

# Theoretical Perspectives for Understanding Marital Abuse among Korean Immigrant Women in the United States

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## Abstract

Ecological theory and symbolic interaction theory have anchored the research on Korean immigrant women's experience of marital abuse and post-divorce adjustment.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is useful in studying Korean immigrants' experience of marital abuse. It posited four sub-systems: society, community, relationship and individual. At the societal level which represents cultural norm, patriarchy, masculine aggression, and acceptance of interpersonal violence are important factors understanding dynamics of marital abuse in Korean immigrant families. At the community level, institutions and social structure, immigration related stressors, low socioeconomic status, lack of formal services, and isolation are associated with marital abuse. At the relationship level, male control in decision making, marital conflict, and obligation to children are factors. At the individual level, gender identity, self-esteem, language barriers, and husband's use of alcohol are factors associated with marital abuse.

According to symbolic interactionists, a woman's definition of the situation is a key to understand her actions and responses within the context of an abusive relationship. Based on this approach, researchers analyze women's identity negotiation and discourses as inherently active self.

Grounded in these theoretical conceptual frameworks, this paper discusses the experience of marital abuse and post-divorce adjustment among Korean immigrant women in the United States and offer suggestions for family policy makers for this population.

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## Key words

Korean immigrant women, marital abuse, symbolic interaction theory, ecological theory, family policy

## Introduction

Violence between family members is one of the most serious social and health problems in the United States (Kim, 1996; Warren & Lanning, 1992). Although this phenomenon is not new, it has received academic attention only in the last 30 years (Pati, 2002).

Because Asian Americans, including Korean Americans, are perceived as a “model minority” with stable and problem-free families (Glenn, 1998), the issue of wife abuse in this population has not been addressed. Consistent with this perception, Koss et al. (1994) found that the reported incidence of wife abuse in Asian American families and the rates at which Asian immigrant women leave abusive male partners were low compared to those of other ethnic groups. Furthermore, their divorce rate, which is often used as a measure of marital instability, is only about half of the divorce rate of non-Hispanic Whites (Humes & McKinnon, 2000).

Despite the reported low incidence of wife abuse and divorce, Kim and Sung (2000), Rhee (1997), and Song (1996) found that actual risk of wife abuse among Korean immigrant families was high. Song (1996) reported that 60 percent of the participants experienced physical abuse in their marriages. Kim and Sung (2000) found that 33 percent of the wives in their study, whose husbands assumed a dominant role in their marriage, experienced at least one incidence of physical assault during the previous year. According to Chang (2003) and Rhee (1997), wife abuse was the primary reason for marital dissolution given by Korean immigrant women. Physical abuse in Korean immigrant families was commonly associated with a traditional cultural background (e.g., patriarchy, emphasis on family harmony) and particular institutional characteristics (e.g., social discrimination, economic hardship, lack of information about American culture, etc.) (Glenn, 1998).

In order to understand the adjustment of women who leave abusive marriages, factors that promote women's self-esteem in the face of adversity must be identified. Self-esteem is closely related to women's resilience, which is defined as “the ability to confront and resolve problems and the capacity to utilize personal or social resources to enhance limited possibilities” (Parra & Guarnaccia, 1995, p. 433). Personal characteristics, affectionate ties, a strong support system of family and friends, and an active

search for external support systems sustain and reinforce resilience, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (O'Leary, 1992, as cited in Parra & Guarnaccia, 1995; Werner-Wilson, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 2000). However, Korean immigrant women who experience abuse are likely to be physically, psychologically, and socially vulnerable because of language barriers, isolation from their family of origin, and unfamiliarity with a new country.

In order to understand the multidimensional and situational aspects of Korean immigrant women and families in the United States, theoretical perspectives need to be applied systematically to this issue. The ecological system approach and the symbolic interaction approach are best suited to recognize family violence issues among this population.

Grounded in these theoretical perspectives, this article is to provide the understanding of the dynamics of intimate partner abuse among Korean immigrant families in the United States, and adjustment after leaving abusive relationships. It is expected that these theoretical examinations will provide policy makers with an understanding of the nature of marital abuse among minority families in the United States and suggestions for a practical agenda to support minority women who need formal assistance.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Two theoretical perspectives that have anchored the research on marital abuse are discussed in this section. The theoretical conceptual framework for this study is also described.

