

*Human Communication.* A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association.  
Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 213 – 230.

**Communication Experiences of Korean Expatriates in the U.S.:  
A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

Yang\_Soo Kim  
Middle Tennessee State University

Yang-Soo Kim, Ph. D. (University of Oklahoma, 2003) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech & Theatre at Middle Tennessee State University. Direct all correspondence to: [yskim@mtsu.edu](mailto:yskim@mtsu.edu)

### **Abstract**

The present study examines the communication experiences of Korean expatriates in the United States. Y. Y. Kim's (1988, 2001) Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory provides the basis for offering an explanation of the linkage between communication competence and psychological health of Korean expatriates vis-à-vis American sociocultural milieu. The analysis uses portions of verbal transcripts obtained through 20 in-depth personal interviews between February and September 2002. The results show that host language competence, cultural knowledge, and cultural differences reflected on verbal behavior and work styles are important sources of psychological challenge for the Korean expatriates. While Korean expatriates are involved in different communication activities with host nationals and deal with different realities in and outside work, the positive and genuine relationship with co-workers contribute to their positive life experience overseas. As Kim's theory predicts, the overall outcome of the study affirms that communication is the central force in the adaptation of expatriates by promoting psychological health in an unfamiliar host cultural environment.

### **Communication Experiences of Korean Expatriates in the U.S.: A Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation**

The business environment is becoming increasingly global. To implement global corporate strategies and manage subsidiaries, many companies dispatch employees, particularly managerial and professional personnel, on overseas assignments. The number of expatriate assignments has been increasing and this trend is expected to continue (Windham International, 1998). In 1999, 80% of midsize and large companies sent professionals abroad, and 45% planned to increase the number of employees on foreign assignment (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Like other sojourners, business expatriates immerse themselves in a new, unfamiliar cultural environment. For such employees and their families, adjusting to life overseas poses a significant hurdle (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Tung, 1988).

Nearly 40% of American expatriates return early (Kealey, 1996), owing to the inability to adjust to a foreign cultural environment rather than to a lack of technical competence (Stroh, Dennis, & Cramer, 1994; Kramer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001). This retention failure incurs serious costs to both companies and individual employees. Early termination of just one expatriate costs an American company as much as \$1 million (Shannonhouse, 1996), in addition to various non-financial costs such as damaged reputation, lost business opportunities, and lost market or competitive shares (Black & Gregersen, 1991; Copeland & Griggs, 1985; Naumann, 1992; Shannonhouse, 1996). Withdrawal from international assignments is found to be costly for expatriates and their families as well, resulting in diminished self-esteem, impaired relationships, and interrupted careers, in addition to a possible adverse impact on qualified co-workers (Stroh, 1995; Tung, 1988).

Practical concerns such as these have been the primary driving force behind an extended body of sojourner studies. Many studies have approached the phenomenon of expatriate adjustment from the perspective of "culture shock" (e.g., Oberg, 1960; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Some studies have generated conceptual models to examine the process and mechanisms of expatriate adjustment, highlighting the roles of attribution, uncertainty reduction and expectations (e.g., Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991; Black, 1992). Other studies have identified specific factors that promote expatriate adjustment, including personality traits (e.g., Harrison et al., 1996; Shaffer et al., 2006;), spousal or family adjustment (e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991; Torbiorn, 1982), cultural novelty (e.g., Dunbar, 1994; Stroh, Dennis, & Cramer, 1994; Van Vianen et al., 2004), organizational support (e.g., Black & Gregersen, 1991; Gomez-Meija & Balkin, 1987; Kramer & Wayne, 2004; Krell, 2005), previous international experience (e.g., Selmer, 2002; Takeuchi et al., 2005), and job characteristics (e.g., Aycan, 1997; Guy & Patton, 1996).

However, driven primarily by practical needs and interests such as selection, training and repatriation, most expatriate adjustment studies have been descriptive and atheoretical (Aycan, 1997). Factors of interpersonal and mass communication activities and of the host environment itself have not been examined. As noted by Shaffer, Harrison, and Gilley (1999), such studies have tended to address only a small number of factors as antecedents while excluding many other factors that are likely to influence the sojourner adaptation process.

The present study investigates the communication experiences of Korean business expatriates in the United States to explore qualitative insight into their process of cross-cultural adaptation. The study examines how the Korean expatriates' communication experiences are related to their psychological well-being vis-à-vis their host cultural milieu (i.e., American

society). Specifically, the important related issues were posed as the following three research questions: 1) What kinds of contact and communication activities do Korean expatriates have with local people?; 2) What kind of communication-related difficulties do Korean expatriates face?; and 3) What is the overall feeling and life experience of Korean expatriates in their host cultural milieu? The present analysis utilizes verbatim transcripts from face-to-face, in-depth interviews, conducted in the United States between February and September 2002.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

Guiding this investigation is Y.Y. Kim's (1988, 2001, 2005) Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory. Grounded in an open systems perspective, Y. Y. Kim's theory (1988, 2001, 2005) approaches cross-cultural adaptation not as a specific analytic unit (or variable) but as the entirety of the evolutionary process an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment. Cross-cultural adaptation is therefore explained in terms of a dynamic interplay of the person and the environment. By placing adaptation at the intersection of the person and the environment, Y. Y. Kim defines cross-cultural adaptation as "the entirety of the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (Y. Y. Kim, 2001, p. 31). Implicit in this definition is the goal of achieving an overall person-environment "fit" that entails "almost always a compromise, a vector in the internal structure of culture and the external pressure of environment" (Sahlins, 1964, p. 136).

