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The impact of the (re)-acculturation process on the ethnic identity of Korean return migrants

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Citation

Bastasic, E. (2022). *The impact of the (re)-acculturation process on the ethnic identity of Korean return migrants*.

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Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Master thesis

A thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Asian Studies

The impact of the (re)-acculturation process on the ethnic identity of Korean return migrants

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Asian Studies

Politics, Society and Economy of Asia

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Academic year 2021-2022

March 02, 2022

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1. Introduction

In the global context, migration is defined as the movement of a person nationally or internationally for more than a year.¹ In the case of Korea, international migration in the sense of the term today began in the mid-nineteenth century with Koreans resettling to the regions of Manchuria and Siberia. Subsequently, Koreans have migrated to many countries around the world with the largest numbers of Koreans resettling in China, the United States and Japan.²

Available statistics show that many Korean migrants have remigrated to Korea. One example concerns the end of the Japanese colonial rule, when more than one million Koreans decided to return after their homeland was freed.³ Return migration, according to Takeyuki Tsuda, is broadly understood as the migration back to one's homeland from another country. Return migration can be divided into two subcategories. The first category focuses on first generation migrants who have migrated abroad and then returned to their homeland. The second category, to which Tsuda refers to as ethnic return migration, deals with the descendants of those first generation migrants; the second and third generations are part of a diaspora in another country and move to the country they ethnically originate from without having permanently lived there before.⁴ Although kinship ties play a role, the search for socioeconomic stability and upwards social mobility combined with a desire to experience ethnocultural closeness are named as the main factors for ethnic return migration.⁵ Additionally, there are differences in policies depending on which country the return migrants are migrating back from. For example, Koreans from China are only offered a limited number of work visas because the South Korean government fears an influx of Korean Chinese labor migrants and therefore applies stricter migration policies to them than, for example, Korean Americans.⁶ Accordingly, the country of remigration may have a significant influence on the remigration procedure and therefore potentially the acculturation process. Acculturation is described by Berry as

¹ "European Commission," Migration and Home Affairs, accessed February 28, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/pages/glossary/migration_en.

² In Jin Yoon, "Migration and the Korean Diaspora: A Comparative Description of Five Cases," *Journal of Ethnic Migration Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012): 413.

³ Yoon, "Migration and the Korean Diaspora," 415.

⁴ Takeyuki Gaku Tsuda, "Ethnic Return Migration and the Nation-state: Encouraging the Diaspora to Return ,home'," *Nations and Nationalism* 16, no. 4 (2010): 616-617.

⁵ Tsuda, "Ethnic Return Migration," 617.

⁶ Tsuda, "Ethnic Return Migration," 624.

the process of individuals (or groups) changing behavior as a result of intercultural contact.⁷ The term acculturation is often used in the context of migration since the surrounding culture of a migrant (or a migrant group) usually changes after migration, leading to new intercultural contacts and therefore a change in behavior. If a person migrates, for example from South Korea to Germany, their intercultural contacts change, and they will need to assimilate to this by adapting their behavior. Although often used as synonyms, the terms “adaptation”, “assimilation” and “acculturation” differ in meaning. Assimilation or adaptation is usually only one phase of the entire acculturation process.⁸ After being exposed to a host country’s culture for an extended period, an individual or group would have adapted to it resulting in the need to re-acculturate to their homeland upon return.⁹ Arthur defines re-acculturation as a psychological process.¹⁰ Factors such as expectations, hopes and fears can play a role. Since re-acculturation is a psychological process, it has the potential to influence an individual’s (ethnic) identity as well.¹¹

Before introducing the research questions of this thesis, it is important to first consider what is meant by the term “ethnic identity“. Identity may be categorized into different groups, such as self and ethnic identity. These categories may overlap, but generally ethnic identity is defined to mean a “self-structured organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history.” Ethnic identity is described as not only a feeling of uniqueness for oneself, but also a feeling of similarity to other individuals.¹² The question of how one’s ethnic identity changes with remigration to a homeland in regard of the psychological impact of the re-acculturation process has not been extensively researched. Since South Korea is a country with a distinct, deep-rooted culture and a history of return migration, this thesis focuses on return migrants from culturally different countries such as the US and Germany to South Korea and analyzes the impact of the re-acculturation process on their ethnic identity.

⁷ John W. Berry, *Acculturation - a Personal Journey across Cultures*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.

⁸ Homer G. Barnett, “Acculturation: An Exploratory Formulation The Social Science Research Council Summer Seminar on Acculturation, 1953: Comment,” *American Anthropologist* 56, no. 6 (1954): 974, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/664756>.

⁹ Nancy Arthur, “Preparing International Students for the Re-entry Transition,” *Canadian Journal of Counseling* 37, no. 3 (2003): 174.

¹⁰ Arthur, “Preparing International Studenty,” 175.

¹¹ Chukwuka Onwumehili, Peter Nwosu, Jackson Ronald and Jacqueline James-Hughes, “In the deep valley with mountains to climb: Exploring identity and multiple reacculturation,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 27, no. 1 (2003): 44-45.

¹² James E. Marcia, “Identity in adolescence,” *Handbook of adolescent psychology* 9, no.1 (January 1980): 159.

The research questions derived from the above are as follows: Do hardships and positive experiences during the re-acculturation process have an impact on the ethnic identity of Korean return migrants? Does the ethnic identity of Korean return migrants change after returning to South Korea, and if so, how? Ordinarily, return migrants have spent most of their life and adolescence in their host country and this is where most of their identity formation took place; therefore, it can be presumed that their ethnic identities were already formed and explored before they returned to their homeland.¹³

To answer the research questions, it is important to consider an individual's life in the host- and the home-country to examine different impacts on their ethnic identity. Nine volunteers above the age of twenty-five were selected for this study, with a gender ratio of three females and six males. All participants were born in South Korea and had migrated abroad for more than 10 years before returning and resettling in South Korea, making them a part of the "1.5 generation." The 1.5 generation refers to migrants that left their home country at a young age, typically before the age of 10, and who have completed the majority of their education in their host country.¹⁴ This study focuses on 1.5 generation return migrants from high-income Western countries such as the US, Germany, Australia and New Zealand to make a robust comparison, since these countries have similar socioeconomic statuses and values and are culturally distinct to South Korea.¹⁵ Furthermore, factors such as discrimination because of race or ethnicity can play a role in identity formation as well as the acculturation process, and it is easier to compare these kinds of experiences when all participants belong to an Asian minority group in the host countries.

For this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants. Each interview contained the same basic set of questions which were explored deeper with each participant on a case-by-case basis. The interviews were conducted via Zoom Meetings, transcribed manually and coded into relevant groups using the software atlas.ti.¹⁶

The structure of this thesis begins with this introduction (Chapter 1) which explains the research conducted and further background information. Chapter 2 discusses and reflects upon the relevant

¹³ Lovely Dizon, Vanessa Selak, Rodrigo Ramalho and Roshini Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity among 1.5 and second-generation Asian migrants: A mixed methods systematic review," *Journal of Adolescence* 89, no. 4 (2021): 96.

¹⁴ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 95.

¹⁵ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96-97.

¹⁶ "Qualitative coding," Cessda Training, accessed Feb 14, 2022, <https://www.cessda.eu/Training/Training-Resources/Library/Data-Management-Expert-Guide/3.-Process/Qualitative-coding>.

literature and research to describe the existing research field and the impact of this study on it. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework by elaborating on key concepts such as acculturation, re-acculturation and ethnic identity. Chapter 4 explains the methodology of the thesis, and then Chapter 5 presents and discusses the collected and coded data in the wider context of the existing theory and research questions. In a next step Chapter 6 points out the most important findings and lastly Chapter 7 concludes the results of the thesis.

