



# Pathways from non-Korean mothers' cultural adaptation, marital conflict, and parenting behavior to bi-ethnic children's school adjustment in South Korea <sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 6 November 2011

Received in revised form 13 January 2012

Accepted 18 January 2012

Available online 9 February 2012

### Keywords:

Children

Marital conflicts

Multiculturalism

Parenting practices

South Korea

## ABSTRACT

We explored the pathways from attitude towards cultural adjustment (separation, assimilation, and integration), marital conflict, and parenting practices of mothers of non-South Korean families on their children's school adjustment in South Korea. One hundred-and-fifty-four Chinese, Filipino, and Vietnamese mothers and their children (3rd–6th grade) from Gyeonggi province participated in the study. Questionnaires measuring mothers' attitudes toward cultural adjustment, marital conflict, and parenting practices were administered to the mothers. We analyzed data using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). We found that mothers' assimilation and separation did not affect children's school adjustment. However, integration of the mothers had indirect effect on children's school adjustment through marital conflict and parenting practices. Acculturated mothers had lower level of marital conflict, which in turn had a higher positive effect on children's school adjustment. It is imperative that culturally relevant programs that enhance positive marital relationships and parent–child relationships among culturally diverse families be developed.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, South Korea has been confronted with an unprecedented rapid socio-demographic shift. Previously recognized as a homogeneous, agrarian-based country, the recent demographic features of South Korea reveal that the country has become more ethnically diverse (Chun, 2008), and for the first time, 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' have been a major focus in South Korea. According to the Korean National Statistics Office (2007), the number of immigrants increased from 386,972 in 1996 to 1,066,291 in 2007. The number of marriages between South Koreans and non-Koreans also increased from 25,182 in 2001 to 110,362 in 2007 (as cited by Yoon, Song, & Bae, 2008) and immigrants and non-Korean spouses constitute 2% of the country's overall population (Hong & Han, 2009). According to the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (2009), the number of children of interracial and inter-ethnic (i.e., between South Korean and other Asian) marriages in South Korea has also increased with 83.4% of these children being elementary school students. Also, the number of middle

and high school students of mixed race and ethnicity in South Korea is projected to increase within two to three years (Kang, 2008).

Children of mixed heritage often experience cultural identity conflict in school and are more likely than South Korean children to experience school adjustment problems (H.Y. Chung, 2007; Hyun, 2008; Y.J. Chung, 2007). Regrettably, these children frequently experience discrimination by the mainstream society due to South Korea's emphasis on racial and ethnic homogeneity (*dan'il minjok*) (Kang, 1999). Because children's school adjustment is significantly associated with educational success and assimilation into mainstream society, there is a critical need for understanding school adjustment problems experienced by children of mixed heritage. Although studies on school adjustment of children of mixed heritage in South Korea have emerged in recent years, there is a paucity of empirical research on pathways that explain factors that are related to school adjustment of these children (In, 2002; Yu, 1998). Considering the increasing presence of non-Korean mothers and children of mixed heritage in South Korean society, there is a critical need for understanding the pathways from non-Korean mothers' cultural adjustment to school adjustment problems of these children. The major focus of our study is to examine the pathways between non-Korean mothers' cultural adjustment, marital conflict, and parenting behavior, and their children's school adjustment.

### 1.1. School adjustment

The definition of school adjustment varies by researchers (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). School adjustment has traditionally

<sup>☆</sup> This article is a part of a larger dissertation written by the first author at Ewha Womans [Women's] University in Seoul, Republic of Korea. Jun Sung Hong and Johnny S. Kim were not involved in the empirical part of the research.

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been defined and conceptualized in terms of children's academic achievement and success (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996). Researchers have documented that children's academic achievement is linked to prosocial behavior (e.g., Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996) as well as the school environment (e.g., Ju, 1998). For instance, earlier studies (e.g., Wentzel, 1991) have found that positive academic outcomes during elementary school years were associated with prosocial interactions with classmates and peers, appropriate conduct in the classroom, and compliance with classroom and school rules.

In recent years, researchers have broadened the construct to consider outcomes other than school performances, such as the child's school bond, friends and peers' school bonds, and avoidance of misbehavior in school (J.H. Kim, 1998, M.C. Kim, 1998; Kim & Heo, 2003; Ladd et al., 1996; Wentzel, 2003). The extent to which a child enjoys his or her school and is attached to teachers and peers is also common aspects of school adjustment (Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001; Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). For the purpose of this study, we used Lee's (1990) concept, which characterizes school adjustment as children's relations with teachers and classmates, school activities, school rules, and participation in school events.

### 1.2. Cultural adaptation

Several South Korean researchers have examined individual and environmental factors associated with school adjustment of children of mixed heritage, such as identity, self-esteem (Ahn, 2006; Lee, 2008; Shin, 2007), as well as inter-parental conflict, mothers' parenting behavior, and social support (H.Y. Chung, 2007; Y.J. Chung, 2007; Hyun, 2008; J.H. Kim, 2006, O.N. Kim, 2006, K.R. Kim, 2007, K.S. Kim, 2007; S.H. Lee, 2007, Y.J. Lee, 2007). However, these studies have only examined these factors as predictors rather than as mediators. Other studies have found that family, peer, and school level factors can influence children's school adjustment (Davies & Dumenci, 1999; Kim & Lee, 2004; Kwak & Kim, 2006). Among family level factors, mothers' characteristics and acculturation, in particular, has been found to positively influence their children's school adjustment (Eshel & Rosenthal-Skolove, 2000; Park, Kim, & Doh, 2000). Moreover, South Korean society has traditionally been a group-based society, and non-Korean mothers often feel isolated, which can negatively affect their children's development. While several studies (Choi, 2009; J.M. Choi, 2007, U.S. Choi, 2007; Park, 2009; Yang, Kim, & Lee, 2007) have examined mothers' acculturation, no studies have examined indirect effects of mothers' acculturation on children's school adjustment.

