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## When West Meets East: A Short-Term Immersion Experience in South Korea

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# When West Meets East: A Short-Term Immersion Experience in South Korea\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore American student perceptions of caring for Korean patients during a 2 week exchange program. Perceptions of Korea/Koreans focused on five areas: respect, hospitality and gift giving, ability to speak English, hierarchal relationships, and being protective. Their perceptions of personal change focused in four areas: valuing personal cultural experiences, increasing cultural awareness and compassion, seeing people from other ethnic groups as individuals and developing interest in oriental medicine. Four areas of importance identified when caring for Korean patients included showing respect, importance of family, food, and care for post-partum mothers. Differences were experienced between an individualistic, low-context society (United States) and a collectivistic, high context society (Korea) where the influence of Confucianism is pervasive.

**KEYWORDS:** Korea, international nursing, exchange program, international education, content analysis

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By 2050, the Asian population in the United States is expected to double from 3.8% to 8% (United States [US] Census Bureau, 2004). In response to the increasingly diverse nature of the US population, the American Council on Education (2000) recommended that institutions of higher education

increase the participation of students in international programs, reshape and internationalize the curriculum ... and develop a comprehensive international agenda for undergraduates across the curriculum. Now is the time to begin better preparing our graduates for productive roles in a world of new and rapidly changing realities (p. 4).

To enable graduates to meet the challenges of working in an increasingly multicultural environment, many schools of nursing have created international opportunities for their students and faculty. Some of these programs are student and faculty exchange programs (Shieh, 2004); others include hands-on clinical experiences (Bond & Jones, 1994; Hadwiger & Hadwiger, 1999; Ryan, Twibell, Brigham & Bennett, 2000; St.Clair & McKenry, 1999). Healthcare providers and clients alike, benefit from these experiences.

## **BACKGROUND**

Since 2000, one American school of nursing located on a regional campus of a large public university in the Midwest, has had a faculty exchange with a South Korean Christian school of nursing in a city approximately four hours from the capital, Seoul. To date, four faculty members from the American school of nursing have each taught for one semester in Korea, and two Korean faculty members have taught for an academic year at the American school of nursing. Since 2002, 47 American university students have participated in the *Korean Culture and Healthcare* course. This one-credit course is prerequisite to the two-credit, two-week *Korean Culture and Healthcare Practicum* held in Korea each May. Students are selected to participate based on a grade point average (2.75 or higher) and a blind review of an essay by faculty, about why they want to participate and how they will adjust to the immersion experience.

To date, 38 Korean students have exchanged to the American school of nursing, and 11 American nursing students have exchanged to Korea. The Korean students tend to be younger (late teens to early twenties), supported by parents, unmarried, and without children. In contrast, the American nursing students tend to be older (mid-twenties to early forties), employed, married and/or responsible for children. To date all Korean and American exchange students have been female.

While in Korea, American students participate in a medical- surgical hospital clinical experience and observe a class about nursing process using problem-based learning. American students and faculty facilitate conversational English classes for approximately 100 students at the host school. Each American student and faculty member works with approximately 10 students at one time. These small group sessions allow participants to know each other better, as they talk about family, culture, healthcare, current events, etc. Since the host school of nursing is Christian, students also attend chapel on weekdays and area churches on Sundays. They speak with nurses and physicians (through an interpreter) at two oriental medicine hospitals, the provincial health department, and a rural community health center operated by a nurse practitioner. Korean nursing students arrange and accompany American students on visits to cultural sites in rural and urban areas. They also eat together in Korean restaurants and homes. For the most part, while in Korea, American students live in the host school's dormitory. For the majority of the experiences, students are usually accompanied by an American and a Korean professor, while Korean students take the American students to visit their dormitory rooms, or for a walk downtown to shop and talk. Students stay in Seoul for three days, use the subway and taxis, visit a Korean palace, the demilitarized zone, a Korean cultural dance and a Buddhist temple, and shop in out-door markets and large department stores.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Cultural experiences improve nurses' competence and perceived effectiveness in dealing with other cultures. Coffman, Shellman and Bernal (2004), in reviewing and summarizing the findings of the *Cultural Self-Efficacy Scale* used with over 3,000 nurses, found a positive association between nurses' perceived cultural self-efficacy and their experience with cultural concepts and ethnically diverse populations. St.Clair and McKenry (1999) found that, "even 2 weeks of stepping out of one's own culture to live and work in a completely different one ... can make a significant difference in students' educational achievement of cultural competence" (p. 234). Frisch (1990) reported that nursing students who participated in an international exchange experience as undergraduates showed significantly more cognitive growth than those who did not.

