selected participants whom we expected would be able to narrate some aspects of family hardship in order to examine how they interpret their past challenges.

This Study

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine the ways in which Korean American emerging adults narrated their experiences of growing up in an immigrant household. We focused particularly on the ways in which Korean American college students narrated their experiences of immigration-related family challenges. We addressed two research questions. First, what do Korean American emerging adults perceive as immigration-related parent-child challenges growing up? Second, how do they make sense out of these challenges? Namely, how do they make meaning out of these experiences?

Method

Participants

The 19 Korean American participants (11 women, 8 men) in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in a large public university in the Midwest. Their age ranged from 18 to 22 ($M = 19.9$, $SD = 0.9$). We tried to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds, including differences of generational status, family constellation, and parental occupations (e.g., entrepreneur vs. professional). Each of these parameters may have important implications for our study. For example, those who moved to the United States at later age may experience less cultural conflict compared to those who were born in the United States. A total of 14 participants were born in the United States, and 5 were born in South Korea but immigrated with their families between 1 and 11. Their parents were all first-generation Korean immigrants, with the year of immigration spanning from 1968 to 1992 (median = 1,980). All participants were from two-parent households except for three cases of divorced or separated parents and two families with deceased fathers. A total of 17 participants had both mothers and fathers who worked full time while they were growing up, whereas 2 participants' mothers stayed at home. Of the 19 households, at least one parent in 8 families was a small business owner, and 6 families had at least one parent in a manufacturing or semiskilled service occupation (e.g., post-office sorter, medical products assembly, warehouse worker). A total of 8 families had at least one parent who held a professional occupation (e.g., nurse, engineer, accountant, pastor). We were interested in parents' occupations as we predicted that the demands of parental work may be an important factor that shapes participants' family experience growing up. All participants had graduated from high schools in the Chicago metropolitan area (including the city and the surrounding suburbs), an area of significant Korean ethnic concentration. In fact, many had attended high schools with a large number of Korean Americans. A total of 16 participants identified themselves as Christian, and 3 identified themselves as either agnostic or having no religious affiliation. Many of the Christian participants had belonged to a Korean American church in their hometown. Thus, most of our participants had experiences in the Korean American community beyond the family.

Interview participants were selected from 65 (of 104 total) Korean American college students who participated in an online survey of college students' well-being and family functioning and indicated their willingness to be contacted for a follow-up interview. Because the research aim was to examine the ways in which Korean American emerging adults make sense out of their past experience of immigration-related family challenges, we selected

interviewees who based on survey results we expected would be able to report on some aspect of personal or family difficulties. Specifically, we selected the interviewees according to one of two criteria: (a) questionnaire or narrative report of their own emotional distress on the survey and (b) questionnaire or narrative report of their perception of poor family functioning or parental distress (e.g., "[My mother] is very stressed out usually with running the cleaners; she works too much," "Deep down [my mother] is sad, doesn't know English that well and [is] often annoyed because of it"). Through this screening process, 20 were selected for in-depth interviews (10 of those reported high personal distress and the other 10 reported poor family functioning or parental distress). We conducted 20 interviews but due to a recording-device malfunction one interview was not recorded; thus, 19 transcripts were submitted for analysis. One out of 19 interviews did not refer to any immigration-related family challenges. Because of this research's interest in Korean American emerging adults' narration of their families' immigration-related challenges, only the 18 interviews containing recalled immigration-related challenges were analyzed further.

Interview Procedures and Protocol

We used a grounded research approach because it offers systematic procedures to generate explanations from the data through identification of context and process as well as the key constructs of the phenomenon of interest and their relationships (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviews were conducted until a point of saturation was reached, as indicated by the recurring themes and the emergence of clear trends (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Interviews were semistructured with broad questions followed by probes. The questions served as a guide but did not restrict the course of the interviews. Our goal was to obtain interviewees' own narrative accounts of their family experiences including immigration-related challenges. Thus, questions focused on family history, daily life ecology, and any change in parent-child relationship over time as well as their current sense of well-being and their own and their parents' mental health over the course of their childhood. Key questions included, for example, "What are some vivid memories you have of your childhood?" "What was a typical day like in your family as you were growing up?" "Looking back, how was your general relationship with your parents?" "How is the relationship with your parents now?" All interviews were conducted in English. Two investigators (a psychologist and an anthropologist) and two trained graduate students in psychology and