2. Literature review

The field of acculturation has been a topic of research since the 1950s and is often related to the topics of culture and identity.¹⁷ Originally, the research focus was on visitors and travelers who go abroad and the possible culture shocks they experience while adjusting to a different society.¹⁸ Onwumechili et al. state that there has been a shift in the focus of current acculturation research. The research focus has shifted from the topic of adaptation with themes relevant to culture shock to the topic of cultural identity with more culture-based themes such as multiculturalism and culture development.¹⁹ More recent research focuses on the acculturation process linked to group identities, self-views and dynamics between individuals and cultural groups.²⁰ There is less research on the connection between re-acculturation and identity formation. Since re-acculturation contains many elements of acculturation such as experiencing the same issues of adjusting to a different mainstream culture, it can be assumed that the impact of re-acculturation is similar to the impact of acculturation on ethnic identity.²¹ Berry created four categories with regard to the acculturation process: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization. He describes assimilation as adapting to the host or mainstream culture but losing one's own cultural identity, whereas separation means to prefer keeping one's own cultural identity instead of adapting to the mainstream culture. Berry defines integration as keeping one's own cultural identity as well as implementing parts from the mainstream society, and lastly, he describes marginalization as an unwillingness to keep one's own culture or to adapt to the host society.²² Criticisms of Berry's acculturation model include the

¹⁷ Nnenna Ndika, "Acculturation: A Pilot Study on Nigerians in America and Their Coping Strategies," *SAGE Open* 3 (October 2013): 1.

¹⁸ Onwumechili, Nwosu, Ronald and James-Hughes, "In the deep valley," 44.

¹⁹ Onwumechili, Nwosu, Ronald and James-Hughes, "In the deep valley," 44-45.

²⁰ Maykel Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

²¹ Onwumechili, Nwosu, Ronald and James-Hughes, "In the deep valley," 45.

²² John W. Berry, "Integration and Multiculturalism: Ways towards Social Solidarity," *Papers on Social Representations* 20 no. 1 (2011): 2.6.

fact that not all four categories always exist in the same population or sample of people and that there could be various subtypes to these categories that have not been specified through further research.²³ Schwartz et al. compared various research on the acculturation model and conclude that “the categories were not as well differentiated as would be expected given Berry’s model, and multiple types of biculturalism were extracted, but three of the four categories proposed by Berry (1980) were well represented in the sample.”²⁴ Additionally, the category of marginalization has received criticism for applying only to a small number of migrants who reject both their heritage and host countries’ culture. Furthermore, it is undesirable to generalize about migrants while categorizing them in Berry’s acculturation model since context is important to understand the actual acculturation process. The context in this case is a migrant’s individual characteristics, their groups of origin, their resources, the society of the host country and a migrant’s language proficiency.²⁵ A further gap in the study of acculturation is that when the research deals with the negative outcomes of acculturation, the focus is mostly within the field of psychology and is related to stress and health issues; therefore, the study of acculturation lacks a full exploration of the negative impacts of acculturation on identity and culture.

Building on his category of integration, Berry formed the integration hypothesis which suggests that when an individual (or group) is in contact with both their home culture and the mainstream culture, they will be more successful in adapting and overall life.²⁶ According to Schwartz et al., recent studies support the integration theory and show that it is associated with most success overall in the acculturation process.²⁷ They state that adopting this strategy leads to a sense of wellbeing, higher sociocultural competence and positive intercultural relations. Furthermore Berry’s integration category is particularly interesting in regard to its effects on ethnical identity, because it incorporates more than one culture that can have an impact on it.

As a form of acculturation that happens after migrants return from another country to their homeland, re-acculturation has been the focus of little research in contrast to the extensive amount

²³ Seth J. Schwartz, Jennifer B. Unger, Byron L. Zamboanga, and José Szapocznik, “Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation, Implications for Theory and Research,” *American Psychologist* 65, no. 4 (2010): 241.

²⁴ Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga and Szapocznik, “Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation,” 241-242.

²⁵ Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga and Szapocznik, “Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation,” 242.

²⁶ John W. Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation in a new society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), chap. 2.1, https://www-cambridge-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/core/elements/acculturation/8908DDEAE81739CBA851B3CF72FD5F92#A-sec-1_4.

²⁷ Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga and Szapocznik, “Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation,” 240.

of research that has been conducted on acculturation.²⁸ This study aims to fill the research gap by examining how re-acculturation affects ethnic identity and if Berry's integration category is also applicable to it and associated with positive outcomes for a migrant's ethnic identity.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Acculturation

Acculturation is the process that occurs when cultural and psychological changes in an individual or a group take place.²⁹ This happens most often when a minority group tries to assimilate into the main culture of a society. Acculturation has been researched since the 19th century and has evolved to be a complex concept that is closely related to biculturalism and cultural identity.³⁰ Acculturation and adaptation are not interchangeable terms. Adaptation refers to strategies used during the acculturation process as well as the outcome, the degree to which individuals have been able to create a new way of living after experiencing acculturation.³¹ The acculturation process can lead to something that Berry describes as "acculturative stress" that produces anxiety and depression in individuals.³² Acculturation is related to migration since an individual is introduced to a culturally different mainstream society after migrating, and changes in the individual's life regarding education, society or economic situation can cause stressful experiences. A summary of the impact of acculturative stress has been described as follows: "Simply put, acculturative stress is responsible for lowering the overall and adequate level of functioning of an individual due to exposure to a variety of social and cultural stressors."³³ Various forms of adaptation can result from the cultural and psychological changes that happen after individuals of different cultural groups form contact.³⁴ Berry defined three forms of adaptation as a long term outcome of acculturation: psychological adaptation, sociocultural adaptation and intercultural adaptation. Psychological adaptation is defined as how an individual feels on the inside; in other words, this describes how well they are

²⁸ cf. Flora Chiang, Emmy van Esch, Thomas A. Birtch and Margaret Shaffer, "Repatriation: What do we know and where do we go from here?," *The International Journal of Human Resource* 29, no. 1 (2018): 1-4.

²⁹ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 2.1.

³⁰ Ndika, "Acculturation," 1.

³¹ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 5.3.

³² Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 3.2.

³³ Ndika, "Acculturation," 1.

³⁴ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 3.

feeling. Berry describes sociocultural adaptation as “doing well” in, for example, social, school and work life. It is the adaptation regarding the link to other members in the new society. The last form of adaptation is intercultural adaptation. The focus is on forming relationships despite the obstacle of cultural boundaries and achieving positive intercultural relationships and acceptance of a multicultural ideology. Berry claims that these adaptation forms are all important for an individual’s wellbeing. If an individual manages to adapt well in all categories, they can gain “a coherent and positive sense of self, supportive social interactions and networks and congenial intercultural relationships.”³⁵ Berry therefore defines the success of the acculturation process and the resulting happiness level of an individual through the successful adaptation in these four categories.

3.2 Re-acculturation

Re-acculturation is the phenomenon that occurs when an individual completes an acculturation process abroad and returns to their homeland where they are confronted by the same adjustment issues they found abroad.³⁶ After experiencing an acculturation process and adapting to the culture of the host country, a person can experience similar struggles of readapting after returning to their home country. Nonetheless, there are numerous differences regarding an individual’s experience with acculturation versus re-acculturation. A factor that plays a large role is the expectations and memories that a person has of their homeland. It can be difficult to deal with these expectations when faced with the reality of returning to one’s home country after many years.³⁷ Problems resulting from these expectations and memories include returnees being unprepared for re-entry problems, having a perception of an unchanged homeland, being unaware of their own changes, having expectations from family and friends and experiencing a general lack of interest in their experiences abroad. In prior research, repatriation and reverse culture shock were often used as a synonym for re-acculturation.³⁸ Gaw describes reverse culture shock as the process of readjustment and re-assimilation after returning from abroad back into one’s home culture.³⁹ Re-acculturation is

³⁵ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 4.

³⁶ Onwumehili, Nwosu, Ronald and James-Hughes, “In the deep valley,” 45.

³⁷ Katrine Sonnenschein, Cristina Michelini and Brian King, “Betwixt and between: a qualitative review of the (Re)acculturation of international students and returnees,” *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, (November 2021): 5.

³⁸ Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, “(Re)acculturation,” 5-6.

³⁹ Kevin F. Gaw, “Reverse culture shock in students returning from overseas,” *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24, no. 1 (2000): 83-84.

also closely related to cultural identity and multiculturalism because of the cultural contacts that play a role upon a person's return to their home country.⁴⁰

The re-acculturation process includes different stages of adaptation for a migrant. Circumstances that have an impact on these stages and how long they last are the duration of stay in the host country, support by family and peers, previous migration experiences, communication skills, commitment to adaptation and having realistic goals.⁴¹ Hyeji Park identifies seven factors that are relevant to the impact of re-acculturation on a return migrant's identity: ideological orientation, a sense of individualism versus collectivism, English (language) ability, self-expressiveness, self-identity and interpersonal communication.⁴²

Critiques on the existing research on (re)acculturation and related subjects include an overall focus on the negative aspects and a neglect of the positive aspects with regard to return experiences.⁴³ Berry's research focused on acculturative stress is an example for that.

