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## Newcomers in a Nontraditional Receiving Community: Korean Immigrant Adaptation Strategies in the American Deep South

Charles A. Lynn

University of North Carolina Wilmington, lynna@uncw.edu

Sun-A Lee

University of Louisiana Lafayette, slee@louisiana.edu

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## Newcomers in a Nontraditional Receiving Community: Korean Immigrant Adaptation Strategies in the American Deep South

### Abstract

This ethnographic case study considers the role of the church in the lives of Korean immigrants in a small town in the southeastern United States. Drawn to a poultry processing plant by the promise of permanent residency, hundreds of middle class Koreans have cycled through one-year commitments at Claxton Poultry since 2005. We analyze the benefits and pitfalls of adaptation strategies developed by the Korean immigrants and how their social networks both help and hinder their livelihood in a nontraditional receiving locale. Results indicate that while membership at a prominent religious congregation does offer Korean immigrants bonding networks amongst themselves, it does not equate to bridging networks with the native population. Considering the high percentage of recent Korean immigrants to the United States who attend church services, the findings of this study contribute new information to the literature on acculturation and adaptation processes.

### Keywords

Social Networks, Korea, Religion, Immigrants

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## **Newcomers in a Nontraditional Receiving Community: Korean Immigrant Adaptation Strategies in the American Deep South**

Charles A. Lynn

University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, North Carolina, USA

Sun-A Lee

University of Louisiana Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana, USA

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Shifts in the population demographics of the United States have been rapid in the past two decades. No other region has seen more change than the South (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). A traditional black/white dichotomy existed in the southern workforce hierarchy after Reconstruction. However, the civil rights movement, increased educational opportunities, welfare reforms, and other features associated with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs constricted the once reliable pool of poor White and Black workers sought by farmers and manufacturers (Griffith, Broadway, & Stull, 1995), forcing businesses to search for nontraditional sources of cheap labor. The locales from which industrial recruitment of immigrant labor takes place are beginning to change due to strict anti-immigration laws and shifts in the hiring practices of some industries such as meat processing. The current study offers a glimpse into that world, providing readers with a snapshot of immigrant life in a nontraditional receiving community.

This article explores the adaptation strategies adopted by a Korean immigrant population working and living in a small town in southeast Georgia. A recent study by the Pew Research Center (2012) shows that Asians are now "the best-educated, highest-income, fastest-growing race group in the country" (p. 1). Therefore, the existence of a sizable Korean population toiling in a poultry processing plant in rural south Georgia raises a number of questions. While much of the situation proves to be in accord with the existing literature on immigrant communities, deviations from existing theories are apparent as well. Our analysis centers on how the nature of ethnic church membership in a small town setting deviates from that of larger, suburban or urban areas. This particular scope allows us in this paper to provide a glimpse of immigrant life in a nontraditional receiving community coming to terms with a second wave of newcomers that differ markedly from the typical labor pool in the poultry industry.

### **From South Korea to South Georgia**

The journey from South Korea to south Georgia is not the stereotypical Asian immigration story. Recent increases in the Asian population of the United States have seen a comparative rise in the number of academic articles focusing on this ethnic group. Similar to the all-encompassing title “Latino”, the term “Asian” includes multiple ethnicities from a variety of countries and linguistic backgrounds. Focusing strictly upon immigrants from South Korea, Yoon (2012) describes how 6.8 million Koreans now live in 170 countries constituting their own diaspora. Although the initial Korean immigrants left to escape poverty or war and oppression at home, the Koreans migrating to the United States since the 1960s are mainly from the middle-class. However, because 96 percent of Korean immigrants in the United States live in metropolitan areas (Yu, Choe, & Han, 2002), there is a dearth of information about Koreans in rural settings.

The influx of Koreans to south Georgia can be traced back to the troubles affecting millions in the post “Korean Miracle” economy. The years following the 1953 armistice saw amazing economic expansion. Although the country suffered widespread destruction during the 1950-1953 war, the collective drive of the South Korean people quickly transformed the nation. Korea followed an economic strategy that subordinated all other socio-economic factors to the market, “building up the physical and human capital base prior to turning to consumer durable production” (Chomsky, 2010). This course of action appeared to be an effective means of growth for the Korean economy until the general crisis of 1997, brought on by a massive expansion of credit based primarily on foreign loans. The World Trade Organization, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund intervened in order to stabilize the financial turmoil. However, the intervention was not without consequence for large sectors of the population, mostly the middle class. A staggering number of businesses failed, unemployment increased, wages froze and domestic income decreased, non-wage benefits were cut, and homelessness grew (Koo, 2007). It is the consequences of the IMF intervention in the late 1990s that set the stage for the movement of Koreans to Claxton Poultry.

In September of 2006, a raid by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at the Crider Poultry processing plant in Stillmore, Georgia left the plant without two-thirds of its work force. Laotian Hmong refugees living in Minnesota were recruited to fill a number of the vacancies. As Baptist pastor Ariel Rodriguez related, “The employers around here are still afraid of hiring Hispanics. They’re afraid that immigration agents are coming, the workers are going to disappear, and they’ll have to pay fines” (Ludden, 2007). Claxton Poultry was well aware of the events at nearby Crider Poultry and started to develop a solution to their labor demands long before suffering a similar fate. Such tactics are not uncommon in an industry that sometimes sees a workforce turnover rate as high as 100 percent in a year (Compa, 2004). And although U.S. regulations forbid employers to require a worker to stay in a job for a fixed time as a stipulation for obtaining permanent residency, an article in the Claxton Enterprise suggests that this is the case at Claxton Poultry. The Koreans working for Claxton Poultry pay thousands of dollars to an immigration broker, Kukjei Immigration Development Corporation (KIDC), who takes care of the visa paperwork and acts as a go between for the plant and the Koreans. An article in the Claxton Enterprise explains:

Once the immigrants arrive in the United States and begin work at Claxton Poultry, they will receive permanent residency visas. However, if they do not fulfill their one-year obligation to work at the plant, the immigrants would not be considered permanent residents and would not be able to receive U.S. citizenship. (Cunningham, 2005, 1A)

Interviews with numerous Korean workers revealed that some of them paid up to \$20,000 for the opportunity to work at Claxton Poultry with the caveat that the deposit would be reimbursed at the end of the one-year work period.

