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# Occupational experiences of Korean immigrants settling in New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

For Korean immigrants, settling in New Zealand is challenging and stress-inducing. There is growing concern that feelings of alienation and loss seem to be key features in their lives. Taking the symbolic interactionism perspective that people interpret a situation through social interaction, the purpose of this study was to explore how Korean immigrants interact with their new environment, whilst re-negotiating their reality. A grounded theory methodology was employed as it places participants' actions at the centre of its attention. Semi-structured interviews and field observations were conducted to collect information from 25 participants who lived in the North Island of New Zealand. Data were analysed using methods of constant comparison, conditional matrix and memoing. The resultant substantive grounded theory was *Regaining Control: A Journey of Valuing Self*. It offers one plausible explanation of how Korean immigrants make choices about their occupations by opting to enact 'Korean Ways' and 'New Zealand Ways' until they reach a place where they will once again feel valued as members of civic society. Through increasing understanding of the impact of immigration on occupations, this study contributes to knowledge of the diversity of human experiences in the occupational science literature.

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The number of immigrants in many developed countries has climbed to historically unprecedented levels, changing the face of cities in those countries (Gupta, 2013) and impacting people's everyday lives. Citizen's daily routines, work places, schools, and leisure have been dramatically changed by the inflow of immigrants (Suto, 2013). This profound shift in the composition of populations has resulted in immigration being of major significance in the social sciences, which increasingly recognise that the success of all immigrants is vital to societal harmony (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004).

By definition, immigration is about people leaving one social unit and entering another (Hall & Kardulias, 2010), which is inevitably accompanied by a period of adjustment (Bhugra, 2004). Research reveals that in order to fit in and

interact, immigrants need to learn and adapt to differences in the host society, changing the way they dress, eat, drive, shop and even their greeting procedures (Berry, 2001). This suggests that immigration can be defined as a process of adaptation (Valenta, 2009), and to understand how immigrants re-build their lives it is necessary to question what these adaptational tasks are (Nayar, 2009).

A critical component of building that understanding is the occupations in which immigrants engage (Nayar, Hocking, & Giddings, 2012). In this sense, the settlement process could arguably be interpreted as occupational adaptation. The rationale for this claim is that people must engage in occupation to continue their lives (Creek, 2010); hence, the adaptational tasks include altered and newly added occupations

that immigrants are expected to deal with (Connor Schisler & Polatajko, 2002). Bringing an occupational lens to the analysis can provide insights into the adjustment process by revealing how Korean immigrants, whose issues are sparsely addressed in New Zealand research (Epstein, 2006), re-configure their daily occupations to adapt to socio-environmental changes.

This article begins by exploring the issues Korean immigrants encounter whilst settling in their new country and highlights the gap in knowledge in the New Zealand context. Next, the literature pertaining to symbolic interactionism and an occupational perspective, which provides the theoretical grounding for the study, is discussed. The methodology and methods with which data were analysed are then explained, before presenting the theory derived from the analysis, *Regaining Control: A Journey of Valuing Self*. Finally, the benefits of gaining an understanding of the meanings immigrants attach to occupation during the settlement process are considered.

## Korean Immigrants in New Zealand

South Korean immigrants (hereafter Korean) comprise the fourth largest Asian ethnic group in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Totalling fewer than 30,200 people in the 2013 census, they are a small community with a unique cultural and linguistic background. They are monolingual, have a strong attachment to their own culture, and 89% are first generation immigrants (Chang, Morris, & Vokes, 2006). Their issues are often overshadowed by and conflated with the larger and more established Chinese and Indian communities, with the result that the topics related to Koreans have been sparsely addressed in New Zealand research (Epstein, 2006).

Research has, however, revealed that language and cultural differences constrain Korean immigrants' social activities (Park & Anglem, 2012), create difficulties establishing relationships with neighbours (Chang et al., 2006) and limit their involvement in the host community (Epstein, 2006). Their potential is underestimated by members of the host community, further limiting their capacity to participate

in civic society (McKinnon, 1996) and contributing to un/under-employment (Meares, Ho, Peace, & Spoonley, 2010). These factors may account for the 2% decline in numbers between 2006 and 2013, as Koreans returned to Korea or re-emigrated to countries such as Australia and the United States. In contrast, the Chinese, Indian and Filipino populations grew by 16%, 48% and 138% respectively (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

Research into Korean immigrants' cultural, psychological and identity challenges in New Zealand has revealed that they experience a degree of acculturative stress, ranging from language difficulties to disruption of their family and social support networks. As a result, they relinquish many of the things they hold dear in order to create a place in New Zealand (Chang et al., 2006). In particular, constraints in the labour market and difficulties in employment are associated with an increased risk of low self-esteem and isolation (Meares et al., 2010). Epstein (2006) posited that a hybrid Korean-New Zealand identity remains in an embryonic state, whilst Park and Anglem (2012) postulated that Koreans' identities are transnational in nature, coupled with the development of communication technologies.