3.3 Ethnic identity

In modern times and through globalization, today's societies are becoming more ethnically and culturally plural. Verkuyten states that this factor is leading to new questions regarding identity and cultural diversity in the fields of politics, culture, psychology and more.

Furthermore, she describes the definition of ethnicity as follows: "Ethnicity is not a property of communities or groups, but rather a dynamic aspect of social relationships in which ethnic distinctions are made, believed in and used for understanding oneself and others."⁴⁴ In current research, ethnicity is an important aspect in the study of acculturation and the reception of migrants.⁴⁵

Identity is described as a concept which relates to the inner self and how that inner self is presented to others: "The concept tells us something about how people, as individuals or as a group, position themselves and are positioned by others in their social environment, and how such positions get

⁴⁰ Onwumechili, Nwosu, Ronald and James-Hughes, "In the deep valley," 46.

⁴¹ Natalia Chaban et al., "Crossing cultures: Analysing the experiences of NZ returnees from the EU (UK vs. non-UK)," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 35, no. 1 (2011): 779.

⁴² Hyeji Park, "Back to Korea: Returnees' Readjustment Experiences of Growing Up in Two Cultures" (Diss., Seoul National University, 2014), 42.

⁴³ Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, "(Re)acculturation," 5-6.

⁴⁴ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 1-2.

⁴⁵ Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga and Szapocznik, "Rethinking the Concept of Acculturation," 242.

personal meaning and value.”⁴⁶ Ethnic identity can be seen as an attempt to understand the personal implication of one’s ethnicity, the understanding of oneself and the people one relates to.⁴⁷ The degree to which individuals see themselves as members of a certain ethnic group has an impact on ethnic identity formation.⁴⁸

In general, ethnic identity is an abstract concept that has led to confusion in various research, and this makes it important to define clearly what is meant by the term. The term “ethnic identity” conveys the feeling of belonging to one’s own ethnic group and engagement with it.⁴⁹ Concepts that play a part in forming ethnic identity are cultural traditions, language, specific norms and values and a belief system. Ethnic identity is tied to these cultural factors, but questions remaining for further research include what role culture plays in forming ethnic identity and how ethnic identity is related to acculturation and multiculturalism.⁵⁰ Oh and Lee argue that although migrants can develop a weakened sense of ethnic identity after successfully adapting to the mainstream culture of the host society, it is more likely that a migrant’s ethnic identity will not weaken, but rather strengthen, after going through acculturation hardships such as alienation and discrimination by other members of the society.⁵¹ In other words, if a migrant encounters struggles in the acculturation stage, such as discrimination by members of the mainstream society, it may possibly strengthen their ethnic identity and bond with their home country. According to Oh and Lee, this phenomenon leads to stronger ties within the co-ethnic community in the host society and places more importance on the migrant’s ethnic identity, which nonetheless is never completely stable but rather varies over time.⁵² Ethnic identity therefore has a strong relationship with acculturation and, as a result, also re-acculturation. Since the re-acculturation process also presupposes struggle and hardship during the re-adaptation to one’s homeland, re-acculturation can just as equally have an

⁴⁶ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 20.

⁴⁷ Jean S. Phinney, “Stages of Ethnic Identity Development in Minority group Adolescents,” *The Journal of Early Adolescence* 9, no. 1-2 (1989): 37.

⁴⁸ Moin Syed and Margarita Azmitia, “Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration,” *Developmental Psychology* 46, no. 1 (2010): 208.

⁴⁹ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, “Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity,” 95.

⁵⁰ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 21.

⁵¹ Joong-Hwan Oh and Jung-Hee Lee, “Asian Values, Ethnic Identity, and Acculturation Among Ethnic Asian Wives in South Korea,” *Journal of International Migration & Integration* 15 (2013): 81.

⁵² Oh and Lee, “Asian Values,” 81.

impact on a migrant's ethnic identity as acculturation. Furthermore, a secure ethnic identity can lead to a person obtaining social support and self-acceptance while facing struggles.⁵³

Dizon et al. argue that the negotiation of one's ethnic identity is a continuous process that must be actively explored and committing to an ethnic identity can lead to positive outcomes such as a feeling of belonging to a group. Adolescence plays a crucial role in the formation of an individual's identity and is an important time for the formation of one's identity despite its fluidity.⁵⁴ For 1.5 generation migrants, the negotiation of one's ethnic identity is particularly difficult because they inhabit a space in between "host" and "home" culture. Dizon et al. explain the struggle as follows: "For both 1.5- and second-generation migrant populations, negotiating ethnic identity requires them to make decisions regarding which elements of each culture to retain and integrate into their sense of identity."⁵⁵ Migrants of the 1.5 generation have experienced both the host country's mainstream culture as well as their home country's culture and are immersed in both, most likely leading to the formation of a complex multicultural identity. Ethnic identity is the main form of identity discussed in the research. Syed and Azmitia found four groups of emotions that had an impact on the ethnic identity formation of emerging adults in their study. Those four groups are feelings of prejudice by others, a feeling of connection, a feeling of difference based on ethnicity and awareness of underrepresentation.⁵⁶ The first three groups are also factors to be considered during the re-acculturation process and can therefore be applied in the analysis of the re-acculturation process as well as the impact on ethnic identity.

4. Methodology

Ethnic identity is tied to social surroundings and an individual's (or group's) interactions with them, which change drastically upon return migrating to one's home country and experiencing a change of the surrounding dominant culture.⁵⁷ Re-acculturation as a specific variation of acculturation has not been researched as much as the latter and offers various opportunities for further research, especially in combination with the field of ethnic identity.⁵⁸ These phenomena lead to the question

⁵³ Timothy B. Smith, Lynda Silva, "Ethnic Identity and Personal Well-being of People of Color: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 58, no. 1 (2011): 48.

⁵⁴ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96.

⁵⁵ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96-97.

⁵⁶ Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 210.

⁵⁷ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 1-2.

⁵⁸ Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, "(Re)acculturation," 5.

of if and how the re-acculturation to one's homeland can impact one's ethnic identity that is addressed in this research. Prior research shows that acculturation can have an impact on ethnic identity, which leads to the hypothesis that re-acculturation should have the same effect.⁵⁹

This research is based on qualitative research in the form of a case study in which each participant gave a private interview. Qualitative research made it possible to gather new data; this was necessary because re-acculturation is not well researched in relation to its impact on ethnic identity. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine participants who were Korean return migrants. Specifically, this means that they were born in South Korea, have lived abroad for more than five years and decided to return to their birth country.⁶⁰ In-depth case study interviews were beneficial to understand each participant's migration story and its impact on their identity formation and allowed for a deeper exploration of the key characteristics of those impacts. Since this research aimed to explore personal aspects related to identity and adaptation, allowing the participants to share their experiences more freely was the best approach. If structured interviews were used, it would have been more difficult to record the personal stories that affected each participant's sense of self and identity.

The participants were volunteers above the age of eighteen who fit the previously stated requirements. The interviews were conducted via Zoom video call, due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Since the interviews were semi-structured, the questions led to a more open and free dialogue with the possibility of follow-up questions. In practice, this meant asking a somewhat open question followed by more detailed questions to elicit the intention and reasoning behind the statements made.⁶¹ It enabled the participants to mention things they personally considered important to their ethnic identity and re-acculturation experiences. In other words, this form of interview enabled the expression of each participant's thoughts, which is what this study aimed for considering identity is a highly personal perception.⁶²

The interview questions were related to the participants' self-identities and re-acculturation processes in addition to the connection to the participants' host countries and how this affected their identity. One obstacle encountered during this study was ascertaining the degree of influence that

⁵⁹ cf. Gabriela Arandia et al., "Associations between acculturation, ethnic identity, and diet quality among U.S. Hispanic/Latino Youth: Findings from the HCHS/SOL Youth Study," *Appetite* 129 (2019): 25–36, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2018.06.017>.