anthropology conducted the interviews. The interviews ranged from 1 to 3 hours long, with an average of 1.5 hours. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. In addition, each interviewer kept a detailed research journal with notes following each interview. As outlined by Taylor and Bogdan (1984), the purpose of these research journals was to record an outline of the topics covered during the interview, notes about emerging themes, nonverbal behavior during the interview, and other salient features of the interview—as well as emerging analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Sanjek, 1990). These research journals and transcripts were reviewed by the entire research team in weekly meetings throughout the course of conducting the interviews.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the phases of grounded theory analysis outlined by Henwood and Pidgeon (2003):

1. open-coding to capture the detail, variation, and complexity of the basic qualitative material;
2a. constantly comparing data instances, cases, and categories for conceptual similarities and differences;
2b. sampling new data and cases on theoretical ground as analysis progresses;
2c. writing theoretical memoranda to explore emerging concepts and links to existing theory;
3a. engaging in more focused coding of selected core categories;
3b. continuing to code, make comparisons, and sample theoretically until the point at which no new relevant insights are being reached; and
4. [engaging in] additional tactics to move analysis from being descriptive to more theoretical levels.

All authors contributed to the first four phases (1 through 2c) of the analysis. It was in the open-coding phase that we identified immigration-related hardship, parent-child relationships, changes in the views of family hardship, and present sense of individual and family well-being as areas of particular interest. The second and third authors engaged in all phases of the analysis in a recursive fashion, and the first author served as the auditor of the analysis by checking the coding against the raw data. Specifically, after multiple readings to familiarize ourselves with the transcribed interviews as well as other supporting documents such as research journals and notes

for the 19 cases, the second and third authors independently examined the overarching themes and narrative trends of each transcript, paying particular attention to the narration surrounding parent-child relations and immigrant-related stressors. The second and third authors identified a diversity of ways in which people gave meaning to recurrent features of immigration-related family life. They then read carefully for participants' narration of changes in their perspective on family life (e.g., "When I was younger, I thought spanking was bad . . . but that's how [my parents] were brought up, so I understand now"). They determined that the interviews could be broadly distinguished by narratives that did or did not describe positive changes in their perceptions of parents or their experiences with parents. Following Henwood and Pidgeon (2003), the second and the third authors independently coded the 18 interviews into these categories and supplied narrative excerpts to justify the coding. They engaged recursively in the process of constant comparison of the basic data instances, emergent concepts (e.g., themes of positive change narratives), cases, and theoretical proposition; refinement of the categories; and recoding the narratives according to the refined categories until they reached consensus on theoretical saturation. By engaging recursively in the axial and selective coding phases of grounded theory methods (LaRossa, 2005), they crafted the story line that Korean American emerging adults' employment of narrative strategies demonstrated positive changes in their perceptions of family challenges.

Trustworthiness, or the degree to which study findings are supported by evidence and can be trusted as accurate reflections of participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was enhanced through three means. First, emerging interpretations of the data were shared with interview participants whenever possible through follow-up discussions (often conducted via e-mail). Second, the authors discussed themes from qualitative analysis with educators, service providers, and scholars whose work involves Korean American immigrant families as well as Korean American emerging adults who were not participants in this study, to gain insights and confirm results. Third, the first author checked the coding against the raw data.

Results

> *Research Question 1:* What did Korean American emerging adults perceive as immigration-related parent-child challenges growing up?

In the following, we discuss key aspects of family experiences that our participants perceived to be challenges in their relationships with their parents. We also note that all of these challenges are related to one another.

