

Resettlement of North Korean Refugees in South Korea: Obstacles to Building Good Relationships with South Koreans

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Abstract

The failed integration of North Korean refugees in South Korea has not been improved, despite many studies and measures created to address the issue. A different approach is required to give a new insight into alleviating the problem. Early studies demonstrated that social capital, resources accessible through social networks, generated benefits; it played a crucial role in the integration processes of refugees. However, as indicated in previous research, North Korean refugees had poor relationships with South Koreans. It is necessary to identify the reasons for the poor relationships to enhance them. Therefore, this study explores the obstacles preventing the refugees from building good relationships with South Koreans. This study conducted semi-structured interviews with eight participants consisting of seven North Koreans and one South Korean. Findings show that the refugees' relationships with South Koreans were hindered by their different mindsets and frequent job changes. Their relationships were also hampered by South Koreans' ignorance and cultural and linguistic differences. This study provides valuable indications for how to improve the refugees' relationships with South Koreans.

Keywords: integration, North Korean refugees, social capital, social relationships, South Korea

Introduction

In July 2019, a North Korean woman and her five-year son were found dead from starvation in their home in South Korea (Jo 2019). Many people in South Korea were shocked by this tragic accident and did not understand how people could currently die of starvation in a country which has abundant food and even produces considerable amounts of food waste. The public and the media strongly condemned the indifference of the South Korean government towards North Korean refugees. As a response to lessen the criticism, the government suggested a prompt measure to address the problem of the refugees. However, this event was not the first case to demonstrate the serious problems facing the refugees. Many topical incidents involving North Koreans had also been in the news headlines. As of the end of 2010, more than 580 North Korean refugees left for the United Kingdom after failing to settle in South Korea (Song 2011). High suicidal ideation caused by financial difficulties and loneliness was found among the North Korean refugees (Korea Herald 2013; Kwon 2019). Furthermore, some North Koreans had recently been mobilized and received payment for taking part in some very sensitive political protests (Ko 2016). Considerable blame mixed with the prevailing discrimination was directed towards the community of North Koreans, but not the political organizations that mobilized them by taking advantage of their economic weakness (Ko 2016).

The issue of North Korean refugees has received close attention since the early 2000s following the explosive increase¹ of the refugees after the late 1990s (MOU 2021a). Many studies and measures were applied to the group of North Koreans to identify their specific difficulties and thereby present solutions (Kim and Hocking 2018; Kim and Jeong 1996; Lankov 2006; Lee et al. 2003; Sung and Go 2014). The South Korean government has provided generous settlement programs for the refugees while gradually increasing its budget for them (KHF² 2021; MOU 2021b). Nevertheless, the problems related to the refugees are not alleviated, as shown in the incidents above. Rather, it seems

¹ The number of North Korean refugees who arrived in South Korea between 1970 and 1996 was estimated to be 11 on average each year; however, the number of North Korean refugees dramatically increased to 148 in 1999, 1,384 in 2005, 2,706 in 2011, 1,418 in 2016, and 1,047 in 2019 (Lankov 2006, 108; MOU 2021a).

² The Korea Hana Foundation (KHF) is a governmental organization founded to support the stable resettlement of North Korean refugees in South Korea.

that the issues have deteriorated further, as the total number of the refugees exceeded 33,500 in 2020 (MOU 2021a). Temporary financial support and a short five-year social service in the current resettlement support programs of the government have not functioned so effectively as to help North Koreans successfully adapt to South Korea (Sung and Go 2014, 2).

Social Capital and Its Positive Effects on the Integration Process of Refugees

More diverse approaches would be helpful to give a new insight into the issue of North Korean refugees. One potential approach can be found in the sphere of social capital, defined here as “the collection of resources owned by the members of an individual’s personal social network, which may become available to the individual as a result of the history of these relationships” (Van der Gaag and Snijders 2004, 200). Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) believed that social capital embedded in social networks could provide people with benefits or access to resources. They emphasized that trust and reciprocity were vital elements in the formation of social capital (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000). Social capital has three types of relationships: bonding social capital referring to collaborative relationships between members of a network who share similar “social identity”; bridging social capital referring to relationships between people who are different in terms of “some socio-demographic (or social identity) sense”; linking social capital referring to relationships between people who are “interacting across explicit, formal or institutionalized power” (Szreter and Woolcock 2004, 655).

