

Married Korean Professional Women with Children in U.S. and in Korea: A Mix of Occupational & Immigrant Status

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Abstract

This qualitative research examined the work and family experience of Korean professional women in Korea and in the U.S. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted; seven Korean immigrant women with children in the U.S., and seven Korean women with children in Korea. Immigrant status and occupational status are anchored to examine (a) how work- family experiences are different in the U.S. and in Korea; (b) how Korean women with children in a profession perceive their accumulated roles (i.e., conflict or enrichment); and (c) how professional women's economic power influences their marital relationships. Work and family spillover, self-confidence, language barriers, work environments, and wholeness emerged as main themes. Work-family polices will be discussed.

Introduction

- Many theories have been developed to understand the nature of power related to resources, work-family interfaces, work-family policies, and family relation changes due to mother's employment
- Little attention has been given to minority groups
- In this study, I address experiences of married Korean professional women with children, focusing on their work and family experiences, and the differences in between the U.S. and Korea
- This research focused on two main dimensions of married Korean women's:
 - Immigrant status & Occupational status
- Target participants:
 - Korean women who completed at least their bachelor degree in Korea and migrated to the U.S. to pursue higher degrees and now join a professional occupation in the U.S.
 - Korean women who completed their higher degrees either in Korea or in the U.S. and now have a professional occupation in Korea.

Purposes

This qualitative research is to examine

- How immigrant factors play a role in married professional women's work and family;
- How women's professional occupations with higher degrees influence their work and family in the U.S. compared to in Korea;
- How married women with children in the professional occupation perceive their accumulated roles in terms of conflict or enrichment work-family spillover.

Background

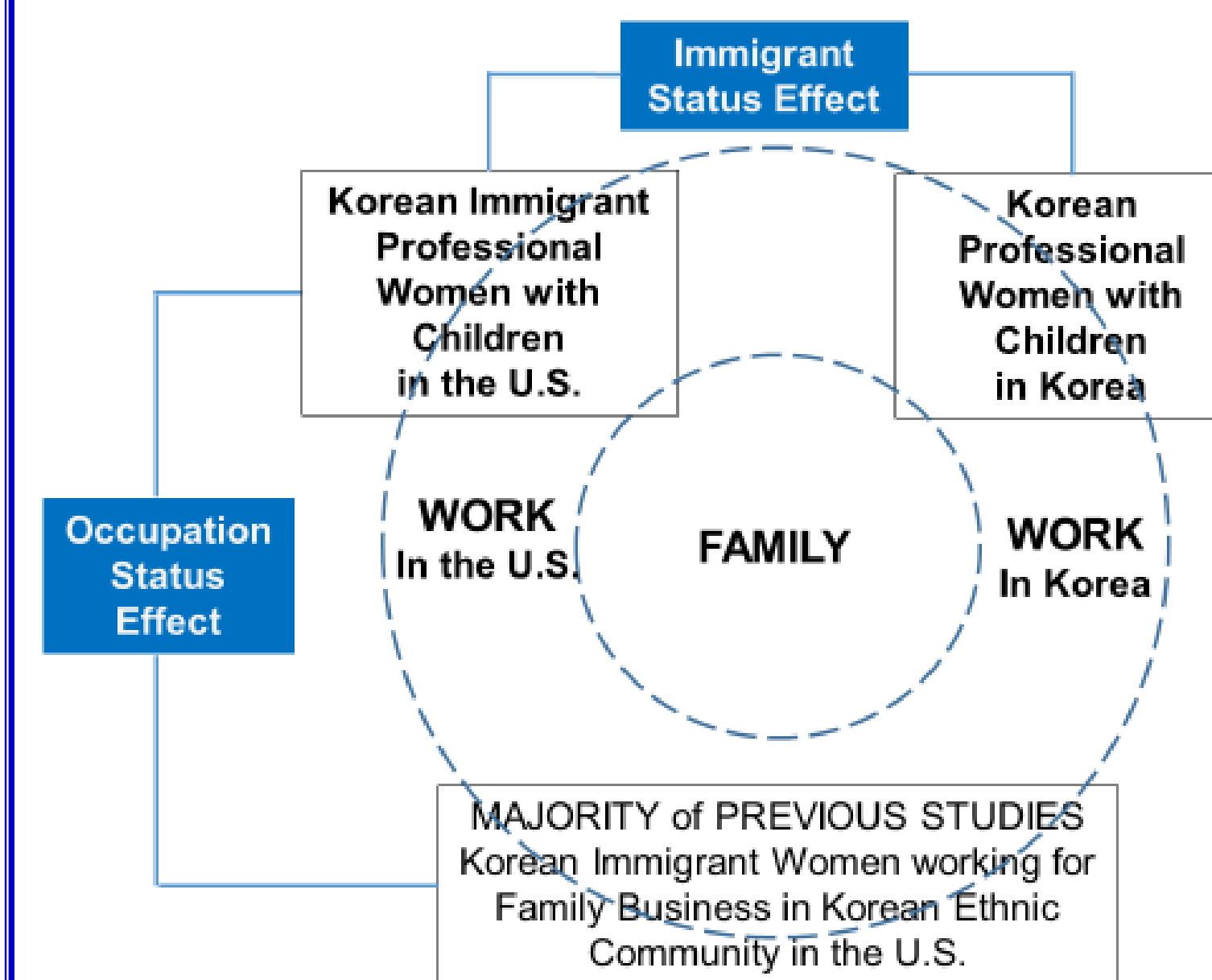
- Work-family spillover: Conflict or enrichment?
- Professional women with children
- Theoretical perspectives
 - Social exchange framework – economic independence effect
 - Symbolic interaction framework – income effect
- Policies for professional women with children in the U.S. and in Korea