⁶⁰ Tsuda, "Ethnic Return Migration," 616-617.

⁶¹ William Adams, "Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews," In *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, edited by J. Wholey, H. Hatry, K. Newcomer (Josseybass, 2015), 493. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>.

⁶² Adams, "Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews," 494.

certain factors had on ethnic identity, since, as later discussed in Chapter 5, identity is fluid, inconstant and highly personal. The problem was solved by comparing the effects described by each participant and finding patterns through comparison and generalization, rather than considering each participant in isolation.

With regard to the analysis of the re-acculturation process, this thesis incorporates a study by Hyeji Park on the readjustment experiences of Korean returnees. She analyzed the readjustment process undertaken by 10 Korean returnees and the difficulties they faced. The themes she used for her interviews offer insight into the re-acculturation process that Korean returnees experience and are also reflected in this thesis. These themes include the following topics: demographic general information, ideological orientation, a sense of individualism versus collectivism, language ability, self-expressiveness, self-identity and interpersonal communication.⁶³

The interviews were voice recorded and manually transcribed. After the interviews were transcribed, the data analysis was performed through open coding.⁶⁴ Key words and phrases used by the participants were grouped into categories and used to analyze major and minor themes, using the software atlas.ti.

The next chapter presents the data results elaborated by quotes from the participants. The results are analysed and placed within the context of the relevant research theories. Changes of identity were determined through factors such as exploration of ethnic identity, acceptance or rejection of heritage or the host country's culture and a clear understanding of one's ethnic identity.⁶⁵ Lastly, a conclusion is drawn and the main aspects of the study are summarized.

A weakness of the presented research is the fact that the limited number of participants makes it difficult to generalize the results. Furthermore, the gender ratio of the participants is not equal; this means results based on gender are inconclusive and therefore are not included in the study. The participants were all adults, but the return experiences could vary for different generations, and it would be illuminating for future researchers to group the participants according to age groups and observe if the results change.

⁶³ Park, "Back to Korea," 42.

⁶⁴ cf. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1990), 220.

⁶⁵ Phinney, "Stages of Ethnic Identity Development," 38.

5. Case study data

5.1 General information

There were nine participants in total, and each one was given a fake name that is used to present the research results. The six male participants are called David, Daniel, James, Luke, Donny and Willie. The female participants are referred to as Rika, Gloria and Soojung.

With one exception, each of the participants had moved abroad by the age of 10, making them a part of the 1.5 generation. Rika was born in Hong Kong, but her family returned to Korea after a few months and she lived there until she was nine years old. Rika is still eligible and valuable for this study because she cannot remember anything from the first months of her life and was therefore uninfluenced by being born abroad. Her first memories are from her life in South Korea.

Regarding the age groups, all participants are adults and belong to various generations with Luke, Rika and Donny being in their twenties, Gloria, Daniel and James being in their thirties and Soojung, David and Willie being between 50 and 65 years old.

Each participant lived between 15 and 53 years abroad and returned to South Korea at least one year ago. All participants are employed in South Korea except for Willie who works for an American company and travels back and forth for work reasons. The host countries the participants have lived in include the US for Willie, David, Gloria and Daniel; Germany for Donny and Soojung; Australia for Luke; New Zealand for James; and lastly Switzerland where Rika spent the majority of her childhood before moving to various countries in Europe. Importantly, each participant had at least some immediate family members living in South Korea upon their return.

5.2 Life in the host country

As a first step, it is important to analyze the participants' experiences and circumstances in which they grew up in their host countries to understand how this impacted their ethnic identities before return migrating and how the acculturation process in the host countries was related to that impact.

Out of the nine participants, seven felt completely satisfied and privileged with their lives growing up in the host country.

I think I was very happy and also very privileged. (Donny, Germany)

David struggled with bullying in elementary school and racist experiences upon arrival in the US, which impacted his childhood, and Daniel stated that although he felt privileged with education and work opportunities, he was not a hundred percent satisfied with his life in the US.

Everyone kept it in. And people would say slang all the time, like, hey, Chinese, hey, slanted eyes. It was very difficult for me. (David, USA)

I do know that I've had maybe better education and more employment opportunities, but in terms of full satisfaction, definitely not. (Daniel, USA)

Overall, all participants reported that their household abroad was culturally Korean, they ate Korean food and celebrated Korean holidays even in the host country. Donny said that his parents tried to also incorporate German elements into the household to make him and his brother feel less alienated from their social groups at school. Willie complained that his parents did not immerse him enough in Korean culture while growing up, and he wished they had pushed him to go to Korean school and learn proper Korean. Lastly, James even claimed that he returned to Korea because his household was culturally Korean, and this gave him a connection to his Korean roots.

I guess it was mostly Korean, but I guess more open minded than other Korean traditional households. One indication, I guess, is that my parents never really interfered much in what I do and then I guess, is that. My parents tried to give us somewhat of a German experience, even inside the house. (Donny, Germany)

But they're very open and accepting of my brother and I doing other things. They never forced us to speak Korean or forced us to learn about Korean culture. I think they just left that to us. In retrospect, I think as much as I would have not liked it, I wish they had. (Willie, USA)

And I think that was if I didn't have that, I don't think I'll be in Korea because then I would not be interested in Korea at all. I would just be a New Zealand bloke. (James, New Zealand)

It was so Korean, and my parents wanted me to keep that Korean tradition. So we did like the New Year's Eve. They did the traditional bow and everything, and they set up the table. (David, USA)

Most participants reported that they had a rather multicultural friendship circle growing up and not much contact with ethnically Korean peers. Only Daniel stated that he had Korean friends from attending Korean church, and he felt those bonds were stronger than bonds with other friends from school. Luke explained that even though he had Korean Australian friends, they were in the same position as him and felt culturally more Australian and they never got in contact with Korean culture outside of home.

So basically our friends were mostly German. Like not that many Korean. (Soojung, Germany)

I didn't have a lot of Korean friends. They were all multicultural or quite international kids. (Rika, Switzerland)

Definitely mostly from Church, and there weren't many. But of course, I think those bonds were more tighter, of course. (Daniel, USA)

So I'll say I have a couple of Korean friends, but they're pretty much in the same position as me. They see themselves as Australian. And they're used more to Australian culture. (Luke, Australia)

Less than half of the participants said that their family was involved with the Korean community in the host country, and these participants therefore had constant contact with Korean culture while growing up. The others reported that they grew up as an ethnic minority without much contact with their ethnic community and had more contact with people from the mainstream society.

Oh yeah. And we went to all of the Korean churches in Düsseldorf. (Donny, Germany)

It was a German community, but my parents had quite a few acquaintances and friends that lived close by. So I remember the weekends we would visit them and they would visit us. But like during the week it was a German environment surrounding. There was no other Korean kids in our school. (Soojung, Germany)

The population of the entire city back then, Uptown, was maybe 27 to 30,000 people in total. The closest city was Anchorage, which was maybe 500 km away, so it was very remote and extremely cold. And there were no other Korean families in Fairbanks at the time except for one of the professors and their kids who were about our age. (Willie, USA)

I felt Korean because we did hang out with a lot of Korean families because of my mom and dad. (Gloria, USA)

5.3 Re-acculturation experiences in South Korea

The re-acculturation process starts in the mind, before the return migrant has physically reached their homeland. Sonnenschein et al. describe the phenomenon as follows: “Re-acculturation is a psychological process rather than a physical relocation to one’s home country.”⁶⁶ The motivation for the return can therefore influence the re-acculturation process and expectations formed by the returnee. The participants’ motivations to move back to South Korea range from socioeconomic reasons to wanting to be with their families, exploring their Korean roots and wanderlust. James and Luke wanted to experience work and succeed professionally in Korea. Soojung explained that she decided to live in Korea so that her children would not feel the same kind of alienation that she felt growing up as an ethnic minority in Germany. Donny wanted to explore the world and ended up settling in Korea. Rika, Daniel and Willie moved to Korea to be with family, and David stated that he wanted to do a trip to explore his Korean roots in Korea but ended up settling there.

