

Life experience of Korean men who married immigrant women through international marriage

Eun Sil Jung¹, Hye Jin Kim², Eun Kwang Yoo³, Yeun Mi Kim⁴

^{1,2} professor, Department of Nursing, Kyungbok University, Pocheon 487-717, Korea

³ Professor, Department of Nursing, Hanyang University, 222 Wangsimni-ro, Seongdong-gu, Seoul, 133-791, Korea

⁴ Professor, Department of Nursing Science, Kyungbuk College, Yeongju-si, 750-712, Korea

*Corresponding Author: Hye Jin Kim

487-717, 154 Shinpyeongro, Shinbuk-myeon, Pocheon 487-717, Korea.

E-mail: jes0325@hanmail.net

Abstract

This is a qualitative research that explores the problems and difficulties experienced by Korean men who married foreign immigrant women. It examines the husbands' life changes and experiences through their international marriage, thereby attempting to provide basic data for development of marriage counseling programs to help establish an ideal role of healthy-minded husbands of multicultural families. The participants were 7 Korean men who married immigrant women, and data were collected from April 3rd, 2013 to July 3rd, 2013, using focus group interview. As a result, there were six major themes observed: 1) "Not dating long enough and getting married too fast", 2) "Cultural differences that are too different", 3) "Stress and scars caused by wives", 4) "Teaching Korean through speaking love language", 5) "Husbands and wives becoming more alike" and 6) "Feeling a strong need for appropriate education". The study has found out that the Korean husbands and foreign wives don't have enough time to truly get to know each other prior to their wedding day, and after their wedding, they experience tremendous amount of stress and difficulties due to complicated process of international marriage as well as cultural differences, especially during the earlier phase of marriage. After attempting to deal with these problems, the couples often feel a strong need for counseling programs, geared toward educating husbands. Therefore, this study will help establish the ideal role of Korean husbands and help strengthen the family bond and provide basic data for developing more adequate marriage counseling programs. Furthermore, it will help multicultural families to be well integrated into Korean society

Keywords: Korean men, immigrant women, life experience, ethnographic research method

1. Introduction

Most international marriages in Korea are done between socially underprivileged Korean men and foreign immigrant women from underdeveloped countries. After the mid-1990s, the number of unmarried Korean men in the countryside has increased and has become one of the major social problems, and the international marriage with foreign immigrant women

was suggested as one of the solutions by local governments. Since then, many problems arose from this measure [1].

Out of all the marriages taken place in Korea in the year 2000, international marriages were 3.5 %. The number had increased to 13.5% in 2005, and it had slowly decreased down to 8% in 2013, where 71.3% of these international marriages were done between Korean men and foreign immigrant women [2].

These foreign immigrant women face and suffer from many different kinds of problems caused by the fact that they have to get used to a completely different culture and start their new lives in Korea[3]. Two of the leading problems are Korean men's patriarchal mindset when it comes to marriage[4] and their lack of knowledge and ignorance on their wives' culture and background [5]. Although previous research and studies attempted to delve into this issue, most of them were quantitative studies that heavily focused on the problems that immigrant women face, not what the Korean husbands have to go through.

Therefore, this study attempted to explore the experiences of Korean husbands and immigrant wives, by conducting focus-interviews and collecting data, in order to truly understand some of the problems and difficulties that the international marriage couples go through before and after their wedding. Moreover, this study attempted to provide possible solutions to underlying issues, such as re-establishing Korean husbands' roles, understanding wives' culture and upbringing, and increasing couples' ability to solve marital problems and conflicts together, thereby attempting to provide fundamental data to develop appropriate educational counseling programs in the future[3].

2. Method

2.1. Research outline

This was a qualitative study utilizing ethnographic research method and in-depth focus group interview. The interview, based on semi-structured questionnaires, was conducted in order to explore the lives of Korean men who married immigrant women. The interviews were conducted both before and after their wedding in the sociocultural and environmental context of Korea[3].

2.2. Participants

The participants were 7 Korean men who married immigrant women in Korea, who agreed to participate in this study[3].