The town to which the Korean immigrants move is Statesboro, Georgia located in the southeastern part of the state about one hour west of Savannah and the coast. The estimated population in 2010 was 24,604. Georgia Southern University is one of the largest employers in the county. There are 16 public schools and 3 private and parochial schools with a combined 9,826 students (<http://www.statesboroga.net>). The racial makeup of the city is 53% White, 39.4% African American, 0.1% Native American, 2.8% Asian, 2.2% Hispanic or Latino, 1.6% from other races, and 3% from two or more races (<http://www.census.gov>). Claxton Poultry, the employer of the Koreans, is located 20 miles south of Statesboro in the much smaller town of Claxton, Georgia.

### **Korean Immigrants and Church**

The existing literature on the link between religion and social networks suggests that religious people are more satisfied with their lives because they build social networks through regular attendance of church services (Lim & Putnam, 2010). The social dimension of religion has been referred to as the “essence and substance” of religion (Durkheim, 1951; Simmel, 1997; Krause, 2008). This is especially true in rural areas. Churches are important sources of bridging and bonding capital that have implications for perceptions of social cohesion in small towns. Research suggests that the bridging social capital enhanced by church attendance may supply an avenue for the social integration of new immigrant groups as well (Andrews, 2011).

Like most immigrants, Koreans come to the United States in search of a life better than what is available in their home country. While an improvement in conditions since the economic troubles on the late 1990s has resulted in a reduction in immigrant figures, Koreans nevertheless continue to move to the United States in large numbers. Korean immigrants' ethnic attachment and ethnic solidarity distinguish them from all other Asian ethnic groups in the United States. Korean immigrants possess high levels of both traits and the phenomenon can be attributed to three factors: the homogeneity of the group, their high concentration in small business, and their high rate of affiliation with and frequent participation in ethnic religious congregations (Min, 2007). Sixty one percent of U.S. Koreans are Protestants (Pew Research Center, 2012). Church attendance by participants in this study was universal, with all families being members of the Korean Mission of The First Baptist Church.

The literature on this topic sheds light upon a critical element in the lives of immigrants, whether newcomer or established: religion. The solace that Korean immigrants obtain by engaging in worship alongside fellow Koreans, all experiencing the hardship of living in a foreign land, helps break down many social constraints in place according to Confucian ideals. Accountants sitting in a pew beside poultry workers on a Sunday morning may not have a chance to interact on any other day of the week. Understanding this context can aid educators, policy makers, and researchers seeking ways to better support Asian American immigrants and their school-aged children.

What the present study offers is a glimpse into their world. The social bonds that Korean immigrants make, or fail to make, affect the lives of the whole community. Because religion plays such a large role in life in the rural South, developing a better understanding of these mechanisms can be beneficial to a large audience. Teachers, social workers, clergy, as well as academics stand to gain valuable information from studies that analyze adaptation strategies of immigrant populations in nontraditional locations. What is at stake for those involved with this topic, both directly and tangentially, is the successful integration of

immigrants into American society. As immigrants increasingly shift from settling in traditional gateway locations to regions less familiar with outsiders, social services such as medical facilities and schools, as well as employers and native citizens will be challenged with understanding their newfound situation. A clear understanding of the newcomers' culture is critical to success.

### **The Study: Theoretical Framework and Research Design**

The purpose of the study was to examine the role of the church in the lives of the Korean immigrants working at Claxton Poultry and analyze how their social networks function in relation to their lives as newcomer immigrants. In order to find out more about the formation and function of their social identities and social networks we used the following guiding questions:

1. How do Korean immigrants in Statesboro, Georgia define themselves?
2. How does their social identity affect the development and expansion of social networks?
3. What role does the church play in the acculturation and adaptation processes of the Korean immigrants?

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research design should help researchers to understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible. Additionally, the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds is the primary criterion that guides qualitative research (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). A constructionist epistemology maintains that human beings construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). We used this epistemology as a lens through which to observe and interpret how Korean immigrants in Statesboro interacted within their social networks and constructed meaning. Considering our status as outsiders of the participants of the study, we consider this stance as the most logical. A constructivist grounded theory approach goes beyond merely looking at how individuals view their situations. It not only theorizes the interpretive work that research participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000, 2002). "The theory *depends* on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130).

In this study, we strive to explore the perceptions of the social networks in the Korean immigrant community of Statesboro, a community in which we live. These immigrants' perceptions were constructed based upon their native culture and language, their community, social interactions, shared experiences, and interpretations of the world. The actions and interactions of the Korean immigrants in this study were closely observed and interpreted using a grounded theory approach. The term grounded theory does not refer to any particular level of theory, but to a theory that is inductively developed during a study and in constant interaction with the data collected. As Charmaz (2006) explains, "Theorizing is a *practice*. It entails the practical activity of engaging the world of constructing abstract understandings about and within it" (p. 128). What grounded theory offers is a guide to interpretive theoretical practice, not a blueprint for theoretical products. The theory is "grounded" in the actual data collected (Maxwell, 2005, p. 43). Considering the unique nature of the Korean immigrant population in Statesboro and our status as outside observers, we felt that grounded

theory was the best option for developing a plausible account of the situation at this particular time in history, in this particular town.

Using an ethnographic case study methodology enables the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources; “This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544). Because this study aims to better understand the case in order to provide insight into immigrant social networks, an “instrumental case study” (Stake, 2005, p. 445) was adopted in order to offer insight into the issue with the potential of transferring the findings to other settings in mind.

