Career decision-making strategies of Korean boys and implications for career guidance practice in England, UK

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Recent government legislation to upgrade the provision for careers in schools has suggested that greater efforts need to be made to engage minority ethnic groups (MEGS) in the career decision making process (DCSF, 2010). A multicultural approach enabling a closer understanding of the needs of specific ethnic groups is seen as one way forward. It was a call for more evidence-based research to investigate the issues that provided further impetus for this study (DCSF, 2010).

Twenty-first century career education and guidance (CEG) in the majority of UK contexts offers unprecedented challenges from the perspective of working with MEGS. Furthermore, with the onset in 2004 of strong economic migration from other EU states to every part of the UK (IPPR, 2007), diversity has spread beyond cities. The majority of our educational institutions reflect a more global picture. Over the past ten years there has been unabated year-on-year growth in demand for places by international students at UK HEIs (UCAS, 2010). It is my view that careers professionals in every sector need to rise to the guidance challenge.

Introduction

This study considers a new affluent, educated immigrant community that has established itself in south west London over the past thirty years. New Malden is now home to the largest population of South Korean immigrants in Europe. I believe this group has been neglected in the literature. The objectives of this study consider the particular

cultural heritage of Korean boys (aged 11-18 and who attend a maintained school), their approach to career decision making and the implications for guidance that arise from the findings.

The selected Korean community lives in the London boroughs of Kingston, Sutton and Merton (Putt, 2007). Around 625 Korean students (Royal Borough of Kingston,(RBK), 2010) attend maintained schools in the borough of Kingston. Their arrival in the UK dates back to the 1980s when the first Korean ambassador settled in Wimbledon and other diplomats nearby in South London. In the 1980s, Samsung opened their first large UK factory in Tolworth, Surrey and migrant workers found affordable housing in nearby New Malden. Also known as 'Little Korea' or 'New Mal-dong'. It was reported in Think London (2009) that more than 200 businesses were concentrated in a small area run by Koreans and exclusively serving the local Korean community and the student community in Greater London. Putt (2007) argues that Koreans seem self-sufficient and have a clear understanding about why they are here compared with many other ethnic groups in London. It is thought that the main reason Koreans move to the UK is to study (40%), followed by parents' work (31%) and personal employment (13%) (Putt, 2007). With higher education (HE) participation rates of up to 90%, competition to enter HE in Korea is fierce (Putt, 2007; Lee, 2006). Art and Design remains the most popular area for HE study among Koreans in the UK because of the lack of such courses in South Korea. South Korea is currently the fourth most important international student market to London's HE sector

and is set to move to third by 2012 (Think London, 2009). It appears it is education as an end in itself that ensures an esteemed place in Korean society rather than money and social class. Korean values are rooted in Confucianism (Kim and Dickson, 2007; Breen, 2004).

Literature review

Career theories and approaches that I consider among the most relevant to working with clients from MEGS include Multicultural Counselling Theory (MCT), social cognitive theory, social constructionist theory and Brown's values-based theory. Patton and McMahon's (1999) Systems Theory Framework (STF) outlines an integrative picture of career theory which has been helpful to me in evaluating the complexity of career influences as well as how career theories inter-relate.

MCT has begun to challenge the western approach to career counselling that favours one style of interviewing clients. Whilst content models (such as Egan, 1990; Culley, 1991; Ali and Graham, 1996) offer a choice of different approaches each focuses on the client as 'self empowerer'. In contrast, Pedersen (1985) notes that for many MEGS identity is defined within the family constellation. As a careers guidance practitioner I am assisted in my work if I have some insight into the cultural background of my client. Against this background are transposed the individual values of the client that may or may not fit within any perceived picture of cultural background. However, the danger of any cultural generalisation is that it can stick in the mind of the practitioner and become a cultural stereotype (Bimrose, 1996) e.g. "most Asians are pressurised into particular career roles". The following table shows contrasted values for psychotherapists in the US working with South-east Asian clients (Klinizie, 1985) and offers useful parallels for a career guidance practitioner working with Korean clients and exposes the pitfalls when western and eastern values collide:

Figure 1: Contrasted values

South-east Asian values	US psychotherapist values
Focus on interdependence	Personal choice and independence
Structured and appropriate social relationships (Confucianism and Christianity)	Rejection of authority. Equality of family relationships
Should live in harmony with nature	Nature to be mastered
Little cultural conceptualization of therapy	Strong orientation to values of counselling and personal growth
Guidance should be information-driven	Counselling is a process that may involve interventions over a period of time
As a trained professional should be active and give solutions to problems	Therapist is often more passive. Best solution is one developed by the client
Failure of the individual implies failure of the family	Personal development involves risk-taking and inevitably involves failure along the way

In the light of this, I suggest that assisting a client on their terms may better be facilitated through greater cultural understanding of the client's 'lived experience' (Bradley, 2009).

