American Journal of Qualitative Research
2023, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 1-24
https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/12711

AMERICAN JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

ISSN: 2576-2141

Using Narrative Inquiry for Exploring Biculturalism and Resilience in Korean American Young Adults in New York City

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ABSTRACT

This research is a qualitative and narrative inquiry to investigate how Korean American youth's bicultural identity develops and to determine whether that bicultural identity serves a protective function in facing prejudice and discrimination and contributes to developing resilience. Data was collected through in-person interviews with ten second-generation Korean youth in New York City. Their life story narratives were analyzed using over 20 coding categories. The findings showed that the Korean youth felt comfortable embracing both their Korean- and Americanness. Their bicultural identities evolved as they confronted racism, including American stereotypes and prejudices towards them, raising their awareness of their Korean and Asian identity. They believed that biculturalism could be an asset as it could contribute to cultural flexibility and adaptation to the multicultural U.S. society. This study has significance for public health in that (1) it takes a closer look at the issues of identity struggles and discrimination experienced by young people with a minority background as they grow up in the United States; and (2) it provides an opportunity to explore ways to help these youth by understanding their psychological and emotional difficulties and sufferings.

KEYWORDS: biculturalism, identity, life story model, narrative inquiry, resilience.

The Korean population in the United States has rapidly increased over the last decades of the 20th and 21st centuries. The 2020 Census reported approximately 1.9 million Koreans living in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), a more than two-fold increase since the 1990 Census when 800,000 Koreans resided in the United States (Min, 2011). In 2019, the top five metropolitan areas by Korean population in descending order were: Los Angeles, New York, Washington, Seattle, and Chicago (Pew Research Center, 2019). Los Angeles has the largest Korean population (326,000 or 17% of the total Korean population in the United States), followed by New York (220,000 or 12%) and Washington (96,000 or 5%) (Pew Research Center, 2021).

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According to the most recent statistics from the Asian American Federation Census Information Center (2019), approximately 100,000 Koreans were living in New York City in 2015. This meant that about 67% of Koreans living in New York State were NYC residents. Among them, 76% were working age adults (age 18 to 64) and 10% were seniors (age 65 and older). The number of children (under 18 years of age) was over 13,700 and this accounted for 14% of the Korean population in New York City (Asian American Federation Census Information Center, 2019).

Despite the increasing number of Korean immigrants and children of Korean parents in the United States, there has been a dearth of research on these youth. The bicultural identity of Korean American youth has gained even less attention despite of its developmental importance. Thus, this study is expected to yield a deeper understanding of the life stories of Korean Americans and their bicultural identity by employing McAdams' life story model (1985, 1987, 1990).

Biculturalism, or bicultural identity, refers to identities that are not limited to someone's inherited culture but with another culture incorporated into his or her identity as a result of belonging to two cultural and/or linguistic groups (X. Chen & Padilla, 2019). Bicultural identities are common among ethnic minority youth, especially Asian and Mexican Americans (Arnett, 2018). Bicultural individuals may have "two cultural minds" (Cheng et al., 2014, p. 4), which allows them to flexibly alternate between their culture of origin and their culture of residence as needed. Often, biculturalism may coexist with bilingualism, which works together to contribute to the psychological adjustment of immigrant youth to a new environment (S. Chen et al., 2008). People who speak two different languages fluently as a result of belonging to two different cultural groups are more likely to experience higher levels of cultural flexibility and fluidity (Cheng et al., 2014). The development of bicultural identity is critical for children and youth in immigrant families, even across marked contextual and individual differences (Schwartz et al., 2018). As such, a growing number of studies on biculturalism have focused on immigrant families and their children undergoing migration and acculturation into U.S. society (Juang & Syed, 2019).

Literature Review

Research on Asian American youth has shown that they have a relatively high degree of bicultural identity (Arnett, 2018; Marks et al., 2011). Asian and American cultures are very different from each other in that Asian cultures value collectivism while American culture values individualism (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Despite the differences in values and customs between Asian and American cultures, Asian American youth seem to successfully manage those conflicts and integrate them within themselves. Yet, it is largely unknown how Korean American youth develop their bicultural identity as a minority growing up in the multicultural context of the United States, despite the increasing number of Korean immigrants and children of Korean parents across the country.

The limited research on the identity of Koreans in the United States has a few commonalities. First, the majority of research collected and analyzed quantitative data focused on the general characteristics of the Korean American population (Atkinson & Kim, 1989; R. Lee, 2005; R. Lee, 2001; Park, 2007; Shrake & Rhee, 2004). Second, only a small number of Koreans are typically included in qualitative studies on Asian American identity. Often, the number of Korean participants goes unspecified. For example, one study analyzed the autobiographical essays of 15 Asian Americans, with an unidentified number of Korean Americans (Min & Kim, 2000). Furthermore, those studies that do include Korean Americans have provided little information about their specific Korean American identity. Finally, although each individual's identity reflects their broad spectrum of life experiences, including big and small "turning points" in life (McLean

& Pratt, 2006, p. 714), studies that have looked at bicultural identity in Korean American youth through their own voices by analyzing their life stories are rare. Thus, this research is a qualitative study of a sample of Korean American young adults in New York City that explores their bicultural identity and the development of resilience as reflected in their life stories.

Purpose and Research Questions

This research was conducted (1) to understand how the Korean American youth's bicultural identity develops as they face critical life experiences and (2) to explore whether the bicultural identity of the Korean American youth serves as a protector in facing prejudice and discrimination and as a contributor to developing resilience. To investigate the bicultural identity development in the ten Korean youth, three overarching research questions were raised.