We believe that the particularity and complexity of their unique situation in Statesboro qualifies the Korean poultry worker families as a case worthwhile for study (Stake, 1995). Merriam (1998) states, “the uniqueness of a case study lies not so much in the methods employed (although these are important) as in the questions asked and their relationship to the end product” (p. 14). As such, the following outline of the methods that we used is such that we believe the end result to be “an intensive, holistic description and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 16) of the experience of the Korean immigrant population in Statesboro, Georgia. It is our belief that a case study method is best to capture the “particularity and complexity” (Stake, 1995, p. xi) of their situation.

The importance of the context in this study cannot be understated. It would be impossible for us as researchers to develop a true picture of the situation in Statesboro without careful consideration of the context in which the events occurred. Great lengths were taken in order to facilitate what Stake and Trumbull (1982) call naturalistic generalizations, wherein conclusions arrived at through my own engagements with the setting are relayed in a manner that allows the reader to feel as if he or she had the same experiences. And while the conclusions made herein are strictly our own, every effort was made to clearly show how those conclusions were constructed. Patton (2002) suggests that research and evaluation should be built on the foundation of a “paradigm of choices” rather than become the handmaiden of any single and inevitably narrow disciplinary or methodological paradigm. With Patton’s advice in mind, we employed ethnographic methods in conjunction with the aforementioned case study approach in order to obtain the “variety of lenses” necessary to flesh out the nature of the situation in Statesboro.

## **The Research Team**

Our research team consisted of two individuals: one Caucasian from the area and one Korean from Seoul. Having grown up in the region, Dr. Lynn immediately recognized the unique nature of the situation at hand once he learned of the Korean immigrants coming to work at Claxton Poultry. As an interracial couple, and academics, Drs. Lee and Lynn possessed entrée with the workers due to our attendance at the same church. We felt compelled to tell their story, not merely for the research value, but because we became close with many of the participants personally.

## **Participants**

Recruitment was conducted through snowball sampling (Patten, 2002). Because we attended services at the Korean Mission of the First Baptist Church in Statesboro on a regular basis, we were able to ask new members of the Korean Mission with school-aged children if they were willing to be interviewed. They in turn recommended others who might be willing to participate.

In all, 17 Korean parents, 12 mothers and 5 fathers, with children at the kindergarten through twelfth grade levels participated in interviews. Of the 17, 2 couples were interviewed twice based upon the uniqueness of their situation. Participants were given a \$20 gift certificate for the first round of interviews and a \$10 gift certificate for all follow-up interviews. Participant names were changed to a pseudonym based upon a list of English names from which they could choose.

## **Data Collection**

There were several methods of data collection in order to provide “triangulation” (Denzin, 1970): semi-structured interview, focus group, observation, and document analysis. As Stake (2005) explains, triangulation is “a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 454). However, unlike quantitative research methodologists who strive for results that can be generalized to some larger population, triangulation in this case is “less a strategy for validating results and procedures than an alternative to validation which increases scope, depth and consistency in methodological proceedings” (Flick, 2002, p. 227). Equally, our motivation for using multiple methods was to provide what Geertz (1973) describes as “thick description” in order to fully explain the context of the study.

**Interviews.** We initially interviewed participants using a semi-structured interview protocol for approximately one hour each. Each interview session involved a series of guiding questions followed by additional probing questions. The purpose of this type of protocol was to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee (Kvale, 2007). The interview questions aimed to elicit discussion about the social capital the participants have access to in their social networks. Our prior experiences as interviewers helped facilitate this process. Although many of the participants speak English very well, some questions and answers required translation. Dr. Lee is fully bilingual and was present during all interviews. The participants determined the location and time of all interviews.

**Focus Groups.** Two couples agreed to be interviewed together as a focus group. The semi-structured interview protocol used for the individual interviews was loosely followed in order to facilitate conversation. The interview was recorded and transcribed in the same manner as the individual interviews. The same couples were interviewed again four months later using the focus group format. The semi-structured interview protocol for the second focus group was based upon answers from the first interview session.

**Observations.** In addition to the interviews, we attended services and lunches at the Korean Mission on a weekly basis. We also attended birthday parties, barbecues, Christmas celebrations and other social gatherings throughout the course of our fieldwork. We kept a double entry journal to record our reactions and thoughts during this period. Because of Dr. Lynn’s status as a Caucasian with limited Korean speaking skills, it was easy to remain on the margins of these encounters and remain present without being a full participant (Glesne, 2005). Dr. Lee later explained any questions that arose in the journal concerning cultural nuances not understood by Dr. Lynn.

**Archival Data.** Concurrent to the interviews, we also analyzed newspaper articles and immigration policy documents for a better understanding of the Korean immigrants who came to reside in Statesboro. This information was used to contextualize the information gained from the interviews and allow us to better answer questions about what exactly the Korean parents were experiencing. Our understanding of the situation and relevant policies was just as important as that of the participants in this aspect. Equally, as Fairclough (1992) states, “The news media can be regarded as effecting the ideological work of transmitting the voices of power in a disguised and covert form” (p. 110). By analyzing the existence of such

evidence we feel that we were better able to show the juxtaposition of how the receiving educational community discursively constructed the Korean immigrant group while they at the same time tried to make sense of their own situation. Fairclough (2003) also asserts, "...texts have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes in, people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and the material world" (p. 8). It was our desire to shed light on these causal effects. All of these data collection activities were done under approval by the institutional review board (IRB).

