

The Influence of Ethnic Church on the Identity Formation of Second-Generation Young People in Australia:

- A Case Study of Second-Generation Korean-Australian Adolescents -

호주 한인 2세 청소년들의 정체성형성에 미치는
호주 한인교회의 영향

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초록(Abstract)

본 소고는 호주 한인교회가 호주 한인 2세 청소년들의 정체성 형성에 어떠한 영향을 미치는지를 4개 호주 한인교회를 연구자리로 선정하여 질적 연구를 통해 분석한 내용이다. 보다 신뢰할만한 정보를 얻기 위해 본 소고는 14 명의 2세 청소년들과 14명의 한인 교육자들을 대상으로 심층 인터뷰 연구를 실시하였다. 인터뷰 연구를 통해 얻은 자료들은 계속적인 비교방법론(Constant Comparative Method)을 사용하여 분석하였고, 분석한 내용들의 신뢰도를 높이기 위해 인터뷰 참여자 체크(Member-checking) 방법을 도입하였다.

본 소고는 크게 세 부분으로 구성된다. 첫째 민족정체성에 대한 정의를 살펴보았다. 민족정체성 연구의 전통적인 접근과 최근 연구동향의 차이점을 언급하고 한인공동체가 가져야 할 올바른 방향을 제시하였다. 둘째 한인 2세들이 민족정체성을 형성하는 과정을 살펴보았다. 어떤 요소들이 정체성 형성과정에 깊은 영향을 주고받는지 통해 정체성 형성과정의 다양성과 복잡성을 보여주었다. 마지막으로 2세들의 정체성 형성과정에 한인교회가 어떤 영향을 미쳐왔는지를 분석하였다.

This essay analysed the influence of Korean ethnic church on the identity formation of second-generation Korean-Australian adolescents through a qualitative research of the four selected churches. To collect reliable and valid data, semi-structured interviews with fourteen second-generation Korean-Australian teenagers, ten teachers and four youth pastors were utilised. Data collected through the in-depth interviews was investigated by using the constant comparative method which is a joint procedure of explicit coding and repeat readings. I also examined the adequacy and accuracy of my interpretation of the data through member-checking in which all interview informants read the results of their interview and confirm its validity.

This article has three stages. First, the definition of ethnic identity was examined by analysing the traditional approach of ethnic identity research and the recent trend in the area. Through such investigation, a whole direction that Korean-Australian community should have was suggested. Second, the process of ethnic identity formation of second-generation Korean-Australian adolescents was explored. In this section, we can see that the process of ethnic identity development is a multidimensional phenomenon intertwined with various sociocultural influences. Last, the influence of Korean ethnic church on the identity formation was presented by mentioning its social ecology influences, religious influences, and negative influences.

주제어: 호주 한인교회, 호주 한인2세, 청소년, 정체성, 민족정체성, 기독교교육, 종교교육

Key words: Korean-Australian church, Second-generation Korean-Australian, Adolescent, Identity, Ethnic Identity, Christian Education, Religious Education

1. Introduction

As with other ethnic minority children, many second-generation Korean-Australian (hereafter SGKA) adolescents grow up in a complex sociocultural context. While they are rapidly acculturating into Australian society through school education or peer relationships, they also have constant pressure from their parents or relatives to maintain Korean culture and values. This complexity has a marked impact on their lives, especially on their identity formation.

Jean Phinney and her colleagues argue that ethnic identity development is a critical developmental task for ethnic minority adolescents like SGKA teenagers. They claim that “during adolescence, many youth, especially those from ethnic groups with lower status or power, may become deeply involved in learning about their ethnicity.”¹ For ethnic minority adolescents like SGKAs, however, establishing an ethnic identity seems to neither simple nor easy. They have to deal with various challenges in building a balanced identity between traditional and new cultures. Tensions abound as they seek to preserve strong ethnic identification and high self-esteem related to their ethnic group amidst prejudice and discrimination from the host society. Simultaneously, they have to resolve tensions with the parental generation which are caused by culture and value differences.

In this article, I will deal with what ethnic identity is, how SGKA adolescents develop ethnic identity, and the influence of the Korean ethnic church on the ethnic identity development of SGKA young people.

¹ Jean S. Phinney et al., “Ethnic Identity, Immigration, and Well-being: An Interactional Perspective,” *Journal of Social Issues* 57, no. 3 (2001): 496.

