

KOREAN AMERICAN MALES' INTERRACIAL CONTACT EXPERIENCES DURING SERIOUS LEISURE ACTIVITY

KangJae Jerry Lee
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences
Texas A&M University
kangjae@tamu.edu

David Scott
Texas A&M University

Abstract.—This study investigated serious leisure among Korean Americans and examined the ways in which Koreans' marginalized status impact their pursuit of serious leisure and participation patterns in the context of recreational sports. Face-to-face, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 Korean basketball players and 4 soccer players. A key finding was that informants recognized different styles of play between Korean Americans and Americans. The styles were different enough that many informants preferred playing basketball with other Korean Americans rather than Americans. Other informants, however, cared little about other players' race and ethnicity because their primary concern was playing with people who had similar or superior skills. The study found that Korean Americans preserved or promoted their ethnic identity through serious leisure participation in sports. Our findings suggest that self-identification may be a durable benefit of serious leisure, at least among ethnic and/or racial minorities.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The quantity of leisure research on marginalized people has increased significantly in the past two decades. To date, researchers have identified clearly different leisure constraints (Scott et al. 2006, Shinew et al. 2004, Stodolska 1998), preferences for leisure activities (Ho et al. 2005), park usage patterns (Floyd et al. 1993), and leisure participation patterns (Gobster 2002, Tinsley et al. 2002) between Anglo Americans

and people of color. By illustrating the unique leisure behavior characteristics of marginalized populations, these studies have extended our understanding of leisure.

However, only a few studies have focused on serious leisure activity (Stebbins 2008) among minorities. Serious leisure is defined as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience" (Stebbins 1982, p.5).

Given the interracial variations that previous studies have identified, aspects of serious leisure among minorities are expected to differ from those of mainstream White Americans. Therefore, research on serious leisure among people of color is expected to foster conceptual clarification and provide a more complete picture of serious leisure. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the experience of serious leisure among Korean Americans. More specifically, this study investigated Korean Americans' interracial contact experiences during pickup basketball and organized soccer and the way in which such experiences shape their participation patterns and orientations to the activity.

2.0 METHODS

This study used a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach. Moustakas (1994) stated that the phenomenological approach aims to "determine what an experience means for the person who has had the experience and be able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (p. 13). In other words, its aim is to explore the details of certain experiences and understand "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept

or a phenomenon” (Creswell 2007, p. 57). The phenomenological approach allows informants to tell their stories, share their experiences, and explain their perceptions of particular occurrences. This approach was chosen because our goal was to gain richer insight into Korean Americans’ serious leisure experiences and understand how informants’ marginalized status influenced their pursuit of serious leisure.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit Korean Americans who participated in recreational sports with unusual passion. All names used in this article are pseudonyms. Ten informants were born in Korea and the rest were born in the United States. Eleven of the informants were basketball players, while four played soccer. Informants’ ages ranged from 19 to 36 years. They had lived in the United States for an average of about 11 years. All informants were enrolled in college or had at least a bachelor’s degree. The informants also varied in their degree of commitment toward, frequency of involvement in, and passion about their activity. Based on Stebbins’ (1982, 1997) conceptualization, the majority of informants were believed to be serious leisure participants, although three informants might be better categorized as casual leisure participants or dabblers.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with informants in August and September of 2008. Because the first author’s native language is Korean and he is fluent in English, the interviews were conducted in English, Korean, or a mix of both languages based on each interviewee’s preference. Interviews were conducted at the interviewer’s house and office, and local coffee shops. Interviewees were asked about a list of topics related to serious leisure and their leisure participation patterns. Once interviews were completed, the data were transcribed into English.

The data were analyzed with the phenomenological data analysis method suggested by Colaizzi (1978). This analysis method consists of six steps. First, we read all interview transcripts several times to become familiar with the contents. Second, we extracted

significant statements or “the phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the investigated phenomenon” (Colaizzi 1978). Third, we coded each significant statement with the designation of interview location, characteristic of interviewee, and particular events during the interview. By doing this, we were able to organize the data systematically. Fourth, we interpreted the meanings embedded in significant statements and clustered the identified meanings into themes. We compared the clusters of themes to the original transcripts in order to validate them and to check for consistency of meaning. If the original transcripts were inconsistent with the clusters of themes or vice versa, we re-conducted the data analysis. Fifth, we integrated the themes into an exhaustive description of the investigated topics. Finally, once we had obtained the themes and descriptions, we returned to the interviewees in order to validate the data and outcomes from the data analysis.