### **Data Analysis**

Data management in qualitative research is an ongoing process (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). We recorded a log of interview transcripts and field notes from observations with comments and reflections as each of these tasks were completed. Afterward, the transcript data was entered and analyzed using MAXQDA software. Data analysis took place in an ongoing and inductive manner. In other words, we reviewed each interview as the transcription was completed. In line with the tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), we began coding with the first transcription, continually comparing data with data, and used the information to direct subsequent data gathering. During coding, we began the memo-writing process, looking for certain codes that stood out. These were used to begin shaping theoretical categories. The emergent theoretical categories dictated the direction of theoretical sampling necessary for the development of emerging theories about the case study. As Charmaz points out, "The acts involved in theorizing foster *seeing* possibilities, *establishing* connections, and *asking* questions" (p. 135, emphasis in original). We repeatedly revisited the data while shaping the emerging theories, being careful to ensure that our assumptions were based upon the participants' experiences, not our own.

For example, early in the interview process we began with open-ended questions about church membership. We knew before beginning the study that an extremely high percentage of the poultry workers attended services at the Korean Mission of the First Baptist Church. However, we were not sure what additional role, if any, the church played in the poultry workers' lives in addition to spiritual solace. We would transcribe and code the interviews immediately after they were conducted. The topic of social networks arose repeatedly in every interview and we coded the material as such. We were able to establish categories after coding multiple transcripts: church attendance, social networks, and relationship characteristics. This in turn led us to further research on the topic of *jeong* in Korean societal norms and the eventual development of our theory about the phenomenon. We followed this routine throughout the study, using the advice of Strauss (1987) as our guide. To develop a theory, it is essential that the categories identified be outlined, constructed, and interrelated; these constitute the conceptual element of the theory, revealing the relationships between themselves and the data collected.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Several postcolonial researchers have written about the complications that arise when Western researchers attempt to characterize the situation of Eastern participants. Said (1979) writes of "Orientalism" and the way in which "the West not only constructs the Orient, but constructs it precisely as its Other, the repository of all those characteristics deemed non-Western (and therefore negative)" (Childs & Williams, 1997, p. 100). Equally, Spivak (1988) warns of the pitfalls that many writers encounter when trying to portray marginalized groups in their writing; "The banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as

transparent” (p. 70). It is precisely the transparency of which Spivak writes which we attempted to conscientiously avoid. As an Anglo-American male writing about Korean immigrants, Dr. Lee’s presence in the research team added validity of our claims.

Rogers (2003) uses the term reflexivity to denote “the examination of the relationship between the researcher and participants” (p. 197). In an attempt to demonstrate how the researcher is implicit in institutional ideologies, she encourages the researcher to turn the analytical lens upon themselves. Facilitating such action includes the idea of understanding the worldview of the participants, reciprocity and dialogue, and the idea that research should include critical analysis and sustained action. It has been our intent to follow Rogers’ advice. The embedded nature of our role in the community under investigation makes any other option unrealistic. It was our goal to buttress Rogers’ idea of reflexivity with candid disclosure to the participants about our motivations for the study as well as questions about how they might view us as researchers.

## **Findings**

The findings that follow are broken into sections that reflect the themes we found to be the most salient to the Korean poultry workers’ lives in Statesboro: an immigrant population in flux, short-term friendships and social capital, and social networks at the Korean Mission. These themes arose from the much broader categories developed during the constant comparison analysis of the data. Their status as themes derives from their recurrence in the data. We provide direct quotes or brief descriptions of the theme, and then interpret what we saw in relation to the current literature. Finally, we present the grounded theory that arose from our analysis.

### **An Immigrant Population in Flux**

Do you think that you will leave Statesboro after your one year contract ends?  
I don’t want to, but you cannot do anything. We don’t have any options here because we don’t speak English very well. Who is going to hire us? (Interview with male poultry worker)

Migrants have a belief that immigration offers better opportunities for themselves and for their children than their countries of origin (Borjas, 1990). What Claxton Poultry affords is permanent residency, a prerequisite for immigrants who want to pursue the American Dream legally. What south Georgia does not offer most Korean immigrants are options for economic prosperity. The Korean population in Statesboro is constantly in flux as a result. Claxton Poultry, and subsequently the Korean church, is continually gaining and losing employees as their one-year contracts end and a new cohort arrives.

A common thread that ran through almost every conversation with the poultry workers was that Statesboro was not their new home. While most were appreciative of the opportunity to come to the United States, south Georgia was definitely not their final destination. The backbreaking work at Claxton Poultry was not the only factor influencing the desire to move. Freedom from the highly stressful education system in Korea motivated the majority of the parents to leave for the United States. However, the Bulloch County school system did not turn out to be the panacea they dreamed of. When asked about her view of the school system, a mother of two middle school aged children answered thusly:

Are you content with the school?

No.

Or are you unhappy with Statesboro itself?

Well... It is a matter of degrees. Actually I don't have any alternatives now.

There isn't any other option than this school. I hoped my kids would adapt to the new surroundings. But now he is the top in the class and...no. I mean my eldest son said students in the class don't study.

You mean there'll be no progress in their education here in Statesboro?

Yeah, well, for example...If the date of the mid-term exam is announced, Korean teachers inform the students of what the test will be on. Here, he went after class to the teachers and asked for a study guide but she said that she would give it the day before the test. Because this was the first time to test for him, he was nervous and tried to study hard. Anyway the students here don't study, he said. Well...those students are those students, to me...I feel so...here, there are students who don't study hard...I feel here is not too hot.

Neither she nor her husband had definite plans for life after their one-year commitment to the poultry plant. However, staying in Statesboro was not one of their options. This feeling of impermanence was pervasive throughout most of the interviews. One mother put it more bluntly when asked about the education that her son was receiving in Statesboro: "What do you think of school here in Statesboro? It's a joke." Because concern over the stressful nature of their children's schooling in Korea was a motivating factor for coming to the United States in the first place, dissatisfaction with the school system in Bullock County understandably frustrated many Korean parents.

