

Embracing New Lives as Korean Immigrants in Canada: A Grounded Theory

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Embracing New Lives as Korean Immigrants in Canada: A Grounded Theory

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Purpose: Many Koreans go abroad for work, study or permanent migration. As they adapt to their new environment, they can suffer from various health problems. This article aims to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of Korean immigrants in Canada. This study reports the findings of a grounded theory study. **Methods:** In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with 18 Korean immigrants in Vancouver. Data was audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. **Results:** Six main categories emerged: motivation, confronting, suffering, efforts to adapt, assimilation, and conflict. A basic social process model of adaptation to life in Canada was developed reflecting the inter-relationships between these categories. Data extracts was presented to illustrate the grounding of the model in participants' accounts. **Conclusion:** Immigrants need empathetic support and cultural understanding; this study increases the understanding of the Korean immigrant population, which should help in the design of effective coping strategies that consider the particular characteristics and problems of immigrants.

Key Words: Acculturation, Immigration, Life experiences, Quality of life, Qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a process of permanent or temporary settlement in another place. According to the 2006 revision of the United Nations World Population Prospects, Asia was the foreseeable major source of 1.3 million migrants annually during the period 2000-2010 (Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, 2002).

Many Koreans go abroad for work, study or to accompany their family members living abroad (Cho, Lee, &

Jezewski, 2005). In 2001, 100,660 or 0.3% of Canada's total population was made up of Koreans. Primarily located in the provinces of Ontario and British Columbia, 71% of the total Korean population lived in major Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs), namely, Toronto and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Migrating represents a significant transition in the move from the homeland to a new home, and brings with it many material and psychosocial losses. This transition can produce profound shifts in people's lives, involving short to long-term implications for health and well-being

주요어: 이민, 경험, 근거이론, 삶의 질

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(Meleis, 1997). It is commonly assumed that immigration and acculturation are stressful experiences that may increase the risk of low self esteem and ill health (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Additionally, the migration process produces “acculturation stress”, and this stress could lead to development of psychiatric conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, substances use and abuse, alcoholism, suicide (Hoschl et al., 2008). A number of studies also show that the process of acculturation or progressive integration produces changes in physical and mental health (Hovey, 2000; Martins & Reid, 2007; Noh & Kaspar, 2003).

Similar to most immigrants, Koreans who migrated to Canada suffer from mental health problems such as depression (Kim, Han, Shin, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Park & Bernstein, 2008). Previous research studying factors affecting the new lives of Korean immigrants included immigrant depression (Kim et al., 2005; Martins & Reid, 2007), stress (Ahn, 2007; Lee, 1993) and acculturation (Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Ruiz, 2004; Yun & Park, 2008).

There is some evidence that the quality of health and psychosocial care for migrants may be affected by access barriers, like structures or financing of health care, linguistic or communicative skills, demands of migrants and expectations of health care providers (Lindert, Schouler-Ocak, Heinz, & Priebe, 2008). Additionally, socio-cultural factors can play an important role in the diagnosis and treatment of individuals with psychological reactions to stress. Even though, migration experience and their effects on health have received attention very recently (Bilkis, Marie, Zheyuan, Shelly, & Arminée, 2004). Moreover, little attention has been given to detailed consideration of the actual experiences of Korean immigrants (Cho et al., 2005).

Up to the time of the present study, there have been no qualitative studies about Korean immigrants' experience that lives in Canada. Therefore, this article aims to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of Korean migrants who live in Canada, specifically to explore their adaptation process on new society. This study reports the findings of a grounded theory study about the experiences of Korean immigrants in Canada.

METHODS

This study used grounded theory in order to grasp a holistic understanding of the Korean immigrant experience. Purposely this qualitative approach focuses on social interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and so is an appropriate means to show the basic process of how Korean

immigrants adjust to a new society.

1. Sample

The interviewees were 18 Korean immigrants living in Vancouver, Canada. Purposive and theoretic samplings were used to recruit the participants. The inclusion criteria were age 20~70 years, minimum residency in Canada of 1 year, the right of permanent residence or citizenship, and willingness to participate.