1. What critical life experiences of Korean American youth in New York City tell us about their bicultural identity?
2. What are the meanings of "being a Korean" and "being an American" at the same time in their everyday discourses?
3. What are the advantages or disadvantages of their bicultural identity while living in the United States as a minority?

Methodology

The research employed a qualitative methodology to examine participants' subjective life experiences in the United States and the development of their identity in the process. The theoretical framework that identity practices are situated in personal narratives served as the base for the design and analysis of this study. We intended to listen to the experiences of Korean American youth, their thoughts, and ideas about their lives through their voices. The main purpose of the study did not lie in its generalization of results to the larger Korean population in the United States. Rather, this study would provide an improved understanding of identity issues among Korean American young adults through their own voices. Therefore, an in-depth exploration into the lives of research participants was of critical importance.

Narrative Inquiry

Researchers have increasingly relied on personal narratives to study identity (Bamberg, 1997; Bruner, 1986, 1990; Fivush, 1991; Gjerde, 2004; Gregg, 2007; Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1990, 1993, 2001; McLean, 2005; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Schachter, 2004, 2005). Bruner (1986) argues that how people construct their stories tells us who they are. Nelson (2003) added that the stories are constructed using individuals' autobiographical memories, and that collective narratives serve as sources for developing a sense of self. Fivush (1991) noted that identity is socially constructed as stories are told in social interaction. McAdams (1990) has argued that "a person's life story provides the individual with a sense of unity and purpose" (p. 151). Hammack (2008) suggests that identity—as a cognition of self—is developed through a meaning-making discourse with those who belong to the same groups. This cognitive component of identity serves both as the content of an individual's discourse and as a structure of the story (Hammack, 2008). Thus, to fully know a person, we should go beyond knowing the person's traits or characteristics and listening to his or her life stories (McAdams, 1995, 1996, 2001).

Life Story Analysis

This study applied a life story model of identity (McAdams, 1990, 1993, 2001), using participants' life story narratives as the primary source of data. It has been argued that a person's identity is best understood through his or her life story narratives (McAdams, 1990); in other words, how people construct their stories tells us who they are (Bruner, 1986). Over the past decades, scholars have increasingly relied on personal narratives to study identity (Bamberg, 1997; Bruner, 1986, 1990; Fivush, 1991; Gjerde, 2004; Gregg, 2007; Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 1990, 1993, 2001; McLean, 2005; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Schachter, 2004, 2005). Research has shown that people find unique ways to express their identity in early adolescence and present a relatively complete narrative by the end of adolescence or young adulthood (Thorne & Nam, 2007). Thus, this research was conducted to listen to Korean American young adults' conceptualizations of their life stories by providing them opportunities to talk about their experiences in the United States and analyzing how they make sense of their life stories as they develop bicultural identity and resilience.

Research Participants

Ten Korean American young adults (five men and five women) from their late teens to late twenties participated in the study. They all met the three participation criteria: first, they were born in the United States or came to the United States when they were under the age of six. Seven were born in the United States, two in South Korea, and one in Argentina. Second, their biological parents are Korean. Third, they primarily speak English but understand the Korean language and culture. Data was collected in 2015 upon the exempt approval of IRB application (File #2015-1193, Exempt: Category 2) from the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.

We followed Marshall's (1996) and Patton's (2002) recommendations regarding sample size. Marshall (1996) points out that a qualitative study requires a practical and flexible approach to sampling that depends on the research questions. He argues that an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is determined by the number of participants required to answer the study questions adequately. Patton (2002, pp. 242-243) adds, "There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources." To answer our research questions, we thought that ten research participants was an appropriate number. Also, we wanted to have an equal number of men and women participants as we thought men and women might have differences. We wanted to be open to any possibilities. Each participant was paid $20 for travel expenses.

Demographic Information

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years, with an average age of 22.8 (SD = 3.52). Seven of the participants were citizens born in the United States. Two were born in South Korea but came to the U.S. when they were less than six years old, and they did not have U.S. citizenship. One was born in Argentina and had Argentine citizenship but came to the United States when he was two years old. All were living in New York or New Jersey at the time of the interview. Three women had graduated from four-year colleges, and one man had graduated from a community college; the remaining two women and three men were college students; and one man had left a community college before earning his degree. All spoke English as their primary language. Their

fluency in Korean varied from low-level conversational skills to high-level verbal and written fluency. All reported that Korean was used at home while they were growing up.

The participants' parents were all immigrants. Nineteen out of their twenty parents had been born and raised in South Korea but immigrated to the United States when they were adults, mostly in their late twenties to thirties. Ten parents had U.S. citizenship. One parent, the father of a female respondent, came to the United States when he was young, so he was bilingual in English and Korean. The rest spoke some or no English. The education level of the parents was diverse. Six parents were college graduates (two with doctoral degrees, both parents of one man; two were community college graduates; eight were high school graduates; two were middle-school graduates. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the study participants.

Table 1

A Summary of the Demographics of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Years of Residency in the U.S.	Gender	Country/ Place of Birth	Current Area of Residency	Level of Education	Marital Status	Primary Language
Alice	22	22	Female	U.S.	NYC (Manhattan)	College Student	Single	English
Isabella	23	23	Female	U.S.	Queens, NY	Bachelor Degree	Single	English
Cindy	24	24	Female	U.S.	Queens, NY	B.A.	Single	English
Lily	21	21	Female	U.S.	Queens, NY	College Student	Single	English
Joyce	25	18	Female	South Korea	New Jersey	Undergrad	Single	English
Jason	27	27	Male	U.S.	Queens, NY	Associates of Science	Single	English
Joseph	29	23	Male	South Korea	Queens, NY	College (did not finish)	Single	English
David	18	18	Male	U.S.	Queens, NY	College (Sophomore)	Single	English
Ethan	20	16	Male	Argentina	Queens, NY	College (Freshman)	Single	English
Jeremiah	19	19	Male	U.S.	Great Neck, NY	College (Sophomore)	Single	English

Data Collection and Analysis

Originally, data were collected for the principal investigator's dissertation research on life stories of Korean youth in New York City using the Korean youth life story interview protocol, a slightly modified version of McAdams' (1995) life story interview protocol. All interviews were conducted in English, as all the participants were either native English speakers or completely bilingual. Participants used Korean words as needed to express their meanings. The interviews were conducted through two 90-minute to two-hour interview sessions.