Methods

- Purposive sampling or criterion-based sampling
- Semi-structured in-depth interview
- Criteria
 - They (a) are between 35 and 60 years old;
 - (b) were born and raised in Korea, completed their bachelor's degree in Korea, and migrated to the U.S. for higher education (for Korean immigrant women criteria);
 - (c) earned a master degree or higher either in the U.S. or Korea;
 - (d) are currently employed in a profession (e.g., college professors, researchers, lawyers, etc.) either in the U.S. or Korea;
 - (e) currently are married to a Korean man and have at least one child
- Seven married Korean professional women with children & Seven married Korean immigrant professional women

The following questions guide this study:

- How do married Korean immigrant professional women with children in the U.S. describe their work, family, economic power and overall well-being?
- How do married Korean professional women with children in Korea describe their work, family, economic power, and overall well-being?
- How does immigrant status and occupation status affect Korean immigrant women's interpretation of work, family, and life satisfaction?



<Figure 1: Conceptual Map>

	Participant	Occupation	Education	Age	# of Children (age)	Husband Education
Korean Immigrant Professional Women with Children in U.S. (KIPW)	Participant A	Professor	Ph. D.	35	1 (6)	Ph. D.
	Participant B	Computer programmer	Master	59	3 (31, 28, 25)	Ph. D.
	Participant C	Dentist	D.M.D.	38	2 (9, 6)	Ph. D.
	Participant D	Lawyer	JD	40	1 (13)	Master
	Participant E	Professor	Ph.D.	38	2 (4, 2)	Bachelor
	Participant F	Clinical Dietician	Master	30	1 (5 month)	Bachelor
	Participant G	Science Researcher	Ph. D / Post- Doc	43	2 (7, 2)	Master
Korean Professional Women with Children in Korea (KPW)	Participant K	Legislative researcher	Ph. D	35	2 (7, 3)	Ph. D
	Participant L	Professor	Ph. D	34	2 (6, 3)	Ph. D
	Participant M	Computer Engineering Manager	Master	35	2 (5, 3)	Master
	Participant N	Professor	Ph. D	55	1 (16)	Bachelor
	Participant O	Director	Master	47	2 (13, 15)	Ph. D
	Participant P	Finance Analystist	Master	31	(18 month)	Master
Participant Q	Director	Master	38	1 (6)	Bachelor	

<Table 1: Participant Demographic Background>

Constructivist/Naturalistic Paradigm

The *constructivist paradigm* assumes a relativist ontology (**there are multiple realities**), a subjectivist epistemology (**knower and respondent cocreate understandings**), and naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures. Findings are usually presented in terms of the criteria of *grounded theory* or pattern theories. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 21, emphasis added)

In *grounded theory*, the researcher simultaneously collects and analyzes data (Charmaz, 2002). Building rapport and interaction between participants and researcher are the initial steps of analyzing data to build a grounded theory (Morse, 2003).

