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# The ‘transnationality’ of Koreans, Korean families and Korean communities in Aotearoa New Zealand – implications for social work practice

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## **Abstract**

Little is known about Korean migrants and their lives in New Zealand. They are likely to be ‘invisible’ in society whereas their population is growing rapidly. This paper describes who they are, how their family ties are reshaped, and what is going on in their community. Data were collected from a mixed method study utilising both qualitative and quantitative investigations. The findings of the study show that the Korean population is diverse despite the homogeneous portrait of it in New Zealand. The lifestyles of Korean migrants are likely to be ‘transnational’ between the homeland and the host society, and their family relationships are necessarily across the two nations. The Korean community plays a vital role as a catalyst to stimulate interactions with people, products and ideas within the migration context. The transnationality of the Korean population has become vividly apparent, coupled with the development of information and communication technologies. It is suggested that social work with contemporary migrants requires an understanding of the nature of transnationality that significantly affects migrant individuals, their families and communities.

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## **Introduction**

Social work is the profession that is at the forefront of the effort to support migrants and their families (Nash & Trlin, 2004). Working with migrants requires social work practitioners not only understanding of individuals’ experiences and perceptions, but also making sense of the context within which they are embedded. Ecological ideas in social work practice help practitioners develop a holistic way of understanding the relationship between environmental and behavioural determinants of migrant clients (Balgopal, 2000). This approach focuses on the interactions and interdependence between clients and ecological factors which range from the micro, through to the mezzo and the macro level (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The social context associated with culture, gender, age and race can be an important element that shapes individuals’ problems and their ability to develop coping resources (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008). For Korean migrants in New Zealand, immigration itself necessarily causes various changes in their lives at individual, family, community and social

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levels. In particular, the immigration process can alter the kinds of social networks to which Korean migrants belong. The relationships and activities that have formed the basis of their pre-immigrant lives are inevitably affected by new environmental factors in the host society. Changes triggered by the transition of social settings can impact on all aspects of their lives, regardless of whether such shifts can be beneficial or problematic to them.

Understanding ecological influences on migrants is an important component of social work practice with culturally and linguistically diverse clients, coupled with cultural self-awareness and practising skills (Maidment, 2009). Social workers' cultural competence can be achieved when they understand the social and cultural context in which social work practice takes place with migrants and their communities. While the ecological approach is particularly relevant to working with Korean clients and their families, there is a dearth of information on Korean immigrants in New Zealand and their transnational circumstances. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide information on the major characteristics of Korean migrants, families and their communities, with a focus on their transnational nature, and suggest some implications for social work practice.

## **Background on the Korean population in New Zealand**

The Korean population is viewed as one of the largest Asian ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand, following the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups. According to Statistics New Zealand (2007a), Koreans have established the fastest growing ethnic minority community in the country from the early 1990s. The number of Korean residents in New Zealand has increased more than 30 times from 930 in 1991 to 30,792 in 2006. Although Korean people occupy only 0.7% in the New Zealand population, they play an important role in the development of the two nations' relationship that began with 'Kayforce', the New Zealand troops sent to the Korean War in 1950 (King, 2003). About 70% of Korean immigrants have settled in the Auckland region, followed by 17% in the Canterbury area. Epstein (2006, p. 149) pointed out that Korean migrants are likely to be 'well-educated, middle or upper-middle class, and thus relatively affluent (or, at least, they were so prior to immigration)'. The new immigration policy that came into effect from 2003, has significantly influenced the inflows of Korean applications and, as a result, the number of people who gained permanent residence has decreased from 1,574 in 2006 to 942 in 2007 (Statistics Korea, 2007). The size and composition of the Korean population are currently changing at a rapid rate.

