Acculturative Understanding of Korean Social Psychology among Western Sojourners in Korea*

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The present study investigated acculturative understanding of Korean social psychology of interpersonal interactions among Western sojourners in Korea. We examined 1) how the Western sojourners perceive social psychological characteristics of Koreans and 2) what types of individual differences influence this perception: we looked at the acculturation strategies (integration, separation, assimilation, & marginalization), the duration of stay, and Korean language proficiency. The acculturative understanding of Korean social psychology was assessed through critical incidents (CI) method. Eight CIs were constructed based on previous study and presented to 50 Western sojourners. The responses to the CIs were compared to those by Korean collegians. Response of Westerners who stayed more than six months was more similar to the response of Koreans than those who stayed less than six months. Westerners have a better comprehension for CIs that deal with issues concerning vertical relationships in Korean society than for CIs that deal with we-relationships (cheong, woori). Only those with some Korean language proficiency showed better understanding of cheong interactions. Four types of people using different acculturation strategy did not show any meaningful difference in their response to the CIs. Possible reasons for this no-difference were discussed.

Keywords: Acculturation; Critical Incidents; Sojourners; Korean; social psychology; hierarchy; Cheong; Woori

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Acculturation Strategy

When an individual moves from one culture to another, many aspects of self-identity are modified to accommodate information about and experiences in the new culture. This process, generally referred to as acculturation, involves changes that take place as a result of continuous and direct contact between individuals having different cultural origins (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936; Sam, 2006). As a result of attempts to cope with acculturation changes, after a period of time, some adaptations (relatively stable changes that take place as an individual or group responds to external demands) to the new cultural context may be achieved. This is more likely as the experience with the host culture increases. As the experience builds up, misunderstanding of local interaction will be replaced with proper understanding and proper manner of responding to the interaction.

A major contribution to the study of psychological acculturation and the prediction of acculturative stress is found in Berry’s conceptual analysis of acculturation attitudes (Berry, 1989), also referred to as acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997). Psychological and behavioral changes that an individual experiences as a result of sustained contact with members of other cultural groups represent a core construct in Berry’s model. Berry (1997) has argued that there are two fundamental dimensions of acculturation: maintenance of original cultural identity and maintenance of relations with host nation. If evaluative responses to these two dimensions are dichotomized, then four acculturation attitudes or strategies may be distinguished: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Integration strategy is taken when individuals want to maintain both their home cultural identity and the host cultural identity. Assimilation strategy is taken when individuals do not wish to maintain their home cultural identity and try to assimilate into the host culture. Separation strategy is taken when individuals place a value on holding onto their home culture and at the same time wish to minimize the host cultural identity. Marginalization strategy is taken when individuals feel marginalized from both home culture and the host culture. Attitudes towards these four alternatives, and actual behaviors exhibiting them, together constitute an individual’s acculturation strategy (Berry, 1989).

Many empirical studies have shown that the people with integration strategy show much better adjustment to the host culture with less psychological distress than the people with the other three types of acculturation strategy. Studies have been conducted with immigrants (Schmitz, 1992), with refugees (Donn, 1993), and with sojourners (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Berry (1997) has demonstrated that marginalization and separation are associated with a high level of acculturation stress, assimilation is linked with an intermediate stress level, and integration is associated with a low level of stress. The reason for this difference in adjustment may be due to many factors: one possible reason is that the integration people have better understanding of working psychology of interpersonal relationship in the host culture than especially those with separation or marginalization strategy. This better understanding helps to reduce the possibility of interactional misunderstanding and unnecessary conflict.

Characteristics of Korean Social Psychology

Westerners coming to stay for a various period of time in Korea inevitably face a great amount of culture difference along with the language difference. Perhaps the most prominent dimension of culture difference for the Westerners to face psychologically is collectivism (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Hofstede, 1980; Hui, 1990). The most important distinction between collectivists and individualists is the emphasis placed on the feelings and opinions of group members and the psychological closeness between a person and others in the ingroup (Kagitcibasi, 1990). Collectivists are more concerned with the consequences of their behaviors on their ingroup members and are more likely to sacrifice personal interests for the attainment of collective interests. Also people