A Comparative Study of the Childrearing Practices of

White American Parents and Korean Parents

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I. Introduction:

A childrearing practice is an important process of creating social stratification. Childrearing practices promote different social class groups. My research with Professor Dennis Gilbert will compare and contrast the childrearing practices of white American parents as studied in Annette Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods* and Lilian Breslow Rubin’s *Worlds of Pain*, and the childrearing practices of Korean immigrant parents in the United States. In order to understand how they are different and why the differences are significant, this research will specifically focus on how and why race and ethnicity matter more than social class in terms of childrearing practices and their impact on social stratification. We will determine how and why the long term outcomes of white American working class families’ childrearing practices are not the same as Korean immigrant families.

II. Research Method:

My research method with Professor Gilbert is slightly different from Lareau’s study (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*. Lareau’s research method included naturalistic observations, interviews, and surveys. Lareau surveys 88 families and selects 12 families to observe and analyze the children (age 2
ranges from 9 to 10 year-old) and parents’ behaviors, which include childrearing practices. Like Lareau, my research will focus on parents who have children from nine to ten years old. Although a powerful methodology, my research will not involve the naturalistic observation approach as it is time consuming and seldom used in social science research. Instead, my research will examine secondary sources from Asian sociologists regarding the childrearing practices of Korean first generation immigrant parents in order to compare the practices to white American childrearing practices. In regards to the childrearing practices of white American parents, I will focus on secondary sources from American sociologists like Lareau and Rubin. In addition, I will conduct interviews with Korean immigrant parents in the New York City area. Professor Gilbert and I have designed key questions for the interviews with Korean parents who come from different social classes in South Korea.

**III. Why did Koreans immigrate to the United States?:**

To leave one’s homeland and immigrate to a foreign country, an immigrant must have extraordinary courage to face such extraordinary risks.
They often have to leave behind their cultural traditions, customs, jobs, and families when they immigrate to the United States. In this section, I will address why Koreans left their homeland and what they were looking for in the United States.

1. Background of Korean Immigrant Movements:

Koreans immigrated to the United States due to economic, educational, political, and family sponsorship reasons. The Korean immigration movement consists of three waves (Moon H. Jo 1999: 1). The first wave of Korean immigrants consisted of labor workers who came to the United States for economic reasons. On the Hawaiian Islands in 1905, the sugar plantation owners needed labor workers and hired Korean immigrants. After the end of the Korean War between South Korea and North Korea in 1951, the second wave of Korean immigrants to the United States began because of the political and social instability in Korea. The Immigration Act of 1965 enabled and encouraged more immigrants to immigrate to the United States. Thus, the third wave of Korean immigrants came after the Immigration Act of 1965.
2. Economic Reasons:

Economic survival is an important aspect of why Koreans chose to leave South Korea. The capitalist economy was, and still is, more unstable, and dynamic. Because South Korea’s market situation is more competitive compared to the United States, South Korea’s economy is in a constant change and flux. Jo’s *Korean Immigrants and the Challenge of Adjustment* claims, “South Korea, which is about half the size of Florida, was unable to absorb these highly educated young people into the labor force, particularly during the 1970s when Korea was still in the early stage of industrialization” (Jo 1999: 30). Korean sociologists Jo and In-Jin Yoon argue that South Korea’s worst recession in the 1960s and 1970s was one of the major aspects as to why Koreans immigrated to the United States. During the worst recession period, the unemployment rate increased, job turnover rate was high, and property values decreased. According to the Korean Ministry of Education, from 1981 to 2000, an astonishing amount, 33%, of highly educated Korean men were unable to find jobs after graduating from college.
or university.\textsuperscript{1} The high unemployment rate among Korean college graduates can be viewed as an important factor as to why Korean immigrants may still choose to immigrate to the United States. Achieving financial stability is an important goal for Korean immigrants in the United States.

