Chapter 9

On Being a "Successful Failure"

Korean-American Students and the Structural-Cultural Paradox

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INTRODUCTION

Shaken by news of the suicides of two Korean-American high school students in Los Angeles, social worker Jae Kim of Partners in Suicide Prevention has made it his life mission to convince Korean Americans not to take their own lives.[1] As Los Angeles is the largest Korean population center outside of the two Koreas, alarming is the group's highest suicide rate of all Asian ethnics, the fifth-highest suicide rate of all racial groups. It is even more alarming that the brunt of the suicides is committed by U.S.-born "transition age youth," those sixteen to twenty-five-years old. Jae Kim attributes this to the:

> Korean culture of competition . . . putting a lot of stress on the second generation . . . The difference in [family and mainstream] culture is putting a lot of pressure on them as well. It's also possible that many of them aren't getting enough emotional support from their parents because they can't seem to communicate well due to the language barrier.[2]

Indeed, extreme events such as the suicides of MIT sophomore Elizabeth Shin by self-immolating flames (*USA Today* January 24, 2002) and that of Virginia Tech student Seung-hui Cho after massacring thirty-three people on campus have been linked, at least in part, to parental and cultural pressures for "model minority" perfection (*Los Angeles Times* October 23, 2007). The link has also been found with respect to the high rates of anxiety, depression, and alienation among Asian-American students in general, including Korean ethnics, most of whom occupy middle- and upper-class ranks (Sue and Okazaki 1990; Suzuki 1980; Kuo 1984; Falk 1995; Kao 1995; Bankston and Zhou 2002; Zhou et al. 2008). These problems were among the many reasons

that law professor Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, a memoir on raising two daughters under Tiger Motherhood, or the "Chinese"[3] way, sparked anti-Asian hysteria, along with a national, transnational, and global debate on proper (racial/ethnic) parenting.

Beyond academic pressure, other major contributors to the high suicide rates, both among the first and second generations, include weaker English proficiency, hence, higher isolation, than other migrant groups as well as the community's cultural taboo against mental health services (*The Huffington Post*, December 21, 2011).[4] Such beliefs flow from the predominant honor-shame and save-face cultural system of collectivism in Korean society and the related doctrine of Confucianism. Such a doctrine mandates that among the five unequal relationships in which all must engage to ensure honor and social order are that of superior parents over inferior children (as well as status [e.g., educational] differentials between males) (Bodde 1953; Min 1998: 26). As a tragic transnational similarity, the South Korean "homeland" has had the highest rate of suicide among the world's industrialized countries (*Time* October 6, 2008; *Los Angeles Times* March 11, 2007; *Economist* December 17, 2011), a country in which only a minority has the chance to attend a respected four-year university (see Min 1996a) and where academic-related suicide rates are among the highest in the world. Why are the children of the immigrants from this country who beat the odds to succeed academically (and professionally) so unhappy, many to the point of suicide? This question is at the heart of our empirical analysis.

Theoretical Debates

Research has discovered the interesting paradox that although higher academic achievement is associated with higher self-esteem (Harter 1998; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) one does not necessarily *cause* the other (Portner 1998). Kingsbury et al. (1981) found that one's academic ability and social class status, not one's past academic achievements, largely account for one's self-esteem. Clifton (2007) found that self-esteem is not necessarily a good predictor of academic success, but of one's perceived control of academic and related situations. What factors, then, explain academic success if common-sense ones like high self-esteem do not? Drawing on a Korean-American paradox of the "unhappy success story," we explore this central question of what accounts for the depression, anxiety, alienation, and even suicides within a group widely vaunted as a model minority to be emulated, envied, and celebrated? In this vein, we are especially interested in the racial/ethnic *and* social class factors that relate to definitions of academic success, since much education research has taken a race *or* class approach to such questions (Gans 1962; Blau and Duncan 1967; Jencks et al. 1994; Featherman