Ager and Strang (2008, 167) conceptualized the integration process of refugees based on substantial documentation and empirical data. In the conceptual framework, four domains, namely, employment, housing, education, and health, are presented as potential markers or means of successful integration. They stated that social connections played a “fundamental role in driving the process of integration at a local level”; these connections acted as “connective tissue” to access the four domains (Ager and Strang 2008, 177).

Specifically, they classified these social connections into three forms: “social bond” with family or same ethnic groups; “social bridge” with host communities; and “social link” with government organizations (Ager and Strang 2008, 178–181). In addition, “language and cultural knowledge” are presented as barriers to social and economic integration; these barriers can be removed by a host government to promote refugees’ better integration (Ager and Strang 2008, 181).

Many studies have demonstrated the positive effects of social capital on refugee integration (Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Duren and Yalçın 2021; Gericke et al. 2018; Im and Rosenberg 2016; Lamba and Krahn 2003). Survey research with a large sample of refugees in Canada concluded that social capital functioned very helpfully in the resettlement process of refugees (Lamba and Krahn 2003, 356). More precisely, a study of labor market integration of refugees in the United Kingdom found that social networks gave refugees more chances to access employment and housing (Cheung and Phillimore 2014, 533). Likewise, qualitative research on a group of Syrian refugees in Germany indicated that social capital was valuable for them to gain access to jobs; especially, linking social capital was more helpful than bonding and bridging one in getting access to decent jobs (Gericke et al. 2018, 58). Im and Rosenberg’s (2016, 512) study of Bhutanese refugees in the United States reveals that social capital improved their access to health resources and psychological well-being. In addition, a cross-sectional study of Syrian refugee adolescents showed that social capital helped to reduce the mental health problems of refugees (Duren and Yalçın 2021, 247).

North Korean Refugees’ Poor Relationships with South Koreans

As evidenced by many studies of other refugees in different host countries above, social capital has high potential to improve the integration of North Korean refugees. However, a social network with South Korean host members does not appear to be well established, despite its very significant importance in the integration process (Choi and S. Kim 2013;

H. Kim et al. 2011; J. Kim and Jang 2007). Many North Korean refugees felt that they were not close to South Koreans (Kim and Jang 2007, 19). One study shows that nearly seven out of ten South Koreans have negative perceptions of North Korean refugees (Choi and Kim 2013, 187). Similarly, South Koreans perceive the highest social distance towards North Korean refugees among five different immigrant groups in South Korea (Kim et al. 2011, 67). Even worse, much research points out that North Koreans are painfully prejudiced and discriminated against by South Koreans (Crisis Group 2011, 17; Jeon 2000, 366; Kim and Hocking 2018, 212; Ryang 2012, 10; Sung and Go 2014, 10–11). As well illustrated, North Korean refugees have established poor relationships with South Koreans. Given the beneficial effects of social capital on refugee integration, it is crucial to improve the poor relationships. To enhance their social networks, it is essential initially to identify the reasons why North Koreans have failed to make good relationships with South Koreans. However, as little research has been conducted on this topic, there is no sufficient information about the causes. This lack is the gap that this current study tries to fill. This study explores, “what are the obstacles preventing North Korean refugees from building good relationships with South Koreans?” Thus, this study attempts to give an insight into improving relationships between North Koreans and South Koreans.

Methods

Participants

North Korean refugees in South Korea can be considered a hard-to-reach population, as for safety reasons contact information for the refugees is not openly provided (Ruel, Wagner III, and Gillespie 2016, 5). Hence, this current study employed snowball sampling to reach potential interviewees, as the sampling works efficiently for hard-to-reach or hidden populations (Ruel, Wagner III, and Gillespie 2016). Initially, I contacted some South Koreans working with North Korean refugees, North Korean refugee churches, and governmental

agencies to ask for potential interviewees, while explaining the details of the research. The churches and the agencies refused the request. However, the South Koreans helped me meet potential interviewees. Ultimately, seven North Koreans aged between 20 and 49 agreed to participate in the interview. All had lived in Seoul or Gyeonggi-do province, and two of them were female. Additionally, one South Korean who had formerly worked for a group of North Korean refugees participated in this study, as his opinion was considered to be highly valuable. The details on the demographic characteristics of the interviewees are listed in the table below.