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al.,1996) places the individual rather than particular behaviours, at the heart of the guidance process. It acknowledges strong mediating factors such as family, for example, a student with little motivation to study medicine may seek a route into chemical engineering as a culturally acceptable alternative. This may also involve a level of human agency (Chen, 2006) whereby work experience and/or discussion that includes a client's family in the guidance process achieves the desired outcome for the client. Social constructionist theories (Savickas, 2005) focus on the particular narratives students have around their experiences and perspectives. Exploring 'wider life themes' with a client acknowledges the complexity of their lived experience i.e. for Korean boys the likelihood of their sudden return to South Korea where they will need to readapt. Similarly, it is not uncommon for Korean parents to return to South Korea when their children reach 16 and for their children to remain in the UK with guardians to continue their further education and in such circumstances the guidance practitioner relationship may be an important focus of continuity. Brown and Crace (1996) point to values as a crystallising of career choices and guidance as an opportunity for clients to explore their values and how these influence their decision making. STF has been particularly useful as a way of illustrating the

dynamic of the themes that have emerged from the research results.

Research method

I conducted a qualitative research project that included some quantitative data collection to assist in the overall preliminary interpretation of results. The initial questionnaire was developed after many drafts and in close consultation with colleagues, fellow researchers and the research supervisor (Flick, 2007; Munn & Drever,1995). Draft questionnaires were piloted at two stages with the assistance of school library staff. 51 potential research respondents of Korean ethnicity were identified using the school database representing 5% of the school cohort. Three recruitment strategies were devised and evaluated. In the final analysis, I decided to invite all Korean students in the school to an informal project briefing during a school lunchtime. At the end of the briefing research questionnaires were distributed to students with a deadline for submission. The questionnaire included an invitation to an optional interview to discuss individual responses. Subsequently, five half hour interviews were recorded and transcribed and the data was included with the responses from the questionnaires.

Every member of teaching and support staff was sent an email questionnaire and four comprehensive responses were returned. The researcher has also relied on secondary literature (Breen, 2004, Putt,

Figure 2: Profile of respondents by age and response rate to initial research questionnaire

Year group	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total
Corresponding age	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
Potential respondents	4	8	13	7	3	10	6	51
Percentage of Korean cohort	8%	16%	24%	14%	6%	20%	12%	
Actual responses	0	2	2	3	1	5	2	15
Response rate	0%	15%	15%	43%	33%	50%	33%	29%
Response to interview invitation	0	2	2	1	0	1	0	5

2007, RBK, 2007) and personal immersion in the Korean cultural scene of south west London. It should be noted that I was a participant as well as an observer in this study because I had been working with the Korean students in the school for more than three years.

Results

I developed a thematic analysis (TA) based on the qualitative data collected from questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The process of arriving at the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) involved a period of several weeks colour-coding, recoding and reflecting on data extracts. Nine codes were originally identified. For each code a definition and an example data extract are provided below with the total number of data extracts for each code shown in parenthesis:

Deference (12) – the respondents stated they were doing something because it is required of them or where if they had the opportunity they might choose a different route or approach, e.g. 'It's about family honour that you make the right choice.'

Enlightened (12) – where a respondent seems to have a more pragmatic approach to career, e.g. 'If you choose a career you enjoy and are reasonably good at, your parents won't mind.'

Family coercion (32) - a sense of family putting pressure on a young person to influence career direction, e.g. 'I was encouraged to choose my career during my first years at secondary school and then I worked to study undergraduate material which I am just about coping with.'

Family support (10) – a respondent appears to have the support and encouragement of close family members, e.g. 'They do not force me but they do recommend or advise me about different careers that otherwise I would not know about.'