When we interviewed Rita and asked about her plans for her new life in the United States, her response was, "First I have to finish this"; "this" being her family's sojourn in Statesboro. She described the way that her husband brought the family (Rita and two children) to the US without consulting them. He was very unhappy with his job and many aspects of Korean workplace culture. She related that he had become frustrated with the constant scrutiny from his peers and the long hours spent with coworkers afterhours. Guided by Confucian ideals, Korean employers and supervisors take care of their employees and subordinates in a father-son like relationship. The boundary between personal and public life is often less clear than the Western conception (Chen & Chung, 1994). Employees are expected to participate in communal drinking with coworkers late into the night, often at the expense of the family. On a whim Rita's husband went to an immigration broker orientation session with a friend in Seoul and applied for a poultry job. She and the children were disappointed with their new circumstances in the US and in a state of limbo while he fulfilled his one-year work obligation at Claxton Poultry. Her 14-year-old daughter was a champion swimmer in Korea. In Statesboro she gained weight and could not compete at the same level as in Korea. Much like the schools, the swim team in Statesboro was not what she was used to at home. Rita's 19-year-old son had just finished the rigorous college entrance exam process in Korea. He was now in the US, unable to speak English, and without many options. Rita did not know where they would go, but they had no plans to stay in Statesboro.

There are many factors that would normally indicate advantages for the Koreans in the job market, and thus potential for finding other jobs in Statesboro. The Korean immigrants in Statesboro are on the average more highly educated and more likely to have

professional occupational credentials than the American host population they join. As Alba and Logan (1992) explain, individuals who come from professional/managerial and other white-collar jobs have a higher potential for socioeconomic success. However, Koreans are less likely than other highly educated and skilled immigrants from Asia—especially those from the former Anglo-American colonies of the Philippines and India—to be fluent in English (Min, 1996), and therefore confront all-but-insurmountable barriers to continuing their professional careers in a rural setting. As the interviewee stated earlier, “We don’t have any options because we don’t speak English very well. Who is going to hire us?”.

**Exceptions.** During the course of the study, the number of Koreans who expressed a desire to stay at Claxton Poultry after one year was very small. However, they do exist. Of the over 200 workers recruited at the time of this writing, we only encountered four instances of Koreans who decided to settle in Bulloch County. Two stayed at Claxton Poultry in supervisory roles. Both bought houses. One came with a large amount of savings and had already bought a house before his yearlong commitment ended. At the time of our interview, Brian had been working at Claxton Poultry for over two years, having worked his way up to a supervisory position. He was attending the local technical college in order to become a licensed electrician. When we asked what he thought about life in Statesboro he answered:

In Korea there’s no day off. I would go to work around 6:30 in the morning and get home around 9:30 or 10 at night. But here in the United States, everybody has their own real life with his or her families after work. Yeah, no matter what they are doing for a living. So, I am happy here. I get up and walk with my family in the mornings on the weekend. I have dinner with them every night. In Korea, it’s more stress.

We conducted the interview on the back porch of Brian’s newly purchased home in a new subdivision outside of Statesboro. It is a pleasant neighborhood with new homes, a pool and tennis courts. Brian’s view of life in Statesboro definitely deviated from the norm. Yet, he and his family were content with what they had found there and not seeking to move on.

### **Short-Term Friendships and Social Capital**

“We feel embarrassed to ask for help. Everyone is so tired”—female poultry worker’s response when asked about seeking help with her child’s schoolwork.

Our conversations and observations with the Korean population in Statesboro revealed much with regard to the depth of the friendships developed during their one-year commitments. While the nature of the shared labor and difficult circumstances helped build friendships quickly, the short nature of their tenure stymied deeper attachments amongst themselves and the native Georgians at church.

We found that the cultural values of Koreans in Statesboro draw upon home country traditions as these traditions are reinterpreted following immigration and resettlement. For the poultry workers, the hardship of one year of manual labor has been important in shaping how they think about their cultural background and relationships with others. Coming from mostly middle-class backgrounds in Korea to the working class of rural Georgia is a paradigm shift. The poultry workers have lost the social standing once held in their homeland as well as having become ethnic minorities. As Bankston (2004) points out, in order for the investment of social relations to yield a profit, there must be an interaction between those relations and a set of cultural norms. The Korean population in Statesboro is still struggling to process those cultural norms in their newfound circumstances, simultaneously sorting out the new environment, language, and culture of the United States as well as shifts in the way they see

their own traditions. The centuries old Confucian ideals that make life at home in Korea both frustrating and familiar have been altered in many ways by the move to rural Georgia. On the one hand, the Korean poultry workers are relieved to escape the pressure of the schools and social hierarchy. On the other hand, they are somewhat lost without the structure provided by predictable Korean social norms in their home country.

The lack of a place for Korean poultry workers in the mainstream society of Statesboro led them to form closely linked social structures (Bankston, 2004). Irrelevant to their social standing before immigrating, the small number of Korean poultry workers residing in Statesboro bonded based upon a shared race, language, and culture. Homophily, the general tendency in networking for individuals to interact and share sentiment with others with similar characteristics (Homans, 1958; Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954; Laumann, 1966; Lin, 1982), dictates that members of the Korean community enjoy access to information from and influence in their networks. However, with the advantages that are generated from such ties come pitfalls as well:

Any given social group reflects degrees of group demarcation and variation of network resources among members. Cognitive awareness of these resource restrictions may motivate some members of disadvantaged groups to establish social ties with members of advantaged groups, to gain better information and influence. (Lin, 2000, p. 787)

This is not what we saw in Statesboro. The members of the Korean Mission had very little contact with the native born members of the First Baptist Church, even though both congregations met at the same times and within the same building. The services are separated upon ethnic and linguistic lines. And while the Caucasian churchgoers who have lived in Statesboro for generations would obviously have access to more social capital, the Korean population rarely takes advantage. An example of this disconnect became apparent when we interviewed Reverend Kim's wife on April 24, 2011. She relayed to us that she had met the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) coordinator for Bulloch County for the first time only two days prior to the interview, although the coordinator was a long-time member of the church:

June: One of the Board of Education members is a member of the First Baptist Church. She is in charge of all of the ESOL programs in Bulloch County, Debra Jones. So I just got to know her in the choir. And you know, "you work at the board of education?" And then, "you know, some families" parents have issues and questions. So the school told me, "you need to call Debra Jones."