Table 1. Interviewees' Demographic Characteristics

Name (Pseudonym)	Origin	Origin	Age	Marital status	Period in S. Korea	Place of residence	Education
Hajoon	North	Male	40-49	Married	+ 15 years	Seoul	graduate degree
Doyeon	North	Female	40-49	Married	+ 15 years	Seoul	graduate degree
Minsoo	North	Male	30-39	Married	7-10 years	Seoul	bachelor degree
Dongmin	North	Male	30-39	Married	10-15 years	Gyeonggi-do	bachelor degree
Seowoo	North	Female	20-29	Married	7-10 years	Gyeonggi-do	high school degree
Sangho	North	Male	40-49	Married	10-15 years	Seoul	graduate degree
Giwon	North	Male	40-49	Married	0-3 years	Gyeonggi-do	bachelor degree
Jeongmin	South	Male	50-59	Married	-	Seoul	bachelor degree

Data Collection

The method of data collection was through semistructured interviews, because interviewing not only allows a researcher to ask prepared defined questions, but also allows an interviewee to respond freely and discuss any relevant topics (Choak 2012, 92). This method makes it possible for other meaningful themes to be introduced (Choak 2012). The interviewing was performed in two different ways, either individual meetings or group discussions, depending on the interviewee's preference. As a result, four individual semistructured interviews and one group interview were conducted; the time for the interviews ranged from one to one and a half hours. Korean, the native language of both the interviewees and the author, was used during the interviews. The interviews were recorded with either a voice recorder or written notes and then transcribed in Korean. In

each interview, first the details of the research, such as the research objectives, were presented to the interviewees. After gaining their consent, I began the interview by asking the prepared research questions. In the middle of the interview, spontaneous questions were also sometimes asked based on the topics that the interviewees introduced. When the required data had been collected and there were no more additional questions, the interview ended.

Data Analysis

To analyze and interpret the interview data, I made use of a thematic analysis, which is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun and Clarke 2012, 57). This method has been found useful in analyzing meanings derived from semistructured interview data (Evans 2018, 3). More importantly, I attempted to find themes directly from the data set. This type of inductive analysis is effectively possible through a thematic method (Terry et al. 2017, 9).

The data was analyzed systematically and carefully through five steps to ensure the high quality of the analysis (Terry et al. 2017, 12–24). The first step was to become familiarized with the collected data, which implied that I deeply engaged with a set of data by reading and listening to the data set observantly and repetitively. This deep engagement made it possible to discover patterns or ideas from the data. Second, a means of coding was introduced. I attached meaningful tags or codes using a few words to all the data fragments which were closely or meaningfully associated with the research question. The third step was to construct possible themes. I examined codes thoroughly to cluster codes together into “bigger or more meaningful patterns” or to identify “a rich and complex code that potentially captures a number of other codes within its boundaries” (Terry et al. 2017, 18). As a result, I discovered “central organizing concepts—clear core ideas or concepts that underpin a theme” (Braun, Clarke, and Terry 2015, 102). These central concepts enabled me to develop candidate themes. Fourth, I reviewed the candidate themes carefully in terms of whether

each theme closely included the meanings of all the codes clustered within the theme, whether the themes were noticeably different from but relevant to one another, and whether the themes presented answers over the research question. The last step was to define each of the themes. This was to write “short summaries of the core idea and meaning of each theme—like an abstract for each theme” (Terry et al. 2017, 22). Through the writing, I made sure that each of the themes contained sufficient details to serve as a distinct and meaningful theme.