and Hauser 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Bankston and Zhou 2002; Louie 2004; Park 2005). Applying both dimensions to the offspring of immigrants is important. As Harker (2001: 970) writes, "[V]ery little work has addressed the relationship between adaptation and the psychological well-being of young migrants." Yet, Asian Americans are among the very young migrants who our society is educating, debating about as students, and who have already changed the political landscape, from demands of state compensation for the 1992 Los Angeles unrest to immigrant workers' rights to post-9/11 due process to racial respect for NBA upstart Jeremy Lin. When considering these dynamics in relation to broader Asian-American groupings, Korean ethnics in particular, we find that socioeconomic status (SES) does not necessarily converge with evaluations of academic success (Portner 1998; Diener and Oishi 2004; Oh 2008) or foster high self-esteem among the more class-privileged (Kingsbury et al. 1981). As previous research hints at but does not fully investigate, students' ability to *do well*—e.g., earn A grades, high test scores, awards, college scholarships—might not necessarily mean that they *are well* (Bankston and Zhou 2002).[5] In pursuing such questions, we do not conduct another study on the socially constructed and status-oriented objective criteria as the key or only measures of academic achievement, but rather on *definitions* of success from the very students themselves. In such a framework, cultural notions, such as of success, are often tied to the group's frame of reference (see Pollis 1968), and it is not necessarily White America that stands in that frame. Cultural frames of reference, or social comparisons, are themselves embedded in structural dynamics such as the destination society's context of reception and the selectivity and cohort of migration (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Kao 2000). To fully pursue these perceptions of success, we also draw on the area of emotional culture that has been largely underdeveloped by immigration and education scholars (see Hochschild 1979; see Goodwin et al. 2001), yet we find that repeatedly invoked in such news stories as those at the start of chapter and from the mouths of anti-suicide activists like Jae Kim. That is, the only account of culture in this case cannot be the pressure-cooker life of Korean-American children's Confucian obligation to their parents.

Engaging, expanding on, and critiquing existing research, we empirically examine students who self-reported membership in "the middle class" and their attendance at a University of California school[6] or a rough equivalent (those higher status, as well) to tap student perceptions of academic success, the potential paradoxes within, and the reasons behind both. We ask: (a) How do structural locations of *social class and race/ethnicity* factor into definitions of success?; (b) In addition, what are the cultural, including emotional, *mechanisms* by which success is defined?; and finally, (c) Do these definitions of success *change over time* or are they *more static*, and what accounts for shifting or held patterns?

As members of one of the largest post-1965 migrant cohorts and as an ethnic group that receives more college degrees than do APAs (Asian Pacific Americans) writ large (Min 2006), Korean Americans are important to understand and draw implications from about the future of the U.S. educational, racial/ethnic, and migrant landscape. East Asian Americans, in particular, are racially celebrated as "model minorities" and "overachievers," hence, widely respected universities where large Korean- and Asian-American contingents exist are an especially important site from which to sample.[7]

STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Ethnic Group Factors via Selective Migration Streams and Immigrant Group Positioning

Societal factors that either constrain or facilitate the mobility and opportunities of some groups vis-à-vis others are at the heart of structural accounts of academic performance. Immigrant selectivity means that groups start off with more or less capital and a higher or lower class status than others, which informs academic expectations within and without (Feliciano 2006a, 2006b). On the importance of premigrant factors, Feliciano (2006a: 138) writes that as immigrants are "only select segments of any home country's population" they "are not necessarily representative of their national cultures . . . but [rather of] their pre-migration structural positions." Despite being a mostly college-educated, professional middle-class slice of a class-polarized South Korea, American hegemonic racial ideologies lump together Korean Americans and the Korean nation. As part of structural influences of race, scholars have found "ethnic effects," or ethnic group-specific factors, like supplementary ethnic schooling to influence immigrant behavioral outcomes, themselves fundamentally shaped by premigration human capital. Other "ethnic effects" include social capital, such as strong networks in one's origins and strong ethnic communities and institutions in one's destination; ethnic cultural capital, such as norms and beliefs that may produce high-achieving students and successful professionals (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut 1997; Bobo 2001; Feliciano 2006a, 2006b; Bankston and Caldas 1998; Zhou and Bankston 1998); and, finally, the way receiving societies see and treat the immigrants' ethnic resources.