However, questions such as what Koreans actually do to create a home and settle into their new country remain unanswered. The purpose of this study was to shed light on how Koreans adapt to a new culture, integrate and reconstruct their identity through participating in daily occupations.

## Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism underpins this study. The basic premise of symbolic interactionism is that 'the self' is an object individuals actively construct and perform through social interaction with others (Mead, 1934), which is only possible because of the significant symbols that humans share (Blumer, 1969). People construct their selves by interpreting each other's actions (Charon, 2010); that is to say, "the self is fundamentally a process" (Bowers, 1988, p. 38). The central notion of symbolic interactionism is, therefore, a process of interpretation through which people create the worlds of experience

in which they live. Symbolic interactionism assumes that humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things hold (Blumer, 1969). To identify meanings, humans put themselves in the place of the other (Mead, 1934). This process of social interaction continues over the lifespan (Charon, 2010).

Shibutani and Stryker's structurally oriented version of symbolic interactionism explicitly guided this study. Shibutani (1955) introduced the idea of reference groups, whose norms are applied as anchoring points in structuring the self, while Stryker (1980) implied that "both society and person are abstractions from on-going social interaction" (p. 2). Their argument is that social interaction is not context-free, since some populations do not have the means to engage in successful social interaction. From their point of view, the self is constructed at the crossroads of narrative, social interaction, and institutional life (Valenta, 2009), and the environment offers opportunities, resources, and also constraints (Stryker, 1980). Bringing a structurally oriented version of symbolic interactionism into the analysis is beneficial in understanding how life events affect immigrants' interpretation of their current situation and consequently, how they enact their daily occupations.

### Occupational Perspective

Given that people engage in occupations, on a daily basis, throughout life (Creek, 2010), it is logical to believe that occupation provides a mechanism for social interaction (Wilcock & Hocking, 2015). This assumption justifies the selection of an occupational perspective, broadly defined as "a way of looking at or thinking about human doing" (Njelesani, Tang, Jonsson, & Polatajko, 2014, p. 233), to the collection and analysis of data for this study.

People enact occupation within their culture, and every occupation has physical, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (Hasselkus, 2011; Iwama, 2005). Occupation is thus understood to provide the basis for people's feelings about themselves and their relationships with others (Christiansen & Baum, 1997; Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). They attach meaning to their occupations and,

through engaging in occupation, make sense of their existence and give life coherence (Hasselkus & Rosa, 1997; Kielhofner, 2002). That is, people's sense of self is "to a large extent occupational in nature" (Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010, p. 72).

These ideas fit well with the symbolic interactionist stance that the self is the accumulation of all previously experienced social interaction (Blumer, 1969), whereby individuals, living together in society, develop selves through social interactions (Charon, 2010). Using occupation as a unit of analysis widens the methodological directions and deepens theoretical insights when exploring what is happening in the participants' real world from the perspective of symbolic interactionism (Nayar, 2009).

### Methodology

A grounded theory methodology positions the human as maker, doer, actor, and self-director (Charmaz, 2014). This is congruent with symbolic interactionism in that humans are acting organisms, who cope with situations based on their interpretation of those situations (Blumer, 1969). Accordingly, the analytic focus of this study was the action undertaken by Korean immigrants as they responded to situations, particularly those they found problematic in the new social context.

This study employed Straussian grounded theory, an approach designed to study action (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which is considered vital to understanding human life (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In conceptualising action at the level of daily activities (Strauss, 1987), this version of grounded theory is appropriate for understanding the embodied nature of performing the occupations that make up everyday life (Hocking, 2000).

Importantly, Straussian grounded theorists believe that a person and society are inseparable from on-going interaction (Strauss, 1987), which fits well with the study's structuralist assumption that "reality is socially constructed through symbolic interaction" (Marvasti, 2006, p. 529). Through bringing the context into the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), Straussian grounded theory had utility for exploring Korean immigrants' meaning-making processes within the

social and political context within which occupation took place. In relation to this the first author, as a social worker, explored the societal context in which participants performed occupations, whilst the two co-authors with an occupational science background examined the function of occupations in order to identify the meaning Korean immigrants attached to their occupations in their new country. The other author, a grounded theorist, guided the analytic process.

Maintaining confidentiality and cultural sensitivity were important ethical considerations. To protect participants' identities, English pseudonyms were adopted. Cultural considerations were addressed by developing Korean versions of participant information and consent forms, and regular consultation with Korean cultural advisors. Lastly, as all research in New Zealand must abide by the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, which accord Māori (indigenous people in New Zealand) the right to partnership, participation, and protection (van Heugten, 2001). Accordingly, provision was made for appropriate guidance from a Māori advisor. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee in 2011 (ref. 11/61).