Like many 'voluntary' migrants from other countries, Korean people tend to move to New Zealand to find a better quality of life in a clean environment (Department of Labour, 2006). Kim and Yoon (2003) observed that Koreans 'often consider New Zealand a sort of 'paradise' in terms of its environmental quality and educational opportunities for their children' (p.87). Yoon (2000) also argued that opportunities for children's education in an English-speaking country attract many Korean parents to choose New Zealand as a place to live, while they have a relatively low level of motivation for economic betterment. The Korean language is still widely spoken in Korean families and nearly one in three Korean residents indicates that they do not speak English in their everyday life (Statistics New Zealand, 2007b). For some newcomers, differences in language and culture often raise significant challenges and difficulties. Especially, their limited English proficiency is a major barrier to settling in New Zealand (Morris, Vokes, & Chang, 2007).

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The majority of Koreans are affiliated to Christianity and ethnic-based churches play a crucial role in their settlement. Results from the 2006 New Zealand census show that more than 70% of Koreans identified themselves as Christians, while only 5% were affiliated to the Buddhist religion. These data contrast with those in Korea where 28% of Koreans are Christians and 22% identify an affiliation to Buddhism (Korean Statistical Information Service, n.d.). It is estimated that there are more than 100 Korean churches across New Zealand. The fact that the Christian religion is strongly established in the Korean community in New Zealand is in line with a similar tendency among Korean communities in the countries to which Koreans have migrated, such as Australia, Canada and the United States (Han, 1994; Laux & Thieme, 2006; Son & Kim, 2006). Morris et al. (2007) pointed out that Korean newcomers are likely to become church-goers because immigrant churches function as major agencies for both spiritual support and social networks.

There is a wider range of ethnic-based organisations and media in the Korean community. The community-based organisations vary from voluntary or informal groups to professional service agencies, including charitable societies, churches, sports or leisure clubs, business groups, alumni associations and Korean language schools. Events and activities provided by such organisations contribute to community members grouping together to share interests and maintain cultural traditions both within and outside the community. Ethnic media directed towards Korean consumers have become powerful institutions that enforce cohesion and unity among members in the Korean community. Such 'Korean' media provide migrants and temporary visitors with an opportunity to connect them with both New Zealand and Korean societies and lifestyles. Coupled with the prevalence of radio and television outlets and the internet, Korean-language newspapers and magazines are largely circulated in the Auckland and Christchurch areas (Han et al., 2007). It was reported that there are 30 ethnic media companies or organisations in the Korean community in New Zealand (Korea Press Foundation, 2007).

## Methods

The study that is the subject of this paper was conducted by using a mixed methodological approach that combined qualitative and quantitative research methods. Data were mainly collected from three sources: key informant interviews, a structured survey and in-depth interviews with older people. The qualitative studies involved interviews with 30 participants who consisted of community leaders, professionals and older people, while the survey involved face-to-face interviews of 50 older people. A non-random selection of participants was used for qualitative and survey interviews with key informants in the Korean community. Some survey participants were also recruited through snowball sampling, where existing participants recruited future subjects from among their contacts. Qualitative interviews and open-ended questions in the survey questionnaire were mostly audio-recorded for transcription. The Korean language was used in the field, and then the important parts of the interviews were extracted and translated into the English language. Data were mainly collected in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Data were analysed by employing a two-fold analytical approach. In the first-stage analysis, concept mapping and quantitative analysis were respectively used to analyse the data collected from three stages of qualitative and quantitative studies. Key themes of the findings emerged from the second-stage analysis in which all data were repeatedly

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evaluated by utilising the concept mapping method in an integrated and holistic manner. A series of data maps was created from concepts and ideas, and then those maps were integrated into a conceptual profile that included key themes. Much care was taken to achieve the best translation between the Korean and English languages throughout the process of data analysis.

The study was undertaken as part of the primary author's doctoral studies. The ethical issues of the study were reviewed and approved by both the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury and the New Zealand Health and Disability Ethics Committee (Multi-region).

## **Results**

Although this study focused on the issues associated with Korean older people's family relationships, there are important themes that emerged in terms of the nature of the transnational context within which they and their families live. The findings of qualitative interviews show that the 'transnationality' of Koreans has become widely apparent at individual, family and community levels. Demographic data obtained from the survey study also represent a vital aspect of the characteristics in the Korean population, although the number of survey participants was considerably limited. The participants' perceptions of the social setting highlight three key themes: living as a transnational individual, forming a transnational family relationship and anchoring to the transnational community.