Based on this systemic conception of cross-cultural adaptation, the theory addresses two basic questions: (1) *What is the essential nature of the adaptation process individual settlers undergo over time?* and (2) *Why are some settlers more successful than others in attaining a level of fitness in the host environment?* The first question is addressed in the form of a *process model* that presents a three-pronged psychological movement Y. Y. Kim refers to as the *stress-adaptation-growth dynamic* — a movement in the generally forward and upward direction of increased chances of success in meeting the demands of the host environment. The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic is not explained as playing out in a smooth, steady, and linear progression, but in a dialectic, cyclic, and continual "draw-back-to-leap" pattern. The spiral model explains that humans, as open systems, have the natural tendency to resist evolution accompanied by the destruction of the old structure. This tendency manifests itself in various forms of psychological resistance, such as selective attention, denial, avoidance and withdrawal, as well as in compulsively altruistic behavior, cynicism and hostility. Yet, no open system can stabilize itself forever. If it were so, nothing would come of evolution. The state of misfit and a heightened awareness in the state of stress serve as the very same forces that propel individuals to overcome the predicament and partake in the active development of new habits. What follows the dynamic stress-adaptation disequilibrium, according to the theory, is subtle *growth*. Periods of stress pass as settlers work out new ways of handling problems, owing to the creative forces of self-reflexivity of human mentation.

Building on the process model, the theory turns to the second basic question: "Why do some settlers adapt faster than others?" or "Given the same length of time, why do some settlers attain a higher level of adaptation?" Integrating various factors addressed by different investigators as constituting and/or predicting differing levels or rates of adaptive change, Y. Y. Kim (1988, 2001, 2005) addresses this question in a structural model, depicted in *Figure 1*. The core of this structure is the dimension of personal communication, or *host communication competence* (Dimension 1), which is defined as the cognitive, affective and operational capacity to communicate in accordance with the host communication symbols and meaning systems. This

dimension serves as the very engine that pushes individuals along the adaptive path. Inseparably linked with host communication competence are the activities of *host social communication* (Dimension 2), through which strangers participate in interpersonal and mass communication activities of the host environment. Activities of *ethnic social communication* (Dimension 3) provide distinct, subcultural experiences of interpersonal and mass communication with fellow co-ethnics. Interacting with the personal and social (host, ethnic) communication activities are the conditions of the *host environment* (Dimension 4), including the degrees of receptivity and conformity pressure in the local population as well as the strength of the ethnic group. The individual's *predisposition* (Dimension 5) — consisting of preparedness for the new environment, proximity (or distance) of the individual's ethnicity to that of the natives, and the adaptive personality attributes of openness, strength, and positivity — influences the subsequent development in personal and social communication activities.

Together, all of the factors identified above directly or indirectly contribute to explaining and predicting differential rates or levels of *intercultural transformation* (Dimension 6) within a given time period. The theory identifies three key facets of intercultural transformation: increased functional fitness, psychological health and the emergence of an identity orientation that reaches beyond a single culture. The level of intercultural transformation, in turn, helps to explain and predict the levels of all other dimensions. The six dimensions of factors together constitute an interactive and functional model, in which all the linkages indicate mutual stimulations (and not unidirectional causations), identified in 21 theorems (see Y. Y. Kim, 2001, pp. 91-92).

### Methods

The present study is based on an analysis of verbatim transcripts from in-depth personal interviews with Korean expatriates conducted in the U.S. between February and September 2002.