\textbf{3. Educational reasons:}

Education is probably the most important factor of why Korean immigrants come to the United States (Jo 1999: 35). Korean immigrant parents see the United States as a place where they can give their children better educational and employment opportunities. Not every Korean high school student can matriculate to a Korean college or university in South Korea because these institutions “accepted student rates” are low. The college entrance examinations are very difficult and rigorous. Therefore, Korean students are encouraged to apply to American colleges or universities.

4. Political Reasons:

During the third of wave, South Korean immigrants left their homeland because they were against South Korea’s authoritarian military regime and its values. Koreans wanted to immigrate to the United States because it was a more democratic country and gave more liberty, freedom of speech, and individual rights to citizens compared to South Korea’s authoritarian government (Jo 1999: 37). Koreans who immigrated to the United States after the Immigration Act of 1965 chose to stay in the United States and had no intention of returning to their homeland. Korean sociologist Moon H. Jo asserts that by 1990, 82,000 Koreans immigrated to New York area and 80,000 of them did not return to their country (Moon H. Jo 1999: 15). The United States INS asserts that 29,019 Koreans immigrated to the United States in 1983. The number of Korean immigrants increased in 1987. A total of 32,135 Koreans immigrated to the United States in 1987 (In-Jin Yoon 1993: 2). However, as South Korea became a more democratic country and moved away from an authoritarian military regime, fewer Korean citizens felt discouraged enough to leave their homeland. Since
1990, the number of Koreans immigrating to the United States started to
decrease,

with less than 25,966 Koreans immigrating to the United States (In-Jin Yoon
1993: 2). In 1992, South Korean citizens elected President Kim Young-Sam,
the first civilian political leader who ended the brutal authoritarian military
regime and the corruption in South Korean politics. Koreans oppose
authoritarian military regimes because they take away individual human
rights. Korean citizens respect the democratic values of liberty, freedom, and
individual rights.

5. Family Sponsorship:

Under the United States Immigration Act of 1965, family sponsorship
is a crucial avenue that enables established Korean American citizens to
sponsor their relatives or siblings to immigrate legally. Korean American
citizens can sponsor their relatives or families to receive a green card, which
legally allows them to stay in the United States.

IV. Language Barrier:
Why Language Barrier Becomes Problematic for Korean Immigrants in the United States?

Language became a problematic barrier for Korean immigrants upon arriving in the states. During the Information Age and Post-Industrial era, the job market required highly skilled workers to be fluent in English. Unfortunately, the majority of Korean immigrants are not fluent in either spoken and written English. Korean sociologist Pyong Gap Min’s study *Changes and Conflicts: Korean Immigrant Families in New York* claims that Korean immigrants value fluency in the English language; however, they have very limited time to learn a new language. In Min’s survey (1988), 54% of Korean immigrants worked full time as laborers in New York City yet had very limited English language skills because they are exhausted after working long hours at their service jobs (Min 1998: 38). Korean immigrants are also less likely to learn English because they speak Korean at church on every Sunday, social gatherings with friends, and with their children.
According to David S. Kim’s *Korean Small Businesses in the Olympic Area* asserts that about 10% of Korean immigrants speak English fluently in the United States.² Korean immigrants worked at service jobs in nail salons, grocery stores, liquor stores, dry cleaners, fish markets, and swap meet stores because these service jobs require little or almost no mastery in English language (Min 1996: 54). Most importantly, the majority of Korean citizens did not speak fluently in English; however, they still immigrated to the United States. I will elaborate on how the Korean immigrant parents’ language barrier impacts their childrearing practice in the United States.