Ethical Consideration

As this study examines human subjects, it is necessary to consider the ethical issues involved. Participation in the interview should be voluntary, and the interviewee should never feel forced to participate in the interview (Ruel, Wagner III, and Gillespie 2016, 8). Nevertheless, it appears that many North Korean refugees were compelled to participate in interviews by using cash incentive of around a hundred euros (personal communication, September 20, 2019). In general, most North Koreans do not want to participate in research projects, because they have strong negative feelings against being treated as a subject to be examined and inspected (personal communication, September 20, 2019). Hence, a cash incentive is widely used to recruit North Korean participants who are located in a low economic class. Those in a low economic state can be easily affected by a large financial incentive (Singer 2008, 88). An incentive is commonly known as an effective way to engage participants in research (Sthli and Joye 2016, 8). However, the amount of incentive should not violate the principles of research ethics. In the case of the North Korean participants, some researchers did not seem to consider research ethics as being important enough.

This current study paid particular attention to research ethics when recruiting the interviewees. No incentive was given to the participants. The study ensured that their participation was voluntary and they were provided with all the necessary details about the study.

Limitations

This study has a limitation as regards the gender composition of the participants, resulting in only two women out of eight participants. Women make up more than 70 percent of the total number of North Korean refugees (MOU 2021a). Generally, women go through different processes of making relationships from men (Lai 2008, 342). Hence, more women participants would produce more diverse findings. In addition, a limitation arose from the interpretive nature of the thematic method. Therefore, findings can be influenced by the researcher to a certain extent. However, an attempt to minimize this limitation was made by thoroughly following the specific stages of the method.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data set was carried out systematically through the five stages of the thematic method. The data analysis ultimately identified four themes. The first theme is “values of money priority and strongly held communist ideology” derived from four subthemes: “money as top priority,” “no sincerity and honesty,” “change in values,” and “strongly held ideology.” Second, the theme, “ignorance and discrimination about us and our ability,” is developed from the data analysis. The second theme consists of four subthemes: “ignorance and discrimination,” “positive images,” “pride and victim mentality,” and “worse than Korean Chinese.” The third theme is “cultural and linguistic differences” developed from three subthemes that are “two-faced character,” “swear words,” and “different dialect.” Lastly, the analysis discovered the theme, “frequent job changes and the hard effort needed to make relationships” constructed from four subthemes: “a time-consuming process,” “frequent job changes,” “the brutal North Korean society,” and “acknowledging and hard effort to survive.” Each of the themes is deeply explored and discussed as follows.

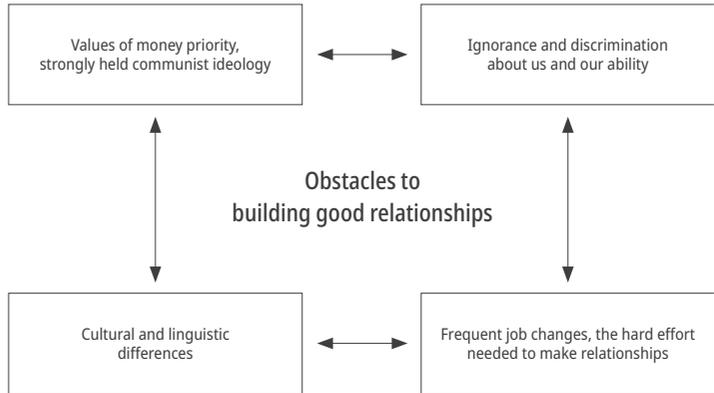


Figure 1. Map of themes

Values of Money Priority and Strongly Held Communist Ideology

One interviewee said that many North Korean refugees regard money as their first priority. The refugees tend to form social relationships or engage in events depending merely on what benefits they can gain. It is natural for anyone in a materialistic society such as South Korea to prioritize money for their reason. However, if one values only money without considering other people or social norms, they may be regarded as being self-interested. This self-interested attitude would adversely affect the establishment of social relationships that expect reciprocity in general. This result supports Coleman’s (1988) and Putnam’s (2000) theory that the norm of reciprocity is a necessity for the formation of social capital. The interviewee added that this propensity causes negative effects on building relationships with South Koreans:

When they meet South Koreans, they first judge the South Koreans based on whether or not they can benefit from them. It is impossible to build relationships with South Koreans based on such values. . . . Especially, elder North Koreans only participate in an event in cases where they can gain cash or the like. . . . After [the early morning service], each of them received a bundle of seaweed. They wouldn’t attend church, if they didn’t get any benefit

from the church. . . . South Koreans come to realize that they only care about money and they make a relationship only if the relationship is beneficial to them. Thus, South Koreans don't want to make a relationship [with them]. (Hajoon, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