#### *The Ecological Framework*

Brofenbrenner (1993) defines human development ecology as:

the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between active, growing, highly complex biopsychological organisms and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as the process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 7)

In other words, a person's behavior is a function of the interaction of the person's traits and abilities with the environment (Klein & White, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner (1993) posits five levels of environmental systems: micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono-systems. The *microsystem* is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting. Particular physical, social, and symbolic features of the developing person are sustained in their activities, and progressively interact with the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

The next nested structure, the *mesosystem*, is comprised of the linkages and processes taking place between two or more micro settings containing the developing person. The *exosystem* is comprised of the linkages and processes taking place between two or more external settings. At least one of those settings does not contain the developing person. Although events occur in the setting where the person is not included, the events indirectly influence the person's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

The *macrosystem* consists of the overarching pattern of the micro-, meso-, and exosystems. The macrosystem is embedded in a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure. The given culture can be represented by belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange (Bronfenbrenner, 1993).

Lastly, the *chronosystem* consists of those patterns that influence developmental change over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). There are two types of transitional events in the chronosystem: normative and non-normative events. Normative events are characterized as events that are universal and take place in an orderly procession in people's lives (e.g., starting school, puberty, entering the job market, starting a family, and retirement). Non-normative events tend to be more stressful than normative events because they are unexpected events (e.g., death of a family member, illness or disability, divorce, job loss, moving, or winning the sweepstakes) (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

The ecological framework provides four fundamental ideas about marriage; (a) that marriages are interpersonal systems; (b) that spouses' personality shapes their individual and collective efforts to maintain a successful marriage; (c) that marriage relationships are dynamic so that they

change in context and evolve over time; and (d) that marital unions are embedded in a social context (Huston, 2000). In examining marital success and stability, Johnson (1999) asserted that the decisions spouses make to stay married or divorce reflect (a) the extent to which the spouses want to stay in marriage (i.e., personal commitment), (b) the extent to which they feel they are obligated to stay (i.e., moral commitment), and (c) the degree to which they think they have to stay (i.e., structural commitment). Personal commitment is influenced by the quality of the spousal relationships, how much time spouses spend together, and whether they pursue other relationships that might compete with the marriage. Moral commitment is rooted in a person's value system and personality. Structural commitment is related to factors outside of the individual, such as financial concerns, negative social sanctions, or lack of opportunity to form competing relationships.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is useful in studying violence against women. Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller (1999) used the ecological framework (see Figure 1) to explain and integrate the origins of gender-based violence. They posited four sub-systems in their work: society, community, relationship, and individual.

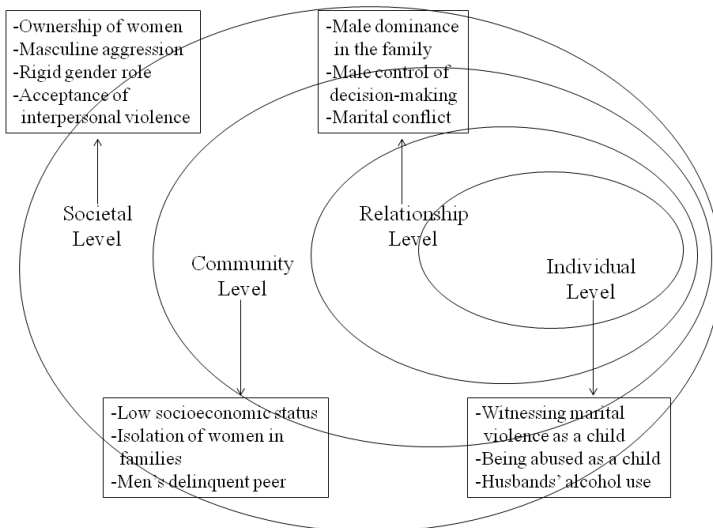


Figure 1. Ecological Model (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999, adapted from Heise, 1998)

According to this model, at the outermost circle, the society reflects the general views and attitudes that permeate the culture at large. At the societal level, male entitlement/ownership of women, masculine aggression and dominance, rigid gender roles, acceptance of interpersonal violence, and acceptance of physical chastisement are important factors that predict violence against women (Heise et al., 1999). The community level represents the institutions and social structures of the workplace, neighborhood, social networks, and identity groups. In the community, women's low socioeconomic status and isolation from families, and men's delinquent peer associations are linked to violence against women (Heise et al., 1999). The relationship level represents the immediate context in which abuse takes place (Heise, 1998). Male dominance in the family, male control of decision-making, and marital conflict are strong predictors of partner abuse (Heise et al., 1999). Lastly, the individual level, the innermost circle, represents the biological and personal history that each individual brings to the relationship, including gender identity, witnessing marital violence as a child, being abused as a child, the experience of an absent or rejecting father, and husbands' use of alcohol (Heise et al., 1999).