**V. Karl Marx’s *Manifesto of Communist Party***:

Unfortunately, Korean immigrants have always been vulnerable and are often exploited as part of America’s working class. Most importantly, their vulnerability limits them to take low-paying jobs, which require minimum or little English. Karl Marx’s *Manifesto of Communist Party* (1848) argues that the bourgeoisie exploits workers in production factories and industries. Marx’s argument relates to how Korean immigrant workers

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² David S. Kim’s *Korean Small Businesses in the Olympic Area*, 52
are exploited at their workplace Jo argues, “Immigrants can be easily
exploited by employers or underemployed in the sense that someone who is
well educated often is forced to take low-paying jobs or perform menial
tasks simply because he or she is not fluent in English” (Jo 1999: 51).
Automobile manufacturers, such as General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford are
driven to make profits. Therefore, they hire immigrants and pay them less
than the minimum wage. Paul Kim, who is a Korean immigrant, explains:

Many people think that all Koreans go to Harvard and get A-plus, that
all Koreans are rich. This is not so. This community has a lot [of]
tragedies, a lot of stereotyping in reverse. We have a lot of poor and
uneducated people. Their living conditions are terrible, one crowded
room, everyone working two or three jobs, without life insurance,
dental or medical benefits, pensions, workmen’s compensation.³

Korean immigrants strive for their economic survival in the United States so
that they will do any job at anyplace or live in extremely harsh conditions in
order to make a living. Yet Korean immigrants experience alienation at both
their workplace and in the Korean community in the United States.

VI. The Importance of the Korean Immigrants Backgrounds and the
Social Circumstances at their Workplace

³ Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu’s oral histories of Korean immigrants East to America, 210
In order to understand the childrearing practices of Korean immigrant parents, the backgrounds of Korean immigrants and social circumstances in their employment play vital roles and impact the parents’ childrearing practices. Social class and social status are fundamental in American society. Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker’s documentary, *People Like Us: Social Class in America*, portrays how Americans consciously and unconsciously distinguish and distance themselves from others who do not fit into their social class or have the same social status. In contrast, social class and social status are less relevant and less evident amongst Koreans as immigrants because they share the same status, nationality, and ethnicity. In addition, Korean immigrants are employed within the same category of service jobs or businesses. The majority of Korean immigrants have owned a small business. Pyong Gap Min’s survey in 1988 shows that 56% of Korean immigrants were self-employed and owned a business, while 29.7% of Korean immigrants are employed in Korean firm in New York City. The fact that the majority of Korean immigrants run their own businesses will be an important factor in the childrearing practices found in Korean immigrant homes.

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4 Pyong Gap Min’s *Caught In the Middle: Korean Communities in New York and Los Angeles*, 48.
VII. Lillian B. Rubin’s Worlds of Pain:

Lillian B. Rubin’s *Worlds of Pain* relates to my research because her work focuses on the lifestyle of working-class families and people who have blue collar jobs. Korean immigrants have similar experiences in terms of the lifestyle of America’s working-class as they have blue collar jobs. Rubin’s study is an influential and powerful work in regards to the financial and economic struggles of the working poor in this country. Blue collar jobs often require exhausting labor yet pay low minimum wages, so the workers tend to take their frustrations at home. Rubin argues that after a day’s work, men are physically worn out, thus as husbands, thus they often experience a lack of communication with their wives. Rubin claims:

> For once marriage is conceived of as more than an economic arrangement—that is, as one in which the emotional needs of the individual are attended to and met—the role segregation and the consequent widely divergent socialization patterns for women and men become clearly dysfunctional. And it is among the working class that such segregation has been most profound, where there has been least incentive to change. (Rubin 1969: 116)

Aside from economics constraint, the reason that working class husbands and wives lack communication is due to lack of college education. A college education is a fundamental difference between the upper-middle class and
the working class as well as the upper-middle class and the working poor. The working class cannot make up for the two to four years of college education that they did not receive. Rubin asserts that the majority of the upper-middle class people have college degrees and develops communication skills and social interactions with others. A college education encourages upper-middle class people to marry at an older and more mature age, while working class people tend either to get marry and have children at a young age, or the women have children and become single mothers at a young age. Therefore, they miss all that a college experience offers. Similarly, the majority of Korean immigrants, who immigrated to the United States from the 1960s to 1990s, also went right to work without a college education due to economic and political struggles. One of my respondents, David Park* said:

I immigrated to the United States in 1975. I did not receive a college education neither in my homeland, South Korea nor in the United States because of my social circumstances. When I immigrated in 1975, the South Korea economic was in worst recession. My entire parents and family struggled with poverty almost every day. Therefore, I decided to immigrate to the United States. When I arrived in the United States, I could not get my college education when my family is worried about where they will get their next meal.
However the majority of Korean immigrants, who immigrated to the United States in the early 2000s, received higher post secondary educations because of the improvement in South Korea’s economy.