Being immersed in another culture changes individuals. Ryan et al. (2000) noted that immersion experiences that require adaptation affect students personally and professionally, and help them learn to care. Reporting on a 2-week immersion experience in Mexico, Bond and Jones (1994) found that being in the minority, helps students develop empathy. When comparing student

international experiences in developing and developed countries, Haloburdo and Thompson (1998) uncovered similar results whether or not the student had previously traveled outside of the United States.

Self-awareness is fundamental to cultural sensitivity. In order to be culturally sensitive, an individual must be willing and able to “examine one’s own ethnoculture, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour” (Majumbar, Browne, Roberts, & Carpio, 2004, p. 162). In so doing, individuals accept that their attitudes and beliefs are not universal but culture-biased, thus freeing them to accept that other individuals may have valid reasons for their attitudes and beliefs. Furthermore, Purnell and Paulanka (2003), maintain that, healthcare providers can improve their ability to partner with clients and provide culturally acceptable care if they have both general and specific cultural knowledge. Cultural competence in healthcare implies providing care to patients and families compatible with their values and faith traditions (Leonard & Plotnikoff, 2005).

Korean and American cultures are fundamentally different in terms of philosophical underpinnings. Xu and Davidhizar (2004) report that world cultures can be defined in terms of individualism, collectivism, high-context and low-context. The United States is considered to be a low-context, individualistic culture in which one’s personal needs and desires are paramount (‘I’ identity supersedes ‘we’ identity). The prevalent communication style in low-context societies is explicit and direct. This is in contrast to Asian cultures, such as Korean, which are predominantly collectivistic and high-context. In high-context societies, communication is indirect and implicit, dependent on internalized cultural programming. Individuals in collectivistic cultures define themselves in terms of the groups and collectives to which they belong: family, work, community. In fact, when referring to their spouses, they use the word ‘our’ husband or ‘our’ wife instead of ‘my’. The needs of the group take precedence over desires or even needs of the individual. Asians appear to be more concerned about saving, maintaining and preserving face, or self-image (Xu & Davidhizar).

Due to the influence of Confucianism, teachers are “regarded as the parent outside the home” (Xu & Davidhizar, 2005, p. 212). By virtue of being substitute parents, they demand absolute respect and obedience while accepting the responsibility of caring for students as if they were their own children. “This cultural values orientation gives teachers enormous authority, power, and influence” (Xu & Davidhizar, p.212).

The immersion experience described herein forced the American students to come face-to-face with their own ethnocentricity, while giving them an

opportunity to personally participate in and observe interactions with individuals in another culture. They used journals to record their thoughts and how they would use this experience to provide more culturally-sensitive client care, in particular to Asian clients. Additionally, it was thought that as more Asians immigrate to the US, these students would be more likely to have an Asian nursing instructor. Little has been written about student nurse immersion experiences in Asian cultures or about interactions between American students and Korean faculty. Examined in this study, therefore, was the effect of interactions between American student nurses and Korean professors, students, healthcare professionals and the public.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of American nursing students regarding Korea/Koreans, personal change as a result of the exchange experience, and expectations about how they should care for Korean clients. It was thought that this information would also be useful in enhancing cultural content in nursing programs.