About five years after the passage of Hart-Cellar Act of 1965,[8] a slice of the Korean population—predominantly college-educated, professional, urban, and middle-class—began streaming to the mainland rather than Hawaii to realize dreams and "less exclusive" educational, political, and economic

opportunities. Owing to migrant capital, U.S. immigration laws (Park 2005), historic geopolitical ties, and post-Civil Rights conservatism, this selective group of Korean and similar East/South Asian émigrés lent itself to the crystallization of the stereotypical model minority mythology. Relative to mainstream South Korean society, the U.S. education system has proven less costly, less competitive, and less about matriculation into one of the rarefied three that is SKY (#1 ranked Seoul, #3 ranked Koryo, and #2 ranked Yonsei University). Owing to the pressure to repay parents who painfully parted with the land and kin they loved for their children, there is a strain of over-achievement among second-generation youth, in part explaining their higher success rates than native-born students (Min 1996a; Park 2005) and white Americans (Kao and Thompson 2003; Zhou and Kim 2006), including double the college degree attainment of the latter (Min 2006). Indeed, multiple APA[9] groups have been found to define whiteness as academic mediocrity and laziness and to deem other Asian Americans their true competitors (Jimenez and Horowitz 2013).

Selective Assimilation and Social Comparisons among the "New Second Generation"

The model of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993) claims that for the post-1965 second generation, assimilation is no longer a singular or straightforward progression into the dominant white society but also a potential pathway of downward mobility into low income of color or oppositional society, and, finally, an upward climb by way of selectively ethnic practices. The selective ethnic pathway is one by which ethnic resources like high immigrant expectations, supplementary schools/faiths, and bilingualism are used rather than abandoned to assimilate academically and professionally. As noted, our study pursues how the process of social comparison and choice of reference group therein might challenge the tenets and generalizability of selective assimilation for some second-generation groups, at least in part. Scholars have found that among the main determinants of self-evaluation are reference groups, that is, "any group with which the individual identifies [him or herself] such that [s/he] tends to use the group as a standard for self-evaluation and as a source of personal values and goals" (Pollis 1968). Importantly, reference groups are often defined by racial, ethnic, cultural, and other social axes (Shibutani and Kwan 1965; Merton 1972; Kao 2000). Research has found that second-generation immigrants largely reference racial/ethnic or social class groups whose given attributes are "on the same level" as theirs (Davis 1966; Lorenz 1972; Kao 2000; Zhou and Bankston 1998; Zhou and Kim 2006). We contend that threaded through these social comparisons and other facets of defining success and self-worth are ethnic patterns of emotional

culture. We arrive at this framework in light of scholars' frequent implication but lack of naming and development of emotional support within ethnic communities as part of selective assimilatory success. As families and co-ethnic communities are the micro-social and emotional environments in and through which many second-generation immigrants interpret their migration experience (Kohn 1977), there is likely a direct or indirect link to definitions of success and happiness (Zhou et al. 2008). In this way, definitions of success can often be culture-specific and multidimensional (Romney et al. 1972) and often reflect real inequalities between groups (Kao and Tienda 1998).

The "New Second Generation," Middle Class Status, and Perceptions of "Success"

Among the post-1965 "new second generation," Zhou et al.'s (2008: 44) study of self-esteem finds that various students "defin[e] success by degrees of dignity, respect, independence and economic self-sufficiency rather than by . . . measures employed by most researchers." Drawing on this provocative finding but moving beyond a focus on self-esteem, we employ an integrated structural–cultural framework pushed by cutting-edge education scholars (Louie 2004; Noguera 2004; Carter 2007, 2010) to explore meaning-making about academic success. In doing so, we contend that those who meet the mainstream's standards and stereotypes of the academic success story might perceive themselves as precisely the opposite, as academic failure, and by the dint of factors we might not expect. Considering the backdrop of racial inequalities faced by middle-class Asian-American youth (Tuan 1998; Park 2005; Purkayastha 2005; Kim 2008, 2009), Kao found that interactions of social class and ethnic effects have a stronger bearing on how individuals construct their self-perceptions and self-esteem than class status alone (1998, 2000), notwithstanding class's impact on performance, resources, and networks (Feliciano 2006a, 2006b; Vallejo 2009). Kao (1998, 2000) demonstrates more broadly that structural and cultural processes dialectically influence one another in the process of students forming perceptions and definitions of academic success.