2. Data Collection

The data collection period was from December 2008 to February 2009. Since the primary language of all the participants was Korean, informed consent forms were written in Korean and all interviews were conducted in Korean. The audio-taped, in-depth unstructured interviews consisted mostly of open-ended questions to gain the participants' perceptions of their life, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of living in Canada. The major questions used in the interviews were:

- Would you please describe your experiences about living in Canada?
- Would you please talk about the factors that influenced your life in Canada?
- How do you feel now?

Each participant had two or three-3 interview sessions. Attentive and non-judgmental listening techniques were used during the interviews that lasted about 45~60 minutes. The interview data was transcribed verbatim in Korean and later translated into English and back-translated for accuracy.

3. Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative analysis method was used. The transcripts of the interviews were repetitively and thoroughly read to obtain a sense of each participant's contextual background, history and relevancy. The data were manually coded line by line and sorted into categories according to their similarities and relationships.

4. Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Inje University Research Ethics Committee, Busan, Korea (IRB No. 08-152). Explanations of the study, objectives, bene-

fits, confidentiality, anonymity and risks were provided to all the participants and written consent was obtained prior to data collection. Each participant was given a small token of appreciation to express the researcher's gratitude. Once the study was completed, the audiotapes and transcripts were destroyed.

5. Trustworthiness

The data and interpretation of findings were checked for credibility, transferability and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary investigator was well-versed in qualitative studies, having published several grounded theory research papers on depression and life experiences (Bae, 2001, 2003). Debriefing was conducted with a qualitative research committee composed of nursing professors for credibility. Member checking was established with the 18 participants to confirm the accuracy of findings and the interpretations. By displaying the data description, study methodology, overall interpretation process, and results to understand the phenomenon, transferability was established. Pilot interviews with five participants were conducted to strengthen the interview questions and promote dependability. This study's validity was further enhanced by the participants' quoted statements.

RESULTS

1. Description of Participants

The participants were 18 Korean immigrants 24 to 69-years-of-age. Ten were Catholic, 14 had high school education, and 10 were employed (monthly income, including that received from Korea, ranged from under \$1,000 to \$10,000). Most of the participants were married and had lived in Canada for more than 5 years (Table 1).

2. Study categories

Findings revealed six categories: having motivation for migration, confronting barriers, suffering, making efforts to adapt, assimilating into new life and having continued conflicts (Figure 1). These categories were referred to as "phases" of the Korean immigrant life experience in Canada.

1) Having motivation for migration

The first phase, having motivation for migration, was characterized by Korean immigrants' internal and external

Table 1. Demographic Data of Korean Immigrant Participants (N=18)

Characteristics	Categories	n (%)
Age	24~29	1 (5.6)
	30~39	5 (27.7)
	40~49	11 (61.1)
	50~69	1 (5.6)
Gender	Male	7 (38.9)
	Female	11 (61.1)
Religion	Protestant	5 (27.7)
	Catholic	10 (55.6)
	None	3 (16.7)
Length of migration (year)	1~2	2 (11.1)
	3~5	6 (33.3)
	6~8	10 (55.6)
Education	Middle school	1 (5.6)
	High school	14 (77.7)
	College	3 (16.7)
Monthly income (\$)	< 1,000	5 (27.7)
	1,001~5,000	5 (27.7)
	5,001~10,000	7 (39.0)
	> 10,000	1 (5.6)
Marital status	Married	17 (94.4)
	Single	1 (5.6)
Occupation	Employed	10 (55.6)
	Unemployed	8 (44.4)

motivators to migrate to Canada. Having experienced the life abroad, whether for study or for work, most Koreans' desire to migrate becomes greater.

(1) Internal motivators

Many Koreans moved to Canada for personal reasons such as a yearning for life abroad, improved quality of life and escape from their local reality. For them, living abroad was a personal desire, an "American dream". For some, migrating was their only chance to escape the social prejudice of Korean society. An immigrant elaborated: "I'm a bankrupt businessman. If I get a blue-collared job in Korea, people will laugh at me. I have to escape to Canada because here, I can do any type of work".