2. Methodology

For this paper, I investigated the ethnic identity formation of SGKA adolescents using semi-structured interviews with fourteen SGKA teenagers, ten teachers, and four youth pastors from the four selected Korean ethnic churches in Melbourne. The names of participants and churches are pseudonyms to keep their privacy.² All the interviews except two were conducted face to face,³ and when necessary, email or phone interviews were used to obtain further information. Some interviews were held in English and others in Korean depending on the participants' preference.

Data collected through the semi-structured interviews was analysed by utilising the constant comparative method which is a joint procedure of explicit coding and repeat readings. For the validity and credibility of this study, I examined the adequacy and accuracy of my interpretation of the data through member-checking.

3. Ethnic Identity Formation

There are various opinions and arguments about the definition of ethnic identity and the meanings of ethnic attachment and allegiance. Until recently, a primordial understanding of ethnicity predominated and this perspective regards ethnic identity as fixed and unchangeable regardless of contexts. In this traditional understanding, ethnic identity is given at birth with ethnic culture and values.⁴

² I interviewed sixteen SGKA adolescents, but the data of two students was discarded when it was found that they did not meet the interview criteria.

³ Two teacher informants, Henry and Andrew, were interviewed via email because of their personal circumstances.

⁴ Miri Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 7.

However, many recent analysts of ethnicity no longer agree with the primordial perspective. They view ethnic identity as the sense of belonging to an ethnic community through accepting its values and traditions; that is, the identity is socially constructed rather than given at birth.⁵ The constructionist paradigm claims that “the self and world can only be construed as sociocultural artifacts... Thus, the construal process of the self and the world is the ongoing result of the active, cooperative and creative endeavours of human beings in relationship to and in the world.”⁶ Joane Nagel describes this construal process of the self and the world like this: “Culture is not a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical, cultural goods. Rather we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present. In other words, cultures change: They are borrowed, blended, rediscovered, and reinterpreted.”⁷

In addition, contemporary people are exposed to a multitude of possible identity models through the television, internet, radio or magazines.⁸ These connections with a wide variety of people have enabled SGKAs to establish multiple identities as a result of conversations and interactions with many others. However, an individual, who has multiple identities, can easily become fragmented, fluid, and unstable through various social

⁵ Jean S. Phinney and Anthony D. Ong, “Conceptualization and Measurement of Ethnic Identity: Current Status and Future Directions,” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 54, no. 3 (2007): 274.

⁶ S. Steve Kang, *Unveiling the Socioculturally Constructed Multivoiced Self: Themes of Self Construction and Self Integration in the Narratives of Second-Generation Korean American Young Adults* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 9.

⁷ Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” *Social Problems* 41, no. (1994): 162.

⁸ Kenneth J. Gergen, “Psychological Science in a Postmodern Context,” *The American Psychologist* 56, no. (2001): 805.

influences.⁹ These numerous identities seem to make it much harder for today's young people to achieve a stable ethnic identity. Miri Song argues that our globalised-postmodern culture tends to cause increasing fluidity and mobility of ethnic identity development depending on contexts and/or time.¹⁰

4. The Process of Ethnic Identity Formation of Second-Generation Korean-Australian Adolescents

George Knight and his colleagues designed a *social cognitive model of the development of ethnic identity and ethnically based behaviours* in order to investigate the process of acquiring ethnic behaviours. They emphasise social influences and cognitive abilities in the process of ethnic identity formation of ethnic minority children.¹¹ They argue that when children, especially adolescents, equipped with abstract and hypothetical thinking skills face ethnicity-invoking contexts, they are likely to internalise ethnic values and norms, and establish an ethnic identity as a major part of their personal identity.¹² Knight et al.'s model seems to be a good framework for comprehending the ethnic identity development of SGKA young people. The paradigm provides four insights into how SGKA adolescents form an ethnic identity.

First, various social ecological realms directly impact on the ethnic identity

development of SGKA adolescents. Thus, in order to understand the process of ethnic identity formation we need to analyse their social ecology to find what social influences are involved and which affect the process of ethnic identity development in the lives of SGKA adolescents. Janice Im argues that analysis of social ecology influences “can aid in defining the many layers and contexts that Asian-Americans must incorporate and cope with during identity crisis and formation. These layers are vital in differentiating the Korean-American experience from the Euro-American and other Asian-American identity development experience.”¹³

Second, ethnic identity develops in various identity hierarchies and its level depends on the choice of ethnic minority people. Multiple identities may emerge in the lives of SGKA adolescents because of various socialisation practices, and the location of ethnic identity will be reflected through their behaviours. Erikson argues that at adolescence, multiple identities of the self which emerged in preadolescence may be reconfigured and reassessed with new perspectives and standards through a psychosocial moratorium.¹⁴

Third, certain contexts where ethnic factors are activated are very important in the ethnic identity construction of SGKA young people. Knight et al. argue that ethnic identity might be fostered in a specific context in which ethnic language or values are accepted and utilised. They call it *immediate contextual influences*. For SGKA teenagers, the Korean ethnic church seems to be an important place for activating ethnic dimensions.