Lack of parental involvement. Seventy-eight percent (14 out of 18) of participants described a childhood with little parental involvement in their lives due to their parents' busy work lives. In fact, several participants were raised by their grandmothers who most often moved in to take care of them while their parents worked long hours away from home. One male student's portrayal of the work life of his parents, co-owners of a dry cleaner, represents an experience shared by the majority of our participants: "They [parents] leave the house at like 6 o'clock in the morning and they don't come back until 7 or 8 . . . they were always working so most of the times we were just left home alone basically." Having extremely busy and physically absent parents, participants reported difficulty in communicating with parents or developing a close relationship with them. For example, Mary recalled, "He [father] wasn't home a lot, and so it was really difficult for me to have a relationship with him."

Language barriers and communication problems. Eighty-three percent (15 out of 18) of participants reported that they had little communication with their parents growing up. Many viewed a language barrier with parents as a significant source of challenge in communication. For instance, Rob said, "The language barrier was always a problem," and Megan recounted, "trying to, like [to] explain something, you know, when he [father] doesn't understand some words, it's hard."

Our participants' dissatisfaction with communication with parents, however, was often something more. Many indicated an established pattern of communication impairments that have developed over the years. For example, Megan said,

I could talk to my mom in English, you know. So [the] problem in communication is beyond the language problem . . . but like since . . . we are used to? It's hard to break out even though I'm like trying to talk to her more a bit, but it's just very difficult because I feel like there's just so much she doesn't know.

Respondents also complained that their communication with parents remained at the superficial level, often because parents were interested only in their schooling. Being unable to share personal issues, they described feeling distant from their parents while growing up. Denis recalled,

I couldn't really come home to two parents that I could talk to about my problems or anything. It's always been . . . I guess that's what I mean by distant. Because . . . I've never really been able to talk to them about anything other than school.

Academic pressure. Ninety-four percent of (16 out of 18) participants reported extremely high parental expectations for academic performance. Mary's narrative captures these expectations: "Education was certainly something where it wasn't like, 'Oh well you did your best, that's ok.' But really getting that A."

Parental academic pressures appeared to create conflicts for youth, especially in socializing with peers. Denis, for example, complained, "For Korean American, [it] has to be like education comes first, your friends come second." Heavy pressure for academic success often created stress that our participants described feeling while growing up. Moreover, some perceived that academic success was closely linked with parental approval. Mary expressed, "It made me feel frustrated a lot of the times. Just because I really didn't feel like I could measure up to their standards sometimes. I felt like they would love me [only] if I got the right grades."

> *Research Question 2:* How do Korean American emerging adults make sense out of immigration-related parent-child challenges from their childhood and adolescence?

We identified the presence or the absence of positive change narratives as the most prominent variation across the interviews. More than half (56%) of the emerging adults in our sample employed narratives of positive change. Among those who did not narrate positive changes (44%), we identified two subgroups: participants who expressed negative affect related to the family challenges but did not report positive changes and those who identified the same constellation of immigration-related family features but narrated them in a very matter-of-fact manner, as if these family features had not posed particular challenges or personal suffering. We note that an interesting demographic pattern was observed across the group who expressed negative affect with no positive changes: At least one parent of all three participants of this subgroup had professional occupation (e.g., accountants, engineer), and all of them were born in the United States. No significant demographic pattern was observed in other groups.

Narratives of Positive Change

A total of 10 individuals provided narratives reflecting positive changes. These narratives capture a transformation in their view of earlier immigration-related parent-child challenges. These youth described undesirable family life or parental behaviors in the past, followed by statements of a new perspective in

which the same behavior or family features are now understood from a more sympathetic stance. We identified two distinct ways in which this new perspective was accounted for: (a) a general sense of self-maturation and (b) spirituality.

With maturation narratives, participants depicted a maturation process in which they now understand the reasons behind the undesired family or parental features and have more sympathy toward their parents. In the case of spiritual narratives, they highlighted the role of their spirituality or religion as an agent of changes in their view, so as to have more empathy for—or more specifically to forgive—their parents for immigration-related family hardship. In both cases, their narration allowed these young adults to revisit negative life experiences in a positive light.