3.0 FINDINGS

Four central themes emerged from the data analysis. First, informants described the perseverance and effort they put forth when participating in recreational sports. Second, informants identified different styles of playing recreational sports based on players’ race and ethnicity. Third, informants belonged to two groups based on their preferred play styles and teammates. Finally, informants deliberately socialized with other Koreans via serious leisure activities, which reinforced their ethnic identity.

3.1. Perseverance and Effort

Among the six qualities of serious leisure, informants explicitly expressed their perseverance and effort in sport activities. Taewon articulated that he always wanted to play basketball whenever he had spare time. He continued playing basketball even though he had had knee surgery and had not completely recovered from it. His perseverance in basketball is reflected as follows:

I felt a sharp pain at my left knee after playing basketball...Then I took MRI and we found that a cartilage at my knee was torn. I received

surgery. I started to play basketball again last month even though I feel minor pain after games because I like it so much.

Chulsoo also described his commitment to basketball. Upon his arrival in the United States as a graduate student, Chulsoo first purchased a recreation center membership so he could play basketball. Although Chulsoo was not confident in his English skills and did not have any friends or acquaintances at that time, he went to the recreation center by himself and played basketball with strangers:

Before I contacted my academic advisor, the first thing I did [after I came to the United States] was purchased a gym membership and played basketball... You can usually find a group of people at a basketball court. So at the beginning, I only played with Americans. I couldn't speak English and didn't know anything about rules in here but I wanted to play.

While some studies identify lack of English skills as one of the biggest leisure constraints that immigrants experience (e.g., Juniu 2000, Rublee and Shaw 1991), Chulsoo refused to let this get in the way of playing basketball.

Similarly, informants stressed their commitment to improving their skills in order to become better players. Jeehun stated that he had played basketball “almost every day for a couple of years” when he was an undergraduate student. He emphasized that he played not just to have fun but also to “practice and work on certain skill sets.”

3.2 Different Play Styles

Informants recognized that different racial and ethnic groups have unique styles of playing sports. Taehyon, the leader of a Korean basketball club and an enthusiastic basketball player in his early 30s, described the individualistic play style of American basketball:

If I play with Americans in the same team, it's not fun...it is about style. Individual play style is so prevalent among Americans compared to

Koreans. We can communicate and ask them to do team play and pass the ball more frequently but it is inappropriate to telling what to do to people that I first meet.

Informants also perceived that Americans focused more on one-on-one match ups, whereas Koreans cared more about the overall performance of the team. Minsoo made the following point:

American players' individualistic play style is one of negative things that you have to take into account when you play with them. Americans only care about their match-ups. As long as you can defend your match-up player well, you are okay and they don't care what you do. However, one-on-one match-up is not everything about basketball. You must do some team play.

Moreover, some informants stated that American players were openly verbal and aggressive in their exhortations toward other players. Korean informants considered this behavior rude and inappropriate.

Some informants pointed out different degrees of intensity that Americans engaged in while playing sports. Taewon noted:

What I realized when I played with Americans is...I think Americans are physically very strong regardless of their basketball skills. They do a lot of hustle plays...I think Americans are better than Koreans, in average. Usually they are physically stronger than us and defense is, I don't know about offense but their defense is much intense and tougher than us.

Korean soccer players also perceived different degrees of intensity when they played with others, particularly Hispanics. David felt that Hispanics soccer players displayed a harsh manner and he regarded them as “rough and dirty” players. The interview excerpt below provides a glimpse of his experience:

David: Recently, last Sunday, when we played our last [intramural] game, the majority of teams were Hispanics. Right before the game,

our coach which was my friend, she was like “ok, there is a bunch of Hispanic people. It would be a tough game.” It’s like an immediate response that just comes to people. But if you actually watch Mexican soccer, like Mexican soccer club league, that’s generally how they play.

Researcher: Really?

David: *Yeah, they play really rough, they tend to nothing really happen but they fall, they said they hurt.*

Researcher: *Interesting. So I guess there is some kind of difference.*

David: *Yeah, different culture. You can say it’s a stereotype but you see it quite often enough to where you can just pick it up immediately.*

David’s case showed that his experience of playing soccer with Hispanics had shaped his perception toward Hispanic soccer players in general. Similar to other informants, he mentioned the existence of different play styles based on players’ race and ethnicity.