Emerging Themes

Child Care and Domestic Work

KIPW

- Mange child care & domestic work with their husbands
- Divide works according to their work schedule & workloads, not their traditional gender role ideology
- Work as a team, but not equal share; rather subjective feeling of fair share

KPW

- All KPW – Assists from family member or paid helpers (geographical proximity to their parents / cheaper labor in Korea).
- Most husbands – traditional gender role: child care and domestic works are not their responsibilities.

Roles as Professional Women Gender inequality.

- Not because of their gender, but because of their being married and having children, KIPW & KPW sometimes had to limit in choosing their jobs and their activities at their work by themselves.
- KIPW: Gave up their careers in Korea and followed their husbands (job or education), restarted(redo) their higher education and careers, searched a job requiring less demanding work or a job close to husband's job...
- KPW: Moved a job close to home, commuted (4 days at work, 3 days at home), refused to be promoted or out-of-state project...
- ➔ All the women felt that their decision about working was voluntary; no one forced them to do it. Therefore, most of the women did not feel their situation was unfair, but they did feel sorry about the situation.
- Economic Independence.**
 - None of the participants considered their earnings to be the main resource in their family nor incentive for their independence.
 - They believed that their husbands' occupations were the primary and theirs were secondary.
 - Even those who earned more than their husbands said it did not give them any negotiable power in their marital relationships.
 - They appreciated the money they could contribute to the family, but did not think of their income as a source of power of independence.

Working Environments

Language Barriers.

- One of main themes in Korean immigrant women's narratives
When discussing an assigned task, I do not have any problem. When talking about other than work, however, it is hard to jump in [to the middle of a conversation].

Language Barriers. (cont.)

- Collogues sometimes showed lack of patience when the job required speed in presenting oral reports. Women overcame with diligence, strong commitment to work, and cooperation with other colleagues
- Students challenged participants (professors). They find better ways to communicate with students
- Most of time the problems arose from cultural differences but from the language itself
- Participant D, a lawyer, said it was extremely hard to complete her degree and get a license because of language problems. She said she was very happy to be able to work for Korean immigrants who had very limited English fluency since she had already experienced how hard it was to learn a new language.

Family-friendly working environments.

KIPW

- Work schedules were quite flexible (both husbands and wives)
- Available when child(ren)'s sick day, conference, other activities

KPW

- Not mentioned children at work (sick day, school events, etc.)
- Overwork is quite regular – afraid to be viewed as incompetent
- Their/ their husband colleagues – act confined by traditional gender role ideology.

Attitude toward Self, Family, and Work Self-confidence.

KIPW

- Showed high self-confidence about their achievement (strong & positive sense of self) in their talks & gestures.
- However, all KIPW experienced some immigrant factors, including language barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. systems, acculturation problems, and social isolation.
- Have positive roles in Korean American communities

KPW

- Due to cultural or societal influences, KPW talked in subtle manner about their achievement, not quite overt
- Expressed gratitude to others to help them to achieve their careers.
- Showed higher desire to be successful in their careers.

Wholeness.

I would not be happy if had only my degree [Ph. D] and my job without my own family. I also would not be happy if I stayed home for my family and did not have my own work ... Once I tried to be a stay-at-home mother, but I gave up in six months and decided to go to a graduate school. It does not mean that I do not value my family or underestimate stay-at-home mothers. I admire stay-at-home mothers because I know I am not able to do so... In my family, I am not a perfect mother or a wife because of obligations at work. At work, I don't think I am able to perform as perfect as I wish to be as a professional because of my family responsibilities, but I should accept it. I think we [married professional women] should not divide work and family into two worlds separately ... should put them into one. I considered my work and my family as a whole instead of two separate spheres (emphasis added).

Discussion & Conclusion

- Balance between work & family
 - KIPW & KPW valued both family and work, keep strong boundaries between, and strong sense of control in both areas → enriched their quality of life and encompassed things happening around them as a whole
- Family-friendly work environment & flexibility
 - KPW were more challenged due to their working context (authority hierarchies, traditional notions about mothers' working as supplementary and the need for a longer time spent at work) → need imperative awareness about gender equality and societal attitudes toward working mothers and fathers in accordance with the family policies.
- Income effect than Independence effect
- Immigrant factors were not negative indicators of KIPW's overall life satisfaction.

Limitations

- Although KIPW & KPW were selected from screened narrow pool, still variation in their professions and their children's ages → Participants from a similar professional occupation pool & similar children's age group.
- Hope to contribute to more in-depth understanding of Korean professional women's lives and to the development and expansion of intervention and prevention programs for diverse immigrant families.