The interviewee points out the two main reasons why the refugees came to have these money-prioritization values. Firstly, the great famine, the “Arduous March,”³ had a significant impact on creating these values. During the famine, a number of North Koreans who upheld communist ideology and hence had neglected material possessions and money died of hunger⁴ (Noland 2005, 16). By contrast, those who had made money by trading on the black markets survived relatively well. The extreme hunger and witnessing family deaths would be traumatic enough to compel North Koreans to hold money-prioritization values. Chang, Haggard, and Noland's (2006) study reveals that many North Koreans have been traumatized by family members' deaths and the starvation that occurred during the famine in North Korea. The second reason is associated with North Korean refugees' families that are still left in North Korea. They greatly desire to bring their families to South Korea even by paying large amounts of money to brokers who can get their families out of North Korea (Kim and Hocking 2018, 210). Hence, they are very keen to obtain money for the brokers. The two factors were well described by the interviewees:

The [communist] ideology was central, before the Arduous March. This ideology was regarded as more important. But, after the Arduous March, most of those who had strongly held the ideology died. People very painfully witnessed the death of their children and family members from hunger. . . . Those who obtained benefits from trading on the black markets gained weight and survived. Experiencing such extreme events, North Koreans came to think that the ideology wasn't important at all and that money was their best option. They needed to have money to survive. (Hajoon, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

³ The great famine in North Korea that occurred from the mid to late 1990s.

⁴ Reportedly, between 600,000 and one million died in the ensuing famine (Noland 2005). Another research estimated that, between 1995 and 1997, nearly 245,000 people (12% of the overall population of the province) died of hunger in the Hamgyongnam-do province in North Korea (Robinson et al. 1999).

My wife and son live in Pyongyang. To bring them here, I need twenty million won [15,000 euro] per person. So, I work hard now and I am planning to make that amount by June next year. (Giwon, male, 40–49 years old, Gyeonggi-do)

The interviewees also said that the elderly North Korean refugees' strong ideological beliefs hindered them from building good relationships with South Koreans. North Korea has indoctrinated deep-rooted communist beliefs in the minds of North Koreans through an intensive propaganda education (H. Kim 1969). It is not surprising that many of them still hold strong communist ideology. However, South Korea is a liberal and democratic society within a capitalist system. The majority of South Koreans oppose communist ideology. Moreover, the North Korean regime and the communist society have been described negatively by the media for decades (Han and Kim 2004, 330). It would be very hard to establish trust between two groups who hold opposing ideological beliefs. This finding is associated with Coleman's (1988) and Putnam's (2000) statement that trust should exist to build a social relationship. Thus, the refugees who uphold strong communist ideology would suffer severe difficulties in building relationships with South Koreans:

It is nearly impossible for North Koreans who are fifty-five years old or more to change their mindset because of the strongly indoctrinated ideology education they received. (Hajoon, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

Their beliefs and ideology are strongly brainwashed. It seems similar to being deeply involved in a religious cult. As those in a religious cult never listen to anyone and never change, the brainwashing of ideology and beliefs in North Korea is the same level as that of the cult. Thus, it is very hard for them to change [their mindset], so they suffer serious difficulties in building relationships [with South Koreans]. It is not easy to be free from those beliefs. (Jeongmin, male, 50–59 years old, Seoul)

The value of making money a priority and the ideological beliefs were firmly formed through extremely painful experiences and long-lasting indoctrination, respectively. Nevertheless, South Korea provides North Korean refugees with a very short period of education about a new set of social values and ideology (KHF 2021). It is obvious that this education would be barely helpful in alleviating a fixed mindset. The data in this study suggests that policy makers should provide the refugees with a long-term education program, especially designed to address this problem.

Ignorance and Discrimination about Us and Our Ability

Interviewees pointed out that they often felt ignored and discriminated against by South Koreans. This discrimination hindered them from making good relationships with the host community members. This obstacle was identified by early studies as the main difficulty that North Korean refugees faced in the South (Crisis Group 2011, 17; Jeon 2000, 366; Kim and Hocking 2018, 212; Ryang 2012, 10; Sung and Go 2014, 10).