## **METHODS**

### ***Study Design***

This qualitative study was based on analysis of journals kept by students during a 2-week cultural immersion experience. Polit and Beck (2004) describe qualitative analysis style of editing in which the researcher carefully reads and interprets data in search of meaningful segments. A categorization scheme and coding system is developed to sort and organize data based on these segments. Finally, the researcher looks for patterns and structure that connect themes. Natural variation is determined by questions such as: Does the theme apply only to certain subgroups, that is, types of communities, organizations, contexts, periods? What are the conditions that precede the observed phenomenon, and what are the apparent consequences of it? (Polit and Beck).

Journals were read initially to get a sense of themes. Themes were listed and coded by journal and year during the second reading. They were analyzed for recurrence by determining how many students in a given year wrote about them and the number of years discussed in the journals. To avoid themes that applied to only one student subgroup, they were not included unless they were 'recurrent', that is, appearing in more than one-half of the journals in a given year over at least three of the four years. While not possible to totally remove researcher bias

in a qualitative study using the recurrent theme test, an attempt was made to minimize its effect.

In terms of establishing trustworthiness of qualitative findings Polit and Beck (2004) note four components, credibility, dependability, confirmation, and transferability, previously established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Three of the four components; credibility, dependability and transferability are addressed herein. Suggestions for establishing credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation (time, space and person). This study is based on journals from nine American nursing students who participated in a 2-week immersion experience in Korea in four different years. This allowed observations related to similar experiences by different students in the different years, thus contributing to credibility of the findings. Dependability (stability of data), was established through recording of similar observations by different students in different years. As for transferability (generalizability to other contexts), given by the richness of the study description, the findings could be useful in other settings.

### ***Participants***

Eleven American nursing students participated in the exchange program with the Korean school of nursing; three in 2003, two in 2004, four in 2005 and two in 2006. Of these eleven students, nine agreed to have their journals used for research purposes. Two were pursuing an associate degree, and seven, a baccalaureate degree in nursing. One had never been on an airplane; one had traveled in Europe; and two had traveled in Central America / Mexico before going to Korea. One participant was born in Korea but moved to America at age three and had lived a short time in England as an adult while serving in the US military. Another participant had served in the US military in Korea for one year. Still another participant's grandfather served 8 years in Korea in the US military, during which time the participant's mother was born.

### ***Procedure***

As part of the practicum, all students were required to keep a journal and write a formal paper on a topic of interest in Korean healthcare. The journal was to be no less than 20 pages in length, beginning on the first day of travel to Korea and ending on the day of return to the US.

Journals (original and copy) were submitted as part of the course grade. The formal paper and final course grade were returned to the student along with a

copy of the journal and a request (informed consent form) to allow the journal to be used for research purposes. The researcher also supplied the student with a pre-stamped envelop in which to return the journal and signed consent form to the department secretary for safe-keeping until the student's final grade was posted. The researcher did not know, until final grades were submitted, which students had agreed to participate. The university's Institutional Review Board approved this protocol. Nine of the eleven exchange students returned a copy of their journals with the signed informed consent. All identifying information was removed by the researcher from the journal copies at first reading.

### ***Data Analysis***

Journals were read initially to get a sense of themes. During the second reading, themes from each journal were listed. Themes were analyzed for recurrence by determining how many students in a given year wrote about them and for how many years of the exchange they were discussed in the journals. In order to be considered recurrent, themes had to occur in at least one half of the journals in a given year and over at least three of the four years.

## **RESULTS**

Themes were divided into three categories; perceptions of Korea/Koreans; perceptions about personal change; and expectations about how their care of Korean clients would change as a result of this exchange.

### ***Perceptions of Korea/Koreans***

Student perceptions of Korea/Koreans focused in five areas: respect, hospitality and gift giving, ability to speak English, hierarchal relationships, and being protective.

***Respect.*** All students wrote about the importance of showing respect in Korean culture. One student wrote, "From a very young age it is instilled into each Korean child that respect towards others, especially elders is very important." One example "is the fact that they bow to one another...It is very humbling when you show such great respect to other people...I wish bowing to each other would become a tradition here in the United States." This same student later marveled at how well behaved and respectful a group of preschoolers were when visiting a Buddhist temple. Another student considered Koreans to be "more laid back than Americans except when it came to things like respect, tradition and education."