The middle-class location of post-1965 second-generation Korean ethnics is not simple or linear, as is the case for most immigrants and groups of color. The majority of the parents moved down the class ladder in the United States owing to nontransferable credentials, institutional and cultural/language barriers, and discrimination (Min 1996b). Many have earned their way back into the middle class, often as small business proprietors or as employees of a lower professional rank than they occupied on the peninsula (Min 1996b; Yoon 1997). Few in the Korean second generation, therefore, attend school without the need to appreciate those cross-border sacrifices and long hours to provide an excellent education, supplementary private schooling and

tutoring, and secure neighborhoods. Despite, and in part because of, the many middle-class resources invested to ensure academic success, the pressure on children only intensifies.

METHODOLOGY

Data and Method

This research drew on in-depth, open-ended interviews from two different studies conducted in Southern California, with first author Kim's data set as primary and second author Oh's as supplementary. With respect to second-generation immigrant students of color, Kim organized her questions around race/racialization, whereas Oh organized hers around education and achievement. Both authors, however, addressed racial/ethnic/national, gender, and social class experiences pertaining to education, family, community, and in- and out-groups.

Kim's study drew on eighteen interviews of second-generation Korean Americans recruited from universities and churches; social, community service, political groups; and varied snowball sampling techniques (January–October 2001) and Oh drew on the twelve Korean-American interviewees from her larger quantitative study on 1.5- and second-generation[10] Korean- and Mexican-American college students (January–June 2006). All lived in Southern California at the time of the interview, though not every-one grew up there. The main analytical themes extracted from the conjoined data were: parental expectations (e.g., cultural norms of success); ethnic peer expectations (of academic achievement, for example); students' perceptions of self-worth/mental health and achievement (Am I happy? Have I succeeded in school?); emotional cultures, support; and students' perceptions of success (Who am I comparing myself and my achievements to?).

In delimiting who fell within the "middle class," the authors relied on self-descriptions and the measures of income categories, parental education levels, and occupational status. The average household income of the self-described "middle-class" Korean-American sample was $75,000 to $99,999, conforming to the U.S. Census's "middle-class" (not lower-middle or upper-middle) household (Thompson and Hickey 2005). The occupations that the college-educated parents had held in South Korea, though not necessarily in the States, included businessmen, professors, politicians, physicians, attorneys, engineers, scientists, and architects.

In line with other societal demographic trends, the majority of the Korean Americans in the overall dataset were citizens (secondarily, permanent residents). The median age of the informants was 23.5 years and there were more

female than male participants. In all, the interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to about five hours in length, depending on how talkative and forthcoming the informant was.

To gain insights from students who meet mainstream standards of academic success, we recruited from the higher-ranked University of California campuses—UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC Santa Cruz, and UC Irvine[11]—and from comparably or higher-ranked universities and liberal arts colleges: Stanford University, University of Southern California, Pomona College, Claremont McKenna College, Mills College, Williams College, Boston College, Johns Hopkins University, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and University of Missouri-St. Louis.[12] All of author Oh's students attended the University of California at Irvine, while three from UC Berkeley, three from UCLA, and one from UC Santa Cruz comprised Kim's subset of University of California students. All interviews were transcribed either by the authors or by trained researchers and were coded and analyzed for academic experiences and viewpoints. Patterned narratives emerged from the coded thematic categories and are presented here.

The "Failing Model Minority" and Reference Groups: "They Did So Much Better Than Me!"

The students shared that because their parents were socialized by the hyper-competitive ROK educational system and by Confucianism, they had constantly compared their children to other Korean Americans who were academic standouts: siblings, other kin, other Koreans' children, and the like. Noticeable in the interviews was the fact that the second generation's reference group was fellow Korean superachievers more than Asian Americans writ large, whom, along some vectors, Korean ethnics outperform (Min 2006). A college student named Joe[13] emphasized the intensity of these comparisons and how he believed that Korean immigrant parents tended especially to be this way:

Korean parents have a tendency to compare you with other kids . . . like other [Korean] friends' kids. So, I remember when I was a kid . . . I had a friend who [sic] my mom and his mom were good friends and I knew him since I was, like, a baby. This kid, like, knew his math times table when he was like seven or eight. So my mom kept on like bugging me to memorize it. She would *honae mae* (discipline) me. She would, like, get mad if I didn't do it

Many among the second generation reported that the comparisons were not kept within one's family. Their parents perpetually compared each other's children or remarked on whose children were the best or the worst students

within their neighborhood, school, church, occupational, or other networks. These comparisons were motivated in part by the elevated status a child's achievement brought to the family, vital for a group fearing mediocrity and loss of face in an already high-achieving ethnic community. On this point, Sandy, a senior, remarked, "I think with Korean parents it really has to do with how much they can brag about you . . . Every brag is a point . . . You always have to be one up [sic] on your friends." Elisa, a junior, remarked on the methods used to ensure success, "I think the story behind the whole Korean community is that "We [parents] have worked this far [for you] . . . so don't screw it up."