VIII. Interview Overview and Comprehensive Analysis:

I completed all of my interviews during the summer of 2009. I did in-depth interviews with 20 parents from May 25, 2009 to August 7, 2009. I did not interview married couples at the same time. I interviewed seven men and thirteen women. More specifically, I interviewed one man in his 30s, four men in their 40s, one man in his 50s, and one man in his 60s. I interviewed one woman in her 30s, four women in their 40s, five women in their 50s, and three women in their 60s. Five of the respondents circled that they have one child. Eleven of the respondents circled that they have two children. Two of the respondents circled that they have three children. Two of the respondents circled that they have more than four children. Each interview ranged from 50 minutes to three hours and 30 minutes. In addition to my 20 comprehensive interviews with Korean parents, I did 10 random surveys with Korean parents as well.
Six of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States between three to five years ago. Four of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States between five to ten years ago. Five of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States about 10-20 years ago. Five of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States more than 20 years ago. Seven of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States for their children’s education. Six of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States for their children’s successful life. Eight of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States to pursue the American dream. None of the respondents circled that they immigrated to the United States for business purposes.

IX. Interview Analysis and Research Question:

The purposes of the interviews with Korean parents are to find out why they immigrated to the United States, why their children do not fit the outcome of natural growth as Sociologist Lareau describes. Korean

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5 Professor Gilbert substituted Concerted Cultivation to Cultivated Growth and Accomplishment of Natural Growth to Natural Growth.
children tend to fit the outcome of cultivated growth. My research question asks, “What child rearing practices enable the majority of Korean children to pursue professional lives although they do not fit the childrearing pattern of cultivated growth which Lareau associates with the path to occupational success?” Finally, the most important question is: “Is the premise of Lareau’s study correct?” In order to answer my research question, Professor Gilbert and I created fundamental interview questions. During my interviews, I wanted to find out whether Korean parents used childrearing practices of natural growth or cultivated growth on their children. In order to answer my research question, I will compared and contrasted the childrearing practices of Korean parents and the childrearing practices of American parents specifically pertaining to their children’s daily activities, the primary/native Korean vs. English language used at home, and their relationship with their children’s school.

X. Annette Lareau’s Unequal Childhoods:

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6 Professor Gilbert substituted Concerted Cultivation to Cultivated Growth and Accomplishment of Natural Growth to Natural Growth.
Lareau’s study (2003) is an influential masterpiece not only in the field of sociology, but also in other social sciences in regards to childrearing practices. Lareau asserts that upper-middle parents practice cultivated growth. In contrast, working class and working poor parents practice natural growth. Three aspects to childrearing practices apply to both cultivated growth and natural growth: daily activities, language, and the parents’ involvement with the children’s schools.

For upper-middle class parents, they scheduled after school activities for their children in the belief that they are important for occupational success. Their parents’ decisions to send them to after school activities affect their children’s lives. Their children feel that their schedule is busy and cannot imagine their lives without these after school activities. Therefore, their children do not have the time to spend with their relatives because they hardly have free time. However, the working class and working poor parents do not see the value of after school activities and these daily activities are a waste of time for their children. They give their children “hanging out” time as Lareau describes it.