***Hospitality and gift giving.*** The American nursing students did not arrive at the Korean university dormitory until after 10 pm local time, more than 24 hours of travel. The students wrote about their arrival and their surprise that there were approximately 30 faculty and students to greet them and carry their luggage. There was a balloon arch welcoming them to the dormitory and welcome gifts in their rooms. “After the warm greeting I had almost forgotten the 20+ hours of long travel I had endured. I felt like a celebrity. The cameras flashing, all the people gathered round to greet us. I have never felt so welcomed.” Another student wrote, “We were served cookies and tea and presented with gifts from the school, a travel clock and anniversary towel.” Another wrote, “...students made breakfast for us and we all ate together.” About visiting healthcare facilities, a student wrote, “Each facility greeted us with a warm welcome.... One of the most striking aspects of these visits was that the head nurses and directors of the facilities greeted us and showed us around.”

A student wrote about gift giving: “If you are a guest, be careful what you say you would like because your wish becomes like a command. You will probably get it.” Another wrote, “We exchanged gifts [with the ... students]. The girls were too generous. We got a rose and quite a few nice souvenirs. We also handed out our gifts. However, compared to their gifts, ours seemed small. I wish we’d have given more.” Experience with Korean hospitality and gift giving reinforced the reality of what students heard and read prior to the exchange.

***Koreans spoke better English than they thought they did.*** The American nursing students were well aware that this exchange would be impossible if not for the Korean professors’ and students’ ability and willingness to speak English. “They were very worried that their English was not good, yet they were very eager to try conversation.” Another student wrote, “The students talk in very low voices because they do not have a lot of confidence in their ability to speak English. They speak English very well. They read English even better.”

***Hierarchical relationships.*** The American nursing students were very surprised by the power Korean professors exerted over their students. A Korean professor directed one of the Korean students to go shopping with a visiting student. Of this incident, the American student wrote, “I think it is wrong because I know she had homework.” Another student wrote, “Students respect the faculty on a whole different level than we do here in the States as a whole. The faculty also expects this respect.” The Korean school of nursing president also presumed that American students would respect the wishes of the administration and faculty without input or question. With only a one day notice, the American student

group was expected to lead the student chapel. No preparation time was built into their schedule.

***Being protective.*** The American nursing students felt more controlled as to where they could go and to whom they could talk, as opposed to what they were used to in the US. For example, when the students engaged in conversation with “some guys from the US that were stationed over here [in Korea], the Korean professor totally cut us off and wouldn’t let us talk.” Another student wrote that the Korean professors were “not very happy” when the American students engaged in a conversation with American military personnel of the opposite sex. Since teachers in Korea are often viewed as parents by their students, this professor’s behavior could be viewed as a parent protecting a child and expecting obedience. As to their health and well being, a student wrote, “Koreans were.... very protective and concerned about our health. Our host had a very hard time accepting the answer “no”. Especially with food. No one ever believed we were full... kept telling us to diet when we get home.” Even though this student said “no” when asked if more food was desired, the host, true to Korean custom (Vegdahl & Hur, 2005), may have thought that the student was just being polite and really wanted the food but would not admit it. (Researcher’s note: When teaching in Korea, the host faculty expressed their expectation that the visiting faculty member should maintain or gain weight while in Korea, as evidence that they were taking appropriate care of the professor. This is another example of what the students found in terms of the concern the Korean hosts had for the welfare of their guests).

Regarding an incident that happened in a Korean city of about 600,000 a student wrote,

You have to really pay attention around here for cars that drive through the shopping district [no sidewalks on side streets]. The girls were always watching for us and very protective. At one point while still shopping, I stepped out of the store to toss my empty soda can, one of the girls came running out, grabbed me and walked with me saying, “not alone”.

In sum, the Koreans expressed their need to protect the students by interceding in what they perceived could be inappropriate or even dangerous conversations with US military men, making sure they were well fed, and keeping them out of harm’s way on the streets. The actions of the Korean faculty were in keeping with Xu and Davidhizr’s (2005) observation that in Confucianism, teachers are “regarded as the parent outside the home” (p.212).