Between July 2011 and February 2013, 25 Korean immigrants were recruited from three cities within the North Island of New Zealand; a metropolitan city (A), a provincial city with a developing ethnic community (B), and a provincial city with a small ethnic population (C). To be eligible for the study, participants needed to meet the inclusion criteria of immigrating to New Zealand since 2000, residing within cities A, B, or C, and being aged 30 years or over. People under 30 years were excluded on the assumption that they were minors or accompanied family members when they arrived. Because the Korean population in New Zealand is relatively small, the cities are not identified to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

To facilitate recruitment, advertisements were placed in ethnic newspapers and flyers were displayed in a variety of Korean shops. Initially, participants were recruited using purposive sampling whereby the first author selected participants (Bouma & Ling, 2004), including two men and two women who

demographically represented the Korean population in New Zealand. The analysis began from the first day of data gathering (Strauss, 1987), with questions about the initial concepts guiding the next round of data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theoretical sampling was then followed, with a further 21 participants recruited based on their relevance to theoretical concepts derived from previous interviews (Charmaz, 2014). This iterative process of sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, with all major concepts well defined and explained (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Each participant was involved in one interview which lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Part of the informed consent process included giving a thorough explanation of the study and informing participants of their rights. Participants were all married and their ages ranged from 32 to 58 years; 10 were male. Of the 25 participants, 19 resided in city A, 2 lived in city B, and 4 settled in city C. Their employment status varied; 6 were employed, 6 were self-employed, 7 were students, 6 were full-time house wives. Two of the major Korean religious groups were represented; Christians (not indicating their denomination) and Catholics.

Semi-structured interviews, which probe for more information and clarification of answers (Barriball & While, 1994), were the main source of data. Indicative questions included "can you tell me about your previous lifestyle in Korea?" and later "can you tell me about your meaningful activities during those days?". Interviews were conducted in Korean, the native language of the first author, as this was requested by participants, and were audio-taped, transcribed and later translated verbatim into English for the purpose of analysis. To gain different viewpoints, five field observations, a total of 7 hours, were conducted at both the individual and community level, where the action participants described actually occurred. Television reports, memoirs and ethnic newspapers were also helpful in gaining an insider's impression of the studied world.

## Analysis

Analysis included three stages of coding, open, axial, and selective, whereby data were initially

fractured, consciously conceptualised, and spontaneously integrated to form a theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Through coding, the conceptual abstraction of data is developed and is re-integrated as theory (Charmaz, 2014). Combining the theoretical grounding of symbolic interactionism and an occupational perspective, open coding was based on the participants' action/interaction, since this explains how people handle situations (Mead, 1934). At this stage, the interview transcripts were broken down line by line and then sentence by sentence to identify action/interaction, feelings, and events participants experienced. Through this process, the first author generated lists of open codes which provided the basis for more abstract interpretations of the data and theory development.

Axial coding elaborated on the categories derived from open coding. Using constant comparative analysis, categories were related to one another, with some subsumed under more abstract categories to develop more precise and complete explanations (Charmaz, 2014). The concept of 'paradigm' and 'the conditional/consequential matrix' were used to understand the circumstances that surround events (Corbin, 2009). For example, several categories emerged from open coding, such as 'language barriers', 'easy accessibility', 'economic benefit', and 'unfamiliarity with new surroundings'. The authors constantly compared those categories and later developed the more abstract concept of 'maintaining the old-me'. This concept positioned other categories as its subcategories, to answer questions such as when, why, how and with what consequences the participant maintained the old-me (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using constant comparison, the authors developed more abstract concepts that were able to encapsulate the things new immigrants do to become established in a new country.

During selective coding, the major categories were integrated to yield a central category linking the various pieces of data together and explaining much of the variation within the data (Stanley & Cheek, 2003). This involved continuously checking hypotheses and propositions against incoming data, modifying, extending, or deleting them as necessary to verify this central category until there were "no gaps in the theory

and all categories [could] be linked meaningfully together" (Chamberlain, 1999, p. 186). At this stage, the strategy of writing a storyline (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) helped to generate a substantive grounded theory that is abstract enough to include all the significant categories and still applicable to all participants. Throughout the analysis, memoing was used to preserve emerging ideas and hypotheses.

## Findings

Despite their different circumstances, recent Korean immigrants, with few exceptions, gave of their best to regain control over disrupted daily occupations through navigating within two world perspectives. This effort assisted them in acquiring the knowledge required to function autonomously at some levels. Participants, however, disclosed that their journey of settlement was not limited to mastery of their new surroundings; instead, they continually engaged in different structural contexts as they sought a place where they could value themselves as members of civic society. This theory is named as *Regaining Control: A Journey of Valuing Self*. The significant elements of this theory include salient conditions, the central category, and the core process.

Analysis found seven salient conditions, at micro and macro level, impacting on how participants rebuilt their lives. *Valuing Self* is the core category. It is the goal to which Koreans aspire whilst interacting with their social surroundings. The core process, *Regaining Control*, is a basic social process in which Koreans engage over time, guiding participants' on-going actions. Quotes selected to illustrate the findings were translated into English by the first author. Back translation by a Korean translator who signed a confidentiality agreement was used to verify accuracy.