Interviewer: Do you see her very often?

June: I met her two days ago.

Our interview was on April 24, 2011, three years and three months after June's arrival in Statesboro. Considering the large number of Claxton Poultry workers' children enrolled in ESOL in Bulloch County schools and the importance of education in their worldview, it is unfortunate that an essential link between the Korean population and the schools took so long to come to fruition.

This was a common theme in the interviews. Most families felt ashamed to ask for help from others, Korean or American, even though assisting those in need is a cornerstone of Christian belief. Because of the exhausting nature of the work at Claxton Poultry, parents did

not seek assistance outside of the home. As April explained on April 23, 2011, “We feel embarrassed to ask for help. Everyone is so tired”. Most appeared resolved to find solutions to their problems on their own. This also helps explain an observed lack of long lasting friendships.

**Jeong.** In Korean culture, the concept of *jeong* refers to a type of special interpersonal bond that has no clear translation in English. The term covers a wide range of English terms: feeling, empathy, affection, closeness, tenderness, pathos, compassion, sentiment, trust, bonding, and love (Kim, Kim, & Kelly, 2006, p. 152). Jeong is the essential element in human life that promotes the depth and richness of personal relationships. As Kim (1994) relates, jeong is what makes us say “we” rather than “I,” “ours” rather than “mine” (p. 19). A necessity for the cultivation of jeong is time spent together. While the workers at Claxton Poultry all have the shared experience of having toiled together for one year at the processing plant, the brief nature of time spent together prohibits anything more than perfunctory relationships at both the workplace and the Korean Mission.

As one male poultry worker explained, “We rarely talk about who we were before coming here. Now, we are all working together at the poultry plant. Later, when we have good jobs, we can brag about what we have. For now, we are all in the same situation.” And this situation is ephemeral. Once finished with their one-year contracts, the poultry workers refer to themselves as “graduates.” While stories of life for the graduates abound, it is always second hand information. Graduates do not come back to visit.

### **Social Networks at the Korean Mission**

“11:00 am Sunday is the most segregated hour in the week” (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 161).

Putnam and Campbell (2010) point out that the religious and political views of church congregations in the US are tightly interconnected. While Americans are not necessarily consciously sorting themselves into, and out of, churches on the basis of issues with political salience (like abortion), their sorting nonetheless brings politically like-minded people together (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 435). Social networks develop within these congregations of like-minded people and these networks tend to “keep people from switching congregations, foster good citizenship—generosity and civic engagement—and strengthen the connections voters make between their religion and their politics” (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 32). This point is especially noticeable in Statesboro. People who live in rural communities are more religious than city folk, and Southerners are more religious than the rest of the country (Putnam & Campbell, 2010, p. 26). When it comes to small town politics, including education, who you know and associate with is often paramount for social mobility.

**Religion and Social Capital.** Social capital, according to Putnam (1995), can take various forms: ‘bonding’ capital typically refers to the close relationships between people within close-knit groups; ‘bridging’ capital to connections between such groups; ‘linking’ capital to relationships cutting vertically through status hierarchies. Likewise, friendships built through church attendance can constitute forms of social capital that facilitate civic integration. However, how such social networks are used and how relationships are developed depends on group members’ understanding of their collective identity (Hopkins, 2011). Interviews revealed that the Korean Mission at the First Baptist Church in Statesboro facilitates strong bonding and linking capital within the Korean Baptist community. However, we also contend that it fails in the area of bridging capital between Koreans and other worshippers, essentially nullifying any advantages afforded through the social networks of the Anglo members of the First Baptist Church.

**The Korean Mission.** Often minority faith-based identities are assumed to encourage self-segregation (see Cantele, 2005) and therefore pose barriers to cohesion and trust. For example, survey research in the US suggests majority group members often assume Muslim identifications subvert identification with larger society (van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). This is true, to a certain extent, with the Korean poultry workers. The majority of Korean immigrants living in Statesboro are members of the Korean Mission, a subsidiary of the First Baptist Church. Even so, they choose to worship separately and in their native language in a location that is literally within arm's length of the entrance to the First Baptist Church. Sociologists have long viewed religious congregations as homogenous social contexts (e.g., Lenski, 1953, 1963; Niebuhr, 1929; Pope, 1942; Wilson, 1969). As McGavran (1980) relates, people "like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers" (p. 223). The members of the Korean Mission and the First Baptist Church do not appear to be exceptions to these archetypes. And with regard to our argument about social capital, it is important to note that faith groups can on occasion provide physical resources and social networks such as interfaith dialogue networks that facilitate bridging relationships (Furbey et al., 2006). However, this is not happening in Statesboro.

Intergroup contact research suggests that for minorities, the relative powerlessness of their situation leads them to experience contact differently (Hubbard, 1999). Moreover, a minority group member's understanding of their identity and their reaction to negative stereotyping may lead them to view contact with caution (Hopkins, 2011). In the case of the poultry workers, the intergroup dynamics among the Koreans in regards to Confucian ideals must first be taken into account, and then their status in relation to the predominantly White, English speaking members of the First Baptist Church.