#### Participants

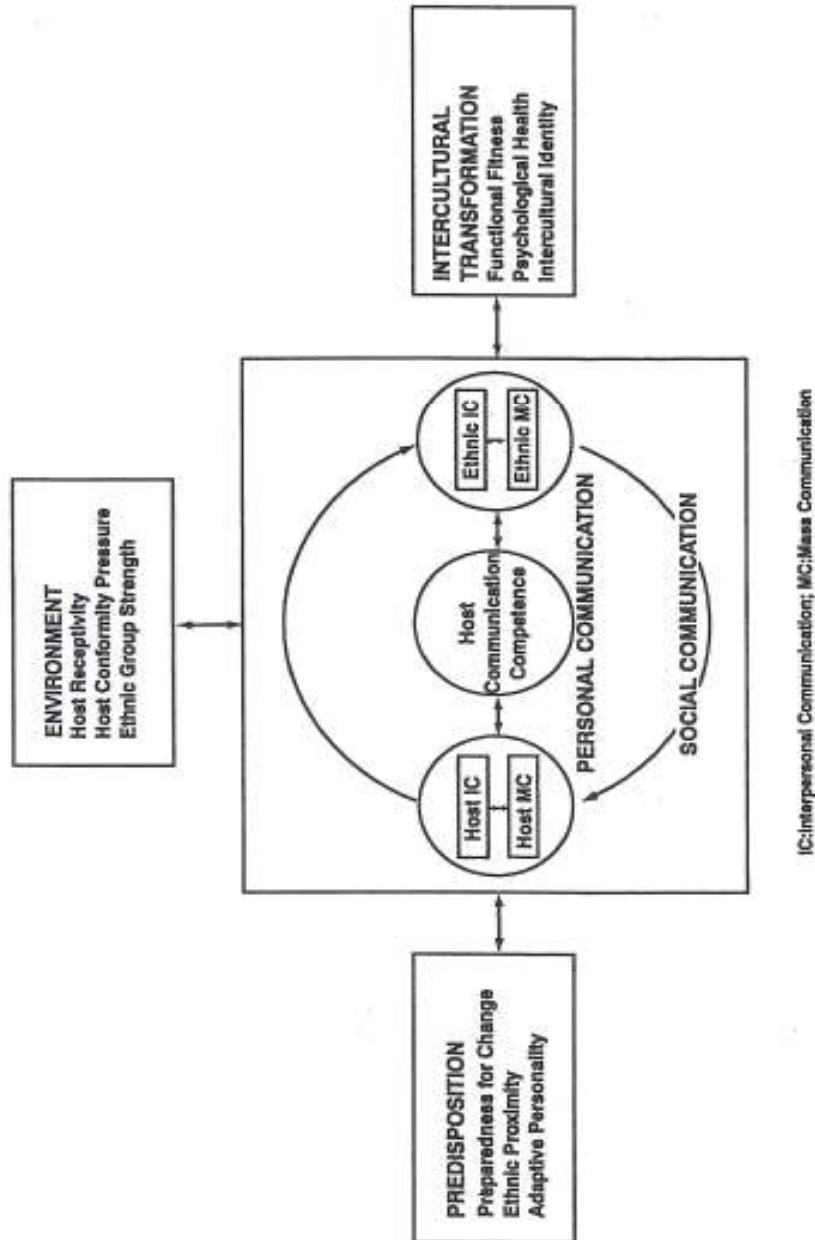
The participants in this study were Korean expatriate employees working in the U.S. The Korean expatriate group for this study was comprised of Korean-born employees of U.S. subsidiaries, joint ventures, overseas branch offices, and multinational corporations located in the United States. This study's aim was to investigate individual expatriates and their communication and adaptation experiences when they were new to a different host culture; thus, Korean Americans who were born and raised in the U.S. were not considered for this study.

For the interview, participants were selected by using a quota sampling method. Twenty Korean respondents were chosen from among those who had completed a questionnaire survey, based on the respondents' age and length of stay. (A survey of 106 Korean expatriates was the first stage of research; findings from the survey are not included for this analysis) (See Y.S. Kim, 2003; Kim & Kim, 2005; Kim & Kim (in press) for findings from the survey). All twenty Korean interviewees were male. The average age of the Korean interviewees was 39.7 years old (SD = 5.2 years; Range: 32–50 years) while the average length of stay was 3.5 years (SD = 2.1 years; Range: 5 months - 10 years). Fifteen interviewees had a bachelor's degree (75%) and five had a master's degree (25%). Nine interviewees (45%) had lived in a foreign country before coming to the U.S. and six had had prior intercultural training (30%).

#### The Interview Procedures

All interviews were conducted by the author in Korean, based on a Korean version of the interview questionnaire. The shared background of the interviewer with the interviewees (ethnic origin and experience as an expatriate) helped to draw more frank and candid opinions and

**Figure 1: Y. Y. Kim's Structural Model: Factors Influencing Cross-Cultural Adaptation**  
 (Source: Y. Y. Kim, 2001, p. 87).



impressions of American people and society from the respondents. All interviews took place in a

conference room or reception hall at their place of work, during working hours, and took approximately 40 minutes each. Interviews began with an exchange of personal information (i.e., age, gender, length of stay, education, etc.) after each interviewee had signed the consent form. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety, with the written consent of the interviewees.

Interview questions were originally written in English. Interview questions were then translated into Korean and the Korean version was back-translated into English by a bilingual Korean. Among the topics covered in the interview, open-ended interview questions dealt with the main research variables: communication ability and communication-related difficulties with local people (“host communication competence”), experiences of interacting with local people (“interpersonal communication”), and overall feelings and positive/unpleasant life experiences in the host country (“psychological health”).

Regarding *host communication competence*, questions included different communication styles the interviewees found between communicating with co-ethnics and communicating with host nationals: “It is likely you have opportunities to interact with American people both in and outside of your work. Do you find any differences between communicating with Koreans and communicating with Americans?” and communication-related difficulties they experienced when interacting with local people both at work and outside the workplace: “Have you ever experienced difficulties in communicating with American people in or outside of the work environment?”. Based on the responses, follow-up questions were used to elicit specific incidents and typical experiences illustrating these differences and difficulties, along with coping strategies used to deal with these difficulties.

With respect to *interpersonal communication*, one question was asked to indicate the amount of daily interaction with host nationals both at work and outside the workplace: “Of all your daily conversations (at work or outside work), approximately what percentage of them do you have with American people?” Another question was asked about the purpose and nature of these interactions: “In what capacities and for what reasons, both in and out of work, do you interact with American people?” followed by a question about the types of social activities with host nationals: “What kinds of socializing do you do with American people?”.

Concerning *psychological health*, the interviewees were asked to describe their positive and/or unpleasant life experiences while living in the host country: “What are some of the positive/unpleasant experiences you have had while living in the U.S. so far?” their general feelings about their life in the host country: “Overall, how are you feeling about your present life in the U.S. as regards your life experiences interacting with Americans in and outside work?” and their desire to return to the country after this assignment: “If you have another chance to work overseas in the future, would you like to come back to the U.S.?”. Follow-up questions were used to allow the respondents to provide specific reasons why they wanted or did not want to return to the host country.