Maturation. About 34% ($n = 6$) of participants described their maturation as a key factor in the change of their perspective on family. Various developmental factors, such as age and change in social context from home to college, seemed to contribute to this change in social cognition. For instance, Grace described how her perception of her mother changed as she became older. She recalled the difficulty of growing up with a mother, a night-shift nurse, who was constantly fatigued, slept during the daytime, and was unable to attend many of her school-related events and activities: "When I was younger, I would get into tantrums with my parents and be like you don't love me because you don't have time to pick me up and don't have time to come to my concert." However, Grace prefaced those remarks with "[when I got older] I understood like . . . a lot of the things they did, a lot of the reasons why they worked so much, or . . . couldn't come to a lot of like meetings, you know . . . I understood why." In a similar fashion, David narrated how he changed his views as he matured. After years of longing to escape his parental home, David expressed how he came to see things differently upon entering college: "I think once you get older, you kind of realize how much you love being home. And it's like you start missing your parents, and I don't know, you just start growing up and maturing."

Critical in many Korean American emerging adults' stories of positive changes was the theme of parental sacrifice. Participants talked about how their understanding of parental sacrifice helped them understand, forgive, and even appreciate their parents for their shortcoming during the earlier years. The word *sacrifice* was often used while describing their parents' immigration-related hardships. For example, Lisa articulated, "I think, [my father] is really smart, but he hasn't really had a chance to do things for himself. He's really, like, sacrificed a lot for me." However, regardless of their use of the word *sacrifice*, there was common new awareness of the costs paid

by parents for the sake of the children. These perceptions often involved recognition that parents' immigration or life as immigrants was for their children and exerted considerable toll or demanded considerable sacrifice, as illustrated in Andy's narrative: "They've given up, like their future in Korea, to come here for me." Similarly Joshua offered, "My dad basically gave up his job in business in Korea, and then he started working at some like lowly paying job here, you know?"

These youth's perceptions of parental sacrifice appeared to help them be more sympathetic toward their parents. Specifically, these perceptions, indicative of social cognitive change from childhood to adolescence, seemed to aid them in overcoming their negative emotions and perceptions regarding their parents and, in some cases, even transforming these negatives into positives. This happened as they interpreted the past immigration-related family challenges, (e.g., undesirable parental and family features in the past) as a result of or byproduct of parental sacrifice, thus as a symbol of parental care and affection. For example, Kelly attributed meaning to her parents' busy work life as an expression of their care for her:

> I didn't realize that until I got older. . . . I was always upset that they didn't have so much time to spend with me when I was younger . . . it was just really good to know that they did care in that way, enough to like sacrifice so much time, so much energy to work and to . . . really care for like how our future is gonna be.

Participants also extended their understanding and sympathy by deeming parents' shortcoming as part of cultural or immigrant traits rather than individual fault, therefore, lifting the blame from their parents. For example, parents' strictness and pressure for academic excellence as well as parental limitations in verbal and physical communication of affection were often perceived as characteristics of being Korean immigrants. Indeed, in discussing "what is a 'typical' Korean family," many participants described it as being "grade oriented." This cultural understanding of parental actions was another important aspect of changes in these emerging adults' perspective on their parents. David's narratives illustrate the use of cultural and immigration narratives in offering his sympathy to his parents for their lack of involvement in his life. In doing so, he extended his understanding to their parents:

> I don't think they really failed to do it [i.e., be involved in their children's lives]. It's just they're very . . . I think my parents, as well

as a majority of other Asian American parents, failed to do something like that. Like they don't really know how to get involved in their children's lives as well as American parents do. So I think in a way . . . but I can't even really say it was a failure, it's just a part of the culture so . . . and if it's part of the culture then that's just the way it is.

In this narrative, David recast what he and other Asian American emerging adults may have earlier perceived as parental failing into a culturally normative behavior that is different rather than deficient.

Spirituality. Twenty-two percent ($n = 4$) of participants highlighted religious belief as a significant factor in their change. In these cases, their religious belief played a role in facilitating changes in their perceptions of parents from earlier years. These participants developed a new perspective and forgave their parents through Christian empathy and a Christian-inflected appreciation of human frailty. For instance, Mary who stated "I didn't grow up in a good family when I was younger" described how her religious faith allowed her to establish distance from the past in a productive way. In particular, she described the Christian value placed on empathy, "not so much focusing on how your own needs are being met . . . [but] being empathetic and in tune with other people's needs . . . and how other people are hurting as well." Similarly, Megan articulated,

It was being so familiar with their pain too, you know? It's just how hard it's been for them in America. So, really [it's] constantly empathizing with [them] that I think really helps me to keep [the] right perspective . . . they're not supposed to be super human, perfect beings, you know?