⁹ Virgil Nemoianu, *Postmodernism and Cultural Identities: Conflicts and Coexistence* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 13.

¹⁰ Miri Song, *Choosing Ethnic Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003), 17.

¹¹ George P. Knight et al., “A Social Cognitive Model of the Development of Ethnic Identity and Ethnically Based Behaviours,” in *Ethnic Identity: Formation and Transmission among Hispanics and Other Minorities*, ed. Martha Bernal and George Knight (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 213.

¹² *Ibid.*, 228-29.

¹³ Janice H Im, “An Ecological Examination of Ego and Ethnic Identity Formation Within Second Generation Korean-Americans” (M.S. diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1999), 9.

¹⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 155-64.

The Korean immigrant church and its religious education practice provide indispensable opportunities for SGKA adolescents to encounter ethnic values and develop an ethnic identity.¹⁵

Finally, SGKA adolescents tend to begin searching for the meaning of their ethnicity from early adolescence because *formal operational thinking* normally occurs at that time. Erikson asserted that the middle teens having attained *formal operational thinking* “can now operate on hypothetical propositions and can think of possible variables and potential relations-and think of them in thought alone, independent of certain concrete checks previously necessary.”¹⁶

Phinney divides the process of ethnic identity formation into three stages on the basis of the exploration of one's own ethnicity: unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search, and achieved ethnic identity.¹⁷ This ethnic exploration depends, she argues, on the extent of cognitive development. The first stage refers to ethnic identity *diffusion* or *foreclosure*. Phinney argues that some adolescents may not encounter ethnic identity issues because they tend to immerse themselves in the dominant culture and even accept negative opinions of their ethnic group from the host society without filtering (ethnic identity diffusion). Other adolescents in the same situation receive ethnic values and behaviours positively from others, especially their parents, without exploration (ethnic identity foreclosure).¹⁸

Adolescents who experience the issue of ethnic minority tend to

move to the next stage, *exploration of their own ethnicity*. William Cross, Linda Strauss, and Peony Fhagen-Smith describe ethnic encounter like this: “[it] causes the person to see for the first time, the racial gap in his or her current social identity and to comprehend the necessity for an identity conversion.”¹⁹ After this experience, teenagers are likely to become involved in rediscovering their ethnicity by dialogue, reading, participation, and so on.²⁰ The final stage of Phinney's three-stage model is *the achievement of ethnic identity*. At this point, adolescents internalise ethnic values and norms into their own value system and commit themselves to their ethnic group with a sense of belonging.²¹

As can be seen, the process of ethnic identity development in SGKA adolescents is a multidimensional phenomenon intertwined with various sociocultural influences.

5. The Influence of Ethnic Church on the Identity Formation

5.1. Social Ecology Influences

Among major social factors affecting SGKA young people, the influence of the Korean ethnic church is remarkable considering the high rate of church affiliation of Korean migrants in Australia. According to the 2011 Australian Census, about 69.1 percent of Korean-Australians called themselves Christians.²² This figure indicates that a considerable

¹⁵ George P. Knight et al., “A Social Cognitive Model of the Development of Ethnic Identity and Ethnically Based Behaviours,” 225.

¹⁶ Ibid., 245.

¹⁷ Phinney and Ong, “Conceptualization and Measurement of Ethnic Identity,” 275.

¹⁸ Jean S. Phinney, “Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of Research,” *Psychological Bulletin* 108, no. 3 (1990): 502.

¹⁹ William E. Cross Jr., Linda Strauss, and Peony Fhagen-Smith, “African American Identity Development Across the Life Span: Educational Implications,” in *Racial and ethnic identity in school practices: Aspects of human development*, ed. Rosa Hernandez Sheets and Etta R. Hollins (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers, 1999), 38.

²⁰ Phinney, “Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults,” 502-03.