Some informants even described the existence of different rules among different ethnic groups. Minsoo noted that he was surprised when he first started playing basketball with Americans. He noticed different sets of rules pertaining to foul calls and the manner in which a game resumes. In pickup basketball in the United States, the player who receives a foul typically calls it. However, in Korea, the player who commits the foul usually makes the foul call. Similarly, in the United States, the offensive team has to pass the ball to the defensive team and conduct a “check” when the game stops temporarily due to a foul or out-of-bounds play. The check is to confirm that the defensive team is ready to resume play. However, in Korea, checks do not exist and people resume a game without any confirmation.

3.3 Different Preferences for Other Players

Recognition of different play styles across different racial and ethnic groups affected some informants’

participation patterns and preferences for other players. We found that informants could be grouped into three groups based on their preferences for other players.

The first group consisted of informants who did not have a specific race or ethnicity preference for their teammates and opponent players. In fact, these informants said they did not consider race or ethnicity of other players as an important factor when they participated in recreational sports. Rather, they insisted that participants’ skill levels were the most critical criteria when selecting partners and games in which to play. Chulsoo’s comments neatly captured this group’s mentality:

It’s just about one’s ability. Although we might evaluate others through their appearance at the first time, after we play one or two games together, I think one’s skill level tells you everything. I like to play basketball with people who have similar level of skills with me. Color is not an issue [when I choose my teammates].

Jeehun also believed opponents’ skill levels were more important than their race and ethnicity as a basis for enjoying basketball:

[Who I play basketball with] has nothing to do with racial side of it. That has to do with skill sets. I remember the last time that I went out there [to play basketball]. There was just one team primary Chinese. There are many Asian teams but [that Chinese team] played really well and they were winning a lot of games. I really wanted play with them not because they were Chinese and not because they were Asians. I wanted to challenge them because they seemed like, they were good enough. So it has more to do with truly their competition level than racial diversity.

The second group consisted of informants who preferred Korean teammates when they participated in recreational sports. Informants in this group felt that Americans’ play style is not enjoyable. Taehyon described his experience of having American teammates when playing basketball:

I mean, there are pros and cons when I play with Americans in the same team. But, I do not enjoy playing with Americans. People usually say Americans are better players but, I think, it's not the matter of skill levels. It's about difference in styles. American players tend to do a lot more individualistic plays. You know? They don't do team play and pass as much as us...it's not fun. It's not fun at all.

Informants like Taehyon believed that having Korean teammates made their participation in recreational sports more enjoyable than when they played alongside Americans.

A third group of informants favored Koreans not only as teammates but as opponents as well. These informants stated that playing exclusively with Koreans was more comfortable than playing with other races because Koreans share a common language and cultural practices. Moreover, these informants believed that there was a greater possibility of injury when playing with Americans due to their aggressive and intense style of play. Taewon stated this sentiment as follows:

The main reason why I only play basketball with Koreans is that it's more comfortable. We speak same language and share same culture so it's much easier for me to communicate and interact with other players. And, the game with Americans is too intense and dangerous. I don't wanna get hurt.

This group of informants also disliked mixed racial games because of the amount of verbal abuse they had witnessed and/or experienced. Kevin noted:

I think Americans tend to express their opinion and feeling without any hesitation. They tell other players what to do and stuff like that. That sometimes offends me. I guess it's because of different culture, and Americans are straightforward, and, you know, don't care about age gap that much. But, in Korean culture, it's very unusual that people directly tell what to do to total strangers. Especially, it's unimaginable

that younger people say such things to older people. But Americans do.

In sum, these informants felt that playing with Koreans only was safe and more conducive to fully enjoying their participation in recreational sports.

3.4 Maintaining and Learning Korean Culture

Some informants suggested that serious leisure activity was a means for maintaining their ethnic identity. This was particularly evident among informants who were associated with Korean basketball or soccer clubs.

Taehyon noted:

I believe that my club has unique characteristics simply because of the fact that we are all Koreans. It would be a challenging task to embrace Americans to our team while we maintain our unique characteristics...I think going to a travel with club members or going out and having a drink with club members are very Korean-like socialization. I like this Korean color in my team and wish that this club maintains such Korean characteristics.

Taehyon's comments suggested that he did not have a strong intention to adopt American members and culture into his club and wanted to preserve the club's Korean culture. In this case, the club functioned as a social outlet for its members. The club members were able to socialize with other Koreans and maintain their social network with Korean friends through the club activities. In other words, being involved in a Korean sports club was one way that they could preserve their cultural and ethnic identity after they came to the United States.