2.3. Data Collection Method and Ethical Consideration

The participants were 7 Korean men who married immigrant women in Korea, selected after getting an approval from Research Ethics Committee (HYI-12-031-3) of 'H' University. They understood the purpose of the study and then agreed to participate in it. Data were collected from April 3, 2013 to July 3, 2013, and in order to ensure the validity of the data, the participants were introduced through acquaintances, which is also known as snowball sampling. Deep interviews were used, asking "What do Korean husbands of multicultural families experience through the process leading up to their wedding and through the daily lives after their wedding?" One session lasted from 2 hours 30 minutes to 3 hours on average. Quiet cafes were chosen as interview places, and the times and dates were chosen based on the participants' convenience[3]. The interviews were recorded upon the participants' agreement with the guarantee of their anonymity, and their freedom to withdraw at any moment during their interview was fully explained.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through an ongoing process according to Spradley's method of content analysis. In order to minimize possible prejudice of the researchers and to ensure the validity of the study, there were many discussion sessions held regularly among the researchers, along with the help of one medical student. The final data was confirmed by two professors from the department of nursing with previous experience of qualitative research and also by one of the participants[3].

3. Result

3.1. General Characteristics of the Participants

The average age of the participants was 46.3 where 6 were in their 40s and one was in his 50s. All of them were employed, and they resided in "H" city in Kyeonggi-province. Five of the husbands' wives were from the Philippines, one from Vietnam and one from China. The average duration of their marriages was 7.7 years[3].

3.2. Korean Men's Experiences

There were six major themes observed: 1) 'Not dating long enough and getting married too fast', 2) 'Cultural differences that are too different', 3) 'Stress and scars caused by wives', 4) 'Teaching Korean through speaking love language', 5) 'Husbands and wives becoming more alike' and 6) 'Feeling a strong need for appropriate education'.

1) Not dating long enough and getting married too fast

This includes 'The third matched date with the same person', 'Marrying a person whom I only saw in a photo,' and 'Getting married quickly just to please parents'[3].

'The third matched date with the same person' tells an example where a Korean man met an immigrant woman for the third

time through a matched date, set up by an international marriage agency, although the woman already rejected the man twice in the past.

I liked her so I said 'okay' after the first meeting, but I guess my current wife didn't like me at that time so she said 'no'. The agency kept asking her to see me again and again, so she saw me two more times after that. On the third meeting, she finally said 'yes'. (Participant 2)

'Marrying a person whom I only saw in a photo' means the couples were introduced to each other through a religious organization, and they got married when they met in person for the first time. They saw each other's faces only through photos prior to their wedding day.

I'd only seen my wife's face in a photo until our wedding day. We were blessed and introduced to each other by our religious organization (Participant 6)

We'd only seen each other's faces through photos until our wedding day as well... (Participant 5)

'Getting married quickly just to please parents' means that some Korean husbands got married, before they got any older, in order to please their parents by giving them grandchildren.

I wanted to have kids before my father passed away, but... yeah. Perhaps that was the biggest pressure that I had, I guess. That's why I got married at forty two. Now that my father passed away, I want to have kids before my mother passes away (Participant 4)

2) Cultural differences that are too different

This includes 'Arguing and getting hurt due to miscommunication', 'Getting frustrated due to wife's different lifestyle' and 'Forcing her to follow Korean culture'[3].

'Arguing and getting hurt due to miscommunication' indicated that couples struggle to understand each other due to language barrier. Some Korean words and phrases have multiple meanings, and sometimes husbands find it difficult to truly understand what their wives really mean when they say something harsh and hurtful.

She does speak Korean...but sometimes it's hard for me to guess what she really means when she says something... I struggle, but she also struggles as well. You know, Korean language has it too. Korean people eat something spicy and say the food is "cool", but it really means it cleanses your sinus and it feels refreshing. Stuff like that... (Participant 1)

I get really confused when I listen to her sometimes. She often says she wants a divorce, and I don't know if she says it in order to get more attention, or she says it simply because she's too angry. So we argue a lot. Sometimes when it gets really bad, I just leave the house by myself... (Participant 2)

We used to argue a lot... We just couldn't communicate with each other well. I have quite a temper, so, once I feel like she raises her voice a little bit, I just leave my house. Sometimes I throw things, like cheap electronic devices... (Participant 4)

'Getting frustrated due to wife's different lifestyle' indicates that many couples argue and many problems arise because of the fact that the wives' culture is too different from Korean culture.