## **Results**

Interview data were analyzed based on a portion of the qualitative verbal responses which were relevant to the interviewees’ personal adaptation experiences in the host environment. The interviewees’ comments and testimonials in response to the interview questions serve as the basis for addressing the three research questions posed above: 1) to identify the communication-related difficulties that Korean expatriates experience in relating to local people; 2) to investigate the kinds of contact and communication activities that Korean expatriates have with local people; 3) to identify the overall feelings that Korean expatriates have in their life overseas.

In analyzing qualitative interview data, all questions and responses to open-ended questions were transcribed in their entirety by the investigator in Korean. After transcription, the verbatim data were grouped into common categories based on emerging themes of communication difficulties, interpersonal contact and communication, and overall feelings and intercultural experiences in the U.S. Before being presented, the findings from the Korean interviews were translated back into English by the investigator and verified by a Korean bilingual.

### **Profiles of Interviewees**

A brief profile of five of the twenty interviewees is presented in the following. These five respondents represent all 20 respondents in terms of geographical area and line of business.

**Interviewee #1.** He is a male in his mid-forties. He has been in the U.S. for more than three years. He has a bachelor's degree and is general manager of a Korean shipping company and in charge of general administration. He lived in the Netherlands for two years before his career in the U.S., but has not taken any intercultural training. He commented that his interaction with local people is limited to coworkers at the shipyard. In addition, the fact that his American coworkers are all employees under his supervision might affect his relationship with them and their mutual interaction. He says that as short-term sojourners, expatriates have an experience merely on the surface, unlike long-term immigrants.

**Interviewee #2.** He is a forty-year-old male. He earned his master's degree in the U.S. and has been in the U.S. for four years. He is the general manager of a shipping company and is in charge of coordinating the shipping between the Seoul headquarters and overseas customers. He had never been in a foreign country and never received any intercultural training before he came to the U.S. He mentioned that one of the most interesting things in his intercultural experiences is the strong and clear boundary between private and public affairs in business.

**Interviewee #3.** He is a male in his late forties. He had been in the U.S. for three years during his first international assignment prior to this one, and had been in the U.S. for nine months at the time of this interview. He has a bachelor's degree and is general manager of a Korean bank, where he handles loans and letters of credit. He had never lived in other foreign countries before coming to the U.S. and had not received any intercultural training prior to this international assignment. He has a positive perception of American society. He commented that to be mainstreamed into the American society, migrants need to master the host language and culture. He gave insightful comments on the interview questions as well.

**Interviewee #4.** He is a male and forty years old. He has a bachelor's degree and is a manager of a Korean company. His job includes procurement within the aerospace industry. He had been in the U.S. for almost three years at the time of the interview. He had never been in foreign countries and had not received any intercultural training prior to this international assignment. Due to his work assignment, he mostly interacts with American coworkers daily. He pointed out that one of the most positive things in his life in the U.S is the well-developed public education system.

**Interviewee #5.** He is a male in his early forties. He is a general manager of a Korean electronics company, in charge of the business and technology division. He had been in the U.S. more than three years at the time of the interview. Before his current job assignment, he took part in a company-sponsored overseas language program and on-the-job training in the U.S. for three months. Although during that overseas program he described his interaction with local people as "a bad experience," he described his current overseas life as "a really positive experience." Like other Korean interviewees, his interaction with local people is largely limited

to coworkers at work and business relationships.

### **Communication-related Difficulties**

Almost all of the Korean interviewees reported that cultural differences, reflected in verbal behavior and work style, contribute strongly to difficulties in their interactions with host nationals. Regarding verbal behavior, one Korean interviewee commented on the informality in interactions with his supervisor:

Here [in the U.S.], people call each other by their name. I saw people addressing their supervisor directly [calling their first name]. . . . I am envious of them. . . .In Korea, we almost forget about our name and we go by our titles. . . .Besides when they sit talking with their boss. . .with their feet on the table and listening to their boss. . .and they finish when they are done. . .There is a clear-cut boundary between private and public setting [in supervisor and subordinate relations].

One interviewee mentioned the individualistic/direct communication style of American coworkers. This communication style is frustrating because this is different from a Korean style:

I have lived in Korea more than 30 years and I am used to Korean styles [indirect communication]. . . .Sometimes. . . .even if I need him [American coworkers] and want to ask him questions. . . . if he has no time and it's not in his scope of work. . . .he turns down my request very coldly. . . .I wouldn't be able to follow this part. . . .because this is not our [Korean] style that we are used to.

Along with different verbal behaviors, cultural differences are reflected in work styles. According to the Korean interviewees, the American approach to management, based on logic rather than hierarchy, creates conflicts between Koreans and Americans.

One interviewee commented:

This might be a cultural difference. In Korean business style, sometimes, prompt changes should be done by the direction from the top management. It is kind of one way communication without any explanation. . . .However, Americans constantly ask questions (why?) and seek logical explanation or justification on the issue. . . .They [Americans] want us to follow American business style. . . .This might cause some conflict between two sides. . . .Different business practice and way of thinking [Asian style] – Americans have difficulty understanding it. . . .