Korea-centric (52) – implicit or explicit influence of Korean culture, e.g. 'As Korean I have set my career aspirations so much earlier.'
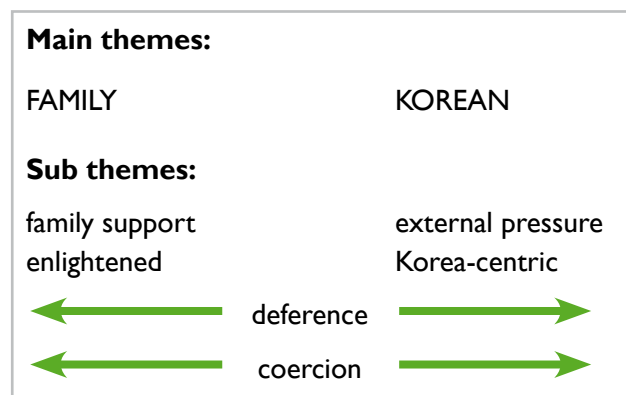
Korea-neutral (5) – Korean culture not influential, e.g. 'I believe Koreans are not that different to the English in how they make choices.'

Non-conventional (6) – indicates comments that may differ from the majority of responses, e.g. 'You should do what you want to do even if you live to regret it.'

External pressure (6) – choices and goals are set to ensure no loss of face, e.g. 'There is an immense pressure from the community even if your family are not so pressurising.'

Non-family support (15) - the influence or perceived usefulness of non-familial sources of support, e.g. 'At my church the minister advises me what careers and jobs I should do'.

For the TA I decided to integrate all but two of the themes choosing to exclude non-family support and non-conventional. I was able to subsume both into the other codes and thus provide a clearer TA.

Main themes:

FAMILY   KOREAN

Sub themes:

family support   external pressure
enlightened   Korea-centric

⬅ ➡ deference
⬅ ➡ coercion

Figure 3: Final TA of career decision making influences on a group of Korean boys – themes and sub themes

The two main themes I identified as influences on the career decision making process of Korean boys are **FAMILY** and **KOREAN** with two sub themes of deference and coercion linked to both. Additional sub themes are linked to **FAMILY**: (i) **enlightened** and (ii) **family support** as well as to **KOREAN**: (i) **external pressure** and (ii) **Korea-centric.** The following discussion considers the meaning

behind the themes and sub themes that have been proposed in the light of the research objectives.

The codes after analysis showed that the most informative data related to the themes of **FAMILY** and **KOREAN**. There was evidence that in most cases family influence was overt and that it was either supportive or coercive. In a supportive context, parents may take a keen interest in their son's progression and, he may perceive that he is supported and guided. There is an expectation that he will succeed (Locke, 1992). This cultural self-efficacy (Ali and Saunders, 2009) is illustrated by one respondent, during a recorded interview, who expressed his exasperation with his non-Korean classmates: 'it's not to be mean but my English classmates seem to put everything to chance and hope things will work out whilst putting in almost no effort and they seem happy with whatever they do but that is not how I have been brought up'.

The comment would seem to suggest that strong parental support and guidance may ensure stronger crystallisation of values (Brown and Crace,1996) but this may only arise if in tune with the personal development of the young person and not merely to meet parental expectation (Chen, 2006; Leong, 1995; Super 1990). Brown & Lent (2005:431) speak of the importance of parental 'warmth, reciprocity, mutual balance of power and attentiveness' as important ways of supporting the career decision making process. Indeed, the sub theme of **enlightened** thinking may be indicative of a nurturing, supportive family influence. Koreans are like anybody else, a point made by one of the respondents.

By contrast, family **coercion** poses a different scenario whereby unrealistic career expectations are set, perhaps without the necessary family support or engagement on the part of the young person. Some 32 codes were identified as coercive confirming strong parental influence does exist. A sense of **coercion** was also alluded to in data collected from school staff: 'Korean parents are pushy to the boy and want teacher to do the same. Positive feedback is met with 'Yes, but what can he do better?'

The wider literature suggests that having made

unsuitable option choices a student may, nevertheless, perform well in these subjects because of their work ethic (Breen, 2004; Putt, 2007) but may not be achieving their true potential or laying foundations for vocational fulfilment (Herzberg et al, 1959). Korean boys aspire to Oxbridge and other top ranking universities as offers from high ranking UK universities can be a backdoor entry into the Korean university system (Breen, 2004; Lee, 2006). A vocational study interest in hotel management born of positive work experience and career research may suddenly wane when it is understood that the course, though highly rated at Surrey, is not offered at Oxbridge.