This theme of religious empathy and perception of human imperfection is articulated in Megan's narratives in which she spoke of a Catholic prayer: "Accept your parents with their faults, with their . . . all the things they lack . . . and see[ing] them as just another person." Moreover, Megan was very explicit about the positive role of church regarding the change in her view and her relationship with her mother: "[Without the church], I would have just held onto more of like the grudge, how I felt . . . I think I would have stayed more like that . . . instead of trying to change my relationship with her." She described that she found the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation "very encouraging" and that it gave her "peace." Megan redeemed her difficult childhood through Christian beliefs in which she accepted her parents, relinquished her grudges, and understood her parents' immigration travails.

Narratives Lacking in Positive Change

Rejection of positive interpretations. Our analysis revealed that among 18 participants who expressed immigrant family stress, there was a small group (16%, *n* = 3) whose social cognition had not changed and thus did not express positive changes in their interpretation of their past challenges. The narratives of three participants suggested that they remained troubled by parental shortcomings and self-consciously rejected making positive reinterpretations of the past challenges. We note this self-conscious rejection as evidence of the extent to which expression of understanding and sympathy toward parents is normative for first- and second-generation immigrant emerging adults. In particular, they made it clear that they are aware that other Korean American emerging adults extend their sympathy to their parents or forgive their shortcoming in the name of immigrant suffering, but that they were unwilling to reorganize their cognition in this manner.

For instance, Paul lamented a childhood with little love and most of all with a father who was unable to fulfill a proper fatherly role. In a passionate statement, Paul outlines that while one might forgive his father's transgression in the name of cultural understanding, he concluded that he could not do so.

> I've always tried to understand that, you know like, I'm automatically different because I'm a minority and that our values and culture are a lot more different than typical American culture, and I've always tried to understand that because I have no choice . . . I've always been like, "Let me think about it from his perspective." You know, like, "Why is he saying this?" "Why is he doing this?" blah blah blah blah blah [sigh] . . . to an extent Koreans aren't quite as heartless . . . [but] you don't have to keep doing that over and over. I mean there's sometimes where you can just be lenient and be just like, "OK, I probably should say this . . . but [in] this instance, I'll just let it go and I'll just make him feel comfortable."

With "blah blah blah blah blah" Paul described the positive-change narrative expressed by others that he is unable to muster. Instead, he expressed his understanding of the limits to empathy. He described an immigrant's obligation to meet his children halfway, even as his father necessarily straddled different worlds. Paul extended empathy but pulled back:

> You are coming to America as a Korean immigrant . . . everything you know is Korean . . . But sometimes I think that like he has an obligation

almost, especially raising a family who are [i.e., American] . . . that he has to show both Eastern and Western values.

Notable in the narratives of participants who refused to positively reinterpret their past challenges or their parents was their expression of desire to distance themselves from their parents. For example, as for his "family and all that," Paul spoke boldly, "I have my own life. I have my own things to take care of . . . And it's [the family] almost just like a nonfactor to me." These three emerging adults insisted on the costs of these immigrant childhoods and expressed their desire to dissociate or gain distance from their parents.

Narratives of the normalization of suffering. Finally, there were 5 participants (28%) who identified the same features of immigration-related parent-child challenges but expressed little indication of personal suffering as a child and correspondingly offered no reassessment of the past. A number of participants with this sort of normalized hardship narrative described empathy for their parents during their childhood and thus having resolved disappointments in the moment. Even in cases in which emerging adults acknowledged having felt some negative affect, they indicated its nearly immediate resolution through understanding or resignation (e.g., "I didn't want to make my parents sad, so I didn't say anything to them" or "He [father] is working like 50/60 hours a week. I couldn't really complain"). We thus distinguish these participants from those who clearly indicated changes in cognition (i.e., their view of their parents) during emerging adulthood.