²¹ Ibid., 503.

number of SGKA children have grown up with a close connection with the Korean ethnic church. From the beginning of Korean migration into Australia, the Korean immigrant church has not only been a religious organisation, but also an essential ethnic educational institution providing ethnic influences. The Korean ethnic church has provided a setting in which they speak Korean, respect elders, and feel group solidarity, which may be helpful in activating their ethnicity. Through church education, many SGKA children have been able to learn Korean culture, values, and language more systematically than at home.²³

It is noted that a sense of intimacy within the Korean community is an essential factor calling SGKA young people to the Korean ethnic church. It was remarkable that many SGKA students who feel comfortable in English answer that they prefer the Korean ethnic church to the local church because they want to communicate with people who have a similar experience of growing-up and similar cultural background. Ben, the thirty-nine year old second-generation youth pastor in the Southeast church, described this phenomenon as a need of heart language, the desire to connect with people who share an identity.²⁴

Luke, a fifteen year old student attending the Southeast church, said that he had sometimes attended a few English-speaking local churches, but found it difficult to share his experience with local students even though he had no difficulties with English. Although he was born in

Australia and feels more comfortable with Australian rather than Korean culture, he said that he feels more connected with SGKA adolescents and feels a sense of belonging in the Korean church.²⁵

Abigail, a thirteen year old attendee at the Central church, also said that she prefers the Korean ethnic church to the English-speaking local church because she feels more connected with Korean people including SGKAs. Since Korean international students make up the majority of her youth group, she said that she sometimes feels isolated in the church especially when she cannot understand the subtle nuances of Korean expressions or the meaning of Korean humour. However, she claimed, she feels a sense of intimacy when she is with Koreans in the church.²⁶

5.2. The Role of Faith

5.2.1. Faith as a Hub of Two Cultures

In relation to the process of finding where they stand between two cultures, faith is considered as the hub of two cultures because faith provides them with an identity that is bigger than cultural identity, namely, Christian identity. Through faith in Jesus Christ, they believe, different cultures can be harmonised or integrated into a new third culture. Therefore, many SGKA students said that faith helps them to resolve the identity confusion between Korean and Australian cultures.

²² Australian Bureau of Statistics, "2011 Census of Population and Housing: Religious Affiliation (RELP) - 1 Digit Level by Ancestry 1st Response (ANC1P) - 4 Digit Level," Australian Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/webapi/jsf/tableView/customiseTable.xhtml> (accessed August 21, 2012).

²³ Knight et al., "A Social Cognitive Model of the Development of Ethnic Identity and Ethnically Based Behaviours," 225.

²⁴ Ben, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, December 22, 2011.

²⁵ Luke, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, December 16, 2011. In *Christian Education Curriculum for the Digital Generation*, Jong Soo Park (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 122-3.

²⁶ Abigail, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, December 18, 2011. In *Christian Education Curriculum for the Digital Generation*, Jong Soo Park (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 123.

Ian, a seventeen year old attendee at the Central church, argued that in Christ cultural difference or nationality is not important in the perspective of faith. Therefore, he claimed that if faith is nurtured well in the church, many problems related to identity confusion can be resolved because faith is likely to make SGKA young people accept different cultural traditions.²⁷

Kate, a fourteen year old girl who goes to the Central church, had a similar opinion of the role of faith in terms of identity exploration. She argued that from Jesus' perspective it does not seem important whether a person is Korean or Australian, so we do not need to be exclusive of other cultures or discriminate against other ethnic people. For her, faith is the hub that embraces other cultural traditions, connects them in Christ and creates a holistic hybrid identity.²⁸

5.2.2. Faith as a Shelter from a Sense of Marginalisation

When SGKAs realise that they are an ethnic minority in Australia, they are likely to feel discrimination because of racial difference, and sometimes they have a sense of marginalisation. Through this interview project, I found that there are many SGKA adolescents who have felt discrimination at school or in other environments because of their race.

Charlie, a fourteen year old girl attending the East church, said that when she was a child, there was little problem getting along with white friends, but after entering secondary school, she began to feel a subtle sense of racial discrimination. She argued that it seems impossible to end such slight discrimination, so she has tried to ignore it. However, this experience has led her to spend time with friends who

have Asian-background rather than Caucasian friends. She argued that in her school it is a general phenomenon that Caucasians get along with Caucasians, while Asians get on best with Asians.²⁹

Even Peter, a fifteen year old attendee at the East church who thinks of himself as an Australian and hangs around only with white peers, said that racial discrimination is a fact of school life. Peter argued that Australia is still a white-centred country although it has become very multicultural, so it is natural that ethnic minorities like him sometimes feel a sense of discrimination or suffer disadvantages in some ways. He claimed that since he cannot change such an atmosphere in Australian society, he tries to downplay or ignore it in order not to be hurt whenever he experiences discrimination by his school friends.³⁰

SGKA participants in this research who have experienced racial discrimination in school tend to be eager to find a sense of fellowship in other places. At this point, faith seems to provide them with a strong sense of belonging. Russell Jeung argues that faith provides ethnic minority youth with “a chance to escape the undesirable aspects of their racial status by adopting an alternative identity, by making Christianity the locus of their identity.”³¹

For Nick, an eighteen year old SGKA student in the Northeast church,

²⁷ Ian, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, December 18, 2011.