Different styles of maintaining business relationships were reported as well. The abrupt attitude change of an American partner was a great surprise to Koreans, who are familiar with relationship-oriented business. One interviewee explained:

Even though Americans okayed whatever I say, in some point [there is no more consensus], they turned away and ceased the business relationship. . . .We have worked together and had a business relationship for a couple of years. . . .Koreans tend to try to work on the contract and business relationship. . . .Americans look okay and get along with business partners well. . . .All of sudden. . .they turn away. . . .To me it is very cold and merciless. . . .It is different.

Culture differences were also seen in a clear sense of time dividing work from other times. One interviewee stated, “They [Americans] have a strong sense of privacy. . . .a clear boundary between their private life after work and public life at work. . . .So, I should not violate

this. . .For example, after five, it is not a good idea to ask for people [American workers] to go to dinner even if I am a boss.”

This different work value provides a kind of shock to typical Koreans, who are accustomed to a corporate system which values hierarchy and has less rigid boundaries between in- and out-of-work contexts.

Another difference was reported by one Korean interviewee regarding attitudes about how to deal with an unclear job situation. He explained his difficulty in dealing with American co-workers:

While Koreans are likely to cope with unexpected situations once they receive job orders, the Americans always request clear and complete information such as instructions or job descriptions. For example, they ask, “give me a clear job description. The clear scope of work or boundary of my authority is not given to deal with things under these circumstances.” Even though this might be attributed to cultural differences, I think there is considerable difference in work style between Americans and Koreans.

In addition to verbal behaviors/work styles, another source of intercultural challenges reported by Korean interviewees is insufficient host language competence and cultural knowledge. One interviewee explained: “Most of all, it [communication difficulty] is English [language competence]. Even though expatriates who have a good English competence were dispatched to the U.S. and had language training, we [expatriates] cannot say our English is perfect. Setting aside discussing business issues with co-workers at work, we cannot fully express ourselves when we have a social conversation at the party, which poses a hurdle for us to get involved in more in-depth conversation.”

One interviewee revealed his frustration related to this language issue:

[W]hen I take the driving license test or when I go to a market. . .Americans believe that if you are here you should be able to speak English. . .In Korea, if an American speaks Korean, Koreans pay more attention to him and try to help him. . .Just because an American tries to speak Korean, Koreans try to figure out the meaning based on the context. . .Americans, here when they interact with Koreans or me, they speak English with the same native tone and accent without considering my position [as a foreigner]. . .If I don’t understand their English, this is my problem. . . .

Host language competence is not only related to stress and frustration but also related to how expatriates are treated by local people. One interviewee explained: “As I told you before. . .if we have trouble communicating with each other. . .then they are unwilling to. . .interact with people who cannot speak fluent English.”

Another interviewee explained his experience:

When I went to visit the southern part, I could feel that. . .it is an unfamiliar place. . . . Because of my [accented] English, I feel like they look down on me. . .particularly at the hotel. I believe that this treatment comes from mainly the lack of language competence. Of course, there are other factors like skin color. But language is the prominent factor. If you do not speak the host language [English] fluently, along with your appearance [ethnic marker], you will be treated based on that.

Along with host language competence, the degree of cultural knowledge is related to difficulty in Korean expatriates’ interaction with host nationals. One interviewee reported:

In doing business in Korea, we don't have much social talk after getting into contract. Here in the U.S., before making a business deal, we need common knowledge to have social conversation. . . .When I am talking about the current issues that most Americans are interested in, such as sports, politics, and culture. . . if I do not know much about these issues, I feel like I am having a wall between me and them [Americans] and our conversation becomes boring. . . So, I think I should have knowledge about those issues.

### **Host Interpersonal Communication Contact and Communication Activities**

As short-term sojourners, Korean expatriates reported relatively limited interactions and personal relationships involving host nationals. They reported that their contact with host nationals was generally limited to coworkers at work or with business partners (e.g., buyer or seller). They socialized during activities such as golf, a company party or going to church. (See Kim & Kim, 2005).

Since expatriates work at the company and carry their daily lives outside the organization, their interaction with host nationals occurs in two different contexts—i.e., in and outside work. While the Korean interviewees reported positive relationships with coworkers mostly at work, they also reported different challenging experiences when they interacted with local people outside work.

One interviewee commented about his positive life experience associating with his coworkers or business partners:

I believe America is the nice place to live. . . .It is a free country. As long as you keep the boundaries, you have freedom to do anything. . . . Another thing is our staffs and coworkers. . . . I don't know whether my higher position in this company might contribute to this nice treatment. . .but I know there are many nice people. I am really grateful for them. . .They [American staff and co-workers] treat me really well. They never perceive me as a foreigner but take care of me as part of the team/family at work. I think that I have such good people at my work.

Another Korean interviewee observed:

I heard Americans are individualistic. So, I presumed that it is very difficult to have a relationship with Americans because of cultural differences. . . .It takes a while to build up a close personal relationship apart from business. On the contrary, in my staying here, if I open my heart first, they open their heart too. I met many people like that. . . becoming friends. . . .Once we get acquainted. . .become friends. . .I cannot feel any difference between Americans and Koreans. . . .If I do my best in treating others, that will work anywhere. It is the same here [in the U.S.]. Our co-workers are like that.