### **Living as a transnational individual**

The findings of the study confirm that the lives of Koreans in New Zealand are likely to be transnational in nature. Living as a migrant significantly affects the lifestyle and social networks of Korean people. In particular, the majority of Koreans are recent arrivals to New Zealand as Korean immigration has a short history in the country. In the survey study with older people, for example, approximately 70% of respondents have lived for 10 years or less in the country, and, as a result, nearly 85% of the respondents stated that their skills in English are poor and unsatisfactory. As a social worker commented, the relatively short length of residency in the new country makes Koreans rely more on their previous lifestyle and traditions in the homeland than on those of the new country. In other words, their short length of residence in New Zealand contributes to the increase of transnationality among Korean migrants.

The transnationality of Korean people is enhanced by the rapid development of information and communication technologies, such as the internet, internet telephones and satellite television. For example, the development of technology available for Koreans allows them to access to their 'first' culture and language in an easy and cheap way. Mr Jeong, a key informant, expressed his personal experience as follows:

I always watch Korean news on Korean TV channels rather than viewing local news [New Zealand TV channels]. So, I am well familiar with the things that are happening in Korea ... I am always concerned about how people in Korea are doing ... I am interested in knowing that ... Well, I have lived here [New Zealand] more than 30 years but my roots are in Korea ... It would be hard for us to live here without watching Korean TV channels ... (Mr Jeong, name changed).

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The legal status of Koreans varies; some have New Zealand citizenship, while others remain as permanent residents without citizenship although they have lived in the country for many years. There are a number of 'intending' immigrants who hold a work permit or visa to obtain legal residence or citizenship in the future. Other Koreans include those people who hold a temporary visa to stay or study for the designated period in the country. There are significant differences among groups in terms of the nature of immigration and its impact on the level of acculturation and social interaction. Several participants of the key informant study pointed out that 'non-voluntary' migrants, including older people, face multiple challenges especially in cultural and language adaptation, while people who are 'voluntary' immigrants tend to adapt or adjust to the host society well.

### **Forming a transnational family**

Korean people in New Zealand are likely to live within a transnational family setting in which family relationships are scattered across two or more nations. Transnational families among Korean migrants are voluntarily established by their utilisation of New Zealand's immigration laws and policies. Those family arrangements are formed when people separate from family networks in their home country to live in New Zealand. Korean families also become transnational when one or multiple members leave the host country to the homeland or another nation. As a result, most Koreans in New Zealand have immediate or extended family members in their homeland or other countries. For example, an older person, who referred to himself as a 'global' grandparent of seven grandchildren, revealed that his family is spread out in four countries:

[Among our children] two live in New Zealand ... two in Sydney, one in Japan ... [Another] lives in Seattle [in the United States]. No children in overseas countries seem to return to New Zealand to live with us ... (Mr Kim, name changed).

Although many Korean migrants maintain strong relationships with nuclear or extended families across international borders, some experience their transnational family ties becoming weak within the new environment in which social and familial networks are changed by separation. Several participants spoke of families having to be split up after relocation in their new environments. A female participant, disclosing her own experience in the family relationship, stated that there are many extended family relationships fractured by the process of relocation in New Zealand. Her comments, shown below, indicate that some Korean families experience the host society as a place where there is a decrease of kin ties among extended family members:

Well, people say that there are numerous [extended] families which were broken down after immigration. For example, family separation between sisters ... even between parents and [adult] children ... And family relationships were 'torn' between brothers ... There are too many families 'turning their back' against each other ... (Ms Lee, name changed).

The nature, structure and functions of transnational families among Korean immigrants in New Zealand are not always similar to those in their country of origin. Their family arrangements are likely to be affected by the processes of transition and resettlement in the host society. For example, a couple of older people in this study stated that changes in the family structure modify family dynamics or roles between generations and, as a result, various types of family conflict and abuse often occur within the transnational family setting.