She wears her shoes and walks around in the house. She even wears them in the bedroom, and it drives me crazy. She doesn't wash dishes thoroughly either. She doesn't scrub the inside of the pots well enough, and she only rinses the lids

with water. I often lose my appetite because of eat. Ha ha, we fought several times because of these reasons... (Participant 2)
How should I say, I know there are many cultural differences, but sometimes, it is too much for me to bear. It really pushes me to my limits. It drives me crazy. So I just leave my house. Sometimes I even scream. We butt heads too often. I don't get along with her side of the family either... (Participant 3)
 'Forcing her to follow Korean culture' indicates that many husbands repeatedly tell their wives to follow Korean culture instead of their native cultures since they live in Korea.
It is part of the Korean culture to live with our parents and take care of them, once they get old. I keep telling her not to add any Chinese culture to it. Since she is in Korea, she has to follow the Korean culture... (Participant 3)

3) Stress and scars caused by wives

This includes 'Scarred by wife's stubbornness', 'Wife having too much pride', 'Stressed because of wife's wasteful habits', and 'Unable to please parents because of her'[3].

'Scarred by wife's stubbornness' indicates that some Korean husbands get scarred by their wives' stubbornness to only follow their native cultures, instead of trying to follow the Korean culture.

I keep butting heads with her way too often...and with her side of the family too. I keep telling her if she keeps being stubborn and sticks to the Chinese culture, I will leave the house. The same problem occurs over and over so it definitely scars me... (Participant 3)

'Wife having too much pride' indicates that some immigrant wives have too much pride, so even if they do something wrong, they are often reluctant to say they are sorry. Also, when the couples argue, the wives don't easily bend their opinions, so the problems escalate to the point where the husbands consider getting a divorce.

Chinese women are very strong-willed...more so than Korean women. They always want to win and hate yielding. I know this is part of their culture, but when it continues like this...it definitely builds up. It challenges your patience. So, I leave my house and sometimes even scream (Participant 3)

One time, there was a situation where I was so sure I didn't do anything wrong. So I kept telling her to point out what I did wrong, but she wouldn't tell me anything. She wouldn't talk because she has too much pride. I wish she'd rather point out my fault and try to find a solution together, but instead she gives me a hard time with her petty pride and stubbornness. So I thought, if this were to continue, it might be better off for both of us to separate. Seriously, I sometimes try very hard not to hit her (Participant 2)

'Stressed because of wife's wasteful habits' indicates that some wives consider Korea to be much richer than where they are from, so they don't feel a need to be as frugal as they used to be. As a result, the wives develop wasteful habits and purchase things without much consideration, and as a result, this gives their husbands a lot of stress.

We, Koreans... especially the elders are extremely frugal. But these people (immigrant women) use things once and trash them, and then buy new ones again...they say they don't understand why we try to be so frugal all the time... I say Korea used to be very poor back in the past, and they say, "That's nonsense. Look how rich people are in Korea." So I

tell them, "That's not true for everyone"... I try to make my ends meet every day, day by day... But they just don't seem to understand it (Participant 1)

So...she sponsors this kid, but she doesn't seem to care about my wallet so much... She says we need to send him more money for education, and it seems like she just spends all the money, without calculating the amount or anything (Participant 2)

Whenever I pay my credit card bill, I feel like my head will literally explode... I let her use my card, and it seems like she can't refrain herself from using it all the time. So when I get the bill, the amount of stress I experience ... it's very overwhelming. I feel like my brain stops functioning, and my heart starts to beat crazily... and then I try to control myself ... ha ha ha (Participant 3)

'Unable to please parents because of her' indicates that some Korean husbands want to move their old parents into their home and take care of them, but they are not able to because their wives disagree. As a result, the Korean husbands feel a lot of regret for not being able to take care of their sick parents who are sometimes in poor health.