A weakness of ecological theory is that it is so broad that every element is integrated--from the individual level to the societal level--(Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009). Because of this broadness, it lacks prediction (Klein & White, 2004). Despite this critique, ecological theory sensitizes researchers to issues that may not be addressed in other theories, such as issues among minority families, and provides a foundation for the multi-directional policy development.

### *Symbolic Interaction Theory*

Symbolic interaction theory is one of the most popular family perspectives today, possibly because it accommodates an interest in the individual within the context of family (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). Symbolic interaction theory focuses on how human interaction occurs, as well as the extent to which those interactions are useful in understanding human behavior.

Klein and White (2004) divide symbolic interaction theory into four variations. First, there is the structural approach, which focuses on the

concept of role. According to this perspective, social roles are learned and then enacted by people when they occupy positions in a social structure. One criticism of the structural approach is that it fosters the idea of the “oversocialized self” with little freedom to adapt to or change the environment.

The second variation is the interactional approach, which argues that the individual is “making” his/her role through interaction with others and his/her social context. This approach emphasizes the creative and problem-solving dimension of roles. A shortcoming of this perspective is that it ignores the constraints of the pre-existing social structure and its tenacity in maintaining the status quo.

The third perspective is the micro-interactional approach. It emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of roles. The self is relatively fluid and defined by the way in which the person frames or schematically understands the context and the rules.

The fourth perspective is the phenomenological approach. It focuses on the taken-for-granted dailiness of life and the ways in which the meanings of that taken-for-granted experience are maintained. This approach is most often used to examine partner abuse. Phenomenological symbolic interactionists assert that families are to be studied as social phenomena emerging out of the interactions of their socially situated members (Erickson, 2003). These theorists have studied the phenomenology of family violence, rather than the history of violence or the impact of personality characteristics (Erickson, 2003).

Symbolic interactionists conceptualize family violence as “a situated, interpersonal, emotional, and cognitive activity involving negative symbolic interaction between intimates” (Denzin, 1984, p. 483). The basic premises of family violence research anchored in the symbolic interaction perspective are that: (a) behavior always takes place within a situation; (b) actors construct their behavior based on their definition of this situation; and (c) all situations involve the self and at least one other identity (Denzin, 1984; Erickson, 2003).

Since social interaction focuses on self in relation to others and the social interchanges between individuals and groups (Eshleman, 2000), it is important to consider how the situation is defined. The *definition of the situation* has to do with the definition of reality and the perceived consequences. In other words, a situation takes its meaning from how

it is defined (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, as cited in Klein & White, 2004). Therefore, situating violence is critical, as it provides the context within which people develop their personal interpretations of a violent event. In an interaction where a man is threatening a woman, it is the women's definition of the situation, rather than the objective characteristics of reality, that matter. How she defines the situation is the key to understanding her actions and her responses within the context of the relationship (Lempert, 1995).