The principal investigator transcribed all the interviews in the two months following the interviews. Each interview generated 11 to 37 transcript pages, for a total of 253 pages. Participants' age and personality were related to interview lengths, as the younger and more introverted men talked less. At the beginning of the transcription process, each participant received a pseudonym to be used in the analysis and presentation of results. The first step in transcription was to write down word for word what participants said. This way, the principal investigator captured participants' original way of expressing themselves, including their specific word choices and their tone of voice or other nuances. In cases where participants used Korean words and expressions, the principal investigator transcribed them in both Korean and English.

Coding Procedure

The coding was performed in four steps. The first step was to read through all interview transcripts several times and create codes. Repeated reading and note-taking were important in the process. The principal coder took notes on any important episodes and remarks and put those notes under specific coding themes. In this way, the first round of coding generated 25 codes. The second step was to assess the frequency of episodes or remarks under each coding theme by looking at the number of references across transcript files. This was intended to determine the significance of each code by looking through a quantitative count. In the third step, the four most frequently occurring codes were selected and several subsets of codes were created within each. This process resulted in the creation of four major coding themes with 16 subsets of codes. The final step was to create an Excel spreadsheet to combine and arrange each set and subsets of codes with the corresponding transcript excerpts for a final round of fine-grained coding and analysis.

Inter-Rater Agreement

To calculate inter-rater agreement, the principal investigator (coder A) had coder B independently code two transcripts. Coder B, a Korean researcher with a Ph.D. (not one of the authors), shared the same ethnic background as the participants. Coder A sent her coding system and two transcripts (transcripts for one man and one woman) to coder B by email; then, in order to create a common understanding of the coding system, they had a discussion regarding how the categories and subcategories were generated, clarifying their approaches, and resolving possible disagreements about each category with examples. Coder B then independently coded the remaining transcripts.

The principal investigator created an Excel file to calculate the percentage agreement between the two coders. For example, if the two coders assigned the same key sentences or paragraphs from the transcripts to the same coding category, the principal investigator marked those passages as having 100% agreement. When there were numerous passages coded as one code or subcode, the principal investigator calculated the number that showed agreement between the

two coders. For instance, if the two coders had chosen three of the same passages out of four totals for a specific coding category, the category was marked as having 75% agreement. In this way, the principal investigator calculated the percentage agreement between the two coders for each of coding category and subcategory. Then, the percentage agreement for all the four coding categories and subcategories was calculated by calculating the mean percentage agreement. The total percentage agreement between the two coders for each code, on average, was 94%.

Findings

Interviews generated over 250 pages of transcripts, which were analyzed using the five coding categories: (1) participants' perceptions of their own identity; (2) bicultural acceptance and bilingual training; (3) minority status and model minority stereotype; (4) prejudice and discrimination; and (5) social support. These themes stood out in the life story narratives of the Korean youth and were used to capture as comprehensively as possible their perception of their own bicultural identity and resilience.

All participants expressed their excitement and gratitude for having the opportunity to participate in the study and to have their voices heard. Most reported that they had never shared their life stories. They stated that it was a good opportunity to reflect on what they had gone through and to share their experiences with someone who understood their culture. This section presents findings from analyses of the life stories of the Korean youth with illustrative excerpts from the interview transcripts. Each participant is referred to by a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.

Participants' Perceptions of Their Own Identity

The life stories of the Korean youth revealed that their identity had evolved from early childhood till the present. They believed that they had changed considerably in how they perceived their identities.

When Did Major Changes Occur?

Most youth experienced significant changes in their perception of Korean and American identity in junior or high school years. Two women and three men reported that they had had turning points in high school. One woman and one man reported experiencing turning points during junior high school. One man and one woman reported that they had experienced a turning point a bit later in college. The last woman stated that her struggle with identity issues was ongoing and that she did not have any changes so far. Cindy reported:

> *Right now, I feel like I'm on a treadmill. I would put it that way. I'm always running, I'm always trying to search for things, but I'm not really going anywhere, and I'm just in the same environment, really same room where if I leave the door I'm gonna be American, but if I come back to the door, I'm gonna be Korean.*

Except for this woman, nine out of ten reported that they had had identity turning points. Their turning points were associated with a variety of factors, such as moving to a different neighborhood, meeting a Korean friend for the first time in life, facing different school environments, confronting racism and bullying, or having life-changing religious experiences. Two

women reported that their turning point involved moving to a new environment. For example, Alice's turning point was when she moved to a new predominantly White neighborhood where she made Jewish friends, which prompted changes in her view of herself.

> *When I was in the seventh grade, I moved to Forest Hills, Rego Park area. I think that was a turning point in my life, in the way I identified myself as. That's when I started getting exposed to my Jewish friends and you know, just more exposure to the White community … I enjoyed my life better in that neighborhood.*

Isabella's turning point occurred when she moved to New York at the beginning of high school. She met many Korean friends after moving, which awakened her to her Korean heritage.