## Salient conditions

The process of adjusting to a new culture was tightly interwoven with societal factors, in particular destination characteristics. Seven conditions appeared prominently within the participants' accounts; Minimum Expectations for a New Life, Sugar Coated World, Language



Barriers, Ethnocentric Attitude, Existing Networks, Korean Enclave and Confucianism. These micro and macro conditions were almost always connected to each other, and formed the structural contexts of Enacting the Old World and Enacting the New World, which influence how participants interpret the situations and concurrently the way in which they respond to situations. The former referred to a context in which participants behaved in Korean ways, whereas the latter was defined as an attitude of learning and adapting their behaviours, reflective of the host society.

Minimum Expectations for a New Life encapsulated participants' prospects of immigration. Many hoped to escape from their stressful life-style: *"I was fed up with my life, so just wanted to have a change"* (Aaron). The real attraction, and the more compelling reason for deciding on immigration was that the participants dreamt of a better quality of life, with the prospect of the good education that the country offered their children: *"My husband told me that New Zealand would be good for our three children's education and would be good for us because of its social welfare system"* (Jill).

The concept of a Sugar Coated World reflected New Zealand's prevailing reputation in Korea, where it is depicted as pure, safe and peaceful: *"The last remaining paradise on earth"* (Sue). For many participants, the offers New Zealand made were too good to resist, which contributed to them regarding immigration to New Zealand as guaranteeing their quality of life. The majority of participants held an optimistic view even if their assessment of New Zealand society was not based on objectively weighed pros and cons: *"I dreamt of 'La vie en rose' ... I imagined that if I could go to New Zealand, there would be sheep wandering on green grass, and my children would be joyfully playing with bare feet"* (Marie).

Participants left their home with a sense of a rosy future, alongside a belief that they may return if things differed from their expectations: *"I can always go back to Korea if it is too hard to live here"* (Mike). Participants regarded immigration in the same light as moving to another town. In some cases, immigration involved just a few months of planning and preparation: *"It took one month to decide to immigrate and*

*pack all our stuff"* (Anne). Accordingly, many participants did not have a specific goal or plan for their new life: *"I just simply held an attitude of 'go and find out what happens'. I wasn't serious about immigration"* (Tom). This resulted in them being in a vulnerable position when it came to adapting to New Zealand society.

Participants in this study reported that they did not seriously consider that relocating would inevitably involve a complicated process of adjustment to a new culture, influenced by a number of interrelated factors such as language, existing networks, and the nature of the social reception. The reality participants encountered was very different from their optimistic expectations.

*I was so scared. I will never forget the first two nights. It had rained all day and was very cold ... Everything was different from what I had expected. I didn't know where to start. I asked my Lord, my Lord, please tell me what this situation means?* (Ruth)

Language Barriers were the first major challenge Korean immigrants encountered: *"English haunted me ... I couldn't open my mouth when I talked to locals"* (Marie). In some instances, participants could speak only a few English words, enough to maintain their survival: *"The only sentence I could say when I came here was 'I am a boy and you're a girl'"* (Carl). This led to participants experiencing constraints on a daily basis such as expressing themselves, performing social roles, and looking for a job. Participants' social isolation also dramatically increased as relations with neighbours were often curtailed: *"I often left the place if I didn't understand people ... This experience made me avoid local people"* (Carl).

Participants perceived many New Zealanders as having an Ethnocentric Attitude. This attitude refers to local people's prejudiced attitudes towards different cultures; often comparing how people in other cultures might behave based on assumptions derived from their own perceptions. There was low tolerance and understanding toward different cultures in New Zealand, leading to discrimination: *"I have experienced their cold reception because I am Asian ... They treat us differently"* (Donna).

This ideology, in many circumstances, served as a justification for New Zealanders not recognising participants' qualifications and life experiences until proven in English, limiting opportunities for participation in many aspects of life, such as work, and resulting in some of the participants being overqualified for their current job: *"I was a care-giver. I knew it was much lower compared to my nursing qualification"* (Judy).

The reality for these Korean immigrants was that New Zealand was not a paradise. Rather than finding a relaxed lifestyle, they had to deal with various problems associated with Language Barriers, compounded by the Ethnocentric Attitude. Many participants started their new life from the bottom; for example, learning English, enrolling in a course to get a qualification, or taking menial jobs: *"I think we, as immigrants, normally take the unwanted jobs which local people don't want anymore, often involving physical labour"* (Anne). This experience was associated with diminished life satisfaction, leading to devaluation of themselves: *"I often found myself a second class citizen"* (Clara).

Existing Networks (family and friends who already resided in New Zealand) were vital to participants gaining familiarity with their new environment, as they could seek advice or support from them: *"I had a close friend here. She helped me a lot, with almost everything"* (Joy). Nevertheless, many participants found themselves alone in this country: *"We are all alone far from our home country"* (Kevin). In response, some participants actively sought an informant, using their wider networks, or pre-arranged a settlement service to assist them with learning about their new surroundings: *"My husband knew someone here. He wasn't his friend. But they used to work in the same field in Korea ... Before we came, my husband contacted him to ask for his help"* (Clara). This support was often designed to provide a brief orientation to where to access necessary resources to continue their lives: *"He spent 3 hours with us ... He gave us a brief orientation regarding issues such as where Pak'n'Save [local supermarket] and the Korean shops are"* (Ruth).