²⁸ Kate, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, December 19, 2011.

²⁹ Charlie, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, November 19, 2011. In *Christian Education Curriculum for the Digital Generation*, Jong Soo Park (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 144.

³⁰ Peter, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, November 27, 2011. In *Christian Education Curriculum for the Digital Generation*, Jong Soo Park (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 144-5.

³¹ Rebecca Kim, “Second-Generation Korean American Evangelicals: Ethnic, Multiethnic, or White Campus Ministries,” *Sociology of Religion* 65, no. 1 (2004): 22.

faith provides him with an alternative identity enabling him to overcome a sense of marginalisation. He confessed that he does not feel a sense of belonging either to Australia or to Korea. For him, faith is not only the hub connecting both cultures, but also provides a refuge from a sense of alienation.³²

5.3. Negative Influences

At the same time, however, it is also true that the first-generation-dominated climate of the Korean-Australian church has caused SGKA young people to feel underestimated, uncomfortable, and even hostile toward authoritarian and hierarchical church leadership. In addition, religious education in the Korean ethnic church is ethnic identity-promoting education. This educational issue has been dominated by the first-generation members' understanding of the ethnic church as a Korean culture-keeping institution as well as a religious organisation. Consequently, from the early days the Korean immigrant churches have played as a core centre for teaching and practicing Korean language, traditional values, and manners. Not only the Christian Gospel, but also such Korean cultural factors have been communicated actively under the church education system with little comprehension of their children's complex life-contexts and the contemporary postmodern situation.³³ Many Korean parents and church leaders also tend to think that ethnic identity is given at birth and can be activated by education.

³²Nick, interviewed by author, Melbourne, Australia, October 7, 2011. In *Christian Education Curriculum for the Digital Generation*, Jong Soo Park (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 145.

³³Jong Soo Park, *Christian Education Curriculum for the Digital Generation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 2.

This ethnic identity-developing religious education has subsequently led to a monocultural education which is not relevant to the Korean-Australian church in which a variety of people with different cultural orientation have journeyed in faith together, such as first and second generations, long-term and short-term overseas students, and international couples and their children. Likewise, the Korean ethnic church in Australia is a contact zone among different cultures and values, and different concepts of Christianity.³⁴

The monocultural religious educators tend to educate SGKA young people with only Korean values and perspectives, which might have negative impact on their settlement in the multicultural main stream in Australia.³⁵ It seems natural that SGKA adolescents who are affected by the individualism of postmodern Australian culture will feel confused about the values and perspectives of collectivism and modernism taught in the context of the Korean immigrant church. As a result, many SGKAs tend to leave the mother church after they graduate from secondary school or leave when they become independent of their parents.³⁶

6. Conclusion

So far, I have investigated the definition of ethnic identity in postmodern society, the process of ethnic identity formation of SGKA adolescents,

³⁴ Ibid., 2-4.

³⁵ Hyeok Kyu Lee, "Damunhwa goyukgwa goyyukgwajeong (Multicultural Education and Curriculum)," in *Damunhwa goyukui ihaereul wihan goyyang goyjae jeosul*, ed. Young Dal Cho (Seoul: Ministry of Education&Human Resources Development, 2008), 53-54.

³⁶ Jong Soo Park, "A Study of Religious Education Pedagogy for Second-Generation Korean-Australian Adolescents: Threefold Structure for an Alternative Model to the Schooling Paradigm" (M. Theol. thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, 2010), 40-42.

and the influence of the Korean ethnic church on the identity formation of SGKA young people. I argued that ethnic identity is not given at birth, but is constructed through various social influences. Among them, the Korean ethnic church has affected SGKA young people remarkably in their ethnic identity development, providing social ecology influences and a sense of intimacy, and nurturing faith as a hub between two cultures and a shelter from alienation. However, the first-generation dominated church climate of most Korean immigrant churches and its monocultural education has made many SGKA young people hostile to their ethnic church. It is necessary that first-generation church leaders consider the ethnic church as a contact zone in which the two generations can be harmonised. In addition, its religious education curriculum and pedagogy should be transformed so as to be more appropriate for the lives of SGKA young people in Australian society.

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