And I always wanted to see what else the world can offer and trying to figure out where else I could go. (Donny, Germany)

So when I graduated from University, I couldn’t find any work that I wanted to do, so I actually went to Korea for six months to teach English, had one of the best times of my life there, and then I wanted to do that again. So that was the primary reason. Other reasons. I spend time with my family. (Daniel, USA)

More because of my kids. I didn’t want them to grow up like me. (Soojung, Germany)

I need to know my heritage. I want to know what my history of my people is in person. And I want to know what it was like back then in person. (David, USA)

I’ve decided to sort of just come back to Korea just to have a bit of a work experience. (Luke, Australia)

I came to Korea because of course, as you know, the health benefits are pretty good over here. Pretty cheap, too. So I got all of that done and nothing was wrong. (Gloria, USA)

According to Berry, an individual is successful in the adaptation to new culture and surroundings when they feel a positive sense of self and have supportive and intercultural relationships.⁶⁷ It is therefore important to have a stable social circle and network of people upon return to the home country to be able to re-acculturate successfully. Furthermore, social contacts are one of the biggest factors that have an impact on one’s ethnic identity.⁶⁸

Out of the nine candidates, four reported not having any friends in South Korea and described feelings of isolation and loneliness (David, Willie, Soojung, Rika). The other five claimed to have

⁶⁶ Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, “(Re)acculturation,” 5.

⁶⁷ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 4.

⁶⁸ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 20.

most of their friends in Korea and to have a rather large social circle. Participants above the age of thirty-five especially seemed to struggle with forming deeper social connections and only had superficial acquaintances (James, Soojung, Willie, David). Furthermore, the participants that did have friends in Korea stated that their social circles were a mixture of Korean and multicultural people. The participants who did not speak Korean fluently struggled the most with forming social relationships (David, Willie).

Most of my friends are in Korea except for my high school friends and here in Korea I'd say maybe one third is Korean, one third is somehow German like either German speakers or German by nationality or blood. And then another third is, I guess, international Koreans. (Donny, Germany)

If they're like really Korean people who haven't left Korea and like very Korean minded and like, I don't have any friends like that or I don't have any acquaintances that are like 100 percent Korean. (Rika, Germany)

I think it's really hard to form friendships because in Korea, you have friends when you're in the same class, when you went to the same school, when you are from the same hometowns, things like, there's always this group belonging. (Soojung, Germany)

I have no friends here. I know people, but I have no friends. And having a family is great and all, but I can't talk to my wife about certain things. I need friends to talk about them. (David, USA)

As mentioned above, research claims that the return migrant's expectations of their home country play an important role in how they adapt upon return and the whole re-acculturation process.⁶⁹ High expectations can lead to a feeling of disappointment and influence an individual's ethnic identity, whereas the opposite is also true for low expectations with positive encounters. Donny explained that he had not been to South Korea often and had no expectations prior to moving there, which led to a positive experience. Rika expressed that she did have expectations, but for example the stress of Korean work life was more than she had anticipated, and she was shocked in that regard. Daniel reported that his expectations were mostly met, except that the satisfaction of people with their lives in Korean society was lower than he thought. James and Luke, who both came to work in Korea, both stated that the workload and work-life was more difficult than they had anticipated and that they struggled with that.

To be quite frank, I don't think I had an expectation because, unlike many other Koreans, I never really visited Korea like growing up. And I was basically approaching it like a blank slate. And I think through that, because I had expectations that low, a basic knowledge, I managed to have a very good experience, I think. (Donny, Germany)

I think, yes, because I obviously had an idea of what Korea is like. I came, you know, sometimes for summer vacation. But I think I think living here and working here and really experiencing like becoming part of this society like every day, it's really... When you like, really experience society, I notice it's more intense than I remember it to be. It's more like claustrophobic, almost. So it met my expectations and more. (Rika, Switzerland)

I think for the most part, everything has been what I've been expecting. I think one small change that I've noticed is that I don't know, people here that are native seem to be a little more cutthroat maybe. I think with the difficulty in low wages and jobs, people are kind of not as happy and fulfilled with their lives. So I can understand their attitudes. (Daniel, USA)

But I just didn't expect how tough it was going to be, definitely. (James, New Zealand)

⁶⁹ Sonnenschein, Micheline and King, "(Re)acculturation," 5.

Alienation, racism and isolation are all negative factors that can be encountered during acculturation that have an impact on one's ethnic identity, but positive encounters and experiences are factors that can also have a significant impact on one's ethnic identity.⁷⁰ The participants with the most positive experiences upon return were Donny and Daniel. Both reported to have had a great time and met many people upon return, which led them to settle permanently in Korea. Donny had voluntarily joined the military and said he had a meaningful time and made many friends there, while Daniel formed social connections through his teaching job. Soojung explained that for her the most significant positive experience upon returning was that she could blend into a crowd and not stand out as an ethnic minority based on physical appearance like she did in Germany. Lastly, James said that for him the best positive experience was the high potential of building a successful business in Korea, which was also the ultimate reason he settled there.

And then I guess I was also lucky that I was assigned to a very, I might say, like a really good batch of soldiers who are very nice people all around. And then we became friends, so I still hang out with them. But that's not the usual case in Korea, the Korean military. (Donny, Germany)

I think it's more about getting more used to Korea, and it was really quick. I think within two months I was super immersed in the culture and everything, and now it's just about improving my Korean language, speaking and learning. (Daniel, USA)

I can go anywhere and nobody is noticing you because you look Korean. The appearance... you never stick out. And that's what I still like. (Soojung, Germany)

Korea is a lot more strict and like a lot of work and lot of stress. But I see more potential and more to gain as a person that's running a business in Korea. (James, New Zealand)

I never really felt anything negative towards the Korean culture or people as well. Yeah, only thing negative, I guess, will be the pace of life tends to be a lot faster between people. Yeah, so I think I'd like to see things in a positive light, a bit optimistic. (Luke, Australia)

Struggles and difficulties while readapting play a key role in the success of the re-acculturation process and have been proven to have a major impact on an individual's ethnic identity.⁷¹ Therefore, it is important to analyze what and how significant the struggles were that the participants experienced after relocating back to South Korea. One of the major cultural differences that the participants had to adapt to was communication. All participants reported that they had to change how they expressed their opinions to not be perceived as harsh or rude by other Koreans. Furthermore, the work culture and hierarchy were significant obstacles to overcome for Rika, James, Luke and Gloria. The largest obstacle in general was language, and the participants that were less fluent in Korean reported more struggles while adapting to their life in Korea. David and Willie spoke little Korean, were not able to form many social connections and additionally felt isolated from the main society. They stated that they felt awkward communicating with other Koreans

⁷⁰ Oh and Lee, "Asian Values, Ethnic Identity," 81.

⁷¹ Oh and Lee, "Asian Values, Ethnic Identity," 81-82.

because of the expectation that they would speak fluent Korean because of their physical appearance. Soojung, James, Donny and Daniel stated that they had to get used to speaking Korean daily and that they took Korean classes to assimilate better, which helped them in that process.

Yeah. I mean, sometimes I would phrase things differently, but it was never to a point that I did not say something that I wanted to say. (Donny, Germany)

When my kids, when they went to school, there are so many things I couldn't help them with. And it wasn't only because of language, it was also stuff like in Korea, it's kind of a cultural thing. (Soojung, Germany)

The biggest obstacle is I think the language barrier is the biggest obstacle for me, I think because of that, and again, so much of this is influenced by the pandemic. I'm living kind of in an island in the apartment because I can do my work remotely. I don't really have interactions with other people here. (Willie, USA)

My point of view sort of differed in sort of a work environment as well. And I think the work culture and the company organization and the hierarchy, et cetera, are all different compared to Australia as well, sort of took a couple months to get used to it. (Luke, Australia)

I always criticize a lot about them, but I don't say it much out loud anymore. Well, I have it in my thoughts. (Gloria, USA)

5.4 Expression of identity

To assess the participants' sense of ethnic identity, they were asked whether they feel secure and stable in their ethnic identity and where they feel most comfortable and a sense belonging, since that is a significant factor for the formation of ethnic identity.⁷² Donny, Rika, Soojung and David stated that it fluctuates between their host countries and South Korea. They said that they feel in between places most of the time, and they could not choose one place where they generally feel like they belong more. Willie, Luke, James and Gloria reported that they feel more comfortable with their host country's culture and also identity more with it, whereas Daniel said that if he could master the Korean language, he would feel like he belonged more to South Korea than his host country, the US. The most significant factors participants identified relevant to their sense of belonging were their language proficiency and feelings of alienation from either the host or home country societies, or both.