Participants identified that the Korean Enclave was a place where they could retain a feeling of control in an unfamiliar society

through using their previous knowledge, including language skills, to continue their lives in New Zealand: *"In Korean shops, I could buy familiar products which I had enjoyed in Korea ... The products I already knew"* (Marie). For many participants, ethnic attachment was a starting point for regaining control in their lives whilst retaining a feeling of security: *"I visit a Korean hair salon. I can easily and fully explain exactly what I want if I go there"* (Jill).

For Korean immigrants, benefits to being involved within the Korean Enclave included sharing useful information and skills with other Koreans and utilising social networks: *"Many community programmes were available for Koreans at Korean churches"* (Joy). This strategy assisted participants to gain local knowledge, leading to increased competency in taking up the challenge of getting involved in the community. The Korean Enclave functioned as a transnational medium between their home country and new country. By participating in the Korean Enclave, participants reported that they were better able to adapt to the new environment.

Most participants retained Confucianism, which strongly values the centrality of family. This cultural belief explained Koreans' family-oriented occupational choices: *"I want to support my son in whatever he wants to do. I believe that is our duty as parents"* (Tom). According to Confucianism, a gendered division of labour exists in the family: *"Men's jobs are typically making money for their family and women's jobs are looking after the family"* (Donna). Admittedly, participants often assigned meaning to occupations based on this belief, regardless of the quality of those occupations, as they believed it was a way of fulfilling their cultural values: *"I just do this cleaning job because I have to support my family"* (Bob).

Yet, an overall sense of frustration ensued in relation to continuing their cultural roles because of the micro and macro conditions discussed earlier. The prospect of returning to their life's previous path seemed to be the only solution: *"We planned to go back to Korea because many things were so different from what we imagined"* (Sue). In the meantime, because of the philosophies of Confucianism, many participants decided to stay by prioritising their



children's well-being: *"The main reason we decided to stay was because my son loves his school ... He said he doesn't want to return to Korea"* (Anne). In some instances, watching the children's happiness was enough to justify their sacrifice: *"When I hear my daughter's laugh on her way home from school, I feel very happy. You know, I did make the right choice"* (Sandra).

### **The central category: Valuing Self**

Valuing Self has the greatest explanatory relevance for capturing the occupational repertoires of Korean immigrants. Initially, newly arrived participants tended to value themselves within the domestic sphere as they found that their daily interactions did not always exist in ways that they would have wanted, putting pressure on them when continuing their lives: *"I felt lost, kind of like being lost in a dark hole. I didn't know what to do at all"* (Carl).

Despite their different circumstances, participants shared similar levels of frustration; that is, they became increasingly incompetent in continuing with their accustomed and valued roles, since immigrating to a new culture presented an immediate challenge in preserving cultural traditions. This experience resulted in losing control of occupations which had previously enhanced their social identity, with a result that some participants had to redefine their identities: *"My authority as a father became questionable. My wife often blamed me, saying because of you, we have a hard time here"* (Aaron).

As such, many participants became less competent in fulfilling their social roles. These social roles were powerful sources of meaning in their lives and enhanced their identity. They came to be subjected to the negative consequences of not fulfilling social roles, such as losing control in the decision making process and devaluing self: *"I used to be a super mum in Korea. I could do everything for my children ... But here, I didn't know the New Zealand education system. When they asked me, I often made mistakes. My authority as a mum collapsed. My children started to look down on me"* (Jenny). At this time, the location where they wished to value self was situated in the domestic sphere because of their immediate needs; that is to say, ensuring

their survival and securing their family's well-being.

To value themselves in this dimension, participants worked on gaining familiarity with their physical surroundings, such as supermarkets, schools and medical centres. Familiarity refers to having a thorough knowledge of something and is the outcome of repeated and frequent exposure. Participants continuously made an effort to interact with the outside world, such as by visiting local shops, travelling around, or being a volunteer: *"I drove the same roads during the day for a month before I worked there at night to familiarise myself with those areas"* (Tom). This experience contributed to enhancing participants' abilities to make informed decisions to some degree, leading to valuing self in the domestic dimension: *"About 2 years later, I felt much more settled"* (Aaron).

For some participants, learning about and gradually adapting to New Zealand perspectives, largely underpinned by individualism, was inevitable. They established a new worldview: *"I came to realise my life is mine, your life is yours"* (Jenny). For these participants, the place where they hoped to value themselves was situated within self. As a result, they were determined to engage in occupations that could develop self while appreciating the possibilities New Zealand made available: *"This is my chance to pursue my dream. I really enjoy every moment of my study"* (Marie).

Whilst gaining familiarity with their new surroundings, some participants came to appreciate what this country offered them, such as family time and the natural environment. These positive experiences contributed to some participants accepting this land as their new home: *"This is my home where I choose to live"* (Sue). Some participants went beyond the scope of valuing themselves at home or self. They were in search of a place where they hoped to value themselves within the wider community: *"I would like to find something, you know, that I can contribute to society"* (Mike).