More specifically, the interviewees mentioned that most of the refugees initially had very positive perceptions of South Korea before entering the country. They had even dreamed of a hopeful future in the South. My interviewee Hajoon said, “She said that she came here for a better education and thereby a better future.” However, the reality in the South differed greatly from their expectations. My interviewees said that they suffered from widely-spread prejudice and discrimination against them in the South Korean society. Since they had initially had positive images of the society, the contradictory reality facing them made them all the more painful and disappointing. This discrepancy was clearly illustrated by the interviewees:

Almost all the people in Pyongyang know very well via the South Korean TV series and movies that South Korea is rich. They don’t have any negative feelings towards South Koreans. The majority admire South Korea and

South Koreans. . . . At present, people in North Korea are envious of other families, one of whose members has defected to South Korea, because the defectors send money to their families in North Korea, and thus the families become rich. (Giwon, male, 40–49 years old, Gyeonggi-do)

South Koreans don't treat us in the same way as other South Koreans. When we say we are from North Korea, they think inwardly, 'what are they doing here?' Such prejudices are deeply rooted. Thus, when social workers [from government organizations] arrange or give information about jobs, they don't provide us with high-position jobs, but only low-skilled or manual ones. . . . I think that these prejudices are one of the obstacles to our building a good relationship [with South Koreans]. (Doyeon, female, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

Our working conditions are much worse, and the salaries are smaller. But, when [they] say that these [conditions] are a good offer for us, we feel angry. If they want to help us, they should offer us jobs without any discriminatory conditions. When there is something unequal, we feel angry. (Dongmin, male, 30–39, Gyeonggi-do)

The quote from Doyeon that social workers only provide low-skilled jobs is noteworthy especially because this data contradicts the findings of Gericke et al.'s (2018) research that linking social capital allowed getting more chances to decent jobs.

In addition, the interviewees described two factors that made them more vulnerable to any negative perception and treatment. One of the factors pertains to the psychological characteristics of North Korean refugees. Most of the refugees have undergone several traumatic events such as famine, detention, and human trafficking in North Korea and China (W. Jeon et al. 2008, 215–216; Y. Lee et al. 2001, 227). Thus, their mental health remained unstable with widespread cases of depression and PTSD (B. Jeon et al. 2009, 126–127; Sung and Go 2014, 6). There is no doubt that mental suffering makes

the refugees more fragile to ignorance and discrimination. Relevant in this respect is my interviewee Dongmin's words: "As a North Korean refugee, we have an inferiority complex, a victim mentality, and jealousy towards South Koreans. We would feel ignored, even though other people were not ignoring them."

The other factor is connected with North Korean refugees' general perceptions of Korean Chinese living and working in South Korea. One may assume based on the shared ideology and decades of alliance between North Korea and China that North Koreans would have a positive image of China and the Chinese. However, it is presumed from the interviewees' statements that North Koreans in general have strong negative perceptions of the Chinese: "North Koreans still hate China and Chinese as much as they did in the past" (Giwon) and "North Koreans don't make any relationship with Chinese, even though they work with Chinese. My mindset is very different from [Chinese]" (Minsoo). The strong negative images seem to be closely connected to North Korean refugees' traumatic experiences in China that were caused by ruthless exploitation by Chinese people, such as hard labor without payment and human trafficking into the sex industry (Haggard and Noland 2011, 32–36). Hence, the situation of being treated worse than Korean Chinese in South Korea seems more unacceptable to the refugees. This tendency was indirectly described in the interview with Sewoo: "South Koreans discriminate and ignore North Korean refugees worse than Korean Chinese. It is harder even than Korean Chinese to get a job."

It is obvious that such discrimination by South Koreans against North Korean refugees would largely prevent the latter from establishing good relationships with the former. Thus, this obstacle should be addressed with a diversity of approaches. However, as Albert Einstein said, "it is harder to crack prejudice than an atom," it is very hard to decrease prejudice and ignorance. One possible clue can be obtained from the results of a survey displaying very little contact between North Korean refugees and South Koreans even in a representative district of North Korean residences (Kim and Ko 2005, 60). In this respect, local governments and civil

organizations should design a special program for promoting more contact between the two groups to reduce the ignorance and prejudice against each other.