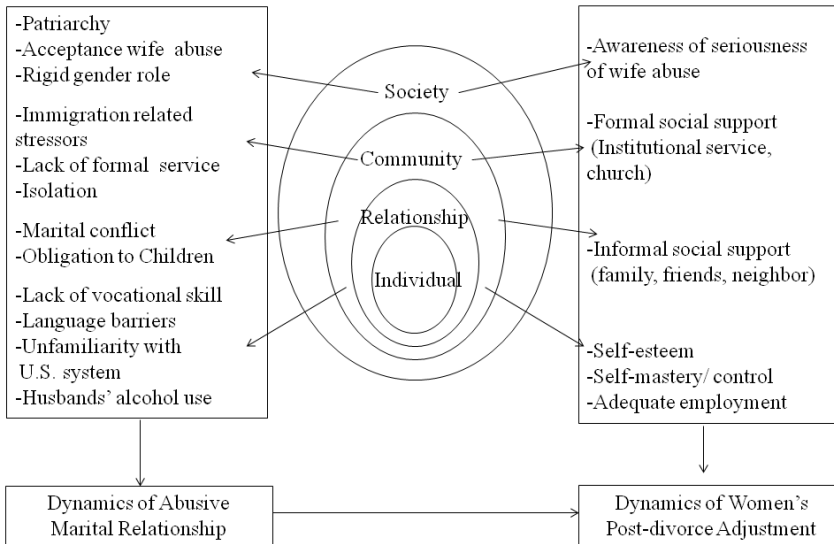
The symbolic interaction approach allows the researcher to analyze women's identity negotiation and discourses as an inherently active self. This approach also demonstrates the importance of considering the intimate familial interactions within the dominant cultural context and institutionalized systems of power (Baker, 1997; Lempert, 1995).

*Theoretical Conceptual Framework for Marital Abuse among Korean Immigrant Women in the United States*

The review of the literature suggests that the conditions associated with wife abuse are cultural, institutional, and relational. Symbolic interaction is a useful approach for examining Korean immigrant women's view of themselves as women, and survivors of abuse within the family, society, and culture. The ecological framework is also useful for examining Korean immigrant women's behavior, as a function of the interaction of their abilities and traits with the family, community, and cultures of the United States and Korea.

This study has drawn on the ecological framework and symbolic interaction theory to shape the theoretical framework for this study. According to Figure 2, which is an illustration of this author's model, abused Korean immigrant women are products of multi-layered settings. They are also dynamic people who actively re-discover themselves within settings.





**Figure 2.** Factors associated with Korean immigrant women's experience of wife abuse and their adjustment after leaving abusive marital relationships

The box on the left lists factors that are associated with Korean immigrant women's experience of abuse. At the societal level, a traditional patriarchal cultural norm that silently permits wife abuse and encourages rigid gender role contributes to partner abuse in Korean immigrant families. At the community level, immigration related-stress, such as the husband's un/under employment, the lack of formal social services for Korean immigrant families, and women's isolation from families of origin and society contribute to partner abuse. At the relationship level, marital discord, and obligation to the children escalate partner abuse. Finally, at the individual level, women's lack of vocational skills, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the U.S. system, and the husband's alcohol use are associated with partner abuse.

The box on the right illustrates factors that are associated with healthy adjustment after Korean immigrant women leave abusive marital relationships. At the societal level, awareness of the seriousness of partner abuse is associated with women's well-adjustment. At the community level, formal services and institutions that are culturally sensitive to women's needs are important for women's adjustment. At the relation-

ship level, a web of informal social support from family, friends, and neighbor is critical to Korean immigrant women's adjustment. At the individual level, high self-esteem, self-mastery/control, and women's employability or preparation for employment is critical for adjustment after leaving abusive relationships.

In the next section, marital abuse and post-divorce adjustment and women's responses in each level is extensively examined.

## **Dynamics of Marital Abuse among Korean Immigrant Families in the United States**

### *Societal Level*

**Traditional Patriarchal Cultural Values** Chinese Confucian cultural tradition has had a profound influence on Korean society (Min, 1998b). The traditional family in East Asia was patriarchal. Roles were clearly defined, with males, particularly the father and oldest son, having the dominant roles. Females, relegated to a subordinate position, were expected to please and obey their fathers and, if married, were subordinated to not only their husbands but also their husbands' parents (De Vos, 1984; Hsu, 1967; Kitano, 1985, as cited in Wong, 1998). Filial piety, respect, and obedience to parents and ancestors, was highly emphasized. Within this cultural context, Korean women have been socialized to be dependent and subservient to their spouses, and to see their sole purpose in life as caretaker for their spouse, children and parents-in-law. Harmony and unity in the home were to be maintained at all costs. Women were expected to make concessions and sacrifices (Yu, 1993). Women who failed in marriage were permanently deprived of the only legitimate role through which they could participate in the society. Given this cultural standpoint, Korean women had no alternative but to endure and suffer abuse.