Along with their positive and genuine feelings about interaction with Americans at work, some other interviewees reported different attitudes and treatment from local people outside work. One interviewee commented on his life experience when his status is or isn't disclosed:

In my relationship with people [Americans], in most cases, I meet with people on business and we exchange our business cards. They are very generous. . . .I could not have feeling that they treat me differently. If I meet people in another context [outside work without identifying my position as business person]. . .probably I could sense that [different treatment]. For example, when I went to play golf by myself, I happened to team up with some Americans that I have not known. . . .I could not join their

conversation. . . something different. After I disclosed myself and position at the company, they seemed to show interest to me.

Some other interviewees reported unpleasant experiences with local people outside of work.

One interviewee explained:

I have no problem at all when I interact with Americans at work on business. Most of them treat me favorably and kindly. However, outside work, it might be different. For example, I had a car wreck. I was turning left on my signal and the other car hit my car carelessly. It was his fault. Nonetheless, he treated me real badly. I sensed that he looked down on me and mistreated me because I am an Asian.

Another interviewee reported a similar unpleasant life experience:

. . . At the airport, when I go through the immigration process. . . well. . . I believe it is the same process applicable to everybody. On the one hand, however, if I were an American, they would not be treating [bothering] me like this, I assume. I felt like they treat me as if I was desperate to come to this country. . . I was one of those people [refugees]. . . As a stranger. . . as a Korean living in the U.S., this is the part I should embrace as long as I live in this country. . .

Most of the Korean interviewees enjoyed their status as expatriates and this played an important part in their relationship with people at work. However, outside work, when their minority status with relatively less powerful ethnic group strength stood out, they faced the reality of unexpected or different attitudes from local people. This might suggest that in communication activities involving host nationals, expatriates dealt with dualistic worlds – in and outside work – and they had different feelings depending on the context.

### **Psychological health**

Most of the interview respondents had very positive impressions about American society/culture in general. They described their images toward American society/culture as: “a land of opportunity that hard work should be paid off,” “not corrupted society,” “convenient societal system for everybody, including minorities,” and “positive individualistic culture respecting individual rights and privacy.” Coupled with these positive images about the host society, regarding their overall life in the U.S., the Korean interviewees generally perceived their intercultural life experience overseas as rewarding and positive.

Almost all of the interviewees replied that they would come back if they have a chance in the future, because of the positive aspects of American culture/systems and the good living conditions.

As one of the positive experiences, almost all of the interviewees highly appreciated the good public education system. One interviewee explained:

I am hoping to come back. . . The most positive thing is public education. . . When I drive my kid to school, I have a chance to talk with teachers. . . They are so nice. I don't know if they treat me kindly because I am a parent. . . I could not find any discrimination against my child. . . If my kid is pretty good at something, they [teachers] always give compliments and encourage him. There is a big difference in teaching styles between the U.S. and Korea. Thus, we can raise our kid very ideally in the U.S. here, I believe. . . For educational environment. . . it is worthwhile to work overseas like this.

Along with public education, one Korean interviewee indicated the better quality of life in the U.S. as a rewarding life experience:

I wish I could have a chance to come back again. . .Speaking of the life in the U.S., I would like to say this, in Korea, with relation to the life and work, I could not have the chance to self-actualize myself. . .too much tied up with work. . .no time to look back over myself. . .spend time with coworkers drinking after work. So, the life was very in a rush. Here, even though I work as much as I did in Korea, I have more time with family. This is the precious opportunity for me.

Another interviewee reported his adaptive experience:

I think my life is very positive. . .First time I began my life here in the U.S., I was feeling uncomfortable. But when I get to know about societal system and adjust myself well, it is very convenient living. The American lifestyles and customs are very convenient and comfortable in many aspects. There is no reason for us to reject it.

Along with the predominantly positive experiences, some expatriates commented on their concerns, such as family (spouse) adjustment, as important challenges during their sojourn:

My wife had a hard time [when she was here first]. . .She is happy now upon hearing that we will be leaving soon. . .She is more adapted now. . .She had a hard time in her first six months. . .We lived in a place where there were no friends nearby. . .She stayed at home by herself. . .It is best for Koreans to live in Korea. . .I see many [Korean] immigrants. . .They are rich and own good homes. . .but I think their life is hard. . .Even if I have a chance to immigrate, I would not do that.

Other interviewees showed concern about the reentry issue for himself and his family after completing his assignment. Two respondents explained their concerns:

This [America] is the best place for education for children to spend their childhood. One thing is that they should go back home someday. . .If they continue to live here, it would be good. . .I am really worried about my child at the thought of their readjustment to the school system in Korea. . .I am afraid my kid. . .has more difficulty readjusting than me. . .This is my concern.

It was a great experience to me. . .It is positive [about the life in the U.S.]. . .One issue is that I spent 3 years overseas. . .connected to [people in] Korea via internet or phone. . .In 3 years I have to return, not live here permanently. . .There is some disconnection. . .how this will affect my life at work back home. . .This is my concern.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of the present analysis has been to examine the communication experience of Korean expatriates in the U.S. in the process of individual adaptation. Y. Y. Kim's (1988, 2001) Cross-cultural Adaptation Theory has served as the basis for examining communication activities which have been posed as three research questions: 1) What kinds of contact and communication activities do Korean expatriates have with local people? 2) What kind of communication-related difficulties do Korean expatriates have? and 3) What is the overall feeling and life experience of Korean expatriates in their host cultural milieu?