(2) External motivators

Some of the participants exclaimed that migrating to Canada was not for them. Growing up in Korea's stressful school environment, these immigrants wished to provide

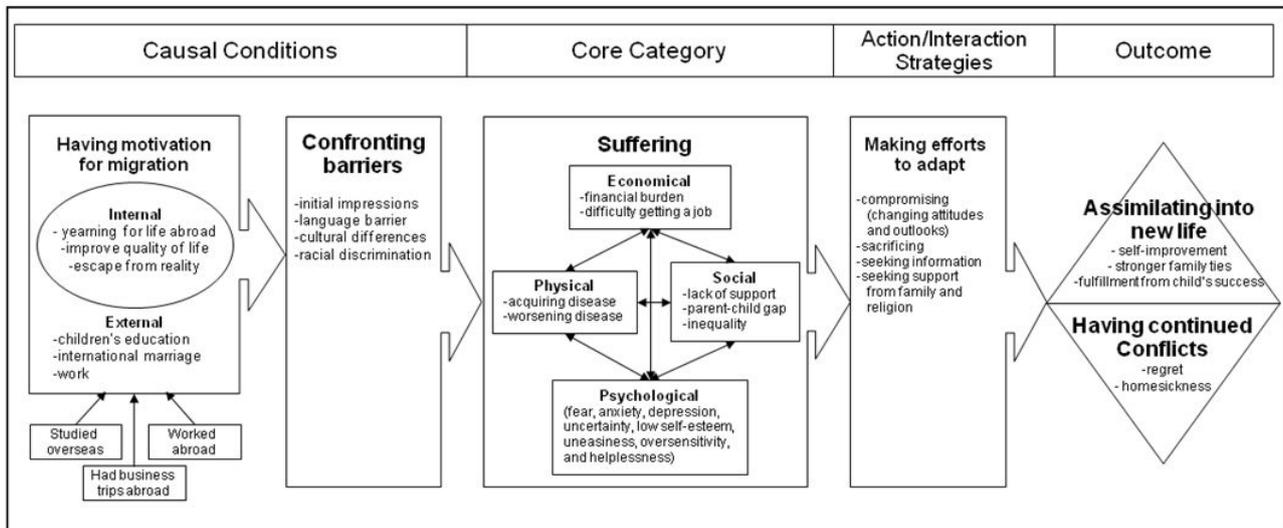


Figure 1. Phases of the Korean immigrant life experience in Canada.

their children with a “more advanced and less stressful learning environment” by migrating to Canada. For others, they moved because they “married someone from Canada” or they were “assigned to work in Canada”.

2) Confronting barriers

During the confronting phase, Korean immigrants had to face the following barriers that hindered their adjustment in Canada.

(1) Language barrier

For most, the language problem was a major barrier while living in Canada. This affected various aspects of their everyday lives such as working, sending their children to school and doing day-to-day chores. An immigrant said, “If I can only speak English fluently, I can get a better Job here.” Due to their poor English skills, participants felt frustrated, afraid, shy and ill-equipped to mingle with other people. When certain events required them to voice their opinions, they either avoided it or remained passive.

(2) Cultural differences

Immigrants had difficulty adjusting because of cultural differences. Having adequate English skills was insufficient to ensure a comfortable life in Canada. As one immigrant said, “Even if I can speak good English, I don’t have enough background of their culture to understand exactly what Canadian expressions mean.” Others verbalized their “uneasy” feeling towards the slow-paced lifestyle in Canada. These differences placed a great deal of weight on them as they struggled to survive each day adapting to

this new culture.

(3) Racial discrimination

Many respondents experienced ethnic prejudice in Canada. Immigrants were concerned because children in schools were divided into racial groups. As one respondent said, “I can endure discrimination but I don’t want my kid to experience it.” Others exclaimed about bias in their work places, as “only white people get promoted.” A few experienced being “bad mouthed” and told to “go home to Korea.” Because of discrimination, immigrants felt “isolated” and thought they could “never become a part of the white society”.

3) Suffering

Consequently, Korean immigrants suffered physical, psychological, sociological and economic dilemmas. Immigrants came across different barriers simultaneously, and so we were likely to observe common barriers leading to a certain suffering. However, not all of them underwent exactly the same suffering. The extent of suffering depended on the severity of the barriers and the burden experienced.

(1) Physical suffering

Although they worked as professionals in Korea, they had “no option but to endure physical labor” in Canada. Accessing Canada’s health care system was difficult due to language and financial problems, and lack of information on where and how to get treatment. Those with existing diseases felt that their conditions worsened after migration. An immigrant said, “My arthritis got worse!