**Korean Immigrant Women's Lives in the U.S.** Korean immigrants bring traditional attitudes to their new homeland because they are a homogeneous group with a high level of ethnic attachment (Min, 1998b). At the same time, 70 percent of Korean American families in a study by Kim and Sung (2000) faced occupational and economic stress that was positively associated with language barriers, unfamiliarity with the culture, and social discrimination. Many Korean immigrants who come

to the U.S. with relatively high socioeconomic status experience downward mobility initially (Kim & Sung, 2000). Given the male-dominated culture from which they come, Korean immigrant men often feel insecure and threatened when their deficiency in English and unfamiliarity with the American culture are exposed. They become defensive and resistant to change and adaptation.

Scholars who have examined wife abuse in cultural perspective view patriarchy as a major cause of violence within a family, especially husband to wife violence (Kim & Sung, 2000; Lee, 2006). Feminist theorists assert that patriarchal ideology buttresses much of a social structure that creates and maintains male domination over women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Schechter, 1982). Lee (2006) and Song (1996) reported that abused Korean American women stayed because they had no other choice, or because they were in unavoidable circumstances. Traditional values and the stigma associated with divorce also played an important role in Korean immigrant women's decision to stay in an abusive marital relationship.

"Saving face" is a strong cultural value, and abused Korean immigrant women feel an obligation not to hurt the reputation of their family. They lack autonomy; they are dependent; they lack survival skills; and they feel incapable of striking out by themselves. Over a period of time, a syndrome similar to learned helplessness develops, and women give up trying to leave or change the situation (Kim, 1996).

### *Community Level*

Many immigrants face language barriers, lack social support systems, have inadequate employment, and experience prejudice and discrimination. The distress that these conditions create increases the risk of family conflict, including domestic violence (Sluzki, 1979; Yick, 2000). Kim and Sung (2000) found that 70 percent of the Korean American families in their sample experienced occupational and economic stress as a result of language barriers and social discrimination.

Many Korean immigrants who come to the United States have a relatively high socioeconomic status. Upon arrival, however, they experience downward mobility (Kim & Sung, 2000). Wife battering most commonly occurs in households in which husbands have difficulty adjusting to the new environment. These husbands experience high levels of stress asso-

ciated with the discrepancy in their employment statuses before and after immigration (Rhee, 1997; Song, 1996). Korean women reported that the frequency and level of violent episodes escalated after immigration to America (Kim, 1996).

Nah (1993) found that Korean American men who battered their wives complained that the domestic violence laws in America were unfair. These men believed that domestic violence should be dealt with only by the family, and that government agencies have no business interfering in what they see as a private affair. In addition, Korean society informally sanctions wife abuse as just treatment for women's wrongdoing. For this reason, it is not surprising that few community members are willing to help Korean women whose spouses mistreat them (Song, 1996). Yoshioka, Dinola, and Ullah (2001) examined attitudes toward marital violence among Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian adults living in the United States. Although Chinese and Korean adults were less likely than Vietnamese and Cambodian adults to endorse attitudes supporting male privilege and the use of violence, Koreans, especially males and the elderly, regarded domestic violence as a private matter.

Social support is defined as those contacts who provide emotional and instrumental support while enhancing self-esteem (Cobb, 1976) and who promote recovery from stress or crises (McKenry & Price, 2000). Social support is vital to women's re-discovery of themselves. Women with strong social support are more likely to believe that they have control over their lives. When stress levels are high, social support assumes a major importance in enhancing divorced women's adjustment (Campbell, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995; McKelvey & McKenry, 2000; Propst, Pardington, Ostrom, & Watkins, 1986; Thabes, 1997).

Isolation is an important factor in marital abuse among Asian immigrant families. For many women, isolation was one of the most painful and disempowering aspects of marital abuse in a foreign country. More than half of the Korean American women whom Kim (1996) interviewed were isolated from their family-of-origin and their friends, due to restrictions imposed on them by their husbands. The isolation stems from women's fear of their legal status, their economic dependency, lack of proficiency in English, restricted mobility, and the lack of information about viable alternative choices. Isolation tactics are deliberately used by the husbands to increase power and control over the wife.

It is not easy for Korean immigrant women who experience partner abuse to seek outside help actively. Song (1996) found that the most common coping strategies battered Korean immigrant women used were to assume that time will solve the problem (42 percent); to keep the problem in the family (35 percent); to pray (27 percent); to consult friends and relatives (12 percent); and to seek professional help (5 percent). Rarely did battered Korean immigrant women use formal support services; 70 percent of the participants in Song's study (1996) were unaware that such services existed.