For Korean immigrants, successful settlement was not all about mastering physical surroundings nor adjusting to a new culture. Instead, it was about finding a location whereby they hoped to value themselves. The scope within which they wished to value self unavoidably

depended on personal preferences and circumstances. Some were satisfied with valuing self within the domestic sphere. Others began to seek a place for valuing self beyond their home, which led to further life satisfaction. For them, a place to feel valued was in a community where they could share their transnational knowledge. This experience helped them to be recognised as members of their community: *"Whenever there is a cultural festival in my town, I demonstrate my Taekwondo skills. I don't care how much they pay me. For me, it is all about sharing my talent with people"* (Antony).

### **The core process: Regaining Control**

Regaining Control is a basic social process that encapsulates participants' on-going actions in response to situations despite the fact that conditions vary over time. Given that Valuing Self is indicative of the goal of Korean immigrants' settlement, Regaining Control is a means of achieving this goal. Participants engaged in this process through the interplay of the Two World perspectives, Korean and New Zealand, bringing together all available elements of their heritage and where they live to regain control over occupations in the domestic and societal sphere. This process is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

### **Being Korean and being a New Zealand resident**

Upon arrival, Korean immigrants often found engaging in occupations, which were critical to the continuance of their lives, beyond their control. For those who were not aware of appropriate behaviours within particular settings, the Old

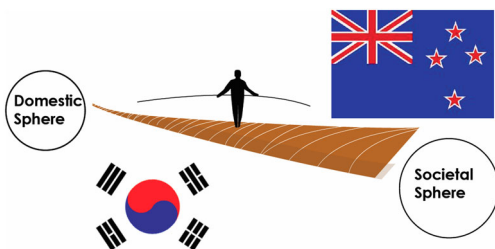
World initially seemed to be a prerequisite to maintaining a sense of internal/external continuity. This resulted in participants consciously behaving in Korean ways: *"I am a Korean father to my daughters and a Korean son to my parents, at least in my home. I don't need to change this as long as we are happy with it at home"* (Jacob).

To retain internal continuity, participants used familiar skills such as eating Korean foods, reading Korean books, listening to Korean music, and preserving the Korean language: *"I mostly stayed home, watching Korean TV and reading Korean books"* (Hanna). To maintain external continuity, they often associated with people who shared the same culture: *"We often met up with other Koreans to hang out"* (Sue). The Old World was crucial, particularly if participants did not possess enough knowledge and skills to perform necessary occupations that facilitated living a satisfactory life in their new country.

Some Korean immigrants gradually learnt about their new community and established their own networks with local people. This helped them to be aware of behaviours that fitted into the New World: *"While I attended community programmes for the last 2 years, I learnt to understand their culture"* (Donna). Through this experience, they began to relish independence from their old worldview, as they adapted to the norms and values of New Zealand society, establishing a new self who embraced their new country's perspectives: *"I never did household chores in Korea. According to Korean proverbs, if a man helped with household chores, he would lose his gender. Now, I realised that is wrong. I think gender doesn't matter ... I do housework a lot now"* (Ant).

### **Domestic sphere (home) and societal sphere (community)**

The home was identified as the primary arena of socialisation and identity formation, playing a central role in securing a livelihood for Korean immigrants. It was within the home that participants could preserve tradition and hold on to a sense of control. The key feature of the home, therefore, was the sense of cultural identity and safety: *"I can do whatever I want without any hassle at home. I am a free human being as long as I stay at home"* (Clara).



**Figure 1.** Regaining Control through the Interplay of Two Worlds

Within the home, participants largely interacted with their home country perspective and replicated the lifestyle they had in Korea. For instance, some participants used modern technology, such as Skype, to stay connected to their family and friends in Korea and occasionally imported ethnic products: *"My mother-in-law sends us Korean foods such as anchovy, salted fishes, and laver"* (Jill). Within this dimension, participants spoke only Korean, to avoid language difficulties and pass on their traditions to their offspring: *"I think my children would have a half identity if they lost their Korean culture. I always spoke Korean at home"* (Asma).

The community was a social unit of society where Korean immigrants interacted and shared an environment populated with locals. Many of the participants defined the community as an ideal place to create new networks and worked on getting to know their neighbours and being involved in the community: *"I loved to be involved in the local community. Otherwise, why did I come here? ... I didn't want to live only within the Korean community"* (Judy). The community was a destination where participants wished to be accepted by using all of the strengths available from both world perspectives: *"I try to do my best to live here because I chose New Zealand. It was my decision to come"* (Donna).

Yet, as presented earlier, an ethnocentric attitude was largely structured into the way in which social institutions operate within the host community, often disrupting participants' involvement. For instance, the high level of English skills required resulted in some participants feeling unwelcome: *"When I met people, they disappeared soon after a short conversation because they didn't understand me"* (Clara). Another example was the regulatory framework, such as the Health Practitioners Competence Assurance Act, which demands fluent English skills. These regulations limit immigrants' opportunities to use previous knowledge and experience in the same fields: *"The New Zealand Nursing Association has a high expectation in terms of language ... To be a registered nurse here, I have to have a 7.0 IELTS score"* (Lucia).