Clear in the narratives were the Korean Americans' own use of co-ethnic peers as their main academic reference group. Also clear is that most of the informants felt that they were on the losing side of the comparison, often defining themselves as less successful than other Korean Americans, or not at all so. For example, Hyun, a sociology major at UC Irvine, bemoaned that she worked so hard yet was nowhere near her friends at "the UC Berkeleys and Harvards of the world":

Like in high school, I had a good SAT score and graduated at the top of my class, but I didn't get in anywhere besides UCI . . . Most of my friends went to Ivy Leagues like Princeton and Yale and I was the only one going to UCI. I couldn't compare to their accomplishments.

Audry, a graduate of UC Berkeley, shared that no matter how hard she tried, she could never be as academically successful as her sister:

Between me and my sisters, I work twice as hard as my middle sister, but she did far better than me at school. And there was just something, I couldn't, I worked three times harder and then [would] think, "Oh my gosh, I failed, you know? I think in a way she was just a better test taker, you know? She did really well in that kind of structure, you know.

In brief, the parents' reference groups became the students' own reference groups.

The Consequences of Ethnic Effects and "Middle Class" Effects: "They Make Me Feel Like I'm Not Good Enough"

As parents who often migrated for their children's education they, like other middle-class immigrants, often drew on the social capital of their co-ethnic community resources in order to move back into the middle class (Zhou and Bankston 1998). As we introduced, however, this selective assimilatory method may not always promote the same definitions of academic "success"

between the mainstream and the ethnic community, let alone positive self-perceptions and related self-esteem among the students. Hyun, whom we met earlier, had lamented that despite achieving valedictorian status, her parents, though loving, regarded her non-UC Berkeley campus to be "mediocrity," leading her to feel the same about herself. In this vein, she relayed how she never felt like her parents approved of her: "Like in high school, I was pressured a lot by them because I wanted them to approve of me. That was a lot of my motivation [for studying]... Yeah, [you] just feel so pressured, that you always feel like you are never good enough, no matter what you do."

Other Korean Americans discussed experiences of not feeling completely supported to pursue their own passions, a frequent generational clash between parents socialized by collectivism and children socialized by individualism. Indeed, Min's (1993) large survey of Korean Americans in New York high schools revealed a strong sense of detachment from Korean culture (e.g., name, language), likely in part because of such pressure.[14] Jacquelyn illustrated this generational clash with a vignette about how she deeply disappointed her parents for not majoring in the expected pre-law or pre-medicine track that would eventually make her the rich and enviable professional that her parents could boast about and financially depend on:

So I took biology and a math class [for pre-medicine] and I totally hated it... When I took an African-American history class I absolutely loved it. It was so interesting and so fascinating and something that I really wanted to study more ... I wanted to study not what my parents tell me [sic] or what is the most logical ... At that point, my parents were okay with it, but they were *really* ashamed. They just couldn't understand.

Similarly, Elisa commented on how she forewent her own aspirations in light of parental and community pressures:

Like, a lot of the Korean parents worked really hard and didn't have the options that we did ... [I]t always makes us feel pressured to do what they want us to do and not to think for ourselves .... In that way, you never feel like you can really do what you really want to do ... There is a big sense of conformity. You don't want to rock the boat, and feel like you messed things up.

In response to a question about whether or not such conformity was "healthy," Elisa replied, "No, it's not ... I think in the midst of wanting to achieve and attain those things for personal benefits ... you lose yourself and what you want because your sight has been set to just achieving those standards ... your morals, your values get lost sometimes."