Korean women in Lee's (2006) study also used passive coping strategies wishing the situation would get better tomorrow because of limited formal/informal support and isolation in the U.S.

### *Relationship Level*

The generic stress of adjustment to American society makes intimate relationships difficult for most immigrants. Changing gender roles is a major cause of marital discord in Korean immigrant families (Nah, 1993). Wives who need to work outside of the home to increase their family income find jobs more quickly than their husbands (Min, 1998a), largely because they are more willing than husbands to take jobs beneath their educational status. Their employment makes them independent, which is inconsistent with traditional Korean values (Kim, 1996).

Theoretically Korean immigrant wives' employment increases her marital power; however, this power depends on the cultural context of marital relations (Min, 1998b). Given that there is a tendency for Korean immigrants to concentrate in small family businesses, Korean immigrant women who work in these businesses are disadvantaged in power and status, as they are usually unpaid workers irrespective of their contribution to the family income (Min, 1998a).

Despite the change in Korean immigrant wives' economic roles, husbands are unlikely to change their traditional gender role attitudes. Korean immigrant husbands have reported consistent fears of wives' challenging their male dominance in families (Kim, 1996). According to Lim (1997), husbands whose wives leave full-time homemaking to join the labor force worry that their wives may bargain for new marital relations based on their newly derived earning power.

Wives' employment and husbands' traditional gender role expectations result in tremendous overwork for Korean immigrant women. The majority of Korean immigrant wives who work for pay or in the family business continue to do most of the housework and provide care for spouses, children, and extended family (Kim & Kim, 1995; Min, 1998a). Korean immigrant wives' physical burnout, due to overwork and to adjustment problems in the labor force and the new western culture put tremendous strain on the marital relations.

Obligation to the children is another reason that women stay in abusive marital relationships. Many abused Asian women reported that they must tolerate the abuse "for the sake of my children" (Bauer, Rodriguez, Quiroga, & Flores-Ortiz, 2000; Lee, 2006). Because children's education and social mobility are the primary motivation for many immigrants, children's social and psychological well-being comes first. In addition, mothers feel an obligation to stay in the marriage until the children are married. This may be linked to a social bias against children of divorced parents. These children are seen as undesirable partners by other Korean Americans (Kim, 1996; Song, 1996).

### *Individual Level*

Korean immigrant women in the U.S. have been characterized as passive individuals who are strongly attached to the family, their ethnic group, and traditional culture and whose destiny is controlled by other people and the conditions surrounding them. Kim (1996) studied domestic violence targeting Korean immigrant families in the U.S., and Walker (2000) studied battered women syndrome based on U.S. National Institute of Mental Health. Both scholars have asserted that a syndrome similar to learned helplessness, in which individuals who have been repeatedly traumatized come to believe that their own actions cannot protect them from adversity (Walker, 2000), has led Korean women to accept partner abuse (Kim, 1996).

Women in abusive marriages vary in their resilience and vulnerability. Many researchers (Aguilar & Nightingale, 1994; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Perilla, Bakerman, & Norris, 1994) have found that abused women reported significantly lower self-esteem than non-abused women. However, the participants in Walker's (2000) study of battered women

rated themselves high on self-esteem. In a study comparing abused women to other women with serious relationship problems, Campbell (1989) found that both groups reported low self-esteem with no significant differences between the two groups. Campbell also suggested that low self-esteem was not a product of abuse per se, but a product of the problematic relationship in general.

There is general agreement among scholars that violent acts within families, such as assaults and fatal accidents, frequently involve heavy drinking (Kail & Cavanagh, 2004). Culturally, Asians are tolerant and permissive toward male drinking, while females seldom drink. According to Rhee (1997), alcohol-related battering is one of the most significant correlates of separation and divorce among Korean immigrant families. Husbands with drinking problems are likely to abuse their wives more frequently and seriously than those who have no problems with alcohol (Lee, 2006; Rhee, 1997; Song, 1996).

### **Leaving Abusive Marital Abuse and Post-Divorce Adjustment**

Symbolic interaction theory is a best fit to provide an understanding of the process of leaving abusive marital abuse. Women experiencing marital abuse have to go through the process of redefining the situation and reconstructing themselves.