The narrative of Susan, a 19-year-old, American-born female student, can be characterized by the absence of cognitive change in emerging adulthood. Susan recalled the long hours that her parents spent at their family-owned wholesale jewelry store far from their family home while she was a young child. Her maternal grandmother had cared for her and her younger sister. Susan described realizing later that these were difficult family circumstances but offered that at the time they did not present a problem. She discussed her loneliness as a child this way:

Sometimes I really felt neglected and didn't really understand why they had to always work because some of my other friends' parents would come home and they would eat dinner together. But I think that *back then* I thought *that's how it was supposed to be*; my parents were supposed to work and my grandmother was supposed to take care of me. (italics added)

Susan similarly narrated her family's brief move to California when her parents had sold their jewelry business and bought a franchise restaurant. Because her grandmother did not accompany the family in this move, Susan (11 at the time) became the primary caretaker for her younger sister. Notably, Susan indicated that this seemed entirely normal or acceptable at the time. In this way, Susan narrated in a matter-of-fact manner how she had managed to normalize this immigrant hardship during childhood. This contrasts with the majority of the participants who reported having held onto their distress about their earlier parent-child relationship until emerging adulthood.

Discussion

The current study examined how Korean American emerging adults narrate and make sense out of their past immigration-related family challenges. Given the high level of immigration-related parent-child challenges among Korean American families documented in previous research (Lee & Liu, 2001; Pyke, 2000), the present study examined how these challenges, embedded in the immigrant family context, shape Korean American emerging adults' narration of their family experiences. This finding sheds light on Korean American emerging adults' subjective experiences of immigration-related parent-child challenges.

Our findings revealed that many of these young people created "meaning, unity, and purpose" (McAdams, 1993, p. 6) out of their past challenges and conflicts with parents as they retold their stories. The immigration-related hardships, which Korean American emerging adults had earlier associated with loneliness and emotional distance, were now narrated more sympathetically, with a new appreciation for the perspectives of their parents who have had to navigate cultural and economic challenges. In these Korean American emerging adults' reinterpretation of their childhood, their parents were redeemed and even hailed as selfless givers who had sacrificed their own lives for a better life for their children. Furthermore, consistent with Singer (2004), these young people's stories often drew from the Korean American community narratives of immigrant sacrifice that provide meaning to the hardship.

Religious factors appear to be a powerful source of cognitive change for some of these young people. A growing body of research has noted the linkage between religiosity and positive youth development, including prosocial behavior and moral development, as well as a positive relationship between religiosity and identity development (e.g., Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). Particularly, religiosity is associated with Erikson's ego strength characteristics of fidelity, love, and care (Markstrom, 1999), which are reflected

in the narratives of spirituality that emphasize growing empathy and understanding as well as love among the family members. Our data, in addition, suggest that religious beliefs also facilitate greater understanding of the immigrant experience among Korean American emerging adults. This is in line with past research that found stronger ethnic identity development to be associated with greater religious involvement for racial minority youth (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Chong, 1998; Hurh & Kim, 1990).

Importantly, the narratives of positive changes occurred in the normative context of that social cognitive change in emerging adults' view of parents. Arnett (2004) documented a similar phenomenon in which changes in emerging adults' perception of their parents contributed to a new relationship with their parents. Likewise, Korean American emerging adults in our study came to view their parents as persons rather than being strictly defined by their role as parents. With their capacity to take parents' perspective and to see the parent as individuals who has shortcomings just like themselves, Korean American emerging adults expressed more acceptance and sympathy toward their parents.

The shift in intergenerational relations to near equals that happened among most emerging adults in Arnett's study (2004), however, was not a salient theme in our sample's narration. We speculate that this difference derives from cultural factors. In Korean culture, the hierarchical nature of parent-child relationship tends to persist throughout the life span of the parents and children (Janelli & Janelli, 1982). Moreover, many parents in the present study continued in their attempt to control their children even after their departure for college, particularly in their career-related decisions. While Korean American emerging adults share similar experiences with other emerging adults from different backgrounds, distinct among this group is the particular narratives (e.g., of immigrant parents' hardship and sacrifice) through which these changes were narrated.