> *After I moved to New York, which was after my freshman year of high school, that's when I actually really started to accept my Korean values and just the Korean part of myself because when I moved to New York, there was a lot more Koreans that I was interacting with … So, more and more I became familiarized with Korean heritage.*

Lily's turning point was in high school when she accepted her Korean heritage not because of the insistence of her parents but because of her own realization.

> *In high school, freshman and sophomore year was when I hung out with non-Koreans and then later on, I guess I kind of grew up and started accepting and taking in more of the Korean culture in my own will because before it was just my parents tried to push me into accepting it, but later on I realized that, that was when I was comfortable with.*

Jason reported that when he spoke with his Korean boss at work in his early twenties was an important moment for his perception of Asian and Korean identity.

> *My Korean boss at the liquor store really ignited the flame in my heart showing that no matter what, people are gonna see me as an American, they are gonna see me Asian, he gave me a really good example … That would be a turning point for me kind of accepting more that I am a Korean.*

Ethan's high school years involved struggles with his American identity. After that, he realized he was a Korean, not an American.

> *In high school, I probably started to accept myself as a Korean, that's probably where because in freshman year I was still thinking, 'oh I am an American, American' throughout like halfway through high school, I started thinking, "no, I am not an American" so probably I realized, like the realization at that point in high school.*

Jeremiah experienced identity changes during high school, though he did not have much of a struggle. He fit in at school and became popular after exploring possibilities.

> *Starting adolescence, went to hit puberty, I guess a lot of things changed, so I started becoming more open to the world, but then tried to explore more to see what really fit me especially tried to fit in school and I was able to, I was fortunate to become pretty popular I guess, so I felt like I started to fit in.*

The turning point of several youths was related to their church experiences. For instance, when David started attending a Korean church where he met many Korean friends, he felt he had had a turning point.

> *I think my turning point would have been the first year in high school when I started going to a church, everyone's Korean there, that's when I started to realize my Korean heritage … That's when I truly accepted, "I am Korean American."*

Joseph felt he had two turning points: the first was during high school when he started playing all the time and not studying at all. The second took place when he returned to church, which made him a better person.

> *My first turning point was in high school, when I became a bookworm to a kid who just wants to play all the time, of course cutting school and all that and it was fun. The second turning point was when I came back to church. Everything then changed for the better.*

Joyce reported her turning point in association with her religious identity, unlike the other youth. She went through identity struggles in high school, but her turning point was when she converted to Christianity in college. Joyce said:

> *I think in high school, I was just trying to figure out my identity, and my parents got divorced when I was sophomore in high school, so I think just me figuring out my life, my friends, my education and then thinking about family stuff at the same time. Then in college when I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior, that is the biggest change in my life.*

Experiences of Identity Conflict

Most of the Korean youth stated that they had figured out who they were after some struggle with their identity. Yet, Cindy and Ethan reported that they had gone through tough times while struggling. Cindy's case was ongoing. The youth's struggle with identity was analyzed in light of the youth's citizenship. In other words, I wanted to see whether the youth's citizenship influenced their identity. Four women and three men were U.S. citizens. Among the remaining three, Joyce and Joseph had Korean citizenship, and Ethan had Argentine citizenship. Ethan's case was unusual in that he was born in Argentina but was living in the U.S. as a Korean. He reported that he had had many identity struggles growing up as his national identity, racial identity, and ethnic identity conflicted all through his school years. Ethan recalled:

> *I really started thinking about who I was as a person as well as I was really struggling because I lived most of my life here, I thought of myself as an American, that's when I was in middle school, I thought I was "oh I am an American, boom," but the thing is I wasn't an American, I am not a citizen here, so that's that who I was, I am a Korean … I was thinking I am not an American, I am a Korean and that's when it really started hit me in high school. I got it really easy when I started changing my mind like that.*

Jeremiah was born in the U.S. He reported that in his adolescence, he had experienced conflict between being a Korean at home and being a Korean American at school. He reflected on those days he was struggling to figure out what it meant to live as a Korean American in the United States:

> *Even though I'm Korean, and even though I do know some history about Korea, there were a lot of social problems with being a Korean American, so there is this borderline where being a Korean was at home and being a Korean American was at school, and that sort of conflicted with my adolescence stage, and there is a lot of problems with the living of a Korean but growing up in America and being able to learn the language, being able to read and write and everything.*

Cindy was also a U.S. citizen but had a tough conflict with her Korean or American identity. She had many sad moments in life and felt that she was isolated from both groups.

> *I thought I was an American, but kids here don't see me as an American, they see me as a foreigner, but in terms of Korean society, they don't see me as a Korean because they consider me too Americanized. In both groups, I kind of felt isolated, and a part of it was my choice, and a part of it was my reactions to their perceptions of me.*

Perception or Feelings of Current Identity Statuses

The majority of the Korean youth reported feeling comfortable with respect to their identity at the time of the interview. They felt settled after they accepted their Korean and American identities. Most men reported positive feelings. For example, Jason expounded on his situation:

> *Identity-wise I was always comfortable. I am a Korean American and nothing is going to change that … I was always proud to be who I was … In my mind, my outer self, my mentality, my thoughts, and my experiences have always been an American, so I see myself as an American but I am an Asian first in my first look and an American.*

David had never been bothered by uncertainty about being Korean or American. He felt comfortable with his Korean American identity: "I am a Korean American. Though I am an American-born citizen I still consider myself Korean as well. It didn't really bother me if I was American or a Korean when I was younger."

Ethan believed that things turned out to be much easier after he had struggled with identity issues. He appeared comfortable with his identity.