The present analysis is based on the data from face-to-face in-depth personal interviews conducted in the United States between February and September 2002. The results of the study show that for Korean interviewees, cultural differences have played out in different verbal

behaviors and work styles, which present intercultural challenges. In verbal behaviors, individualistic/direct communication and informality are revealed as sources of communication difficulty. Culture differences are also reflected in work styles as there is a clear distinction between life in and outside work, which presents a challenge to Korean interviewees who are more used to a collectivistic/relationship-oriented culture which has less-clear boundaries between private life and public affairs (i.e., work). This cultural orientation even played out during the interview process. When this investigator conducted the interviews, most of them took place at the respondent's workplace during their working hours. This reflects the Korean culture, which sees private life and organizational tasks holistically.

In addition, two important sources of psychological challenges were revealed – host language competence, which is related to the quality of treatment by local people, and cultural knowledge, which could inhibit effective business communication.

In their interaction with host nationals, Korean expatriates seemed to deal with two worlds in their relationship to host nationals: within- and outside work. Coupled with their expatriate status, these two different settings presented different realities: Korean expatriates perceive their interaction with co-workers inside work as meaningful, which contributed to the positive life experience in their life overseas, but they reported more frustration when they dealt with Americans/host environment outside of work. This status was also an important factor influencing the limited perception of expatriates as short-term sojourners, which was reported by some of the Korean interviewees. One interviewee commented about this limited perception colored by a “traveler's mentality”:

My perception [about host interpersonal ties and the host environment] is very positive. However, my viewpoint may be skewed. I mainly interact with American managers at work and have no interaction with the Korean community. The reality other immigrants face in daily context might be totally different from mine. . . .In 2-3 years, as short-term sojourners, we are going back home [Korea]. We do not take the life here serious that much regardless of life situations. . . .kind of life of sojourners. . . .Therefore, we might be in the position to perceive the American society in rather more positive light.

Most of the Korean interviewees perceived their life overseas as very positive and rewarding. They reported on the public education system and privileges they could enjoy from the host system as expatriates, as well as on some concerns, like family adjustment and reentry shock.

Theoretically, even though expatriates as short-term sojourners might have different motivations as compared with long-term immigrants, the study clearly shows that cross-cultural adaptation occurs through communicative interaction vis-à-vis their host cultural milieu. Most of the Korean interviewees said that the promotion of their host language competence and host cultural knowledge is related to their overall psychological well being in their life overseas. In addition, although the context and interaction partner might be important factors for Korean expatriates' interaction with local people (i.e., in and outside business), meaningful ongoing relationships with co-workers at work is related to the overall positive life experiences of Korean expatriates. As predicted by Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory, it shows the centrality of communication in the process of adaptation in their expatriation. There is a reciprocal relationship between communication and psychological health. One Korean interviewee explained his adaptive change in the process of adaptation:

It has been changed a lot. At that time [when he began his life in the U.S.], the life in the U.S. . . well. . . I was scared. It has not been long since I came to the U.S. . .

uncomfortable. . . . When I interacted with Americans, if something unexpected happens, how could I deal with the situation? . . . I was nervous. What should I do? Now two years have passed. I might be able to deal with the unexpected situation. . . . I can express myself clear. . . . I [can] get what I want to get. . . . Even in hard situations, I can explain my situation effectively. So, as compared with before, I cannot feel any difficulty anymore.

Methodologically, the present study uses interviews to describe the communication and life experiences of Korean expatriates in the American cultural milieu. This emic perspective of using in-depth personal interviews yields richer information on the practical aspects of participatory experience in the field and allows the researcher to have a clearer understanding of the participants' reality, i.e., the personal and authentic experiences of expatriates living in a different host cultural milieu. This provides accounts from the expatriates themselves, which is closer to the interviewees' own reality and helps illuminate some relevant facets of the concrete everyday reality in which expatriates find themselves.

Practically, the present study provides some insights into the adaptation experiences in a different host cultural environment. The findings show that the expatriates' knowledge and understanding of their host culture and active involvement in interpersonal communication with host nationals will help them to meet intercultural challenges arising from the process of adjustment. Given that for Koreans host language competence constitutes an important factor in successful adjustment, and enhancement of active involvement in host interpersonal communication and treatment by local people beyond a work context, training programs for international firms should focus on knowledge and understanding of the host culture and communication systems, particularly with respect to the language and cultural practices of the host society. As some of the interviewees reported, family adjustment is another significant issue in their life overseas. Therefore, companies should take this factor into account when they dispatch their employees—such as by incorporating it into the training program. Reentry shock has also been revealed as one of the concerns that Korean expatriates have. Thus, international companies should seriously consider long-term planning in expatriates' management, which incorporates reentry and repatriation. The globalizing trend in business organizations makes the need for cross-cultural competency more important than ever before (Gertsen, 1990; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Nauman, 1992). International firms could improve retention by offering comprehensively designed, extensive training programs to their employees, leading to more successful overseas business experiences.

Because of the small sample size, the present findings are to be interpreted and generalized with some caution. They can, however, be made less problematic as consistent findings are obtained over time across different studies involving a wider range of nationalities working in different countries (e.g., American employees in Indonesia or Swedish employees in Japan). Furthermore, studies can be done regarding different types of sojourner groups (e.g., refugees, immigrants, and international students) in different countries (particularly, a non-Western cultural context). Also, in addition to communication activities, the study would be more complete if predisposition and environmental factors were included in future studies.