Being involved in a Korean sport club also helped Americanized Korean immigrants to reconnect with their Korean identity. Jeehun came to the United States when he was 4 years old, and was in his early thirties at the time of interview. He said he had had limited contacts with other Koreans and his friends were all Whites and African Americans. He had been Americanized and felt more comfortable

communicating in English. He stressed that his knowledge of Korean culture and the language had been greatly improved as a result of his involvement in a Korean basketball club:

I mean [playing basketball with Koreans] helps me to better understanding my culture and the country where I came from. Getting associated with Korean culture and Koreans in general, that happened to me later in my life. It's very recent thing. So before I play basketball with this Korean team, all my friends were Americans (White and African Americans).

Hence, some informants' serious leisure context was imbued with Korean culture. This allowed the informants to meet with people who shared the same culture and language and distance themselves from mainstream American culture. Moreover, in the case of Jeehun, who had been Americanized and had lost much of his Korean identity, participating in serious leisure activity with other Korean Americans was a way to reclaim his Korean ancestry and identity.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain a richer insight into the serious leisure of Korean Americans and the ways in which their marginalized status in the United States impacts their pursuit of serious leisure and participation patterns. This research reported a unique finding that previous serious leisure studies have glossed over. Korean Americans saw their style of play in recreational sports as quite different from that of their American counterparts. Korean basketball players asserted that they emphasized team play while Americans usually focused on one-on-one match ups and individual play. Although leisure researchers have revealed that people have different orientations toward their leisure activities (Brown 2007, Scott and Godbey 1992, Snyder 1986) and recreational sports preference varies some by race and ethnicity (Gobster 2002, Shinew et al. 2004, Tinsley et al. 2002), this kind of interracial variation within one leisure activity has been documented by only a few studies (Irwin et al. 1990, Tirone and Pedlar 2000).

This interracial dynamic within the same leisure activity provides an important insight for leisure service organizations and recreation program planners and managers. Scott (2000) asserted that leisure and recreation agencies have failed to meet the leisure and recreation needs of disenfranchised people in our society, including ethnic and racial minorities. He contended that marginalized people's access to leisure services and resources may have been discouraged by taken-for-granted agency practices. By taking into account racial groups' different styles of leisure activity, leisure service organizations and practitioners may better understand the leisure needs of disenfranchised people and create effective recreation programs or marketing strategies to entice diverse populations to their program and resources.

Differences in perceived styles of play resulted in many Korean basketball players purposely avoiding playing recreational sports with non-Koreans. It is important to emphasize that informants felt that many of the non-Koreans with whom they had played basketball or soccer were ill-mannered and overly competitive, qualities that are antithetical to Korean culture.

Our results are consistent with studies that indicate that leisure can be used for ethnic boundary maintenance. Barth (1969) posited that immigrants to the United States do not always adopt American culture but retain their cultural heritages and traditions. Importantly, they may use leisure to highlight how they are culturally different from non-immigrant groups. This explanation is consistent with the notion of selective acculturation. Keefe and Padilla (1987) explained that immigrant groups sustain their cultural cues while selectively accepting some traits from American culture. Leisure served as a context through which Korean immigrants could communicate in their native language and play recreational sports according to valued cultural norms and customs. Thus, Korean Americans' serious leisure was a form of ethnic enclosure, the "tendency of minorities to maintain social networks primarily within their ethnic group" (Stodolska et al. 2007, p. 2). This allowed Korean Americans to maintain or promote

their own ethnic values and distance themselves from American culture (Cheska 1984, Stodolska and Alexandris 2004, Stodolska et al. 2007).

There is another unique finding from this study that has not been previously reported in the serious leisure literature. While Stebbins (2008) explained that there are eight durable benefits and several personal/social rewards from serious leisure, our study illustrated that self-identification is another durable benefit of serious leisure activity. The members of Korean basketball clubs were able to immerse themselves in Korean culture and the Korean language by participating in serious leisure with other Koreans. Importantly, this serious leisure context was an occasion for Americanized Koreans to rediscover their Korean roots and ancestry. Thus, the serious leisure setting allowed informants to sustain their Korean identity and insulate themselves from the dominant culture.