### ***Perceptions of Personal Change***

The American nursing students realized that immersion in a culture so different than their own, where they could not speak the language, and where they were so obviously in the minority had life-changing effects. They spoke of building relationships and the importance of experiencing other cultures in person. Student perceptions of personal change were focused in four areas: valuing personal cultural experiences, increasing cultural awareness and compassion, seeing people from other ethnic groups as individuals, and developing interest in oriental medicine.

***Valuing personal cultural experiences.*** Students valued the opportunity to be immersed in another culture. One student wrote, “experiencing this culture first hand has had a great impact on who I am as a person and as a future nurse. I believe that one cannot truly appreciate a culture until they experience it in person.” Another wrote, “experiencing being a foreigner in a country where I could not speak the language had a great impact on me.”

***Increasing cultural awareness and compassion.*** A student said it this way, “Learning a country’s culture first-hand like this makes the little things that we as Americans perceive as strange, suddenly fit...I think this exchange program will do wonders in increasing cultural awareness and compassion.” Another wrote, “I learned two cultures can be so alike but also be very different. I think it would do a lot of people good to see how another culture lives and runs their society.”

***Seeing people from other ethnic groups as individuals.*** Seeing beyond cultural stereotypes and seeing others as individuals shows real growth and acceptance. One student wrote, “Koreans look more distinctive and unique (with facial features) than my last stay over here [with the military].” It was obvious that people, seen once only in group terms, now were associated with names and unique personalities. Another student wrote that it was “a very unique experience to communicate with other nursing students and hear their perspectives on nursing school and how they see their futures in nursing.... I have... gained many life long friendships ... that I will value forever.” All these American nursing students wrote that they would like to spend more time with the Korean students. They wrote about making lifelong friendships and seeing people from other cultures as individuals.

***Developing interest in oriental medicine.*** In the pre-requisite *Korean Culture and Healthcare* course, students were introduced to the basics of oriental medicine. A student expressed:

I am most interested in the practice of non-Western medicines. I tend to... believe that typical Western medicine is limiting. I believe that complete wellness can combine herbs, pressure points, acupuncture, and Western medicine, to help reach optimal levels spiritually, physically, and emotionally.

One student felt “very lucky” to experience moxibustion and acupuncture while in Korea “I will remember this forever!”

### ***Expectations about Care of Korean Clients***

Students identified five areas of importance when caring for Korean patients including showing respect, importance of family, gender issues, food, and care for post-partum mothers.

***Showing respect.*** Students described showing respect as appreciation of their culture, getting the individual’s name right, and being patient. As noted earlier, it is common for a woman, when referring to her husband to call him “our husband” but is also common for a woman who is referring to her husband to call him Mr., and a man when referring to his wife to call her Mrs. One student wrote, “If I come across a Korean in my healthcare [practice], I will make sure I treat them with respect, addressing them by their surname.... Above all, I will have a greater insight into their culture, which I can use when I converse with them, hopefully giving them a sense that I deeply respect and appreciate their culture.” Another student wrote, “While trying to communicate with my Korean patient, I will never be condescending, or put down a patient [whose] English is not their first language. Patience is the key, along with respect.” A third wrote, “My entire perception of nursing care for a Korean has changed. To begin with, I believe I would be more patient.” Another student suggested, “Get their name correct.”

***Importance of family.*** Being a collectivistic society, Koreans place high value on family. It is common in Korean hospitals for an extra bed to be available under the patient’s bed for a family member to sleep on, and a refrigerator for family and patient food. One student wrote, “The family likes to stay with the sick client, so when planning, there should be ample room for family.” Another student wrote, “I have a better understanding of their culture, so if the family would want to assist in care I would know why.” A third wrote, “I will recognize the important role family plays in their life.” A student emphasized the importance of knowing who should be included when a medical

prognosis or plan of care is discussed, “When explaining a prognosis, it may not be appropriate to relay the information directly to the client because the head of the family is usually in charge.” “The family likes to stay with the sick client so when planning, there should be ample room for family.” One student suggested, “Be sure to ask about herbal remedies, find out who makes the healthcare decisions.” And another wrote, “Understand how big a role the family takes; educate the patient and family and be sure interpretation is clear.”