There's some aspects of Korea that I really like. And then when I'm here, because obviously because you're living here, you know, you feel like the everyday life and society and stuff. So there's a lot of things that I don't like. And then when I'm here, I, I miss Europe, but I was very satisfied in Europe. I plan to go back again. I don't think I will settle in Korea. (Rika, Switzerland)

I think the only thing holding me back is speaking the language. And I think if that's something that I were to achieve, then I think my homeland would be able to embrace me back with open arms. So I don't see it as a negative. (Daniel, USA)

So everybody kind of knew you and you were almost and sometimes they made fun of us, like saying this words, which are pretty rude. And in Korea, we were like one of many. So that was pretty amazing feeling for me and my sister. We enjoyed that. (Soojung, Germany)

As far as comfort, going outside, it's awkward for me. Not because I look very Korean. They speak to me in Korean, but I can't reply very quickly. (Willie, USA)

I know that I associate myself more in the states. And then I have more friends here in the states, and I know how to live there and do everything there. (Gloria, USA)

⁷² Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 95.

As mentioned above, the participants reported that the feeling of being alienated from and by the main society has an impact on their sense of belonging and therefore their ethnic identity as well. Daniel, David, Soojung and Rika all had trouble being fully accepted into society by their host countries. The main reason for that was that their appearance identified them as an ethnic minority. They reported incidences of racism, bullying and having to compete harder with members of the main society. Willie and David said they could not completely assimilate to Korean society and therefore felt alienated because of the communication barrier. Soojung and James struggled with cultural differences, like adapting to a collectivist society while being raised in an individualistic one. Soojung reported that when she expressed her opinion too directly she was seen as a foreigner and automatically alienated from mainstream Korean society.

My life is a constant identity crisis. I think it's mainly because I don't know for other people. But like for me, my identity is also based on whether my community kind of accepts it or not. So, for example, like sometimes I feel like I can't really claim my German side because I don't really look that German. I mean, when I go to Germany, like my German is worse than my Korean. (Rika, Switzerland)

They think it's not polite and they don't say it to my face, but I hear it from other people. And then they all probably because she grew up in Germany, things like that, which is true. (Soojung, Germany)

But when I'm in public, especially if I normally interact with some other people, I am very aware and very self-conscious of my limitations. And it is frustrating. It's a little embarrassing. We're not really embarrassed by it. It's just frustrating that I lost my ability, my Korean language skills. (Willie, USA)

But definitely the way I think is very different to Korea, like I think I was raised in the society of in the sense of stronger individualism than collectivism. (James, New Zealand)

When asked to identify with either their host country or Korea, most participants identified with both and described their identity as in between. Gloria and Willie identified more with their host country the US, whereas Daniel identified as a Korean American although he placed more importance on being Korean.

I don't I don't have that dilemma anymore, though. Mm-Hmm. I am. I am an American citizen. I am American who's just living in Korea. That's how I identify myself. (Gloria, USA)

So I think I never really had the point where I said am I Korean, am I Australian? I just said my parents are Korean. I am in Australia. On the roots I would say I am Korean, but sort external wise ... and I suppose my experience and that thing I'd say I'm Australian. (Luke, Australia)

When I'm here. No, I'm not Korean. I'm American. When I'm in America, I'm not American. I'm Korean. (David, USA)

Oh, yeah, yeah. I mean, it's like you have two powers why you only use one. You know what I mean? So I think when people start enjoying that, you enjoy your identity of a multicultural person, you know? (James, New Zealand)

I'm in the middle between the two identities. (Soojung, Germany)

Korean American is a good way to put it. Of course, the majority of my life has been in America, but yeah, I think the Korean word comes first for me. (Daniel, USA)

But after, I guess, after I came to Korea my identity changed in a way that I became more aware of my Korean roots. (Donny, Germany)

The last factor that was considered to analyze each participant's sense of ethnic identity was the emotional connection they had to both their host country and South Korea. Rika, Daniel and James

stated that they have an emotional connection to Korea and to Korean history and that they feel a sense of pride for Korea and being Korean rather than for their host countries. Willie and Soojung said that they did not feel that type of connection with either country, and Gloria explained that she felt pride for being part of the Korean American community.

And I notice that like, I don't I don't feel like patriotic to any of my country, but for example when they speak about the Korean War and like the...cause Korea was a very poor country and like when when I see documentaries about Korea and stuff it hits, it hits me more. (Rika, Switzerland)

Definitely when my country does well in soccer, for example, it's definitely like a huge sense of pride, even though I've only experienced current Korean culture for a shorter time in my life. But when the United States does something. Well, I don't feel anything, to be honest. (Daniel, USA)

It's not a really emotional connection, but I feel it's more of an intellectual acknowledgment and recognition. The Korean history with Japan, Japan was pretty horrible to Korea. It's not a guttural emotional feeling for me. It was terrible. It shouldn't have happened, but it's more of a cognitive thought as opposed to something that I feel in my heart. (Willie, USA)

So I'm very emotionally connected to the history. The things that's going on once you realize what's what's happening and what. You know how backwards we went because of these things, and I think we're still at a recovering phase and I think we're finally there where we realize. I think we're doing OK now. (James, New Zealand)

6. Discussion

6.1 Influence of host country on ethnic identity

Since research suggests that an important part of ethnic identity is formed during adolescence, it is important to examine the impact that growing up in the host country had on the participants' ethnic identity.⁷³ It is only through grasping the influence of the life in the host country that it is possible to assess the impact that re-acculturation had on participants' ethnic identity. As a preliminary point, the participants cannot remember much of the acculturation process in the host country because they moved abroad at a young age. The only feature that they remembered was the difficulty of communication before learning the host country's language, but most participants stated that they learned the language quickly due to attending primary school in the host country, and they do not recall any adaptation struggles afterwards. All participants referred to their host country's main language as their first language during the interviews. The impact of the initial acculturation process on the participants' ethnic identity as a child cannot be examined and taken into consideration because they do not remember many experiences during that time. It is not possible to say if the participants' bond to Korea and their own ethnic identity was weakened or strengthened during the acculturation process by experiencing hardships and struggles.⁷⁴ It is only possible, but nonetheless important, to examine the impact of their life growing up in the host country on their identity.⁷⁵

⁷³ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96.

⁷⁴ cf. Oh and Lee, "Asian Values," 81.

⁷⁵ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96.

Willie, Soojung, David, Daniel and Rika grew up in places predominantly surrounded by people from the main society and neighborhoods with no Korean community, whereas Gloria, James, Luke and Donny had consistent contact with the Korean community mostly through the efforts of their parents such as sending them to Korean school or attending Korean church. David and Daniel felt the impact of being an ethnic minority in a way that made them want to compete with members of the main society. In Daniel's case, this impacted his ethnic identity by increasing his pride in being Korean; in David's case, this weakened his identification with being Korean because he tried to adapt completely to the main society while living within it. It can be observed that the social environment in which both men grew up had different impacts on their ethnic identity and the position they chose to represent of themselves in that environment.⁷⁶ These findings align with Syed and Azmitia's research on the four groups of emotions in that feelings of this type have impacted Daniel's and David's ethnic identity.⁷⁷

Out of the nine participants, five were satisfied with their life in their host country and felt accepted by the main society. They described their life as joyful and privileged. Although these five participants experienced subtle racism such as comments on their physical appearance, it did not impact their positive view on their life growing up in the host country. These occurrences did not produce a feeling of not belonging to the main society, and the five participants instead saw the occurrences as rare and trivial incidents. In accordance with Berry's theory, the positive experiences and successful psychological, sociocultural and intercultural adaptation have led to a sense of happiness, satisfaction and overall positive connection with the host country for Gloria, Luke, Willie, Donny and James.⁷⁸

Two interviewees, Daniel and David, felt alienated from the main society and experienced bullying or direct racism as a child. Both stated that it led them to more deeply discover their Korean roots during adulthood, which was the main reason for their return to South Korea. Daniel described his ethnic identity as Korean American with more focus on Korean, whereas David described his identity as a wave moving between both. Their experiences led the men to consciously think about their ethnic identity and their position as part of a minority in the host society. The feeling of being alienated and treated as different led Daniel to form deeper bonds with his Korean peers and desire

⁷⁶ cf. Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 20.