### 1.3. Marital conflict

In relations to the family level factors that influence children's school adjustment, studies have shown that parents' marital conflict is a predictor of negative school adjustment of children (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Chung, 2004; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Fincham & Osborne, 1993; Kim, 1993; Lim, 2004). Marital conflict between parents has been found to be a significant predictor for negative parenting behavior and negative parent-child relationship. Studies have shown that parenting-related stress can lead to marital conflict (Fincham, 1998; Grych & Fincham, 1993; Lee & Oh, 2000), which can undermine positive parenting practices (Buehler & Gerard, 2002; Krishnakumar & Burhler, 2000). Parents under stress are more likely to employ abusive and harsh disciplinary parenting practices (Brody, Arias, & Fincham, 1996; Lee & Han, 2003; Yeon, 1992). Samples in the studies that examined the relationship between marital conflict and parenting behavior have been parents in the general population (Faubert, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Kim, 1990; Krishnakumar & Burhler, 2000) but studies that have investigated marital conflicts among diverse families in South Korea (Choi, Kwon, Kim, & Woo, 2007; J.H. Kim, 2006; O.N. Kim, 2006; Park, Park, & Kim, 2007) have not considered parenting behavior.

Nevertheless, studies in the United States have reported that cultural and behavioral differences between interracial and inter-ethnically married spouses are likely to experience marital-related stress (Burman & Margolin, 1992; see also Gotlib & Hooley, 1988; Johnson & Warren, 1994) due to cultural differences (Patterson, 2004). In contrast, interracial or inter-ethnically married couples that are well-adjusted to mainstream society are more likely to express satisfaction with their married life (Marin, Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Nah, 1993). In South Korea, marital conflict between interracial and inter-ethnic couples are higher than between South Korean couples (J.H. Kim, 2006; O.N. Kim, 2006), which can negatively affect children's school adjustment and development (Chae & Hong, 2007; J.H. Kim, 2006, O.N. Kim, 2006; Park, 2007; S.H. Lee, 2007, Y.J. Lee, 2007; Shin & Yang, 2006). Studies have found that cultural differences between the husband and wife, as well as difficulties in acculturation of the non-Korean wife, increase the likelihood of marital conflict (Han, 2006; Park et al., 2007).

### 1.4. Parenting behavior

A number of researchers have examined the relationship between parenting behavior and children's adjustment problems (Bae, 2004; Bronstein et al., 1996; Chartrand, 1992; Kim, 2002). Studies have found that mothers' democratic parenting behavior (a style of parenting where parents and children work together) positively influences children's adjustment (see Kim, Doh, Hong, & Choi, 2011); conversely, negative and restrictive parenting behavior can increase the likelihood of children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Chung, Chun, & Kim, 2004; Chung & Kim, 2003; J.H. Kim, 2006, O.N. Kim, 2006; Lee & Lee, 2004). Parenting behavior has also been reported to be a significant predictor of children's developmental outcomes, which can be influenced by cultural adjustment for non-Korean and immigrant mothers. Generally speaking, immigrant and ethnic minority mothers' parenting practices may be shaped by contextual factors, such as their area of residence. Several researchers (Bamaca, Umana-Taylor, Shin, & Alfaro, 2005; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1993; Shumow & Lomax, 2002) have documented that parenting practices are influenced by the conditions of neighborhood residence. To illustrate, African American parents residing in high-risk areas might employ authoritarian disciplinary practices to keep their children safe from negative neighborhood influences. Additionally, immigrant parents are forced to reconstruct their parenting behavior, attitudes, and values (Ogbu, 1981) to fit the mainstream society (see Farver & Lee Shin, 2000; Kim & Hong, 2007), and parenting behavior can be negatively affected if they feel alienated (Kim, Cain, & McCubbin, 2006) or experience stressors that are associated with cultural adjustment (Berry, Kim, Tomas, & Mok, 1987). Unfortunately, studies on the relationship between cultural adjustment and parenting behavior have been inconsistent. For example, a limited number of studies (e.g., Partel, Power, & Bhavnagri, 1996) report that mothers' parenting behavior is not related to cultural adjustment but rather, it is related to the length of residence. These inconsistent results illustrate the variations in theories that explain the relationship between cultural adjustment and parenting behaviors.

## 2. Research question and the focus of the study

Given the aforementioned review of studies, our research question for this study asks, what are the pathways from parents' attitude towards acculturation, marital conflict, and parenting practices of mothers of non-South Korean families to children's school adjustment in South Korea? We hypothesize that acculturation status (i.e., assimilation, separation, and integration), marital conflict (i.e., economic problem, aggressive behavior, problems communicating emotion, and problem communicating problem seeking), and parenting behavior (i.e., refusing/restrictive) are pathways to children's school adjustment

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