However, not all Korean American emerging adults provided narratives reflecting positive changes in their perceptions of parents and past parent-child challenges. The narratives of a small group of participants ($n = 3$) indicated a rejection of such changes. In their narrative account of their past family challenges, they highlighted their own suffering and self-conscious rejection of positive reinterpretation of past challenges that are commonly employed by their Korean American peers. Instead, these emerging adults expressed a desire to distance themselves from parents, similar to those emerging adults in Arnett's (2004) research who express resentment and anger toward parents as they come to see them as flawed individuals. Because the interview captured a onetime snapshot of their

narrative process, we appreciate that it is quite possible that these Korean Americans who were struggling actively with their family's past at the time may later arrive at a narration of positive interpretation. This possibility would be consistent with McAdams and colleagues' (2006) finding of both temporal continuity and developmental changes in narrative identity over a 3-year period of emerging adulthood. Interestingly, all participants in this group had at least one parent in a professional occupation, meaning their parents were more likely to have fixed work hours. Given that perceptions of parental sacrifice was one of the important factors for the transformation in their view of parents, it is possible that having parents in white-collar occupations that are likely commensurate with their education may have contributed to the emerging adults' decreased willingness to redeem their parents. Moreover, while birth in United States alone is not a sufficient indicator of acculturation, the finding that everyone in this group was born in the United States may potentially indicate that these young people's cultural orientation may play a role in their willingness to positively change their views of their parents or invoke the culturally prevalent narratives of immigrant parents' hardship and sacrifice. These potential explanations, however, are in no way conclusive given a small number of participants in this group.

The other subgroup of this category ($n = 5$) narrated immigrant family stress similar to others yet without descriptions of negative feelings often associated with such hardships. One possible interpretation of this disaffected narration of immigration-related difficulties is to appreciate this as a particular narrative strategy in which immigrant children normalize family challenges at the time of their occurrence (i.e., vs. positive interpretation later in life). Some scholarship has revealed that many Korean American youth come to think about immigration-related hardship in socially normative terms through informal and formal ethnic social networks, most prominently Korean churches, during the at-home years of their youth (Kim, 2004; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For other ethnic minority individuals, attending college and becoming immersed in a dense coethnic social network (Kim, 2004; Zhou & Kim, 2006) may provide the first opportunity to develop a positive narration of their immigrant childhood and adolescence.

The present findings, however, must be interpreted with the study's limitations in mind. Foremost, because our research was interested in the narration of immigration-related family stress, we recruited interviewees from a larger survey based on their reports of personal distress and family functioning so as to maximize the likelihood that we would elicit rich narratives about their family lives; it is a selected sample. We also note the specificity of the

current findings because we surveyed and interviewed Korean American emerging adults who attend a college, currently hold separate residence from their parents, and have extensive access to coethnic cohorts prior to or during college. For example, emerging adults who still live with their parents may have different experiences and meaning-making processes as they are more likely to deal with issues that cause conflicts than those who have more physical distance from their parents. Moreover, given high parental expectations for academic success, those who do not attend college may experience more negative parental behaviors. Nonetheless, because a large number of Korean Americans in the United States reside in areas with high ethnic concentrations (Yu, 2003), our findings may be applicable to a large segment of the college-aged Korean American population.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study contributes to the growing literature on Asian American emerging adulthood. Our findings challenge the notion that Asian American family dysfunction can result in severe relational impairment. We argue that for the case of immigrant families we must also consider how children give meaning to apparent struggles in the parent-child relationship. The present findings support the body of research that suggests change in parent-child relations during emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 1997; Arnett, 2004; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). Moreover, it sheds light on the divergent pathways through which positive transformation occurs. Further work is needed to study these issues with Korean American youth whose experiences may be different from our participants, including those who do not attend college, who live in the same household with parents, and those who have no or little exposure to ethnic community. Finally, it would also be interesting to examine the family narratives of emerging adults in other immigrant groups, particularly those with distinctive cultural frameworks, such as other Asian American groups or Latino Americans. Through following the experiences of diverse group, we can more adequately understand the processes through which emerging adults develop.

Acknowledgment

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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