See, I work in a laundry shop so I have to carry heavy loads each day”.

(2) Psychological suffering

Most immigrants suffered psychological symptoms such as fear, helplessness, anxiety, depression, uncertainty, oversensitivity and low self-esteem. Living in a strange place made them feel “scared, helpless, isolated” so their self-esteem decreased. Many immigrants felt “anxious and depressed” because their families’ future remained uncertain. One stated, “I’m anxious because my husband worked as a researcher in a big company in Korea but here, he only does construction work. It’s depressing to face each day without knowing what our future will be.” This anxiety often resulted to oversensitivity that they unconsciously projected towards other family members creating relationship gaps.

(3) Social suffering

Koreans have strong family ties, so immigrants found it hard being away from their relatives. As they faced emotional instability caused by migration, they sought comfort through long-distance communication. However, they often avoided worrying their relatives and friends in Korea, like one said, “I have mountains of problems but when I phone home, I always pretend to be okay.” In effect they approached fellow immigrants but they were either “disregarded” or “given wrong information” by them. This created superficial relationships within Korean immigrant communities. Moreover, parenting became a burden and immigrants felt “hurt and helpless,” not being able to help their children when they had problems in school. The gap between parent and child worsened. One respondent comments that, “adult immigrants retained their values but children easily adapted to the western culture”.

(4) Economic suffering

After migration, immigrants’ socioeconomic standing changed. Their once stable and secure lives were replaced with a future full of uncertainties. Mainly, they relied on their savings from Korea because “due to language and discrimination,” getting a job in Canada was difficult “unless you have connections”. They felt upset because their salaries were insufficient to secure their future.

4) Making efforts to adapt

During this phase, immigrants used the following strategies to overcome their sufferings.

(1) Compromise

Compromise took the form of “staying humble” and “doing their best” even under unpleasant conditions. As they sought meaning in their lives, they gradually transformed their attitudes and outlooks from hopelessness into optimism. Whenever they encountered hardships, they saw it as “a chance to grow as a person.”

(2) Sacrificing and pushing forward

Immigrants sacrificed personal gains to provide their family a better future. As one said, “I comfort myself everyday by saying it is okay, it is for my children’s future.” Being able to face and resolve their problems made them feel fulfilled and proud. Finding meaning for their new lives inspired them to continue “pushing forward.”

(3) Seeking information

Many immigrants equipped themselves by seeking information regarding job opportunities, children’s schooling and health facilities. They used various sources like the Internet, reading materials and other people. They felt “more familiarized” and “less afraid” after gaining knowledge. To overcome their language problems, they listened to audio tapes or searched for free English classes. They became “less anxious and more confident” blending with other people as they improved their English skills.

(4) Seeking support from family and religion

Migration strengthened family bonds as immigrants sought “...support from other family members”. Aside from family, they also turned to religion when they experienced difficulties. Previously inactive practitioners became active participants of church activities in Canada. Through religion, they felt that they were able to rid themselves of hatred, grief and self-doubt; and they gained “peace of mind and stronger faith”.

5) Assimilating into new life

After exerting efforts to adapt, most immigrants satisfied and assimilated with living in Canada. Their benefits of a new life in Canada included fresh air, beautiful scenery, simple way of living, open-minded and rational society, advanced education and less competitive learning environment for the children, less stressful competition in the work place, strengthened family ties and a deeper sense of patriotism and a chance for self-development. For parent immigrants, seeing their children successfully adapt to Canadian culture gave them fulfillment and hope no matter how difficult living in Canada was.

6) Having continued conflicts

Conversely, other immigrants still had unresolved conflicts such as their uncertain future, homesickness and burdensome lifestyle in Canada. Some expressed regret in coming to Canada unprepared. They felt hopeless and powerless, and wished to return home to Korea when their children became more financially stable and independent. They worried about their employment, health and finances, children's education and their careers. Not being able to acquire better jobs and to provide comfort for their families was devastating for many immigrants. They felt homesick and at times thought about going back to Korea. Some found living in Canada "burdensome," as one described, "Living in Canada is burdensome. I have to do everything by myself like cut the grass, cook, shop and maintain the house unlike in Korea". They reminisced and compared their old comfortable lives with their current lives as immigrants, which made them "feel down".