In accord with Confucian philosophy, maintaining face and avoiding shame play key roles in one's social status and the nature of one's relationship with in-group members defines one's identity (Shon & Ja, 1982). For the members of the Korean Mission, the majority of whom left middle-class lifestyles to come work manual labor, the downward shift in status makes adjustment to life in the US a stressful experience. Negotiating Korean cultural norms without a clear understanding of one's own status in the hierarchy compounds the difficulty inherent in interaction with those outside of the community. The added language barrier compounds the shame factor. As Hopkins (2011) explains, situations such as that in the Korean Mission create an atmosphere in which within-group bonding activity is construed as a precondition for successful participation in bridging networks. In other words, we believe that what may appear as a reluctance to engage in bridging activities (i.e., self-segregated worship rather than with the First Baptist Church) may actually be the Korean group members' interpretation of their group's powerlessness and their analyses of the resources (including space and the bonding social capital that it may support and sustain) needed for identity empowerment. Their separate worshiping space can be understood as "empowering and as facilitating the development of bridging and linking capital" (Hopkins, 2011, p. 537). The hurdle to fully realizing identity empowerment and building capital in Statesboro lies in part because the poultry worker population is in a state of constant flux. Because of the short nature of their stays, the churchgoers at the Korean Mission do not gain much more than solace. The confidence needed to make the next step to developing bridging capital is never actualized. However, we believe that other factors are at play as well.

**Role of the Korean Mission in the Korean Community.** The Korean Mission at the First Baptist Church started as a bible study group that met weekly in the early 1990s. A handful of Koreans living in Statesboro at the time would gather and discuss passages out of the Bible and eat Korean food, usually at someone's home. Eventually, they were motivated to find a pastor and the First Baptist Church helped facilitate the procurement of a place to

worship (an annex of the First Baptist Church) and a small house on the church grounds with a kitchen for after service Korean meals. The Korean Mission officially started in 1999.

Many researchers have noted that it is the spatial concentration of immigrants that leads to an increased reliance on people of similar origin for survival and the reciprocity implicit in the exchange of social capital that allows immigrant networks to aid members (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1995; Rogers & Henning, 1999). The development and evolution of the Korean Mission of the Statesboro First Baptist Church mirrors that of most Korean church congregations in the US since the 1970s, when Korean immigrant communities were beginning to develop in earnest. The church initially provided Korean immigrants with fellowship and various services associated with immigrant adjustment. Eventually, offering Korean language and cultural education for second-generation children and providing social status for Korean adult immigrants started to become increasingly important (Min, 1992). However, the short-lived nature of the poultry workers' stays in Statesboro makes those functions difficult to sustain since members generally do not stay long enough to maintain such functions and a second generation of Korean Americans has not emerged.

**Maintenance of Social Status and Positions.** Korean immigrant churches tend to offer lay leaders many religious positions as elders, exhorters and deacons, and tend to organize these positions more hierarchically among lay members than other American Protestant churches. Koreans who hold these lay positions usually are not paid, although they contribute more money and spend more time for services than other church members. However, these ethnic church positions meet their needs for social status, which cannot be met in the larger society (or poultry processing plant). The title indicating a church position as an elder, an exhorter or a deacon is carried not only inside the church, but also outside of it. For example, Elder Lee is called as such not only by church members, but also by other Koreans, unless he possesses a better title associated with his occupation or a voluntary organization (Min, 1992, p. 1389-1390). While this social status function may be unintended by pastors, a survey of Korean immigrants in Chicago in the 1990s indicated that Korean male immigrants who held staff positions in the ethnic church showed a lower level of depression and a higher level of life satisfaction than those who did not (Hurh & Kim, 1990). This finding is not surprising considering the fact that most Korean adult immigrants have lost their relatively high social positions associated with their pre-immigrant occupations, acutely so in Statesboro. An interview with George revealed a phenomenon that clearly illustrates their hypersensitivity to status. There exists a tacit agreement among workers at Claxton Poultry. They do not talk amongst themselves about what their jobs were back in Korea, thus eliminating a major underpinning of social standing so vital to the Confucian hierarchy that remains prevalent in Korean society. Essentially, some social norms are ignored in Statesboro because the shared experience of working at Claxton Poultry acts as a status equalizer.

**Choosing to be Separate.** Muslim immigrants have been described as an "indigestible" minority (Huntington, 2004, p. 188) and Islam as a "bright boundary" separating immigrants from host societies (Alba, 2005). Korean immigrants in the United States on the other hand are predominantly Christian. And while individuals generally hold membership in multiple social groups and self-categorize in terms of multiple collective categories (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012), being Christian in The South is a huge advantage with regard to integration. There are also many categories that members of the Korean Mission share with the First Baptist Church congregation other than religion. Korean culture is based upon Confucian ideals such as respect for one's elders, courtesy, and rule through moral example. These ideals resonate with conservative Southerners. And as Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman (2010) point out, religious group identification offers a distinctive "sacred" and unfalsifiable worldview, moral guidance for practices and behavioral choices,

and “eternal” group membership that bind both groups. Considering that majority group members seem to favor ethnic groups to be assimilated into the dominant society (Horenczyk, 1996; Van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998), the Koreans in Statesboro could theoretically join the worshippers of the First Baptist Church rather easily if they so desired. However, interviews revealed attitudes to the contrary.

When asked about the separate services, the Korean immigrants in Statesboro revealed a strong desire to maintain their original culture and little desire to build relationships with members of the native born citizens of Statesboro. Berry (1980) classified in a clear schema the ways in which immigrants search for their “fit” into a new society. Two elements stand out as crucial for the type of adaptation an immigrant chooses: the newcomers’ need to maintain their original culture and their desire to build relationships with members of the dominant group in the host society (Berry, 1980; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992). As Korean churchgoer put it:

I grew up as a Christian in Korea listening to a certain format and style of sermons from a Korean pastor, which I am so used to. Even if I understand the sermon in English, it feels like it is not a sermon blessing me. It sounds more like dialogues. It is culturally different, I think. A Korean sermon is more serious, based on lessons, etc. So, I feel like I am blessed and have ‘real’ worship when I am at Korean church.

Another Korean mother added:

Since I grew up in Korea and I have strong identity as Korean, it will not hurt my identity as a Christian-Korean to go to services in English. However, since my children did not grow up there and do not have a strong identity as Korean, I want to continue to send them to Korean church to keep their identity as Christian-Koreans.