Four dimensions of Regaining Control - the Old World (being Korean), the New World

(being a resident in New Zealand), the Domestic Sphere (home), and the Societal Sphere (community) exist in an intricate and delicate relationship with each other, providing the setting in which participants created a home.

### **Sub-process of Regaining Control: Achieving a Balance/Making a Commitment**

Two sets of sub-processes comprise the process of Regaining Control which constitute the participants' action/interactional mechanisms for carrying out the core process. The first sub-process 'Achieving a Balance' is a dynamic process in which participants move in and out of aspects of each culture whilst seeking all available resources from their past and present situations, in order to sustain their lives.

To achieve enough balance to continue their lives, participants initially behaved in Korean ways. This strategy was deliberately chosen by those who wished to retain control by using their existing knowledge and networks. For those who were deficient in local knowledge, this strategy seemed to be the only option to ensure their survival. By behaving in Korean ways, participants aimed to continue their lives without the immediate pressure of adapting to New World perspectives. In this regard, participants manifested their strong preference for preserving their old lifestyle although they were physically away from their own country: *"We have Korean style dishes every day"* (Carl) and *"They watch Korean TV all day"* (Donna).

There was time for participants to experiment with local ways of doing things; *"Now, I know how to make 'Kimchi' with local cabbages"* (Asma). This experience increased their knowledge of their present situation. Over time, some participants reached a point where they enhanced their ability to assess their choices and to make informed decisions in their current environment.

However, having thorough knowledge of their present situations did not mean that participants recklessly abandoned their Old World perspectives. Instead, in many cases, Korean immigrants gradually learnt how to strike a balance between Korean ways or New Zealand ways, depending on the specific situation. 'Achieving a Balance' was not a dichotomous

choice. Rather, it was a deliberate strategy employed by Korean immigrants, ensuring that participants did not fall off one side and become isolated from the other world.

*Here in New Zealand, I have to choose between being a Korean or a New Zealander several times a day. When I go home, I am Korean ... But, when I go to work, I have to be a Kiwi and behave just like them.* (Mike)

The second sub-process 'Making a Commitment' delineates how participants made their best effort to do what they were expected to do within the New Zealand context, based on their assessment of self-efficacy. The level of making a commitment depended on the individual participant's readiness, including skills, networks, and personal motivation, with the result that participants held an attitude of being either an active responder or observer in their respective situations.

Participants initially identified occupations to which they hoped to make a commitment based on their cultural beliefs, in which the gender division of labour clearly existed. For example, a father made a commitment to find employment in order to fulfil his responsibility as the breadwinner of his family: *"I was desperate to find employment. I told myself I can do whatever to support my family"* (Carl). Alternatively, a mother made a commitment to look after the family as part of fulfilling her responsibility: *"As a mother, I have to know the school system here for my baby"* (Lucia). However, some participants began to demonstrate their willingness to make a commitment beyond the home by relinquishing this family centred belief. Some did their best to develop themselves: *"I pushed myself harder and harder. I have done my best over the last 2 years, showing them my potential"* (Hanna). Some gave their best effort for the community: *"I started as a volunteer at a local disability centre ... For the last 3 years, I have helped them to publish their magazine in Korean"* (Clara).

However, there were times when participants were passively dedicated to the process of 'Making a Commitment'. Rather than taking responsibility for specific activities, some of them relied on others' assistance. Although they deliberately

chose this passive stance to avoid difficulties and hassles, it created pressure on other family members who had to pick up their roles: *"My husband did almost everything regarding English. I was reluctant to do those things because I was scared of making mistakes in English"* (Jill). This often prompted role negotiation and a power shift within the family system: *"My daughter spoke good English, so she often represented us when we had to communicate with others"* (Joy).

As such, the process of Regaining Control existed in the transactional relationship of the person and environment, depending on the availability, possibility and inevitability of occupations, through the interplay of the Two World perspectives. This process was ongoing, as one need was fulfilled and the participants sought to fulfil the next need.

## Discussion

By conceptualising Korean immigrants' experiences, this study contributes further knowledge about the process of occupational adaptation in a new country. Additionally, it brings to light an ethnic minority people's perspectives into the meaning of occupation. *Valuing Self* emerged when participation in occupation was confined, restricted, or disrupted due to their minority status. This concept highlights occupations that enrich people's potential when they are marginalised and excluded from previously valued occupations; or when their experience of occupation is alienating or exploitative. Various micro and macro conditions prevented the participants from living out their occupational lives to the fullest extent and, as a result, they encountered a heightened risk of occupational deprivation, which is described as leading to depression and physical frailty (Whiteford, 2000).