The parents' tendency not to focus on or prioritize their children's emotions draws, too, from South Korean/immigrant valuing of Confucianist

parental superiority and valuing of controlled emotions, withheld emotional communication, and self-sacrifice (Ellinger and Carlson 1990; Falk 1995; Hyun 2005). In contrast to Zhou et al.'s (2008) findings, then, our informants revealed that they did not enjoy the independence, dignity, and respect which they wanted or desired to realize personal fulfillment, self-styled definitions of success, and, ultimately, happiness. In this way, the second-generation informants demonstrated their acculturation into professional middle-class American styles of parenting (Min 1993) while they still longed for the approval of their parents based on an ethnic collectivist barometer.

Structure–Culture Variations: Maintaining Informational Capacity and Becoming More Emotionally Supportive

Even with the tendency to feel little autonomy in decision making about their academic lives, the Korean-American students felt, in contrast, that relative to others like the Latino students on their campuses, they had sufficient informational access to do well in school and excel (Lew 2006). By way of their parents and ethnic networks, many felt that they could get the tutoring as well as SAT and college essay preparation to achieve (Park 2005; Lew 2006). Although the Korean-American respondents tended not to feel that they ever fully met their parents' expectations or had their unfailing emotional support, structural-cultural interactions also fostered changes in parents and in self that fostered a sense of familial acceptance and self-satisfaction.

Korean-American parents could learn to "let go" of control through outlets like ethnic churches or organizations. They began to trust their children, in part, by supporting their individual goals and needs, and learned to become more emotionally supportive in mainstream U.S. terms. Jacquelyn shared how the struggles of immigrating, especially as racialized minorities, have prompted her parents—particularly her father—to seek the church and become less grades-obsessed and more emotionally supportive.

I think growing up [in South Korea] our family had our dysfunctions. Like my dad, he was a drinker... he smoked... My mom was always home taking care of us... And then once we moved to the States, uh, yeah, my dad really changed ... He's [sic] become one of the most relatable, sensitive men that I know and he's very, very affectionate with me, my younger sister, in particular... And my dad is always wanting to talk, always wanting to know what's going on in my life, my love life, and gives me advice about everything... [So], like, I always saw their sacrifice before their anger, even though we didn't give them what they wanted from us ... they were never satisfied with my grades at school even though I did well ... But then, yeah, you know, once I got to college and they realized that they weren't going to see me every day, like, they don't harp on me about grades as much.

Throughout her interview, Jacquelyn made clear that although she and most of her sisters were never the "perfect" students that their parents wished them to be, she felt she had achieved a sufficient level of academic success and had a positive self-image owing largely to her family's eventual emotional support. Similarly, Ron, a Stanford graduate and University of Southern California (USC) student, related that if his family had remained in South Korea, the pressures on him would have been overwhelming, but after settling in a new country, his parents seemed to realize that everyone working collectively was paramount. His father taught the following lesson as he drove Ron and his siblings to school:

He would be like, "Family is like a car, and the car has four wheels, and in our family we have four wheels, so every wheel has its job and when one wheel falls off then the car can't go, so all of the wheels have to work together." This was like his very subtle way of being like, "You guys have to do your jobs" . . . The good thing was that my parents never said, "Oh, you have to get straight As." They were like, "We want you to just give it your best shot."

Ron appreciated that his parents simply expected them to do their best in their "jobs": being good, not necessarily perfect, students. If they achieved a modicum of success by keeping their wheels on, the family would never break down.

Moreover, the data showed that just as parents rethought education, so did the children. Patsy shared how her definitions of success changed as she left college.

Before, I thought being successful was being the top of my class, being the prestigious lawyer, or being the top-notch surgeon or doctor . . . It's starting to slowly change. I feel like being successful is being happy . . . [which is] way more important than graduating here with the best GPA. Like, if I were to get my PhD and make a lot of money but am really unhappy, I would just want to be a bank accountant to be happy . . . I feel like I should be a good, stable person inside, I don't know . . . Like, maybe stressing out so much academically makes me a worse person inside. I think being successful now means doing something worthwhile and meaningful.

Elsewhere in her interview, she shared how academic pressures caused her to push away, and to lack appreciation for, the most important people in her life, behaviors she could not reconcile with being "successful."

Although structural changes incited cultural ones, the interviews largely reveal that the students' reference group of better performing co-ethnics coupled with intense parental pressure and nonmainstream emotional culture translated into a sense of failure and dissatisfaction with self.