For upper-middle class parents, the languages used with their children are reasoning. They allowed their children to use negotiation techniques with
them. For example, Alexander Williams, who belongs to an upper-middle family, negotiates a deal with his mother in regards to having one more potato chip. Lareau quotes:

Alex takes a bite of one, then begins to twist-tie the bag closed, but changes his mind and opens the bag again. He eats about five more, then comments, “You’re right. I can’t eat only one.” Ms. Williams says, “Okay, Alexander. That’s enough. Put them away.” Alex: “Just one more?” Ms. Williams: “Okay, one more.” He eats one more chip, then closes the bag. (Lareau 2003: 127)

As part of their child rearing practices, upper-middle class parents allow their children to use their negotiation and reasoning skills. They make sure that their children’s opinions are heard. Furthermore, upper-middle class children not only negotiate, but also they bargain for what they desire. Lareau argues, “[Upper-middle] children tend to bargain, using reasoning to secure small advantages” (Lareau 2003: 127). These negotiations are very valuable for upper-middle class children’s occupational success.

In contrast, working class and working poor parents practice physical punishment rather than reasoning with their children. Lareau claims that working class and working poor parents do not allow their children to voice their opinions like upper-middle class parents allow their children to do. These physical punishments have negative effect on working class and working poor children’s life chances.
Upper-middle class parents are very involved in their children’s school. Lareau points out those upper-middle parents encourage their children to talk to adults. Lareau describes how upper-middle parents “[train] their child to take on this role” as to command their order to teachers at school (Lareau 2003: 31). However, working class and working poor parents experience frustration with their children’s schools. They are not involved with their children’s schools because they believe that school teachers and administrators are experts. They feel uncomfortable to interacting with the authority figures in their children’s schools.

**XI. Conclusion: The Result of the Research**

In the long term, upper-middle class children feel a “sense of entitlement.” In contrast, working class and working poor children experience a “sense of constraint” (Lareau 2003: 31). The upper-middle children have more advantages over the working class and working poor children. Due to *cultivated growth*, upper-middle children proceed to have professional lives and to achieve occupational success. In contrast, due to *natural growth*, working class and working poor children do not experience the same occupational success as the upper-middle class children.
Professor Gilbert and I believe that Lareau’s premises are **wrong** and do not apply in regards to Korean children. The majority of the Korean parents practice *natural growth*. However, Korean children do not fit the outcomes of *natural growth*. Instead, they fit the outcomes of *cultivated growth*. Korean children have professional lives and occupational success when their parents practice *natural growth*. My research question examines why this is the case and outcome. We carefully analyzed three aspects of childrearing practices of Korean parents: daily activities, language use, and the parent’s involvement in their children’s schools.

Korean parents practice two out of three major aspects of *natural growth*, which are language use and the parent’s involvement in their children’s school. For language used at home, Korean parents emphasized to their children to respect adults, especially the elderly. All of my respondents said that they emphasized to their children to respect their elders. If their children do not follow their parent’s orders, the parents would use physical punishment. The majority of my respondents said that they still used strict and physical punishment as a child rearing practice with their children if and when the children make mistakes. My aunt, Young Jeh Kim said, “Although I am a single mother and female household, I make sure my children respect
my opinion and do not disobey my authority.” Korean parents do not allow their children to talk back to them.

For the parent’s involvement in their children’s schools, Korean parents are less involved compared to American parents. Although the majority of Korean children are fluent in English, the majority of Korean parents are not fluent in English. Korean immigrants did not receive their education in the United States nor do they continue their education. Therefore, they experience language barriers. Almost every respondent said that they speak Korean in the home. Fourteen out of 20 respondents said that they only speak Korean with their children. Due to language barriers, more than half of my respondents attend their children’s PTA meeting with their children so that the children can translate from English to Korean. Among the 20 people interviewed, eight people attended PTA meetings. Eight out of seven parents bring their children with them to the PTA meetings. The majority of the Korean parents feel that they are not confident enough with their English to interact on their own with their children’s schools.

However, Korean parents practice one out of three major aspects of cultivated growth, which involves their children’s daily activities. Korean parents are more focused on their children’s academic rather than
enrichment activities, such as sports, piano and gymnastics lessons.