DISCUSSION

The present study identified a number of categories concerning the experiences of Korean immigrants to Canada. The first category, having motivation for migration, was comprised of internal and external motivators. Among the motivators were an improved chance to quality of life and provide their children with better education, similar to Lee's (2006) analysis of Korean immigration literature, where he found that immigrants go abroad looking for the best education for their children. This reflects the traditional importance placed on education by Korean parents. Nowadays, fathers stay alone in Korea to earn and send money to his wife and children abroad, a phenomenon well-known in Korean as "kirogi appa," which contributes to divorce, disputes within families and weakening of family ties. This shows the need to improve the current status of educational systems in the country to prevent dysfunctional immigrant families.

In the second category, confronting barriers, immigrants faced barriers such as language problems, cultural differences and racial discrimination in adjusting to life in Canada. Previous studies (Ahn, 2007; Lee, 1993; Lee, 2006) revealed that the language barrier is one of the major problems for newly arrived immigrants. Insufficient language skills hinder daily tasks such as getting assistance for their documents and establishing credit. Furthermore, Lee's (1993) study on Korean Americans showed that low English proficiency decreases self-esteem while cultural differences result in discrimination

and maltreatment. The World Health Organization has cautioned that racial discrimination can influence the deterioration of health of immigrants; the agency recommended better policies to protect immigrant rights (Wolffers, Verghis, & Marin, 2003). Language training to facilitate easier daily life for is also a prudent step.

The third category that emerged in the study is suffering, which covers physical, psychological, social, and economical aspects. Lee (1997) reported in his study on health care of Korean immigrants in New Zealand that over 50% of the people complained of physical health problems. However, they scarcely made use of health care systems in their adopted country due to the different medical health care delivery and language difficulties (medical staff in host countries including New Zealand may not speak or understand the Korean language). Maxwell, Bastani, and Warda (2000) compared Korean's and Filipino's frequency of undertaking cancer screening testing in the United States. They found that Koreans had a lower frequency of testing than Filipinos due to the difference level of English competency. Because of this language problem, most Koreans have difficulty in accessing health care facilities.

According to Toronto's Yonhap News (New immigrants in Canada, 2006), new immigrants in Canada are physically and mentally vulnerable, and they suffer from various mental health problems such as depression, stress, loneliness and despair. However, governments as well as medical institutions consider this a common migration phenomenon during the process of acclimation to a new country (Saldanha, 2009). Immigrants can go abroad to gain a more convenient life, but instead encounter immigration-related stress that fuels posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, drug abuse and even suicide (Hoschl et al., 2008). Oei and Kwon (2007) evaluated the immigrant depression model and found that stressful life events cause depression and anxiety among the immigrant populations. Therefore, government and medical agencies should be more concerned about migrant mental health and foster a climate where mental health problems of immigrants are recognized and services provided.

Social suffering presently experienced by immigrants included lack of support and parent-child gap. Kim et al. (2005) studied high-risk factors for depression among Korean Americans and reported that the most significant influencing factor is lack of social support. Park and Bernstein (2008) mentioned that most Korean Americans experience depression and that social supports as well as assimilation are important factors that influence immigrant depression. Typically, a host country provides a sin-

gle-entry visa for immigrants, who must then migrate without families or partners, taking away their usual support mechanisms (Wolffers et al., 2003). Strengthening Korean immigrant associations to become more systematic and organized, and seeking out additional social support through self-help groups could be prudent steps.

Parenting in Canada becomes a social problem when parent-child gaps are formed due to cultural discrepancies. Ahn's (2007) study on the experience of Korean-American women's acculturative stress reported that first generation parents experience parenting stress. It is common for Korean parents to show deep concern and practice parenting control towards their children. However, children can become unappreciative and more desirous of independence as they see their Canadian friends who are more liberated (Lee, 2006). Traditional oriental teachings greatly influence Asian parenting principles, such as authoritative parenting and paying deep respect, obedience to parents and good academic achievement (Kim & Wong, 2002). This creates conflict when children are influenced by western culture, where children are treated autonomously and are more liberated from their parents' control. Accordingly, our study suggests providing parenting education to Korean immigrant parents on improving communication skills and problem solving strategies with their children.