DISCUSSION

"Academic success" has often been a dependent variable that most have relegated to the cultural realm or in comparison only to White America. We argue, however, for an analysis that interrelates structural dynamics—social class positioning and ethnic group factors (e.g., migrant selectivity, ethnic networks)—with cultural dynamics—expectations, reference groups, emotional expression—as they inform students' cultural definitions of success and, ultimately, why these might not match conventional expectations. Our study found, for instance, that emotional support systems mattered much more to these definitions than previous work by migration and education scholars have acknowledged in terms of ethnic cultural forms.

In broad terms, we found that immigrant groups are segmented into divergent pathways not only by their social locations (e.g., class, race), status and education system by the capital immigrants bring with them (e.g., skill set), and by the ethnic networks of which they are part when they come to the United States. As one group, Korean immigrant parents' expectations of youth for overachievement flows from the confluence of South Korean and Korean-American structural and cultural realities, including the desire to ameliorate racial discrimination against Asian Americans as internal foreigners. Much of the Korean community's resultant fixation on hyperachievement has tended to preclude Korean-American youth from feeling happy and satisfied with themselves despite matriculating into respected universities, some of the best in the world. Moreover, similar to "Tiger Mom" Amy Chua, the Korean parents whom the informants described indeed desire the "best" for their children. As with the criticisms of Tiger Motherhood, however, much of that desire imposes undue pressure on children to "repay" their parents' material and emotional sacrifices, to raise the family's social status, and not to "crack" at all in the process. While parents and community members put pressure on the second generation, they typically are not socialized to engage in the American norms of emotional communication by which the students are also socialized. The parents, therefore, know little about and weakly engage the students' own perspectives. In turn, a pattern of second-generation dissatisfaction with their accomplishments often stems from feelings that they would never be able to satisfy their parents, even if the parents think it is clear that they do so to preempt complacency and thus underperformance. To be sure, we revealed when and in what manner important exceptions exist.

CONCLUSION

The research of Annette Lareau (2002, 2011) finds that middle-class parents emphasize a more intentional and organized form of child development, often hurrying the child from one school activity to another while she learns to negotiate with her parents on how she wants to be disciplined. Relative to norms of working-class child rearing, Lareau (2002, 2011) finds that it is not at all clear that middle-class methods foster more happiness and satisfaction and, in fact, might countervail both. Considered in this light, the Korean-American students mostly defined "success" not as elite school admissions or high-paying careers, but as being "happy." They define in this manner owing in part to the many "dime-a-dozen" good students like them who were clearly not happy. Another reason for defining "success" as "happiness" is the Korean Confucian norm of filial piety, meaning, in part, the collapse of the children's happiness with that of the parents, who themselves were often unhappy, whether in reality and/or as a strategy. Analyses of the interplay of structural and cultural influences on meaning-making in education demonstrate that being part of the "middle class" does not always mean a sense of self-satisfaction and of defining success in a way that conforms to mainstream middle-class American standards. Unlike, then, what some educational assimilation scholars claim, success and perceptions of it may not be linear (or singularly so, as segmented assimilation has shown us). Rather, they can be multifaceted and, at times, unpredictable and paradoxical. For instance, future research should take up the striking sub-finding in our study that Korean students do not necessarily invoke or compare themselves to U.S. society's so-called "model minority" stereotype. Rather, most outside of academe had not heard of the label but saw the sentiment as unremarkable and took it for granted. Supplanting discussions of "model minority" standards as shaping their definitions of success were, instead, the standards set by parental, familial, and community expectations and by competitive comparisons.

We are clear that the findings of our study do not apply to all Asian-American student populations. We do, however, contend that asking new questions, such as about how people come to understand concepts that our society and scholars seem to take for granted, is imperative to move beyond basing "success" only on quantifiable GPAs, scores, and completion rates and, in turn, basing immigrant assimilation success on these measures. What does it mean if we label "successful" students who consider themselves "unhappy failures," in large part because they use their own criteria to do so? What are the implications of dismissing the disproportionate rates of mental illness and suicide as exceptions to Asian-American overachievement? Group perceptions of success need to be addressed by way of transnational, familial, and communal contexts and with a new eye on racial/ethnic and social class influences.