⁷⁷ Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 210.

⁷⁸ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 4.

to explore his ethnic homeland.⁷⁹ David spent more years in his host country and returned to South Korea later in life with the same wish of exploring his Korean roots. An important difference that played a role in the formation of the two participants' ethnic identity is that Daniel was more fluent in Korean and had a simpler time communicating and adapting upon return.⁸⁰

Soojung was satisfied with her life in Germany but felt alienated because of her physical appearance as a minority group. Being able to blend into the main society contributed strongly to her sense of belonging and identity, which is why she felt more comfortable in South Korea. This feeling can be categorized as belonging to Syed and Azmitia's group of "a feeling of difference based on their ethnicity," which the researchers claim has an influence on ethnic identity formation.⁸¹

Furthermore, the household culture was described as Korean by all nine participants. James placed importance on the fact of his family and household being Korean and did not see himself moving back to Korea or being interested in his Korean ethnic identity without that influence during his formative years. This outcome can also be attributed to adolescence being the prime time for ethnic identity formation.⁸² Donny felt that he adapted well to German culture and society because even though his household was primarily Korean his parents tried to incorporate German elements into it. He did not consider that these elements took away from his identity as a Korean. Conversely, Willie regretted the decision of his parents to not immerse him more deeply into Korean culture and especially the Korean language as he was growing up, and he described a feeling of regret, because it made him lose touch with his Korean identity. Willie was unable to speak fluent Korean, struggled with intercommunication and stated that even his own family viewed him as an American in South Korea due to his mannerisms. In other words, he felt like he lost touch with his Korean side while participating in South Korea's main society and experiencing a feeling of being different.⁸³ These experiences made him feel like he did not belong and they impacted his ethnic identity.⁸⁴

Lastly, most participants had a multicultural friendship group growing up in the host country and did not have extensive contact with Korean peers. Donny stated that this led to a feeling of

⁷⁹ Oh and Lee, "Asian Values," 81.

⁸⁰ cf. Park, "Back to Korea," 67.

⁸¹ Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 210-211.

⁸² Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96.

⁸³ cf. Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 1-2.

⁸⁴ Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 208.

responsibility to represent the Korean community in the host country, which put emphasis on his ethnic identity. Rika, James and Luke felt less aware of their Korean ethnic identity in a social context due to being surrounded by a variety of cultures. They can be categorized as falling within Phinney's first stage of ethnic identity development (diffuse) because they show little understanding and exploration of their ethnic identity during their adolescent years.⁸⁵ Daniel had Korean friends he knew from church and felt like bonds with them were stronger due to their similar life circumstances and struggles of being part of a minority group. This feeling of belonging to his friendship group and sharing of similar values and experiences different to those of the members of the main society may have further contributed to Daniel's sense of ethnic identity as a Korean minority.⁸⁶

6.2 Influence of re-acculturation on ethnic identity

There were struggles and hardships during the re-acculturation process for all participants, and they all reported dealing with reverse culture shock in one way or another.⁸⁷

Five participants (Donny, Daniel, Willie, David and Soojung) did not have many or high expectations upon returning to Korea because they did not visit South Korea often while living abroad, which resulted in them not having a clear picture of what living there would be like. They were not strongly disappointed or impacted in their Korean identity by any experience since they did not have many memories of their homeland.⁸⁸ Four participants (James, Rika, Gloria and Luke) did not expect Korea's work culture to be as intense as they found it. Especially for Rika and Gloria, this was a factor of great dissatisfaction. Gloria changed her workplace before going on maternity leave, and Rika even decided to leave South Korea after the Covid-19 pandemic ends, because of the stressful work culture. The four participants reported that the work stress and poor work-life balance did not have an impact on their perceived ethnic identity, but rather made them reconsider building a career in South Korea.

One of the largest obstacles to the participants readjusting to Korean culture was the hierarchy-based society and work sphere. All participants struggled with the concept of a collectivist society that applied hierarchy and seniority principles derived from both Confucianism and Korean culture

⁸⁵ Phinney, "Stages of Ethnic Identity," 38.

⁸⁶ Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 208.

⁸⁷ cf. Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, "(Re)acculturation," 5-6.

⁸⁸ Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, "(Re)acculturation," 5.

and society.⁸⁹ Gloria, Rika, Luke and James struggled especially with the inability to express their opinions directly at their work place due to the fact that they for example ranked lower in terms of seniority.⁹⁰ Gloria and Soojung felt like they were seen as foreigners rather than Korean by other members of the society when they expressed their opinions directly. This produced a feeling of not being accepted by their own ethnic group and emphasized the impact of the host country on their ethnic identity.⁹¹ The adjustment struggles of these five participants can be traced to the effects of individualism and collectivism on communication styles, since all of them lived in Western host countries with individualist ideologies before returning to Korea, which is shaped by collectivism.⁹² All five have adapted in the sociocultural sphere by either keeping their opinions more to themselves to avoid being criticized or by wording their thoughts more carefully than they did in their host country environment.⁹³

The factor of language played one of the most important roles in ethnic identity formation for the nine participants.⁹⁴ Participants describing difficulties in communicating with other members of Korean society also reported that they automatically felt more like a foreigner and alienated. Soojung felt alienated and treated differently from others because she had an accent when she first returned to Korea. Willie and David faced the biggest struggles around language because they did not continue speaking it in their host countries and returned to Korea later in their lives. It was impossible for them to fully see themselves as Korean without being able to communicate with others and share the language.⁹⁵ Soojung, Rika and Daniel struggled with understanding a higher level of Korean that is influenced by Chinese characters (Hanja), which is used for example in the news.⁹⁶ This lack of understanding did not affect their everyday life, but they reported being treated differently when they asked questions about it, which caused them to feel insecure.

⁸⁹ cf. Chong-Min Park and Shin Doh Chull, "Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 3 (2006): 341–61, <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2006.46.3.341>.

⁹⁰ cf. Oh and Lee, "Asian Values," 80.

⁹¹ cf. Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 21.

⁹² William B. Gudykunst et al., "The influence of cultural individualism- collectivism, self construals, and individual values on communication styles across cultures," *Human Communication Research* 22, no. 4 (1996): 511.

⁹³ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96-97.

⁹⁴ Park, "Back to Korea," 28.

⁹⁵ Oh and Lee, "Asian Values," 77-78.

⁹⁶ Jeung-Ryeul Cho and Ming Ming Chiu, "Rapid naming in relation to reading and writing in Korean (Hangul), Chinese (Hanja) and English among Korean children: a 1-year longitudinal study," *Journal of Research in Reading* 38, no. 4 (2015): 388.

A further problem that occurred during the re-acculturation process was the difficulty in forming friendships and building a social circle. Willie, David and Soojung did not have any friends in South Korea, which they blame on their late return and the inability to share meaningful experiences such as student life or growing up in the same hometown. They felt disconnected from Korean society, and this exclusion impacted their sense of Korean identity. As Verkuyten notes, social exclusion has a greater impact on an individual and their identity than social inclusion, and the human desire to be part of a group or a community is strong and can impact ethnic identity immensely.⁹⁷ As mentioned above, language also played a significant factor in hindering the formation of social connections for David and Willie. The participants that had a social circle described it as rather multicultural, because they preferred to speak the language of their host countries to bond with others. Those who had an extensive social circle such as Donny, Daniel and Gloria had a more positive attitude and feeling of belonging to Korea.⁹⁸ Donny recalled positive memories of the first months upon returning to South Korea and joining the military, because he made good friends and felt welcomed by his peers. Daniel felt welcomed at his workplace as an English teacher by his colleagues and students and explained that it was easy for him to make good friends after returning. Both men associated the period after their return with positive emotions of feeling connected to others that strengthened the Korean part of their ethnic identity and made it easier to overcome other struggles during the re-acculturation.⁹⁹

Lastly, acceptance by the main society also plays a role in the formation of ethnic identity. Rika did not feel completely accepted by Korean society in everyday life, which had a significant impact on her. She stated that her ethnic identity depended on the acceptance of her peers. These findings align with Verkuyten's statement about inclusion: "Everyone has the need to be socially recognized and valued – not only for who they are as individuals, but also for what they are as members of a group."¹⁰⁰

David and Willie did not feel accepted due to their low language proficiency. Soojung and Gloria felt viewed as foreigners when they displayed behavior that differed from the collectivist ideology, such as criticizing others higher in seniority or expressing their opinions too directly.