Cultural and Linguistic Differences

Korea had been a unified country for centuries before the division between North Korea and South Korea in 1945. Therefore, the same history, language, and ethnicity have been shared for a long time. Many South Koreans expected North Korean refugees to be readily assimilated into South Korea as they could “think and behave just like South Koreans” (Jeon 2000, 367). However, this estimation appears over-optimistic. Cultural and linguistic differences have been the main difficulties in the resettlement of the refugees (Crisis Group 2011, 16–18; Lankov 2006, 122; Suh 2002, 77). The interviewees also recognized these differences as a barrier to building social relationships with South Koreans. More precisely, they pointed out that South Koreans tended to display distinctive behaviors in socializing:

North Koreans like me open their minds to other people who we think are close to us. But, the other persons in fact have different faces inside, even though they pretend to be close and to listen to. . . Yes, it is calculating. It is not frank. I used to often think that they were not frank. . . . It is a Janus-faced character. But, we, North Korean refugees, are more frank at that point. We are clear between what we like and what we dislike. But, South Koreans remain neutral without showing what they like or dislike. (Dongmin, male, 30–39, Gyeonggi-do)

They don’t talk openly, unless they think we are very close friends to them. (Doyeon, female, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

This difference in behaviors may cause misunderstanding, emotional hurt, or disappointment for North Korean refugees. Subsequently, this may lead to the refugees’ hesitance to build relationships with South Koreans. This difference seems

closely connected with the different nature of the society between the two Koreas, as shown in Jeon's (2000, 367) study, which states, "Because North Korea is a collectivistic society, defectors will have a high aptitude for collective behavior."

The interviewees also said, "Linguistic differences are the biggest problem" (Minsoo) in building good relationships with South Koreans. However, it is worth noting that the language issue in the context of North Korean refugees is distinguished from a general language issue in international studies of refugee integration. While the latter dealt with the matter of communication, the former was associated with cultural elements. The refugees do not have any serious problem in communicating, as their mother tongue is also Korean. Their linguistic differences were found in the frequent use of swear words, accents, and word meanings. In addition, it should be noted that the linguistic differences were strongly intertwined with discrimination and ignorance:

The biggest problem is a language issue. We are very cautious about saying something. In North Korea, people talk about anything to each other when they are close friends. For example, they talk freely even to the people they meet first in a private gathering, saying, "How have you lived so far?" But, the culture here is different. When we say something wrong, we are easily blamed. [We] easily get ridiculed. (Minsoo, male, 30–39 years old, Seoul)

South Koreans often say the swear word, *ssibal*. If they speak the word in North Korea, they would be struck and punched. Swear words must not be used in North Korea. But, in South Korea swear words are used very commonly, especially among teenagers. So, I was very shocked. Then, I thought, "Ah, here is very different from North Korea." When people say swear words, they cannot avoid death. (Minsoo, male, 30–39 years old, Seoul)

[In Hanawon⁵] we are frequently advised that we should learn a South Korean accent to make a good relationship in the society. In Hanawon, they said, "You should learn a South Korean accent, when coming to South Korean

⁵ "Hanawon, operated by the Ministry of Unification, is a facility with initial reception and resettlement education programs for North Korean refugees. The facility provides various programs to them for 12 weeks" (KHF 2021).

society.” . . . It is essential because South Koreans have stereotypes [of a Northern accent]. (Sangho, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

This finding supports Ager and Strang’s (2008) speculation that language and cultural knowledge act as barriers to the successful integration of refugees. More importantly, this finding implies that these cultural and linguistic differences seem to have been overlooked based on a general perception that North Koreans belong to the same ethnic group as South Koreans. As described above, the consequences of these differences are as damaging as those that other foreign migrants in South Korea suffer. More attention should be paid to this barrier to improve social relationships between North Korean refugees and South Koreans.