> *I guess I kind of embraced the fact that I am Korean, no matter how much I try to run away … no matter like where I go, I will still be Korean, so I just kind of accepted that. Because I accepted that I think it got a lot easier for me in high school.*

None of the women explicitly expressed positive feelings regarding their identity. They just seemed to feel secure with identity issues. For example, Isabella said that she embraced her Korean identity though she did not like some Korean values. Alice acknowledged that she was Americanized even if she knew that she carried a lot of Korean values and that people would see her as an Asian: "I'm super Americanized, but I know people would perceive me as Asian, and also, I still have a lot of Korean values."

Yet, Cindy was still in denial of her Korean heritage, and she expressed negative feelings multiple times in her interview narratives. She reported that she had never figured out whether she was Korean or American. Thus, her struggle was ongoing as shown in the following quotes.

> *I guess now it's more like denial of my ethnicity in a way because I don't really fit in. It's like logically I know it, emotionally I know it, you know paper-wise I know it, but in terms of having that level of empathetic connection, I don't have that, It's like it is what it is, what more can I do about it, it kind of like in denial, my ethnicity it's like, I don't feel that any relation to it.*

> *I am definitely not Korean, and now trying to find my ways to fit in the American society where I can best fit in, so I decided you know, 'let's forget about this racial wise, because clearly it does not work black and white, so that was a moment I decided, okay so Korean thing isn't for me, so what's my next plan? What's my next group that I can fit into?*

Bicultural Acceptance and Bilingual Training

Understanding and Retaining Korean Cultural Values and Manners

Most of the interviewees reported that they had grown up with Korean values even if they had been born and raised in the United States. Nine out of the ten shared episodes related to Korean values. Their learning of Korean culture was associated with a variety of life experiences: the death of a family member, visiting South Korea, attending Korean culture schools on Saturdays, and living with grandparents who taught them those things. For instance, Alice reported that she had learned a lot about Korean culture after her father's sudden death.

> *My dad's death impacted me a lot. Through this experience, I had to take care of a lot of stuff. In that way, I learned a lot about myself, like Korean cultural stuff. I feel like it was a time for me to learn to become independent because of that event.*

Learning the Korean Language to Retain Korean Identity and to Communicate with Korean Parents

Despite different levels of Korean fluency, all participants made efforts to speak Korean better. They all reported that Korean was used at home while growing up, so they understood Korean better than they spoke it. The majority also attended Korean culture schools on Saturdays. Each respondent believed it was important to speak Korean in order to be identified as Korean. There is a saying in Korean that all the interviewees knew, "You should speak Korean, if you think you are Korean." A few reported that their Korean identities were strengthened after they improved their Korean. Jason, who spoke only Korean at home, had worked hard to speak Korean better: "I made a lot of efforts to learn Korean and I speak it fluently, because my whole family is Korean living in the house, we spoke Korean at home, so I almost only got to speak English outside."

Learning and Embracing Western Values and an American Lifestyle (and Resisting Korean Values)

Several participants reported that, as they were born and raised in the United States, they were accustomed to doing things in accordance with western values and the American lifestyle, and did not agree with a lot of traditional Korean values. For these reasons, they experienced lots of struggles—especially with parents and other older adults. Cindy described her experience of meeting the mother of a (now former) boyfriend and how the mother treated her and insisted that she support her son, who was planning on becoming a pastor. The mother was following traditional Korean values, such as the idea that a wife should be submissive to her husband and help or support him instead of pursuing her own career. But she resisted, saying:

> *I guess the way she came off, she wanted the typical Korean housewife kind of standard, and that wasn't me. To me, it's like you have a kid who grew up with American values, and you are used to that. He doesn't speak any Korean, right, and I am just his girlfriend, and you are kind of putting me in a situation I have to take care of that boy kind of thing, it was very uncomfortable.*

Minority Status and Model Minority Stereotype

Thoughts on Immigrants and Minority Status

The majority of participants discussed their status as ethnic minorities and immigrants in the United States. They believed that much of their struggles had to do with being children of immigrants and that they had many disadvantages compared to their non-immigrant peers. Several explained that parents chose to move to the United States for a better education for their children, which in turn caused a lot of pressure and anxiety for themselves. They were anxious about the idea of not meeting their parents' expectations and standards for academic success, as well as the burden of supporting their family, especially when their parents' age. Alice described her fears:

> *This is the scary part. Obviously, a negative future would be not achieving the stuff I have in mind. And then, if that happens, I probably would be really upset and very unmotivated, which I easily can get to. I can be a very negative person at times, because I feel like I get anxious really easily when I don't have a control over things. Being an immigrant child, you have the pressure supporting family, it is kind of burdening to think about.*

Model Minority Stereotype as Both Pride and Pressure

Most participants described the stereotype of the model minority among immigrants. A few discussed it with pride, but more experienced it as a burden or pressure, especially when they did not attend prestigious schools or did not have the skills that society expected them to. Alice made two different comments on the model minority phenomenon.

> *I am kind of grateful that because I interacted with White Americans at a young age and I was exposed to them, I have no trouble communicating with them or feeling inferior something like that, because I feel a lot of Asian people feel inferior to White people, you know what I mean? We are a minority, but we also are model minority.*

> *I felt crappy when I didn't get into an Ivy League school. Most of my friends go to pretty good schools like NYU, Cornell, Columbia, then they ask me, 'what school do you go to?' Not that Hunter is a bad school, but obviously it looks bad next to Columbia. That was a constant thing I felt in my college years, it makes me feel crappy.*

Cindy discussed the pressure she felt from the model minority stereotype because she did not consider herself to fit into that success story:

> *That's my life challenge, it's an ongoing challenge. You have this pressure that the Asian stereotype that wants you to be the model minority and they want you to be perfect in everything, but it's like, I suck at math, don't put me in accounting, I am terrible at it, I am terrible at science, no, I am not gonna be a doctor. You know, so it's like, I'm not really valued, but I have to keep up with the model minority stereotype and it's just struggle I am gonna face more and more.*