Immigrants also suffered economically aspect while living in Canada. Korean-Americans can experience stress mostly due to economic instability and low financial income (Lee, 1993). Furthermore, parallel to our study results, economic difficulties and language problems remain the major stressors for immigrant populations (Maxwell et al., 2000).

The fourth category that emerged in the study is making efforts to adapt which includes compromising, changing attitudes and outlook, sacrificing and pushing forward, seeking information and seeking support from family and through religion.

During this phase, as immigrants exert efforts to adjust to their new living conditions, they achieve progress and learn how to compromise, be resourceful, optimistic, and sacrifice themselves for their children's future. In parallel, a study of Korean-Americans reported that immigrants can find it necessary to change their beliefs and refine their goals towards their children's education (Lee, 2006). Moreover, support from family and church activities can be essential in dealing with acculturative stress in immigrant populations. This coincides with previous studies (Hovey, 2000; Hurh & Kim, 1990; Martins & Reid, 2007). In particular, Hurh and Kim (1990) reported that social

networks formed within minority churches serve as buffers and are positively related to immigrants' psychological well-being. In addition, Martin and Reid (2007) reported that socialization facilitates the adjustment process among immigrant populations as building friendship networks gave immigrants a sense of comfort, emotional support and sources of information.

The fifth category, assimilating into new life, includes satisfaction that immigrants gain from their children's successes, their own self-development and the stronger family ties that result from their success at adaptation. Similarly, Park and Bernstein (2008) studied about depression in Korean American immigrants and found that the most significant factor of depression is family. Most Korean parents consider that the main goal of immigration is for their children to become successful. They feel more assimilated when they see their child successfully adapt to a new culture. Over time, immigrants became more suited to Canadian way of living and considered their new host country like their own home town.

In the final category, having continued conflicts, immigrants who were not able to find meaning for their new lives and who did not achieve their goals even after putting efforts to adjust experienced homesickness, missing their families back in Korea and in the end they came to regret their decision to migrate to Canada. Similarly, a previous study of Korean-American immigration literature reported that the experience of immigration of most Korean-Americans was the point realization that their dreams had collapsed (Lee, 2006). Koreans who chose to migrate became more miserable and unsuccessful in life than those who stayed in Korea. Moreover, the categories identified in this study confirm findings of other Korean immigrant researches concerning the continuous confrontation with the challenges of immigrant life (Cho et al., 2005).

The findings from this study are significant because this suggest for mental health professionals to understand the impact of migration basis acculturative stress. Through this study, it is recommended that health professions consider that different cultures often cause various suffering experiences in immigrants. It is also important that nurses be mindful and sensitive to cultural patterns among immigrants for understanding their perception and expression of mental health problems.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that Korean immigrants move to Canada to fulfill their dreams of living abroad, improve

their quality of life and to escape from Korea's stressful lifestyle. Once on Canadian soil, they face barriers like language problems, cultural differences and racial discrimination. During the process of overcoming these barriers, immigrants can suffer physical, social, psychological and economic dilemmas. In spite of such hardships, they tend to try to adapt to their new lives in Canada by compromising, sacrificing, seeking information and finding comfort in family and religion. In the end, they usually became assimilated and comfortable with their lives and they express satisfaction and hope for their future. Those immigrants who are not successful in adjusting experience regret and homesickness so they wish to return to Korea.

Advice that was offered during the course of the study included learning fully about Canadian life prior to leaving Korea, avoiding unrealistic expectations, improving English skills, having a secure financial circumstance, being confident, resourceful and strong-willed, being willing to sacrifice self-interest and deal with hardships, retaining a focus on goals, and putting aside memories of formerly comfortable life in Korea.

Through this research, we suggest that immigration authorities should consider integrating better and appropriate support systems into immigration policies. Education about immigrant life in Canada and creation of support groups should be offered for those interested in migrating to Canada. Further research is imperative to replicate the studies of Canadian-based Korean immigrants including a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, English proficiency skills and different geographic areas in order to broaden the generalizability of the findings regarding the Canada life experiences of Korean immigrants. Furthermore research designs need to account for the fact that reporting of perceived mental health and acculturative stress is sensitive to culture and ethnicity as well as migration experience.

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