Just as women leave abusive relationships for a variety of reasons, women choose to stay in abusive relationships for several reasons. Women who stay may go through a decision-making process weighing pros and cons in the context of a multidimensional relationship (Schechter, 1982). Thus, careful interpretation is needed so as not to view all women who stay with an abusive partner as the same that is socially and psychologically victimized to the point of helplessness (Peled, Eisikovits, Enosh, & Winstok, 2000). Given that the most effective way to end abuse is to terminate abusive relationships, only women who leave the abusive partner are discussed in this section.

Symbolic interaction perspective approaches following models as the frequent used to explain the abused wife's decisions to terminate the marital relationships.

According to the *learned helplessness model*, women quit trying to cope with partner abuse because of the failure of their efforts or their dis-

belief that the relationship can be saved (Haj-Yahia & Eldar-Avidan, 2001). Although this model considers the difficulties abused women face, it may not represent the full scope of abused women's decision-making process (Choice & Lamke, 1997). Empirically and practically some abused women actively respond and cope with abusive relationships, and still decide to leave abusive partners.

The *transtheoretical model* (also called the stage of change or model of change process), developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1982, 1986), conceptualizes the behavior change process as five stages: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. In the pre-contemplation stage, women do not recognize the abuse as a problem. They may believe that the husband abuses because he cares and the women are not interested in change. In the contemplation stage, a critical event causes the women to examine their relationship. This critical event is a turning point (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). The women begin to recognize abuse as a problem. They weigh the costs and benefits of change. In the preparation stage, women develop the intention and a plan to leave, such as getting a job or looking for a place to live with their children. In the action stage, the women take action to end the abuse. Along the way in the action stage, women use various ways of disengaging (Landenburger, 1998), such as spending longer periods away from home, emotionally withdrawing, disclosing their husbands' abusive behavior to others, and reporting the abuse to the police. In the maintenance stage which is the final stage, women take steps to prevent a relapse after the abuse ends. They take responsibility for their lives (Burke, Gielen, McDonnell, O'Campo, & Maman, 2001), and reestablish social networks and activities (Few & Bell-Scott, 2002). Landenburger (1998) added a final stage, recovery. During this stage, women work toward empowerment.

Illustrative of the transtheoretical model is a qualitative study of the decision-making process that heterosexual Black college women used to terminate psychological abusive dating relationships by Few and Bell-Scott (2002). Women in this study followed a four-stage process. The first stage began with an assessment of the relationship. This assessment involved recognition of the abuse and a calculation of the pros and cons of the relationship. This eventually led the women to assess turning points, to re-structure the relationships, and to make a decision



to leave. The second stage involved physical and emotional separation from the abusive partner. In the third stage, the women reestablished social networks, and (re)engaged in social activities. At the final stage, women rebuilt their self-esteem, re-claimed their desires, and left their abusive partners.

Lee's (2006) study revealed that Korean immigrant women went through several stages in their journey from abused wives to self-reliant divorced women. Stage I, a premature marriage was fueled often by social pressures to get married, early evidence of relational problems and abusive behavior by the husbands, and women's lack of knowledge about their husbands. In stage II, an actual emotional and physical abuse that included name-calling, cursing, manipulation, deprivation of sleep and food, endless monitoring, threats with weapons and reckless driving, control of family funds, isolation from family and friends, physical battering, and marital rape by husbands, emerged. Wives also experienced difficulty with their in-laws, in particular their husbands' mother. Wives resorted to a number of coping strategies, such as praying alone, concealing the problem, and, in some cases, defensively fighting back verbally and physically. Religious and cultural values, however, discouraged them from considering divorce. If they had children, divorce was even more difficult to consider. Stage III is characterized by turning point. Korean immigrant women's experienced a specific violent event, which caused women to re-examine and re-define their commitment to the marriage and to re-examine their fears of being ostracized, living alone, and taking care of themselves. This turning point led women to adopt problem-focused strategies. They broke their silence and reached out for outside help. They also began consciously preparing for divorce and life alone. Stage IV, was characterized initially by emotional and economic hardship, difficult relations with ex-husbands and former in-laws, and mixed reactions in the community. Nevertheless, women developed a new sense of self, a renewed connection to God, close relations with the children they raised, and a positive outlook on life. Many said that their willingness to participate in this study came from a desire to help other women who may have faced abuse.