By way of this study we also hope to have inspired ideas on how to empower Korean-American and similarly situated students. Owing to model minority generalizations and, in related fashion, a de-racialized view of Asian people, the state, public opinion makers, and civil society are unaware of the higher rates of domestic violence, drug abuse, mental illness, and suicide common to Korean and other Asian Americans than in the general population (Min 1996b; Danico and Ng 2004). Yet, solutions are few and far between. In the least, we hope that this study has generated ideas on how to provide more mental health and emotional support to Korean- and other Asian-American students, especially the "most successful ones," lest we violate the old adage never to judge a book by its cover.

NOTES

1. Suicide rates in New York have also doubled and quadrupled in recent years, owing in part to intense academic pressures (*New York Times*, December 31, 2009).

2. Unless otherwise noted, the information and quotations in this paragraph come from Son, Narae. 2013. One Man's Battle to Prevent Korean American Suicides. *KoreAm: The Korean American Experience*. Retrieved on August 31, 2013. (http://archive.iamkoream.com/august-issue-one-mans-battle-to-prevent-korean-american-suicides/)

3. In the genre of self-parody she defines "Chinese" as holding such beliefs as an A- is a bad grade and that one must be two years ahead of one's classmates in math.

4. As in the U.S. immigrant community, ROK policy makers and the public readily admit that mental illness—even a common disorder like depression—is rarely talked about openly in the country largely for fear of losing one's job (*Time*, October 6, 2008).

5. This is an important area of research, as the U.S. population is becoming more diverse. The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that 34% of youth come from minority groups and that one in five school children are the children of immigrants (Kao and Thompson 2003).

6. Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC) sets the standards for admission to the UC system: applicants must rank in the top 4% of their high school class, based on an 11-unit UC-approved high school course model and a GPA of at least 3.0 (http://www.ucop.edu/student-affairs/programs-and-initiatives/undergraduate-admissions/elc/).

7. The UC system is composed of 28% Asian Americans (California Postsecondary Commission 2009).

8. This act abolished the racist/ethnicist exclusions of the National Origins Formula used since the 1924 Immigration Act preference clauses based on skill and family reunification.

9. Asian Pacific American.

10. Children of immigrants who came after age eleven are considered to be addressed by way of transnational, familial, and communal contexts and 1.5 generation, while those who came before eleven are the second generation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

11. By coincidence, no student from UC Davis or UC San Diego agreed to be interviewed.

12. The fact that most of those who attended not UC Irvine but UC Los Angeles, UC Berkeley, Stanford, and University of Southern California also expressed dissatisfaction with their academic feat(s) in comparison to co-ethnics affirms our overall framework here.

13. All names have been changed to protect the interviewees' identities.

14. The students did, however, maintain very strong social attachments to ethnically Korean peers.

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Chapter 10

Reassessing the American Dream
Family, Culture and Educational "Success" among Korean and Chinese Americans

Angie Y. Chung and Trivina Kang

The educational achievements and upward mobility of children of Asian immigrants have been a puzzle to sociologists largely because their performance defies conventional wisdom on the socioeconomic factors that usually lead to favorable academic outcomes. Even after holding class constant, Asian-American students tend to outperform other racial groups (including native-born whites) from the same or higher socioeconomic status and enter more lucrative white-collar professions in record numbers (Kao and Tienda 1995; Louie 2004). In response to misguided explanations about the cultural superiority and deficiencies of different minority groups, a long line of scholarship has reflected on the diverse structural factors that explain Asian-American achievement (along with underachievement), including the various contexts of their immigration and incorporation; the forms of capital that immigrants bring with them; the racial, class, and economic constraints that second-generation youths face; and the larger school and neighborhood structure within which they are raised (Gans 1992; Lew 2006a; Portes and Rumbaut 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993).

Culture nevertheless remains a persisting albeit controversial lens through which to understand the framing of educational aspirations for second-generation youth. Part of the difficulties lies in the ways cultural explanations have often been used to conflate race with "good" or "bad" cultural values that supposedly explain socioeconomic mobility among minorities with less attention paid to the racial, class, and gender inequalities that characterize American education. For Asian Americans, continuous references to their status as the "model minority"—that is, the notion that hard work and strong family values have enabled them to overcome all structural obstacles and achieve the American Dream—has been a mixed blessing: by facilitating the opening of job opportunities blocked to other racial minorities on one hand