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### **Anchoring to the 'ambidextrous' community**

Not only do Koreans form transnational families, but they also live within the community which functions as a transnational medium between the homeland and the host society. The nature of the Korean community is 'ambidextrous' in terms of its interactions with people, groups and communities in the two nations. The ethnic-based groups and organisations in the community provide Korean migrants with ample resources varying from religious, social and cultural to economic. Such community resources, gained from both nations, are especially crucial for newcomers or older migrants for their survival in the new country. For example, a community leader commented that senior groups, mainly run by Korean churches in the community, make it possible for older people to compensate for their losses of family support and social networks:

Older people have nowhere to 'go out' because here [in New Zealand], having no access to a car is like 'having no feet' ... Only through attending the senior club (programme), even from a long distance, they can meet together, socialise with others, and share news or information about what's going on in their homeland ... (Mr Seo, name changed).

The mobility of the Korean population is high because a number of people are 'coming and going' across the two countries. Another community leader believed that, while there are a number of newcomers, similar numbers of people continue to leave New Zealand to go back to Korea. The major reasons for returning to the home country, or moving to another country, are likely to be related to language barriers, difficulties in getting a job or accessing health services, loneliness and boredom, and problems with family relationships. For instance, Ms Ahn, a health professional, commented that:

Both older people and adults who have difficulties in communication [in English] return to Korea ... After all, there are Korean inpatients in [this] hospital who have returned to their homeland. Surprisingly, not a few, but many ... (Ms Ahn, name changed).

This high level of population mobility is likely to contribute to the development of transnationality, particularly in such domains as business, health, education and religion within the Korean community. As several participants identified, community organisations and institutions, including incorporated societies, business associations and sports clubs, often serve as brokers to promote interactions with people and groups in the homeland. These community-based organisations are especially important for those people who have difficulties with the language and culture that are operated in the host society.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that the Korean community consists of diverse and heterogeneous groups despite its homogenous portrait in New Zealand. The characteristics of Korean people rely heavily on the immigration law of the New Zealand Government. Immigration rules and regulations about who can enter New Zealand exert a powerful influence on the nature of the Korean community, and its ability to develop community cohesion. The feature of the Korean population is in 'being transnational' in terms of its interactions with both the home and host countries. The lifestyles or immigrant lives of Korean people are likely to be transnational between their native culture and that of the host society. The issues associated with the transnational context also affect their family connections across

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the two nations. Such a transnational nature of Koreans and their families influences, or is influenced by, how the Korean community is shaped and how its components fit together.

Koreans in New Zealand are transnational actors who exist between the homeland and the host nation. They are the transnational individuals who have 'a unique capacity to handle different cultures and lifestyles, different social statuses, different roles and relationships, and to function effectively in different social, political and economic systems' (Trueba, 2004, p. 39). For Koreans in New Zealand, the resettlement process necessarily occurs in the context in which different languages and cultures co-exist or often clash with each other. These people are likely to have contact with their original culture and maintain strong ties to home culture and language. Not only is English a major challenge for those people when settling in New Zealand, but it is also an important source of attraction to the country (Yoon, 2000). Their transnationality can also be enhanced by ongoing contacts with newcomers from the homeland, including students and tourists, as well as the increasing availability of transportation, the internet and mass media.

As a consequence of immigration, most Korean families are functioning in the transnational setting. Koreans in New Zealand are likely to shape or reshape the transnational families that 'adopt separate living arrangements in two or more countries but retain close links with their homeland' (Cho, Chen, & Shin, 2010, p.30). Most people have extended or even immediate family members outside New Zealand. As the findings of the study show, some families have members who have returned to the homeland or moved to another country to get a job or an education. The financial burden often causes Korean families to choose to live separated from each other so that one of the parents works in Korea to support the rest of the family members in New Zealand (Pio, 2010). Such transnational families have been described as 'astronaut families' or 'wild goose families' because family members are separated from each other and rarely meet in person (Kim, 2009).