Placing a High Value on Education

Korean culture values education quite highly, and this is even more true among Korean immigrants in the United States. Many Korean parents aspire to send their children to prestigious colleges in the United States, referred to as the American dream among Asian immigrants. Multiple participants discussed their parents' expectations for their educational success and how their own happiness hinged upon their schooling experiences. Jeremiah discussed how happy his parents felt when he was accepted into Cornell University despite his father's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. Yet, he had experienced much pressure from his parents growing up, which was worst in his high school years. He commented,

> *My parents would always say, 'you should do well in school, you should always study hard.' Once a junior year came along, my dad got diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, so there was a lot of problems then, but I was able to stick it through junior year, and when I became senior year, my grades were phenomenal. My dream college that I wanted to go to for a long time, throughout my high school years, was Cornell University, and then once it came to applying for early decision for Cornell, my parents supported me. I got accepted to Cornell, so both my parents were very happy about it, they were like 'oh, my child is finally going to an Ivy League,' which is the American dream, I guess, for Koreans especially.*

Prejudice and Discrimination

American Stereotypes of Koreans and Asians

Multiple participants reported that they had encountered stereotypes toward Asians in the United States and other western countries. For example, Alice described different emotions while traveling and meeting people from all over the world. She was annoyed by the fact that many of them thought that Asians did not speak English. She also believed that people from non-Asian countries seemed awkward, as if they did not know how to interact with Asians. She had been offended when people were shocked at her perfect English. Similarly, Cindy described her embarrassment when her college professor made comments on her essay:

> *I remember having an instance where, yeah, during my undergrad, too, I wrote an essay for class and the professor actually wrote 'wow, you speak really well of course someone of your background.' That was what he said, and it's like, I told him like where I grew up, so 'what did you mean?' 'So, well, people don't really have a good sense of—people don't have a good writing skill,' 'What do you mean my people? I grew up here, I am an American.' I think that's when he knew that he crossed the line.*

Racism and Bullying Experiences

Two men and two women reported on experiences of racism and bullying in several contexts: school, the workplace, fast food restaurants, socializing, and traveling around the world. Cindy experienced a subtle form of racism at her workplace. Her coworkers often did not complete their work, and she worked hard to cover it until finally realized that she was being taken advantage of for focusing on her work and being quiet instead of vocal. Alice shared an experience of racism at clubs that did not let her enter until her White friends came out to pick her up. She perceived it as racial discrimination as the bouncer at the club stood her aside and let all the White girls go in first.

> *Racial discrimination, for sure at the clubs, yeah … I was trying to go into this club, but my friends were already in there and I had to go in alone, and the bouncer was like, 'are you alone?' I was like, 'no, my friends are in there' and he was like, 'who?' Then he was totally discriminating because he put me aside and then he let all these White girls go in, right? And then,*

> *I called my friends, 'can you guys come out and get me?' and my two friends came out, and he was like, 'okay, go in.' So, it's like discrimination, you know. I can't help but to think that oh, you totally did that because I'm an Asian.*

Ethan experienced severe bullying in junior high school. He recalled how miserable he felt multiple times during the interview. The bullying had an effect on his identity struggle. He related the first time he was bullied:

> *I got bullied in the beginning of seventh grade. That was the first time actually I was getting bullied and I was wondering why that was happening to me. And I think it was because I was too nervous or too shy or the way I came off, but I don't think they knew, 'oh, he is like the same as us,' because I am an Asian because most of my class were, they were mostly Hispanic, so I was trying to relate to them, but it was really hard, and it just got really tough.*

Experiences of Racial and Ethnic Labels and Epithets

Five participants reported that they had been addressed with condescending racial or ethnic labels, including *whitewashed*, *Twinkie*, *fob* (fresh off the boat), *yellow*, *Americanized*, *Korean-washed*, and *Koreanized*. Ethan reported that he had been called 'yellow' when he was bullied in junior high school. Jason commented that slang such as 'fobby' was a racist term for people who had recently immigrated and had not yet adapted to U.S. culture. Alice discussed White friends saying that she was the most 'whitewashed' Asian they knew. Being young, she did not understand what it meant at the time, but in the interview, she wondered whether or not they meant it as a compliment:

> *When I was younger, I would always get comments from my White friends, they would always say, 'Alice, you are the most whitewashed Asian I know,' 'you are like a twinkie.' Twinkie is kind of pastry, inside is white cream and outside is yellow. Because I was so young, I just didn't even think twice about it, but now I am older and I'm thinking about the stuff, 'Did they think as a compliment to me when they were saying I am whitewashed?'*

Striving to Speak Perfect English as Protection Against Racism

All participants spoke English as their primary language, but several reported that having perfect English was an effective tool for protecting them against racism. For this reason, they exerted extra effort into their English skills. Jason commented:

> *Growing up, even though there was a lot of racism going on, I was always proud to be who I was, and I don't think being Asian had any influence like held me back from anything, but because I speak English well, but some people take advantage of Asian people because we don't speak English that well. But if you are well-spoken, properly express your feelings and thoughts, then they don't ignore you, they take you seriously because they*

> *know you are an educated person. So, I would have a passion for the English language because I didn't want to become like Asians who live in America but don't know the culture, who refuse to learn English, or refuse to mingle with other groups of people. That's why I went above and beyond learning English, expressing a lot, reading a lot, and writing a lot.*