#### References

- Aycan, Z. (1997). Acculturation of expatriate managers: a process model of adjustment and performance. In D. M. Saunders (Series Ed.) & Z. Aycan (Vol. Ed.), *New approaches to employee management: Vol. 4. Expatriate management: Theory and research* (pp. 1-40).

Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, Inc.

- Black, J. (1992). Coming home: the relationship of expatriate expectations with repatriation adjustment and job performance. *Human Relations, 45*, 177-192.
- Black, J., & Gregersen, H. (1991). Antecedents to cross-cultural adjustment for expatriates in Pacific Rim assignments. *Human Relations, 44*, 497-515.
- Black, J., & Gregersen, H. (1999). The right way to manage expatriates. *Harvard Business Review, 77*, 52-62.
- Black, J., Mendenhall, M., & Oddou, G. (1991). Toward a comprehensive model of international adjustment: an integration of multiple theoretical perspectives. *Academy of Management Review, 16*, 291-317.
- Copeland, L., & Griggs, L. (1985). *Going International*. New York: Random House.
- Dunbar, E. (1994). The German executive in the U.S. work and social environment: Exploring role demands. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 18*, 277-291.
- Gertsen, M. (1990, December). Intercultural competence and expatriates. *International Journal of Human Research Management, 341-361*.
- Gomez-Mejia, L., & Balkin, E. (1987). The determinants of managerial satisfaction with the expatriation and repatriation process. *Journal of Management Development, 6*, 7-17.
- Guy, B., & Patton, W. (1996). Managing the effects of culture shock and sojourner adjustment on the expatriate industrial sales force. *Industrial Marketing Management, 25*, 385-393.
- Harrison, J., Chadwick, M., & Scales, M. (1996). The relationship between cross-cultural adjustment and the personality variables of self-efficacy and self-monitoring. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 20*, 167-188.
- Kealey, D. (1996). The challenge of international personnel selection. In D. Landis & B. S. Bhagat (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (pp. 383-399). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, Y.S., & Kim, Y. Y. (in press). Communication patterns and psychological health in the process of cross-cultural adaptation: a study of American and Korean expatriate workers. *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*.
- Kim, Y.S., & Kim, Y. Y. (2005). *Communication patterns and psychological health in the process of cross-cultural adaptation: a study of American and Korean expatriate workers*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Boston, MA.

- Kim, Y. Y., & Kim, Y.S. (2004). The role of host environment in cross-cultural adaptation: a comparison of American expatriates in South Korea and their Korean counterparts in the United States. *Asian Communication Research*, 3, 5-25.
- Kim, Y. Y. (1988). *Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: an integrative theory*. Clevedon, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming Intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2005). Adapting to a new culture: An integrative communication theory. In W. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 375-400). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kramer, M., & Wayne, S. (2004). An examination of perceived organizational support as a multidimensional construct in the context of an expatriate assignment. *Journal of Management*, 30, 209-237.
- Krell, E. (2005). Budding Relationships. *HRMagazine*, 50, 114-118.
- Kramer, M., Wayne, S., & Jaworski, R. (2001). Sources of support and expatriate performance: The mediating role of expatriate adjustment. *Personal Psychology*, 54, 71-101.
- Mendenhall, M., & Oddou, G. (1985). The dimensions of expatriate acculturation: A review. *Academy of Management Review*, 10, 39-48.
- Naumann, E. (1992). A conceptual model of expatriate turnover. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 23, 499-531.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural Shock: Adjustment at new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7, 177-182.
- Sahlins, M. (1964). Culture and Environment: The Study of Cultural Ecology. In S. Tax (Ed.), *Horizons of Anthropology* (pp. 132-147). Chicago: Aldine.
- Selmer, J. (2002). Practice makes perfect? International experience and expatriate adjustment. *Management International Review*, 42, 71-88.
- Shaffer, M., Gregersen, H., & Harrison, D. (2006). You can take it with you: individual differences and expatriate effectiveness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 109-125.
- Shaffer, M., Harrison, D., & Gilley, K. (1999). Dimensions, determinants, and differences in the expatriate adjustment process. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30, 53-73.
- Shannonhouse, R. (1996, November 8). Overseas-assignment failures. *USA Today/International edition*, p. 8A.

- Stroh, L. (1995). Predicting turnover among repatriates: Can organizations affect retention rates? *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 6, 443-457.
- Stroh, L., Dennis, L., & Cramer, T. (1994). Predictors of expatriate adjustment. *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 2, 176-192.
- Takeuchi, R., Tesluk, P., & Yun, S. (2005). An integrative view of international experience. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, 85-100.
- Torbiorn, I. (1982). *Living abroad: Personal adjustment and personnel policy in the overseas setting*. New York: Wiley.
- Tung, R. (1988). *The new expatriates*. Cambridge: Balinger.
- Van Vianen, A., De APater, I., & Kristof-Brown, A. (2004). Fitting-in: surface- and deep-level cultural differences and expatriates' adjustment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 697-709.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The Psychology of Culture Shock*. Philadelphia: Routledge.
- Windham International and National Foreign Trade Council, Inc. (1998, June). *Global relocation trends: 1998 survey report*. New York: Windham International.