This study contains several limitations, all of which are linked to suggestions for future research. First, this research was focused on Korean Americans only. Expanding the study to other people of color could deepen our understanding of serious leisure among minority groups. Second, although the research interviews yielded rich insight into Korean Americans' experiences of serious leisure, it only represents males' perspectives. Future study can investigate a more heterogeneous gender group and examine minority women's experiences of serious leisure. Third, this study investigated the case of recreational team sports that are intrinsically competitive in nature. Researchers can also investigate serious leisure activities of minorities through recreational sports that do not require competition such as running and weight lifting. Finally, this study was conducted at two southern cities. Acquiring study samples from more diverse locations will help to see whether the findings are regionally biased.

5.0 LITERATURE CITED

- Barth, F. 1969. **Ethnic groups and boundaries**. Boston: Little Brown.
- Brown, C. 2007. **The Carolina shaggers: dance as serious leisure**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 39: 623-647.
- Cheska, A. 1984. **Sport as ethnic boundary maintenance: a case of the American Indian**. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. 19: 241-255.
- Colaizzi, P.F. 1978. **Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it**. In: Vaile, R.; King, M., eds. *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press: 48-71.
- Creswell, J.W. 2007. **Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Floyd, M.; Gramann, J.; Saenz, R. 1993. **Ethnic factors and the use of public outdoor recreation areas: the case of Mexican Americans**. *Leisure Sciences*. 15: 83-98.
- Gobster, P. 2002. **Managing urban parks for a racially and ethnically diverse clientele**. *Leisure Sciences*. 24: 143-159.
- Ho, C.; Sasidharan, V.; Elmendorf, W.; Willits, F.; Graefe, A.; Godbey, G. 2005. **Gender and ethnic variations in urban park preferences, visitation, and perceived benefits**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 37: 281-307.
- Irwin, P.; Gartner, W.; Phelps, C. 1990. **Mexican-American/Anglo cultural differences as recreation style determinants**. *Leisure Sciences*. 12: 335-348.
- Juniu, S. 2000. **The impact of immigration: leisure experience in the lives of South American immigrants**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 32(3): 358-381.

- Keefe, S.; Padilla, A. 1987. **Chicano ethnicity**. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Moustakas, C. 1994. **Phenomenological research methods**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.
- Rublee, C.B.; Shaw, S.M. 1991. **Constraints on the leisure and community participation of immigrant women: implications for social integration**. *Society and Leisure*. 14: 133-150.
- Scott, D. 2000. **Tic, toe, the game is locked and nobody else can play!** *Journal of Leisure Research*. 32: 133-137.
- Scott, D.; Godbey, G. 1992. **An analysis of adult play groups: social versus serious participation in contract bridge**. *Leisure Sciences*. 14: 47-67.
- Scott, D.; Lee, S.; Lee, J.; Kim, C. 2006. **Leisure constraints and acculturation among Korean immigrants**. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*. 24: 63-86.
- Shinew, K. Floyd, M.; Parry, D. 2004. **Understanding the relationship between race and leisure activities and constraints: exploring an alternative framework**. *Leisure Sciences*. 26: 181-199.
- Snyder, E. 1986. **The social world of shuffleboard: participation by senior citizens**. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 15: 237-253.
- Stebbins, R. 1982. **Serious leisure: a conceptual statement**. *Pacific Sociological Review*. 25: 251-272.
- Stebbins, R. 1997. **Casual leisure: a conceptual statement**. *Leisure Studies*. 16: 17-25.
- Stebbins, R. 2008. **Serious leisure**. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Stodolska, M. 1998. **Assimilation and leisure constraints: dynamics of constraints on leisure in immigrant populations**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 30: 521-524.
- Stodolska, M.; Alexandris, K. 2004. **The role of recreational sport in the adaptation of first generation immigrants in the United States**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 36: 379-413.
- Stodolska, M.; Marcinkowski, M.; Yi-Kook, J. 2007. **The role of ethnic enclosure in leisure in the economic achievement of Korean immigrants**. *Journal of Leisure Research*. 39: 1-27.
- Tinsley, H.; Tinsley, D.; Croskeys, C. 2002. **Park usage, social milieu, and psychosocial benefits of park use reported by older urban park users from four ethnic groups**. *Leisure Sciences*. 24: 199-218.
- Tirone, S.; Pedlar, A. 2000. **Understanding the leisure experiences of a minority ethnic group: South Asian teens and young adults in Canada**. *Society and Leisure*. 23(1): 145-170.

The content of this paper reflects the views of the author(s), who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.