**Gender issues.** Students noticed the relationships between men and women in Korean society and identified the following implications. “If my patient was a male and preferred me not to touch him, I would be as accommodating as possible.” Another student wrote, “I will also be cautious about men who may not want to receive care from a female or won’t take orders from a female physician.”

**Food.** Food is very important in Korean society, partly because of the lack of it during the Korean War and partly because it is believed to be directly connected to health (Vegdahl & Hur, 2005). One student commented, “I would see that the food is what they are used to. There are many cultural and spiritual considerations that before taking this trip or the Korean culture class I may never have thought about.” “Try to make dietary choices that would please the patient’s appetite.” Another student wrote “Be aware they may be lactose intolerant.”

**Post-partum care.** Several students wrote about post-partum care but this one summarizes it best: “After giving birth, the mother should stay in bed for at least a week, be kept very warm, and drink an abundance of seaweed soup.”

To summarize, American student perceptions of Korea/Koreans focused in five areas: respect, hospitality and gift giving, ability to speak English, hierarchal relationships and being protective. They wrote of building relationships and the importance of experiencing other cultures in person. Student perceptions of personal change focused in four areas: valuing personal cultural experiences, increasing cultural awareness and compassion, seeing people from other ethnic groups as individuals, and developing interest in oriental medicine. Students identified four areas of importance when caring for Korean patients: showing respect, importance of family, food, and care for post-partum mothers.

## CONCLUSION

This two-week exchange experience in South Korea immersed American students in a culture where they were clearly in the minority and for the most part did not know the language (except for a few words of greeting and the names of a

few foods). This required flexibility and adaptation. Ryan et al. (2000) noted that immersion experiences that require adaptation affect students personally and professionally, and help them to learn to care.

Students indicated that the immersion experience afforded them the opportunity to explore aspects of the Korean culture that they had once considered 'strange' but now made sense to them. They could also understand that other countries might interpret what Americans do, as strange. This indicated the self-awareness that is fundamental to developing cultural sensitivity (Majumbar et al., 2004).

Students wrote of how they developed cultural awareness and compassion by being immersed in a culture as a minority who did not know the language. Several of their responses evidenced their gain in cultural competence by the importance they placed on caring for Korean clients in ways that were acceptable to the client. This is consistent with characteristics of cultural competence; learning to care (Ryan et al. 2000), developing empathy (Bond & Jones, 1994), and providing care that is consistent with the receiver's values and faith traditions (Leonard & Plotnikoff, 2005).

These students experienced first hand the differences between an individualistic, low-context society like the US, and a collectivistic, high context society such as Korea where the influence of Confucianism is pervasive (Xu & Davidhizar, 2004). They wrote of the respect accorded to professors and the expectation of unquestioned obedience.

One possible limitation of the study is that one student had served in the US military in Korea for a year, an experience that could have contaminated the data. This student was not eliminated from the study because her changed perspective was important to report. Based on experience in the military, the student thought of Koreans in group terms with group characteristics, however when immersed in the culture, she saw Koreans more as unique and distinctive. This shows the possibility of living in a country (as with the military) without really getting to know the people or the culture.

While knowledge of other cultures can be taught in a variety of ways, this study demonstrates that personal interactions with individuals from other cultures may have the greatest impact. Given that these students were forced to reconsider their stereotypes of the Korean culture, it is possible that they might reconsider their stereotypes of other cultures, without having a personal immersion experience in those cultures.

The impact of one immersion experience on a participant's ability to question stereotypes about other cultures, should be examined in future research. Additionally, researchers should study the long-term effects of exchange programs on students. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the effectiveness of faculty exchange programs in building cultural competence in the curriculum for students who cannot participate in an immersion experience. As well, interactions between American students and 'foreign' professors is worthy of study.

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