After my father passed away, I asked her if I could move my mother into our house...but she disagreed...this really hurt my feelings... We argued a lot when my father was hospitalized. She said Chinese people don't bring old parents home, but they just bring them to hospitals. She made me speechless and I just stopped talking... but, I don't know... I really wish I brought him home and took care of him...Maybe he would have lived a bit longer if I took care of him... (Participant 3)

4) Teaching Korean through speaking love language

This indicates that husbands speaking love language from time to time gave their wives chances to improve their Korean language skill.

We recently got married... so we say things often, like, "I love you" and "I miss you". I sometimes call her and ask, "What are you up to, sweetie?", "Did you eat yet? What did you eat for lunch/dinner?", "How is mom doing?", things like that... So now, she's getting more used to Korean and she is able to understand most of them... (Participant 7)

5) Husbands and wives becoming more alike

This includes 'Financially supporting wife's family', 'Giving her a Korean name', 'Visiting her country', 'Participating in multicultural family support events' and 'Studying hard to reach wife's education level'[3].

'Financially supporting wife's family' indicates that many Korean husbands financially support their wives' side of the family whenever they need help.

We send money...when they need help... or from time to time... whenever she thinks they need more money... (Participant 2)

We've been trying to help her family... send some money for them... we don't do it as often as every month, but... she knows when they need help, so... (Participant 5)

'Giving her a Korean name' indicates that some Korean husbands give their wives a pretty Korean name that sounds similar to their original names.

We tried to think of a good last name for her first, and we decided to use the same last name as mine. And then we tried

to decide a name that would go well with it. My last name is Kwon, and our daughter's name is Mi Mi, so we chose a syllable 'Seon' and 'Mi' from our daughter's name, so my wife's name became Seon Mi Kwon (Participant 5)

Her English name is Josephine, so I call her Cho, Se Bin. They even sound similar, and she loves it! She likes it a lot whenever people call her that name (Participant 6)

'Visiting her country' indicates that some Korean husbands take their time to learn their wives' language and visit their home countries with their children. They get to experience the culture in which their wives grew up, and many of them develop a desire to revisit, although they often have to take a long, tiresome journey.

But... we had to take a 12-hour bus ride from Manila... That was very tiring (Participant 1)

My Tagalog is very choppy... But we went there three times...My family loves experiencing the culture and exotic fruits of the Philippines. We definitely want to revisit (Participant 4)

We went there five times already. We even stayed there for one whole month last Christmas (Participant 6)

'Participating in multicultural family support events' indicates that many Korean husbands get a chance to learn many things and get other benefits by attending and participating in multicultural support events.

There was one called "Dream Start" when our kids were toddlers... they have a childcare service for multicultural families, so we can call people over to our house. They also provide postpartum care service for about two months, and they also offer other services for 6 months at the city hall... (Participant 6)

She's been getting Korean language learning service... the same people came over again and kept teaching her. You can sign up for 6 months or for one year. We've been using this program for two years... (Participant 3)

They also have a program where they teach our kids... we still use it sometimes... some college students come over and play with our kids (Participant 4)

'Studying hard to reach wife's education level' indicates that some Korean husbands attend colleges and study hard to graduate in order to match their education levels with those of their wives.

Although many people tend to look down upon these women from Southeast Asian countries, they actually have higher education level than we do. We have to accept that as a fact. I've been trying to graduate from Korea National Open University, but it's been very hard for me... It's taken me more than ten years, but I still haven't finished... that's why I try not to miss any class every day. Missing even one class makes me lazier and not want to study. I haven't missed a single class this semester (Participant 4)

6) Feeling a strong need for appropriate education

This indicated the fact that the husbands of multicultural families seek continuous counseling programs that are more in-depth and detailed, as opposed to the ones that are designed only for immigrant wives or the one-time events that are not practical.