The great majority of Korean parents force their children to get involved in after school programs. Seventeen parents said that they send their children to prep schools and tutoring programs. However, three parents responded that they do not send their children to tutoring programs. Two out of three parents are in their 30s, and their children are in elementary schools. They are mostly focused on daycare rather than tutoring programs for their children. Korean parents send their children to tutoring programs because they want them to succeed academically in school.
XII. Comprehensive Interview Analysis: Interview Questions

1. What is your occupation?

Two of the respondents circled professional as their occupation. Eight of the respondents circled self-employed. Eight of the respondents circled salary.

2. How many hours do you spend with your children per week?

Six of the respondents circled that they spend with their children per week from three to five hours. Eight of the respondents circled that they spend with their children per week from five to ten hours. Six of the respondents circled that they spend with their children per week from 10 to 20 hours.

3. How many days do you work per week?

Two of the respondents circled that they worked from one to two days per week. Three of the respondents circled that they worked from three to
four days per week. Eleven of the respondents circled that they worked from five days per week. Four of the respondents circled that they worked seven days a week.

4. Which areas of your children education interest you the most?

Two of the respondents circled that they want their children to achieve higher GPAs in school. Two of the respondents circled that they want their children to be accepted to good colleges or universities. Four of the respondents circled that they want their children to be involved in community or voluntary work. Nine of the respondents circled that they want their children to pursue professions (i.e. CPA, lawyers).

5. What is considered being successful when it comes to your children?

Sixteen of the respondents circled that they considered good character as a quality of being successful when it comes to their children. Four of the respondents circled wealthy as a quality of being successful when it comes
to their children. Three of the respondents considered fame as part of success when it comes to their children.

6. Which area of traditional Korean values do you teach your children?

Two of the respondents circled education as the Korean traditional value they teach their children. Six of the respondents circled ethics as the Korean traditional value they teach their children. Six of the respondents circled rules of manner (etiquette) as the Korean traditional value they teach their children. Ten of the respondents circled diligence as the Korean traditional value they teach their children. Four of the respondents circled success as the Korean traditional value they teach their children.

XIII: Body 1: Korean Parent’s Childrearing Practices and Interview Questions

(한국 자녀교육의 사회적인 특성)

1. Which language do you use with your children?
The majority of the respondents circled that languages used with their children are Korean. Two of the respondents circled that the language used with their children is English. Five of the respondents circled that languages used with their children are both English and Korean.

2. What kind of conversation do you have with your child(ren)?

The majority of my respondents said that they have basic conversations with their children.

3. Do you emphasize being independent to your child(ren)?

The majority of the respondents said that they do not promote independence in their children, while eight parents said that they give independence.

4. Do you emphasize to your child(ren) to respect elders?

All of my respondents said that they must respect their elders.
5. Do you attend PTA meetings?

Among people I interviewed, eight parents attended PTA meetings. Eight out of seven parents bring their children with them to PTA meetings.

6. What do you do when your child(ren) watch TV when they have homework to do?

The majority of the parents responded that they forced their children to finish their homework before watching TV.

7. What do you do when your child(ren) make mistakes?

Eight of the respondents circled that they would be strict and give punishments to their children when they mistakes. Thirteen of the respondents circled that when their children make mistakes, they would talk it out with their children. Three of the respondents circled that there would be no set consequences to their children’s mistakes.
XIV: Body 2: Korean Parent’s Goal for Their Children and Interview

Questions

1. What kind of after school activities are you involved in with your child(ren)? Do you force your child(ren) to get involved in those activities or do you let your child(ren) decide?

   The majority of the parents said that they would force their children to get involved in an after school programs. However, eight parents said that they would allow their children to decide for themselves if they wanted to participate in after school programs.

2. Do you compare your child(ren) to your relatives’ or friends’ child(ren)?

   Six parents said that they do compare their children to relatives. In contrast, fourteen parents said that they do not compare their children to their relatives.
3. Do you support and encourage your children’s decision to go to college?

The majority of the parents responded that they recommend their children to attend IVY League colleges and universities, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, University of Penn, and Cornell etc.
Bibliography:


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