Social Support

Sharing Bicultural Experiences with Other Korean Americans

All the participants reported a close relationship with other Korean Americans from either school or church. They perceived that sharing similar experiences as a child from an immigrant family with other Korean friends was something meaningful in their life stories. Alice commented that she grew more aware of her parents' sacrifices when she was older, something she shared with her Korean friends who had had similar experiences and awareness. David told a story about meeting many Korean friends when he began going to a Korean church, an important moment in embracing his heritage. Ethan reminisced about a day that he went to church with a close Korean friend. He felt joy and connection when he realized that they could relate to one another:

> *When I first went to the same church with my best friend, that was when I got to first interact with people with who I can relate, 'wow, I understand this guy, he understands me.' I really was able to feel this strong connection at that point. That was a peak moment in my childhood. Just that sense of understanding, well, such as I can really relate to this guy or these guys, they were very similar to me, and they can put themselves in my shoes, so because of that I really felt good.*

Attending Korean Ethnic Churches as a Social Support

The Korean church is unique in terms of its cohesiveness and its role in the lives of Korean Christians. Many Koreans in New York attend Korean churches as a way of connecting with other Koreans. The majority of the interviewees reported that the Korean church had supported them and their families in times of difficulty. More importantly, they met most of their Korean friends in church. They recalled many empowering church experiences and support from church people. Korean church was, therefore, an important context for them to develop and strengthen their Korean identity. David made a lot of Korean friends only after he started going to a Korean church. Through this experience, he accepted his Korean heritage and began embracing both his American and Korean identities.

> *In high school, I started going to a church, and that's where I found a lot of Korean friends who embrace their Korean side and heritage, so through that, I was able to realize my Korean heritage myself and get better at speaking Korean because I couldn't speak Korean at all. That's when I think I realized that though I am an American-born citizen, I still consider myself Korean as well … I don't like all my Korean heritage, so I kind of like the idea of being a Korean American so I can embrace both sides.*

Having Multicultural Friends: Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White Friendships

Except for two women, eight participants reported that they had close friends from diverse cultural backgrounds. They described their relationships with non-Korean, non-Asian friends, and how multicultural friendships influenced them and their perception of Korean and American identity. Isabella noted an Italian friend helped her realize the cultural differences between Italians and Koreans, which played an important role in her awareness of her own Korean heritage. Jeremiah reflected on his many Jewish friends from high school. He believed that he was a 'whitewashed' Korean American because of their influences. Ethan reported on his Mexican American friend who had had a similar identity struggle to him in junior high school. Cindy commented on her Latina friend, who was independent and her own person, who influenced her a lot, as she had wanted more and more to be independent, the opposite of how she was raised in Korean culture. Cindy added that she had found more comfort in her non-Korean friends. She perceived that her White friend was more understanding than her Korean friends or family, even though she did not have any direct experience of Korean culture. Cindy commented,

> *I found more comfort in non-Korean friends, my best friend in college is actually, she is White, I felt more connected to non-Korean, non-Asian friends, which is kind of weird. My best friend is White, she understands and even though she may not fully get the picture 100% because she doesn't have that direct experience, but the fact that she can empathize or at least pretends to empathize, that helped a lot.*

Discussion

The Korean youth, as an ethnic minority, have been underrepresented or marginalized in identity studies. This research study was the first to look closely at the bicultural identity and resilience of the Korean youth in New York City by analyzing their life story narratives. By employing qualitative and narrative analysis techniques, it expanded existing scholarship on the lives of New York City Korean youth and how their bicultural identities were linked to their life experiences in the United States. The findings showed that the identities of the Korean youth were mirrored in the individual life stories. The participants' life stories produced rich data on who they were and how their bicultural identity had developed. Among the critical life experiences that stood out were learning about and accepting their cultural heritage, making efforts to learn the Korean language, dealing with the model minority stereotype, facing prejudice and racism, and having support from friends and the church.

The participants did not adhere to the lifestyles of Koreans in Korea but accepted and followed the American value system, which promotes individuality and autonomy (Cheng et al., 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 1991); however, they also retained Korean collectivistic, Confucian values. Their relationship with their parents were crucial, recognizing their parents' sacrifices and demonstrating filial piety, which are uniquely Korean values. Another important Korean value that stood out was placing a high value on education. Participants' perception of racial prejudices, discrimination, and bullying radically enhanced their awareness of their minority status and ethnic identity, which they felt was a big obstacle to success in the United States (Schwartz et al., 2006). Being bicultural and bilingual, along with having multicultural friends and attending Korean church, all worked as a protective mechanism against racism and discrimination, which further fostered resilience. Participants stated that they had developed strength and resilience through the

hardships they had confronted so far. The participants believed that biculturalism could be an advantage in terms of developing cultural flexibility. Children from immigrant families have to work hard to become bicultural or bilingual. This can be a disadvantage in the U.S., where people value doing things quickly and spontaneously. However, immigrant children need more time than their peers to communicate.

The study findings confirmed that the participants' life stories were full of reflections on their bicultural identity as Korean Americans. Their perception of Korean identity largely occurred when they encountered Americans' stereotypical thinking toward Asians in general or Koreans in particular. Confronting racism or experiencing bullying (Park et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2011) seemed to enhance their awareness of their Korean or Asian identity (Kibria, 1997). Likewise, the bicultural identity of the Korean American youth was socially constructed in accordance with both the way Americans saw them and how they perceived or reacted to the way Americans see them.