Frequent Job Changes and the Hard Effort Needed to Make Relationships

Lastly, one interviewee gave his analytical opinion on why many North Korean refugees had failed to build good relationships with South Koreans based on his personal experience. As he regarded a relationship as a time-consuming process that requires persistence, he said that many of the refugees changed their jobs frequently and thus they did not have sufficient time to build relationships with South Korean colleagues. He also added that the lack of relationships caused by the frequent job changes brought adverse consequences for the refugees:

A relationship relies on the amount of time. It takes a long time to build a good relationship with a person. But, they quit the company shortly after getting a job there, and then quitting again. So, there isn’t any friend [to form a relationship with]. Those who frequently change their churches can’t also build any relationship with other people. Likewise, those who often change companies. It took me fifteen years to build a social network. I studied in a university for nine years, worked as a preacher in a church for seven years, and have worked as a pastor

here for six years. That's how I established my network. (Sangho, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

They feel desperate. They don't make good relationships [with other colleagues] in companies. Thus, they quit again. After that, there is no place to go. So they just drink alcohol or go abroad. These people end up failing to build any relationship. . . . Those with no good relationship leave [a gathering] very early. [They] leave very early. They even get depressed by the failure of building a relationship. This is really a serious problem. (Sangho, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

The interviewee saw the refugees' frequent job changes as a barrier to building good relationships. In this regard, the interviewee gave his interpretation of a possible reason for the frequent changes. He said that North Korean refugees had survived the brutal North Korean society by overcoming very serious difficulties. Thus, the refugees should have the ability to deal with any problem occurring in South Korean society. However, he said that the refugees didn't put more effort into overcoming their difficulties in the workplace:

Going through the Arduous March from the mid-1990s, they lost morality. It was a dog-eat-dog world. . . . Fraud, thieving, and robbery were very common. It was very easy to break a relationship and trust. We lived in such a society. . . . But, when I arrived in Seoul and met South Koreans, I felt that they were really gentle people. . . . In some points, we, North Korean refugees, are stronger and more powerful. We survive well. So, the difficulty we suffer in South Korean society is like a cold. They should admit the difficulty. . . . They should do anything to survive, even to survive by risking their lives. . . . Just don't take it too seriously. The weak should struggle harder to survive in the stronger's world. They should strengthen themselves. (Sangho, male, 40–49 years old, Seoul)

This interpretation is differentiated from the findings of early research on North Korean refugees' employment that work environment and discrimination were the primary causes of frequent job changes (Bidet 2009, 162–164; Cho 2020, 363–365). More importantly, this aspect mentioned by the above interviewee is significant because it contains self-reflection on the reality of South Korea. He attempted to see the issue of failed relationships as objectively as he could, based on his experience of resettlement and his past history in North Korea. Thus, he believed that this obstacle was likely to be overcome through hard effort. This interview indicates that the experiences of North Korean refugees, who have adapted well to South Korean society, would be helpful for other North Korean refugees who want to build good relationships with South Koreans. In other words, this data shows that bonding social capital can provide support for creating bridging social capital.

Conclusion

This study examined barriers hindering North Korean refugees from building good relationships with South Koreans. The study found that the refugees' values of prioritizing money and their communist beliefs adversely affected their formation of reciprocity and trust with South Koreans, which are necessities in building a social relationship. Frequent job changes were also discovered as the main reason why the refugees ended up having poor relationships with South Koreans. In this regard, the study showed that the refugees may possess the ability to overcome this obstacle. In addition, this study found that the discrimination and the cultural and linguistic differences that the North Korean refugees experience in South Korea discouraged them from making social relationships with South Koreans. These findings are significant because they provide valuable indications for improving North Korean refugees' networks with South Koreans. The improved networks would give the refugees vital resources that may help them to integrate successfully

into South Korea.

As theoretical implications, this study identified meaningful evidence that bonding social capital can play a beneficial role in generating bridging social capital. The study also showed that linking social capital may not be helpful for the North Korean refugees to get an adequate job. Practically, the findings of this study suggest that government agencies should provide more systematic and long-term programs specially designed for social norms, cultural knowledge, and language while being aware of the severe effects of these factors on their resettlement. Moreover, NGO staff or social workers could organize social activities or workshops among North Korean refugees to enhance their bonding networks. This study recommends further research on the particular barriers to social relationships that North Korean refugee women are facing in South Korean society and on the potential solutions to the obstacles explored in this study.

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