They should keep teaching how to improve parenting skills. You know, parenting skills are very important for normal

families, so imagine how important they are for the parents of the multicultural families... especially for the guys...When I first attended the program, I realized the importance of being a good father and husband, especially when you are younger. When you become old like us, it is almost impossible to change... so those programs are crucial. (Participant 6)

It is husbands who really need education...the same kind that the wives get (Participant 3)

Not the ones that are too simple and not practical. I want a program that is more in-depth and detailed. (Participant 5)

So, the ones that only last an hour... those are useless. I think the programs should last three days... at least two days... or for an entire day, twice a year. I need to learn how to communicate with my wife, and I often feel like I don't know how... it's not just the language that gets in the way. There are more things that I need to learn. (Participant 2)

Many Korean men marry foreign immigrant women without spending enough time getting to know them. As a result, many husbands experience a lot of stress caused by various factors, such as cultural differences, language barrier, the wives' stubbornness and wasteful habits; however, many couples come to accept their differences and develop more love and trust, and finally help each other to be happy as husbands and wives.

4. Discussions

Since the number of international marriages between Korean men and immigrant women increased, there have been a lot of quantitative studies conducted. Many of those studies however, especially the earlier ones, had a tendency to depict immigrant women as victims and Korean husbands as people who are incapable and uneducated, physically disabled, deuterogamists or people who already failed in their previous marriage [8], and people who commit domestic violence regularly [1][7]. The general depiction of these Korean husbands was undoubtedly very opinionated and negatively stereotypical with a lot of prejudice[8]. Part of it had to do with the fact that some immigrant women were actual victims of domestic violence, and this arose as a big societal problem before [9]; however, it is not fair to generalize that all the international marriages between Korean men and immigrant women have the same problem. One study has found out that many recently married Korean men who married immigrant women with an intention to have a good marriage life suffer from both physical and mental damage, such as despair, anger and disappointment, caused by their wives cheating, getting pregnant outside of marriage, leaving [8][10], and pressuring their husbands to support her side of the family [11]. This study also confirmed that many Korean husbands do experience a lot of stress and get scarred because of their wives' stubbornness, wasteful habits, too much pride and unwillingness to help their husbands take care of their old parents. Instead of stereotyping the Korean husbands as violent and social failures, there needs to be an effort to understand their mental suffering and anguish, so they can heal their scars and establish their role as husbands and fathers. It is often observed that many participants of this study didn't get to spend enough time getting to know their future wives prior to their wedding. Many of the men only saw their photos

and got married quickly in order to simply please their parents. Most international marriages arranged through international marriage agencies are characterized by the fact that men and women either don't see each other until they get married, or they only meet each other once or twice prior to their wedding day [1][8][9]. The whole process is way too fast for both men and women to be actually prepared for their marriage, and as a result, they suffer from many problems and conflicts after their wedding. Marriages done without love and trust will likely cause unhealthy family dynamics, and the children who grow up in those families will likely cause negative social effects [2], and this will lead to greater societal problems in Korea overall. Also, it is well confirmed through this study that the Korean husbands want to attend programs that are in-depth and detailed (Participant 5), the ones that last at least two days or an entire day for twice a year (Participant 2), and the ones that are specifically designed for husbands (Participants 3 and 6). Korean society needs to put more focus on the Korean husbands of multicultural families with different kinds of support. Up until now, the Korean government has heavily focused on making new policies to help the immigrant women and the children of multicultural families and has provided them with economical and educational support, but the Korean husbands of those families have been ignored; therefore, there needs to be a lot of effort made in order to minimize many marital problems and conflicts and provide healthy education for the children of those families. In other words, Korea needs to also focus on making new programs that will help prepare the men to be better husbands and fathers of multicultural families in the future, rather than only focusing on the foreign immigrant women.

5. Conclusions

This study confirmed that many Korean men who marry foreign immigrant women experience a lot of stress and go through many difficulties due to various factors, such as cultural differences, language barrier, the wives' stubbornness and wasteful habits, especially during the earlier phase of marriage. It showed that both husbands and wives go through many conflicts and end up stressing and hurting each other; however, many couples come to accept their differences and develop more love and trust, and finally help each other to be happy as husbands and wives.