## Discussion

Family cannot exist in a vacuum. Multi-dimensional and systemic approaches are needed to understand family issues. Family members' perceptions in interpreting events are the key to understand how they cope with problems. Korean immigrant women's lives in the United States and their experience of marital abuse are needed to be examined in these contexts.

Multiple factors from the individual level to the societal level contribute to Korean immigrant women's experiences of marital abuse and post-divorce adjustment. These factors include historical, cultural and religious teachings on women's role to maintain family harmony at any cost; minority immigrant status in the United States which creates a lack of formal support when they are in need, discrimination, language barriers; rigid gender roles based on patriarchal beliefs, lack of immediate family support, isolation, obligation to children; low-self esteem, and never-examined personal qualities.

In these circumstances, Korean immigrant women who experience marital abuse are viewed as suffering from "learned helplessness," and as having "no alternatives but to stay." This view often put women to answer "why do you stay in abusive relationship?" This question places the accountability for marital abuse on the victim, rather than the perpetrator.

Therefore, family policy makers need to rephrase the question to "How do you survive?" To answer this question, policy makers need to understand women's attitudes toward marriage and divorce in the context of Korean history and the role of Korean culture--particularly Confucian and religious teachings--. For five thousand years, Korea has been dominated by one ethnic group, despite numerous invasions from neighboring countries (Park, 2000). The strength of Korean culture, with its focus on unity, has been the key to its survival. All of the women in Lee's (2006) study faced the dilemma of whether to remain true to their culture or make the decision to divorce. Greater attention to how women resolve the conflict between this background and their situation as abused wives in the U.S. would broaden our knowledge of women's resilience. There is also a need to study those women who resolve this dilemma by staying with their abusive husbands.

There is also a need for family policy makers to compare the experi-

ences of Korean immigrant women to those of Asian immigrant women, to non-Asian immigrant women, and to other women in the United States. Comparative studies might clarify the importance of ethnicity, class, and citizen status for abused women.

### *Suggestions for Policymakers*

**Societal/community Level** Despite its prevalence, there is a lack of awareness about family violence in Korean immigrant communities in the United States. For this reason, prevention education programs that explain the nature and consequences of abuse are a necessity. In order to be effective, these programs must be bilingual, and the professionals must be sensitive to Korean culture. Because of the role Korean churches play in women's lives, it is essential that some prevention education programs be housed in these institutions. It is also important that church leaders and social workers work together to address the concerns of marital abuse.

Negative attitudes that abused immigrant women encounter in the legal system and health care systems have kept them from seeking outside help (Abraham, 2000; Bauer et al., 2000). At the societal level, there is also a great need for legal and health services that are attentive to the seriousness of domestic violence in immigrant families. In order to advocate for the invisible victims who are likely to experience language barrier, low social class, and discrimination, it must be mandatory for the police, court, attorney, and health care providers to consider cultural context in dealing with their cases. It is hoped that this study contributes to build policy foundations and programs for the underrepresented immigrant abused women in the United States.

Given that Korea is second among nations in the use of the high-speed Internet ("U.S. Lags," 2006), it is important that prevention education and support services develop websites in English and Korean to reach abused women. Most Korean immigrant women in the United States are unaware of services in the community. Those who are aware are often reluctant to contact services to ask for help. Those who are unable to visit an agency or who wish to remain anonymous would get information and referrals via the Internet. Abused women could also share their stories anonymously on websites. An Internet community

for Korean women in the U.S. already exists and includes websites for Korean married women and divorced women (e.g., missyusa.com, mizville.com and gomissy.com). Social service agencies and support networks could build on this foundation.

In addition to prevention education, there is a need for emergency services, such as shelters for abused women and their children. Several of the women in this study remained in abusive relationships when they desperately wanted to leave because they were economically dependent and had nowhere else to go. There is a need for further policy developments considering the abused immigrant women who reside outside of large Korean immigrant communities, including transportation and distant assistance.

**Relationship/individual level** It would be empowering and helpful to involve the abused women through prevention and treatment programs. Some women (Lee, 2006) have expressed a desire to help others; their stories would give hope to others facing the problem of marital abuse. Programs at the relationship level, such as volunteer groups led by women with similar experience, empower women who are facing adversity. Such informal supports are powerful tools to improve self-worth and social development.

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