⁹⁷ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 117.

⁹⁸ cf. Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 117.

⁹⁹ cf. Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 210.

¹⁰⁰ Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 118.

6.3 Results

Out of the nine participants two were very positively impacted by the re-acculturation process (Daniel, Donny). They formed bonds and felt welcomed and included by other members of society so that they felt part of a group; this strengthened their Korean ethnic identity and gave them a strong sense of belonging.¹⁰¹ They had fewer negative encounters and were not disappointed by any prior expectations. These findings align with Syed and Azmitia's theory that certain emotions have an impact on an individual's ethnic identity and these include "a feeling of connection."¹⁰² Notably, there is a major difference which concerned their experiences in the host countries. For Donny, these experiences were positive and he primarily identified as a German Korean and felt part of the German main society; however, Daniel felt the burden of being part of a minority group in the US and struggled with having to compete to be accepted into society. This indicates that their positive experiences during the re-acculturation process had a significant impact on their ethnic identity since they experienced the same changes upon return despite having had different experiences prior to it.

For three participants, language was the most significant factor that influenced their ethnic identity upon return. They realized they could not be part of Korean society without speaking the language at a native level. Soojung felt treated like a foreigner because she had a foreign accent while speaking Korean. It made her realize that she cannot be fully accepted into neither Germany's main society nor South Korea's, which established her identity as a multicultural migrant whose identity oscillates between German and Korean but is never fully one or the other. For Willie and David, the return experiences of living in their home country did impact their identity as Korean, but the inability to communicate and be fully accepted enforced their American identity as well. Their ethnic identity of being neither fully American nor completely Korean but instead multicultural was strengthened through the re-acculturation process.

To sum up the factors that had the biggest influences on the nine participants' ethnic identity during the re-acculturation process were: the ability to communicate, acceptance by other members of the society, feelings of loneliness and isolation due to few social connections and dealing with cultural differences such as hierarchy and seniority principles.

For nearly half the participants (Gloria, Luke, Rika, James), the re-acculturation did not completely change their perceived ethnic identity, but rather strengthened it which agrees with Oh and Lee's

¹⁰¹ cf. Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 208.

¹⁰² Syed and Azmitia, "Narrative and Ethnic Identity Exploration," 210.

theory of acculturation struggles having a positive impact on ethnic identity formation.¹⁰³ The struggles and hardships they faced upon return made them consciously explore their ethnic identity more. Cultural differences such as those concerning interpersonal communication contributed to them feeling like a foreigner and identifying with cultural traits of their host countries rather than cultural traits they experienced in Korean society. Nonetheless no participant felt like they lost touch with their Korean identity through negative encounters. All four participants developed the view of themselves as citizens of their host country with Korean ethnic roots, capable of switching between both cultures and adapting quickly to social situations. In other words they also recognized their ethnic identity as a multicultural person (like Willie and David) that has both home and host country cultures implemented and they experience this fact as beneficial, which agrees with Berry's integration category.¹⁰⁴

As Dizon et al. explain, it is especially difficult for 1.5 generation migrants to navigate their ethnic identity because they experience both home and host culture and the outcomes lead to the formation of a multicultural identity.¹⁰⁵ Seven out of nine participants were impacted by re-acculturation in the sense that they realized they could not fully adapt or be accepted by either society, and this enforced their ethnic identity as a multicultural person that could adapt to both cultures and exist in a sphere of in betweenness. Two out of nine participants experienced a reinforcement of their Korean ethnic identity through the experience of inclusion and acceptance by other members of society and were not significantly impacted by negative experiences. This contradicts other research that claims that social exclusion during re-acculturation has a larger impact on identity than positive factors such as inclusion.¹⁰⁶ One possible explanation for this phenomenon could be that in the case of the two participants they simply encountered more positive experiences than negative ones, and the results could change if there had been more encounters of alienation than acceptance by the main society. Contrary to other research on re-acculturation that emphasizes the importance of expectations, the expectations the participants had prior to returning to South Korea only had a small impact on the adaptation struggles they faced and their ethnic identity.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Oh and Lee, "Asian Values," 81.

¹⁰⁴ Berry, "Integration and Multiculturalism," 2.6.

¹⁰⁵ Dizon, Selak, Ramalho and Peiris-John, "Factors influencing the negotiation of ethnic identity," 96-97.

¹⁰⁶ cf. Verkuyten, *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity*, 117.

¹⁰⁷ Sonnenschein, Michelini and King, "(Re)acculturation," 5.

The results agree with Oh and Lee's theory that ethnic identity strengthens in some way through different encounters during (re)acculturation. All participants had to reconsider and consciously explore their ethnic identity during the re-acculturation process and either their identity as Korean or a multicultural person became stronger as a result.¹⁰⁸ For most participants' their perceived ethnic identity did not change from a feeling of belonging from host to home country or vice versa, but rather the fluidity of being able to adapt to both and a person who identifies with multiple cultures has been emphasised.¹⁰⁹

7. Conclusion

Research has showed that acculturation impacts a migrant in various ways, such as in ways of communication, language and also identity.¹¹⁰ Since the cultural and social environment changes completely upon migrating to a new and foreign country, the ways in which this can influence a migrants ethnic identity are many. The research question that evolved from this pattern was if and how the re-acculturation upon returning back to the home country impacts a migrants' ethnic identity, since they return to a culture that is already somewhat familiar to them.

I have proven throughout this work that the re-acculturation process after return migrating back to South Korea has an undeniable impact on the returnees ethnic identity while also showing the prior impact the life in the host country has had on it. The nine participants of this study all reported to have been confronted with having to contemplate about their identity and struggled with thoughts of where they actually belong. Their ethnic identity changed in the sense that they became more aware of its fluidity and their own traits as multicultural people. I explored how positive and negative aspects during re-acculturation, such as encounters with other members of the society, language ability, interpersonal communication and prior expectations play a role in the impact of a migrants ethnic identity. My findings contradict the theory that ethnic identity is formed during adolescence and strengthens the theory of an ever evolving, fluid concept of ethnic identity that can be impacted throughout an individuals life and is multiculturally adaptable in different social contexts.¹¹¹ This thesis has elaborated on the niche research subject of re-acculturation and the impact on the ethnic

¹⁰⁸ Oh and Lee, "Asian Values," 81.

¹⁰⁹ Hyonsuk Cho and X. Christine Wang, "Fluid identity play: A case study of a bilingual child's ethnic identity construction across multiple contexts," *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 18, no. 2 (2020): 201-202.

¹¹⁰ Berry, *Acculturation and adaptation*, chap. 3.

¹¹¹ Cho and Wang, "Fluid identity play," 202.

identity of Korean return migrants. Additionally it provides insights into the interrelation of the fields of migration, identity and re-acculturation.

For future research it would be interesting to compare re-acculturation experiences of migrants in the same age group, to see if they show further similarities in regard to their ethnic identity formation. Furthermore a study that focuses on the difference in gender during re-acculturation experiences might show new outcomes, since the gender ratio was too low in this research to give conclusive results.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Demographic Information of the interviewees

	James	Willie	David	Daniel	Donny	Luke	Soojung	Rika	Gloria
Age	33	62	52	35	29	26	52	27	36
gender	male	male	male	male	male	male	female	female	female
Age they moved abroad	7	7	6	3	1	10	6	6	9
Age they returned to Korea	30	60	30	33	18	25	33	25	mid 20s
Years in Korea after return	3	2	22	2	9	1,5	19	2	8
Host country	New Zealand	USA	USA	USA	Germany	Australia	Germany	Switzerland/ Germany	USA
Occupation	Entrepreneur	Entrepreneur	Salesman	English teacher	works for German Chamber of Commerce	Translator/ Documents controller	English/ German tutor	Consultant	Works in administration