It is undeniable that the majority of the participants in this study experienced occupational disruption for a period of time. Social isolation, coupled with discrimination, meant that many of them were initially unable to participate fully in occupations of meaning and necessity in the context of their new country. In response, they made their best efforts to manage those disrupted occupations and many eventually

demonstrated the capacity to be adaptive. In most cases, they came to make occupational choices again, dependent on the realities of their new society. This is conceptualised as Regaining Control, which supports the idea proposed within the occupational science literature that the immigration process is temporal, indicating that individual immigrants are able to re-configure their daily occupations with some level of control as they navigated divergent cultural spaces (Nayar, 2009).

What this study has further revealed is that for Korean immigrants, the purpose of Valuing Self as members of civic society was crucial. This finding extends the scope of occupational science research, which has largely focused on mastery of occupations in a new environment (Bhugra, 2004; Brown, 2008; Connor Schisler & Polatajko, 2002). Participants in this study continually searched for a place where they could be recognised and accepted again as members of society, whilst dealing with societal constraints. The concept of Valuing Self depicts what the participants really wished to accomplish by participating in occupations.

The relationship between meaning and occupation has been discussed extensively in the occupational science literature, with engagement in personally meaningful occupations thought to influence health, identity and well-being; thus, understanding the meaning of occupation is a necessity when supporting participation in society (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010; Hasselkus & Rosa, 1997; Kielhofner, 2009). The concept of Valuing Self is an example of the meaning ethnic immigrants attach to occupation when they are deprived of participation in life-long valued occupations. The concept provides a foundation for further discussion of the reasons immigrants who are already familiar with their new surroundings are still socially isolated or even voluntarily excluded from their host society.

### Implications for Occupational Science

Immigration studies in occupational science indicate that it is a major life-transition that disrupts people's established occupations, and conclude that when immigrants' occupational choices are out of balance, their health and

well-being are compromised (Bhugra, 2004; Brown, 2008; Connor Schisler & Polatajko, 2002; Farias & Asaba, 2013; Gupta, 2013; Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010; Krishnagiri, Fuller, Ruda, & Diwan, 2013; Nayar, 2009; Nayar et al., 2012; Suto, 2013). These studies make it clear that an understanding of occupations within different spheres of experience is a necessity, as the world undergoes profound demographic change due to the great inflow of immigrants.

It is, however, not easy for occupational scientists with mainstream backgrounds to understand what it is like for ethnic immigrants and the way they interpret the meaning of occupations from the perspective of their specific religion, culture, and language (Iwama, 2005). There is a risk that occupational science imposes a Western worldview on the lives of people who have a different cultural background (Hinojosa, Kramer, Royeen, & Luebben, 2003). Through understanding how Korean immigrants connect to different places through their occupations, this study has potential to give occupational scientists insight to the reality that immigrants encounter; consequently enhancing their capacity to incorporate non-Western people's cultural views and values into their theories and research.

### Limitations

In grounded theory, the theory inevitably contains a particular perspective as the findings are co-constructed by the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2014), whose reality researchers aim to fairly represent (de Vaus, 2001). Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were used to ensure the findings accurately reflect what was studied. The credibility strategies used were prolonged engagement and member-checking. Multiple sources of data enhance transferability of the findings (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The co-authors provided regular feedback, whilst the university's grounded theory group, which included experienced grounded theory researchers, checked whether the first author's inferences were grounded in the data, thus addressing dependability. To enhance confirmability, the



findings were validated by peer-debriefing at diverse conferences, which endorsed the findings as an accurate reflection of the participants' reality. Additionally, a self-reflexive stance, which helped to minimise the researchers' influence (Stern, 2009), was continuously applied.

The theory that emerged has explanatory power specifically to immigrants of a similar age group to those involved in the study. By excluding adolescent and senior Korean immigrants, the findings have limitations with regard to capturing their settlement experiences. Those who came to New Zealand before 2000, when the Korean presence in this society was extremely rare, might have had very different experiences. Further, because all participants resided within three cities in the North Island of New Zealand, the findings may not fully embody stories of Korean immigrants who settled outside of these locations. Exploring the theory of 'Valuing Self' across a range of ages, arrivals and locations is a research avenue to be pursued.

The emphasis of the New Zealand government is no longer solely on bringing immigrants into the country but on ensuring their full participation in society. A large range of settlement services have been established to accommodate immigrants' everyday needs. Further discussion is recommended to investigate how the changing attitude of the host society impacts on Korean immigrants' journey of Valuing Self.

## Conclusion

The participants in this study contributed their experiences of settlement to the development of a theory. Each participant's story contained experiences of occupational disruption, accompanied by a general sense of frustration in relation to fitting into New Zealand society. In response, Korean immigrants engaged in a process of Regaining Control over occupations through the interplay between two worlds; Korea and New Zealand. For them, the journey of settlement was not limited to mastery in disrupted occupations; instead, they continually sought a place of Valuing Self, to achieve a sense of belonging in New Zealand society. By adopting an occupational perspective, the findings of this study demonstrate that the discipline of occupational science enriches immigration

studies and contributes to immigrants' well-being, through understanding the meaning immigrants give to occupations in their new country.

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