The transnationality of Korean migrants and their families is influenced by the role of their community in connecting with the homeland. The Korean community is a sort of transnational community which, according to Rodriguez (1996), maintains ongoing interaction across national boundaries. This transnational community facilitates immigration and settlement of Koreans in New Zealand. It plays crucial roles in a range of areas associated with the social and community life of the Korean population. Many Korean migrants maintain their cultural identities and a sense of belonging by residing in close proximity in a general area and sharing their similar cultural heritage. The boundaries of the community are not only geographical but also represent a cluster of ethnic-based interest groups. That is, characteristics of the Korean community tend to be swayed by both place-based geographical factors and sociological or functional elements such as interest-based congregations and 'virtual communities' without face-to-face interpersonal interaction (Ife, 2006).

The Korean community maintains 'real time' connections with what is going on in the homeland, which has been enhanced by advanced information and communication technologies (Epstein, 2006). Ethnic-based organisations also play roles as 'gatekeepers' or 'cultural brokers' between the community and the mainstream society in cultural, economic, social and political areas (Kim, 2001). No institution in the community is in a better position than are religious groups to influence Korean residents living in New Zealand (Morris et al., 2007). As mentioned earlier, 'Korean' churches provide the people with safe places for social and

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religious gatherings. Supportive functions of such ethnic media and organisations serve as vital agents especially for those people who are seeking ethnic support systems, including new arrivals, older people and temporary visitors (Kim, 2001). In other words, community groups and media provide 'familiar' spaces in which individuals and families can meet, share common values and enhance their relationships with each other.

## **Implications for social work practice**

Social work with migrants does not exist in isolation. Rather, it occurs in the context in which clients are embedded. For social work practitioners, it is necessary to gain understanding not only of the experiences and perceptions of migrant clients, but also of their ecological factors 'at the international, political, community and family levels' (Nash & Trlin, p. 47). In particular, the transnationality of migrants is an important aspect that defines both client-hood and social work services for Koreans in New Zealand. The enduring inclination to their transnational lives will continue to grow in the next few decades as information and communication technologies are rapidly developed, coupled with the continuing influx of new arrivals and products from their homeland. Practitioners working with Korean migrants and their families are sorely needed to reflect on the contemporary change of immigration and its nature of transnationality. As immigration regulations directly impact on the characteristics of the migrant population and communities, social workers need to be actively involved in advocating for more effective and rational immigration legislation (Glicksen, 2011).

Not only are Korean clients' problems caused by their transnational circumstances, but sources of potential solutions can be also found in the transnational context. A strengths-based model can be a suitable approach to social work practice with migrants, families and communities (Sisnerous et al., 2008). This approach is focused on the strengths, possibility and resilience of individuals and their families, rather than addressing their deficits and weaknesses (Saleebey, 2006). For Korean migrants, the transnational community is a vital source of strength, opportunities, resilience and belonging. To meet the needs of migrants and their families, it is important for practitioners to work with groups, organisations and other institutions at the community level (Berg-Weger, 2010). This community-level social work practice, based on the strengths-based approach, can be extended to macro practice in the transnational context within which Korean clients are positioned. The roles of social work practitioners with migrant communities can range from empowering clients and their families, to utilising the community's own resources, and to promoting the participation and inclusion of migrant clients in their host society.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary migration is more complex and dynamic than traditional migration was few decades ago. As information and communication technologies are developed, the immigration of people, products and cultures is rapidly growing in contemporary New Zealand society. This trend can facilitate the development of transnational communities and their roles in the host society. Koreans in New Zealand and their communities are good examples of transnational agents between their homeland and the host society. The transnationality of individuals, families and their communities becomes significant in all aspects of migrants' everyday lives, lifestyles and social networks in the host society. Social work with Korean



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migrants needs to understand the nature of transnationality that significantly affects the well-being and quality of life of clients and their families. It is particularly important for practitioners to utilise the sources and strengths that the transnational community can provide to their members.

The limitations of this mixed method study include a small convenience sample of professionals, community leaders and older people. Voices and thoughts of young people and children are not reflected in this study although their ideas and views may differ from those of the participants. It is suggested that further research in this area would shed more light on the nature of migrants, families and their communities to contribute to the development of social work practice.

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