One thing to note was the fact that many Korean men's under preparedness for their marriage, caused by spending not enough time getting to know their future wives prior to wedding, manifested as a failure to grasp reality [6] and lack of genuineness [8]. Also, their stubbornly patriarchal mentality and the wives' stubborn attitude exacerbated their marriage problems. In order to overcome all of these difficulties, Korean husbands feel a strong need to attend educational counseling programs that would help them solve marital problems more effectively, understand their wives better, and learn better parenting skills. They also want to attend programs that are continuous, more in depth and more detailed.

This study will help establish the ideal role of Korean husbands, help them understand their wives' culture better, strengthen the family bond by helping them develop better

marital problem solving skills [3] and parenting skills; thereby providing basic data for developing more adequate marriage counseling programs. Furthermore, it will help multicultural families to be well integrated into Korean society and secure healthier family bond.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Authors



Eun Sil Jung

Professor Eun Sil, Jung, RN, Ph.D. teaches Nursing at the School of Nursing, Kyungbok University located in Gyeonggi province of South Korea, since 2004. She began her career as a faculty of Women's Health Nursing in 2004 after receiving M.S.(2002) in Nursing from Hanyang University, and a Ph.D. in Nursing (2006) at the same university. She is one of the members of Korean *Sanhujori* Academy. Her studies focus on the health of women from different cultural backgrounds and elders. She participated in the research 'Development of program for the married immigrant women and family' and 'Development of WISE HF *Sanhujori* Guideline.' She is one of the authors of 'My mom health JUMP - Joy Ultra Mom Program' and 'My mom health *Sanhujori*.'



Hye Jin Kim

Professor Hyejin Kim, RN, Ph.D, she teaches Nursing at the School of Nursing, Kyungbok University located in Gyeonggi. She began her career as a faculty of Women's Health Nursing in 2001 after receiving B.A. (1997) from Hanyang University, M.S. (2005) and a Ph.D.(2008) in Nursing from Hanyang University. She is co-author 'My mom health JUMP - Joy Ultra Mom Program' & 'My mom health *Sanhujori*'. She participated in the study 'Development of program for the married immigrant women and family' & 'Development of WISE HF *Sanhujori* Guideline'. The main research interests include multicultural women's health and childbirth and *Sanhujori*, contraception.



Eun Kwang Yoo

Professor Eunkwang Yoo, RN, Ph.D teaches Nursing at the School of Nursing, Hanyang University located in Seoul Korea. She began her career as a faculty of Women's Health Nursing in 1982 after receiving B.A. (1978) from Hanyang University, M.S.(1980) in Nursing from Yonsei University, and a Ph.D. in Nursing (1993) from University of California, San Francisco(UCSF) as a Fulbright Doctoral Grantee. She has been a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Boston College, School of Nursing (2007~2008), a vice president of Korean Fulbright Alumni since 2004 and a Chair of Korean *Sanhujori* Academy since 1999. Professor Yoo, a leading authority on Women's health nursing, especially the pioneer of *Sanhujori*, Korean traditional postpartum care, and IPC (Integrated Postpartum Care), is the author of 'East meets West- Integrated postpartum care - *Sanhujori* & nursing care' and 'Contemporary *Sanhujori*' and co-author of 24 books including 'My mom health JUMP - Joy Ultra Mom Program' & 'My mom health *Sanhujori*' with many other articles. Her recent research interest is to develop a system for connection of health knowledge with consumer's everyday life. She was selected as a Marquis Who's Who in America (2013 Edition) and TOP 100 Health Professionals in America 2013.



Yeun Mi Kim

Professor Yeunmi Kim, RN, Ph.D teaches Nursing at the School of Nursing, Kyungbuk College located in Kyungbuk province of South Korea, since 2014. She began her career as a nurse of Ewha Women's University Medical Center from 1992 to 2000 after graduated Jeju Hala University(1990), M.S.(2011) in Elderly Dementia Nursing from Hanyang University, and a Ph.D. in Women Health Nursing (2015) from Hanyang University. She had worked a researcher (2012~ 2014) at the School of Nursing, Hanyang University located in Seoul Korea. And she had worked a chief (2007~2010) at the Health Center, Kyungdong University located in Gangwon province of South Korea. The main research interests include multicultural couple's holistic health and Korean nursing, and elder.