The bicultural identity of the Korean youth was developing at the intersection of being Korean by ethnicity, Asian by race, and American by upbringing (Kibria, 1997; J. Lee, 2002). But those who did not have U.S. citizenship identified themselves as more Korean and Asian than American (Jung & Lee, 2004). The majority of the participants were born and raised in the United States and therefore considered it their homeland; however, they still spoke Korean at home and were influenced by Korean values (Park, 2007). In addition, in the eyes of many Americans, they were purely Asians in terms of their outward appearance. This racial labeling seemed to play a crucial role in their process of identity construction (Kibria, 1997). They identified as Koreans, Asians, and Americans, categories that were thoroughly mixed in their life stories, confirming that identity is multidimensional (Jones et al., 2014).

The bicultural identities of the participants were evidenced in their individual life stories, which cannot be written separately from their social-cultural context (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Côté, 1996; Côté & Levine, 2002; Erikson, 1968; Hammack, 2008). Thus, the analysis of their life stories revealed each individual's developmental context, which further explained his or her bicultural identity. In this sense, understanding a person's identity requires an understanding of the context in which his or her life story is being written.

The study findings provided us with useful information for our understanding of the Korean youth's lives in New York City. The stories of the Korean youth revealed that they were making constant efforts to create better lives by adapting better to U.S. culture. Baumeister and Muraven (1996) define identity as an individual's adaptation to the sociocultural environment. The study participants' life stories confirmed this idea—their bicultural identity reflected their constant efforts to create better lives by trying to adapt more to U.S. sociocultural context. In so doing, they continued to construct a self-understanding of whom they were within that environment while making interpersonal connections with different groups of people around them.

Implications for Future Research on Identity

The study demonstrated that the Korean youth's bicultural identity was constructed while their life stories were being written. Thus, the identity of an individual can be well understood by studying the individual's unique life experiences. In this regard, we support McAdams' (1985, 1987, 1990) life story model of identity. Here, we have a few suggestions for future identity studies.

First, the Korean youth's life stories revealed that the identity of the youth has changed over time in the face of important life events. The Korean youth had had a few critical points in life that caused them different perceptions of identity in different lifetimes. Among the ten youths, one woman whose identity struggle was still ongoing said that if she could have the same conversation

in ten years, her identity would have changed again. She was certain that she would present a different perspective on her identity when she grew older. So, taking longitudinal approaches to identity studies would provide much richer information to understand identity development. As Henry Murray (1938) wrote, "the history of the organism is the organism" (p. 39). From this perspective, studying a person's identity requires an understanding of the history of the individual.

Second, the study interviewed only Korean youth in New York City who either were born and raised in the U.S. or came to the U.S. when they were six or younger. In future studies, recruiting Koreans born and raised in different contexts and comparing their identity outcomes would provide us with an important piece of information for our investigation of the role of context when it comes to identity formation. For example, studying and comparing four different groups of Koreans would be interesting, that is, native Koreans in Korea, Koreans who came to the U.S. when they were fully grown up, 1.5 generation Koreans (Koreans who were born in Korea but came to the U.S. when they were teenagers), and second-generation Koreans (Koreans who were born and raised in the U.S.). To have these four groups of samples and apply the life story model of identity would make the identity literature richer.

Third, as the findings revealed, there was a clear difference between the younger and older youth in the number of life stories and reflections on them. For example, youth in their late teens to early twenties have just begun writing life stories, whereas youth in their late twenties have written a considerable number of life stories. In addition, the older youth were more likely to have reflected more deeply on their life stories. Further, life stories emerge in adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1990; McLean, 2005). Including teenage life stories will show how the stories begin and continue to evolve over time. Comparing the life stories of different age groups of youth in future studies will provide us with much detailed information about the trajectories of identity development with age.

Fourth, future research needs to disentangle the influences on the identity of sociocultural variables such as race, ethnicity, culture, immigration, acculturation, social class, and other economic indicators. Quintana et al. (2006) recommend that researchers assess sociocultural processes directly and not by proxy as sociologists do when studying ethnic demographics as predictors of identity outcomes. This requires that that racial and ethnic consciousness and identity be explored directly rather than merely inferring them from an individual's group membership.

Finally, individual and group differences within different Asian ethnic groups and the antecedents and underlying processes, that is, "identity negotiations" (Palmer, 2007, p. 277) involved in variations in identity outcomes among these ethnic minority youth should be considered in future identity studies. Culture should necessarily be understood as a context in which identity develops (Hammack, 2008), but not as a sole determinant. The identity of Korean and Asian American youth is a value-laden crucible that should be explored to better understand these youth and their life trajectories in their new land or in their land of birth.

Conclusion

Korean youth, as an ethnic minority, have been underrepresented or marginalized in identity studies. This study looked closely at what critical life experiences Korean American youth have gone through, in their own voices, as part of the process of developing their bicultural identity. This research contributed to the literature on Korean American identity. We were interested in the bicultural identity of Korean Americans because we thought they would experience identity conflict living with both Korean and U.S. value systems. They are Koreans at home, often with parents who lack proficient English skills. Seven of the ten youths were U.S.-born, with the

remaining three arriving in the United States early in life. Thus, they were children of Korean immigrants but Americans living American lifestyles for most of their lives. Nonetheless, they understood and retained many traditional Korean values.

As the research findings revealed, participants' awareness of their Korean heritage occurred in many different life experiences. Images of Koreans specifically and Asians in general influenced their awareness of Korean and Asian identity, specifically racist stereotypes and prejudices aimed at them. While a few youths believed that their Korean heritage would be a hurdle to a successful American life, each had come to embrace their Korean and American sides because their Korean heritage was undeniable. Although living between Korean and American life may, on occasion, be difficult, the majority of the Korean youth felt comfortable accepting both their Korean- and Americanness. The life stories of the Korean youth, indeed, showed who they were and how their bicultural identity and resilience have developed as part of those stories.

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Manuscript received September 22, 2022
Final revision received December 11, 2022
Accepted December 12, 2022