The Koreans working in Statesboro are Christian-Koreans, with the hyphen, not separated. To parse the two terms is to take away their identity. They are not trying to blend with the Caucasian church population because it would detract from their Christian-Korean(ness). And while they are grateful for the space for worship, the details of the arrangement do come with troubling caveats. Being subservient financially and clerically to the main church feeds to the feelings of inferiority brought on by working in a poultry plant. However, the solace provided by church services in their native language trumps those feelings.

In many ways, the Koreans who come to Statesboro can no longer be who they were in Korea, at least for one year. Most leave middle class lifestyles and prominence in their homeland to come toil in the chicken processing plant, effectively stripping away the status so critical in a Confucian based society. The shared experience brought people together. However, with few metrics for measuring social status the church was more of a place for solace than socializing.

Based upon our constant comparative analysis of the data and eventual theoretical saturation, we established the following theory with regard to the social networks developed at the Korean Mission. We agree with the Hopkins (2011) that group members’ understanding of their collective identity is essential for the effective use of social networks and development of relationships. We have observed that the poultry workers attending services at the Korean Mission have a clear conception of their status as one-year poultry workers undertaking huge physical and psychological struggles in the hopes of a better

future. The missing component needed in order to ensure bridging capital between Koreans and other worshipers in The First Baptist Church is *jeong*: the essential element in human life that promotes the depth and richness of personal relationships. We consider the short nature of their stays in Statesboro as a critical missing factor that stymies the formation of *jeong* amongst the poultry workers and subsequently the native citizens. And while church attendance does fill an important role in the lives of poultry workers struggling under difficult circumstances, religious services in Statesboro provide little in the way of integration.

### Discussion

Our findings lead us to a number of conclusions about the nature of life for the Korean immigrants working and living in south Georgia: our grounded theory. As mentioned above, we believe that the short nature of their stays in Statesboro stymies the formation of deep connections amongst the Koreans, while church attendance mitigates much of the emotional strain of the difficult circumstances. Equally, the Korean immigrant population in Statesboro is in a constant state of change. Therefore, access to social capital available within the predominantly Caucasian Baptist Church is also unobtainable.

The segregated nature of the First Baptist Church and the Korean Mission stymies the sharing of information about schooling and possible employment that would be easier to access if the two groups worshiped and engaged in fellowship together. For the disadvantaged to gain a better status, strategic behaviors require accessing resources beyond the usual social circles (Ensel, 1979) and routine exchanges. This is not happening with the relationship between the Korean Mission and the First Baptist Church. The language barrier and cultural norms (on the part of both parties) preclude the types of interactions necessary in order for the Koreans to access information about schooling in Statesboro. As Lin (2000) points out, members of resource-rich networks are privy to information not easily available to others; "Members of such networks enjoy access to information from and influence in diverse socioeconomic strata and positions. In contrast, members in resource-poor networks share a relatively restricted variety of information and influence" (p. 787). Our interviews and interactions with the poultry workers in Statesboro revealed that most of the new immigrants are very aware of their status in the community and what they may or may not be missing by separate worship. The majority the participants also appear content with the fact that their situation is temporary. They remain hopeful that their American Dream will come to fruition in the near future in some other place.

### Conclusions

Blau's (1977) theory of social structure states that the possibility of social contact must precede any possibility for social interaction. Clearly, the members of the Korean Mission at the First Baptist Church are in position to form closer ties with the native population of Statesboro. In contrast to the homophily present in most other social institutions in rural towns, church may prove to be the one place where Korean immigrants can most easily make inroads with natives. However, referring back to the Hirschman (2004) quote from earlier, this unique group's search for refuge, respectability, and resources is limited in many ways and seems to end at the front door to the Korean Mission.

The short-term nature of the Koreans' tenure at Claxton Poultry prohibits the development of deep-seated bonding social capital amongst themselves (i.e., *jeong*) as well as bridging social capital with the members of the First Baptist Church. Because the majority of the poultry workers leave immediately following their one-year commitment, a second

generation of Koreans in Statesboro has yet to become established. Likewise, long lasting friendships rarely materialize amongst the Koreans themselves.

The confidence needed in order to make the eventual transition to interacting with native members of the First Baptist Church, and eventually others in the community, fails to come to materialize. The resulting disconnect ensures that members of the Korean Mission rely upon human capital (i.e., a high level of education from the Korean system) to navigate life in Statesboro on their own rather than rely heavily on support from other Koreans or members of the First Baptist Church.

In conclusion, this study makes a contribution to the understanding of immigrants' adaptation processes. Researchers such as Lew (2007), Zhou and Bankston (1998), and Zhou and Kim (2006) have written about the benefits of ethnic enclaves to immigrants. While there are opportunities for cross-cultural interactions in multiethnic congregations, further research is needed to assess whether attendees of different ethnic backgrounds choose to take advantage of the opportunities they have to interact with one another or whether they form ethnic/linguistic cliques within their congregations. Additionally, research is needed to see what affect crossing ethnic boundaries has on churchgoers lives when interactions occur, especially with regard to congregations in rural areas. This allows us to better understand when and why a sense of belonging toward one's ethnic church versus worshiping with the native population is perceived and experienced as complementary or contradictory.

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### Author Note

Dr. C. Allen Lynn is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. His research interests include marginalized English language learner populations as well as critical discourse analysis. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: University of North Carolina Wilmington, Watson College of Education, 601 S. College Road, Wilmington, NC 28403-5980; Email: [lynna@uncw.edu](mailto:lynna@uncw.edu); Phone: (910) 962-2843; Fax: (910) 962-3609.

Dr. Sun-A Lee is an assistant professor at the University of Louisiana Lafayette. Her research focuses on adolescent and young adult's psychosocial development in diverse contexts including different family structures, ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: University of Louisiana Lafayette, Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Child and Family Studies, P.O. Box 40198, Lafayette, LA 70504-1098; Email: [slee@louisiana.edu](mailto:slee@louisiana.edu); Phone: (337) 482-1132.

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