The theme **KOREAN** includes: the influence of Korean culture in terms of the pull to study and live in Korea (**Korea-centric)**, the pressure to conform to particular study choices and career routes that emanates from within the community (**external pressure**) and the inclination of young Koreans to strive to meet parental expectation (**deference**). **External pressure** is the influence of people outside the family, presumably from within the UK and home Korean communities and is an indirect influence that should not be underestimated as having an impact on Korean boys (Kim et al., 2001). The concept of losing face (Breen, 2004; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996) is felt in Korean culture and the perceived failure of a son i.e. not achieving sufficient high scoring GCSE results or not gaining a place at a Russell Group university may be perceived as a family failure. It is not just the son but the parents too who are perceived to have failed (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). Korean parents who want to offer more leeway to their son to make option or career choices, ceding to more Western cultural values (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1995), may not actually follow through with it. If parents allow their son to make choices that are atypical for Koreans, such as choosing art or non science subjects over science subjects for GCSE and A level, there may still be the nagging sense that other Koreans will be judging them e.g. 'it is always this comparing of you to others, it's what we do as Koreans' (data extract). Korean parents who have insufficient understanding of the UK education system and elementary English may struggle to support their son's progress (Kim & Dickson, 2007) and, as a result, this may add to

the pressure already felt. The sense of **external pressure** from fellow Koreans may be felt more acutely, as Koreans are more co-ethnically reliant than other MEGS (Putt, 2007; Sue and Sue, 1990). The sub theme **Korea-centric** included 52 data extracts and provided the richest strand of data:

> 'The family suggests what roles I should do so they are important.'

> 'I would like to work back in Korea.'

> 'We have more expectations from our parents and peers because in Korea university and study is even more important than in the UK.'

> 'If I made a choice that my parents disapprove of it would mean that it would be bad i.e. like against the law.'

> 'I have lived in Korea until the age of 10 my English is not so good as English people so I will look for careers where English is not so taken seriously.'

The final sub theme of **deference** connects with both **FAMILY** and **KOREAN**. In contrast to coercion which entails strong influencing both overtly and covertly, deference, by contrast, is potentially something within the control of the individual. It is an act of complying with or aspiring to parental or community pressure to make particular choices or to take particular career routes. Here are three examples:

> 'It's sad but respect is carved into our backbones.'

> 'It's about family honour that you make the right choice.'

> 'I want to make sure my job is highly acceptable in society.'

Guidance implications

Five implications for guidance are suggested based on the key findings:

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Guidance needs to be sensitive to the lived experience of Korean boys. A guidance practitioner may well benefit from having some understanding of the Korean immigration story and cultural heritage, the Korean university system and the complex choices that face Korean boys.

CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY

It is important that guidance practitioners who work with Korean students are engaged with an ongoing personal critical reflection on their guidance practice, something they will have committed to during initial guidance training. Guidance practitioners who work with students of Korean heritage might usefully meet to share the process of critical reflection. Bradley, 2009 proposes a three-stage model for challenging our 'whiteness' and 'taken for grantedness'. In adapting this to the Korean guidance context, I maintain that this could involve:

i. Identify emerging critical insights i.e. 'the silence and respectful bowing is difficult to relate to.'

ii. Meet with local practitioners to critically reflect on approaches to working with Korean clients.

iii. Draw on the experience of co-practitioners to refresh one's own guidance approach.

ADVOCACY

A guidance practitioner may see an opportunity to be a 'co-agent' (Chen, 2006) e.g. work with a client to gain parental acceptance of a chosen alternative career / course route or option choice scenario, encourage work experience or assist parents with misconceptions about particular career routes.

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE NEED

The potential complexity of the lived experience of Korean boys means that the career guidance process may need to involve more guidance time

to explore emerging guidance issues for example: moving suddenly back to Korea and the implications or needing more support because parents have returned to Korea during further education or coaching for the UK university interview process.

COACHING

Guidance practitioners, where appropriate, may assist Korean students to develop interpersonal skills through mock interviews to ensure that they are on a level playing field with other university applicants where selection interviews are involved.

Conclusions

Advocacy, critical reflexivity and cultural sensitivity are key aspects of any initial careers guidance training. However, coaching and additional guidance need may be considered more controversial; the former because it may be deemed counter-cultural to coach someone to achieve a goal or even culturally insensitive, the latter because this may be impractical as it requires more time to build a guidance relationship. Mutual accessibility of the guidance professional and client is a key consideration. Such an approach may be more difficult to implement where a school does not have the guidance resources, where typically a guidance practitioner may spend only one or two days a week in school.

In the course of this study further research opportunities have been identified. Areas of particular interest could include: (i) the community influence on Korean boys and/or girls, (ii) the coping mechanisms of Korean boys and/or girls in a bi-cultural world across a broad range of schools; and (iii) adapting this research design to explore the experience of other MEGS such as those of Chinese, Vietnamese, Tamil Sri Lankan or Somali heritage.

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