

Summary of Research

No Place to Call Home – A visual ethnography on North Korean defectors in Toronto

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Summary of Research

Since the year 2000 the estimated total number of North Koreans who have fled their country due to political, economic, or social motivations has risen from roughly 1000 to over 20,000 in 2013 (Kim, 2013). After battling their way through China while hiding from Chinese authorities and North Korean spies, they reach South East Asia. From there they most-often end up moving to South Korea. For various reasons, after living in South Korea many North Koreans choose to migrate elsewhere, thus creating small but growing communities of North Korean refugees in places like Canada. The difficulties and challenges faced by North Korean refugees in the city of Toronto have rarely, if ever been academically investigated. Due to the closed nature of the country and the unwillingness (most often due to fear of the regime) of North Koreans to discuss their past or present lives, there is a scarcity of academic scholarship on North Korea as a country or its current/former citizens (Chan & Schloenhardt, 2007). The experiences of North Korean refugees are especially important. In general, migrating is a stressful activity regardless of if it is voluntary or involuntary (George, 2010). Factors such as finding employment, learning the local language, becoming part of a new social group, understanding the politics, and a number of other variables make this process very difficult for the newcomer. According to Dow (2011), these stressors can often cause chaos and extreme adjustment problems. For the North Korean refugee, these factors can have even more impact because the country from which they escaped is so starkly different from the rest of the world in so many ways. The process of adapting to a new culture is compounded by tremendous psychological trauma that lingers in the form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) acquired from horrible experiences in their homeland (Kim & Lee, 2009).

According to Dow (2011), refugee migrants experience a host of problems when attempting to settle in a new country. Difficulty finding work, mistreatment from employers, uncertainty about the future, vulnerability related to a fear of being deported, and restrictions in their ability to return home to see family and friends can all contribute to a very difficult experience. This can often result in serious mental and psychological disorders (Briggs, 2011). As one could imagine, the inability to see family or friends from home can be especially difficult for North Korean refugees as they risk the assassination of their family for

attempting to contact them by phone, and risk their own death by attempting to return to North Korea and visit (Darusman, 2013).

My research was drawn from and contributes to literature written on refugee identity and difficulties faced by relocation (Briggs, 2011; Dow, 2011; George, 2009; Hatoss, 2012; Kinefuchi, 2010; Montgomery, 1996; Phillimore, 2011), more specifically the hardships faced by North Korean refugees (Chan & Schloenhardt, 2007; Kim, 2010; Kim, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2009; Song, 2013; Wolman, 2012) in order to gain valuable insight into the North Korean defector community in Toronto. In the field of communication, social discourse surrounding refugees and the hardships they endure is helpful for understanding how the institutions or phenomena that are presently in place contribute to the difficulties faced by refugees and the social exclusion they may experience (Cresswell, 2012; Hatoss, 2012). The testimonial discourse of the refugees themselves and their articulation of the difficulties they endure can be helpful to the overall understanding of refugee experience from a first hand perspective. Communicating these discourses has served to empower the North Korean refugee population, binding experience to social discourse (Bakhtin, 1986; Dentith, 1994; Shemak, 2010).

The goal of my research was to add to the insufficient academic scholarship that had been conducted on the topic of North Korean defectors experiences in countries other than South Korea. My goal was to allow the North Korean population to tell their story and raise awareness about the difficulties and challenges they endure while living in the city of Toronto. I achieved these goals through a visual ethnographic project that culminated in a 24 minute documentary film (See Appendix A). I conducted qualitative interviews with North Korean defectors and other prominent individuals who have in depth knowledge of the North Korean experience in Toronto.

Method

Framework:

This was an ethnographic (Murthy, 2013; Singer, 2009) research project. Singer (2009) states that although different disciplines define ethnography differently, most can agree that it is a holistic description of cultural membership. I specifically utilized visual ethnography (Levin & Re Cruz, 2008; Pink, 2007; Schembri

& Boyle, 2011) to tell the story of each research participant. My use of this method served the research in two main ways. First, visual methods, as Schembri & Boyle (2011) suggest, are a very effective means of studying social life through social practice. Viewers are able to visualize the happiness, pain, sorrow, and other emotions through watching the interview process. They were also given a glimpse into the reality of everyday life for North Korean defectors in Toronto through still images. Secondly, this research strategy emphasized the participants' frames of reference and understandings of the world (Singer, 2009). This allowed me, as the researcher to go to the data and collect it in the participants' surroundings, resulting in a credible account of their cultural experience as a defector in Toronto or a member of the community who has an intimate understanding of the North Korean experience in the city.

Method of Data Collection:

I drew upon data collected through in-person, one-on-one interviews. I focused on selecting 5-8 participants who were North Korean defectors or members of the Toronto community who were deeply involved in the North Korean community. This was a manageable number of interviews and each participant had many stories to tell. Participants were found by networking with various organizations in the city of Toronto who work with North Korean defectors.

The specific profile of the participants in this research project included defectors residing in the city of Toronto, or members of the community who possessed intimate knowledge of the North Korean defector community.

The interviews with participants were semi-structured, allowing me to ask follow-up questions. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 3 hours. They were open ended. The entirety of each interview was audio and video taped. Informed consent was obtained through a consent form and a film release form.

Ethical Conditions:

I was aware of the dangers that may have been associated with my participants being part of this project. Because the North Korean government has been known to inflict harm on those who speak out about them, it was of the utmost importance that the identity of participants be concealed (if they wished)

during the filming and interview process. Blurring and voice deepening were techniques used to conceal the identity of participants who expressed the desire to remain anonymous.

Data Analysis:

Video collected during the interview process was analysed and edited away from the site of the interview.

Creative Notes:

The video footage was used to create a short documentary film (See Appendix A) highlighting the lives of the participants and the plight of the North Korean defector population in Toronto.

Challenges and Limitations:

While attempting to find participants for this study I quickly realised that the North Korean population in Toronto was not easily accessible, nor was access to individuals who dealt directly with the community on a regular basis. I began to realise that new Canadian governmental policies put in place to prevent misrepresentation by refugee claimants were frightening the North Korean community underground or out of the country completely. This made my goal of interviewing multiple North Korean defectors in the city very difficult. I began to focus on not only gaining insight from defectors themselves, but members of the community with knowledge of both the North Korean experience overall, and the way that these policies have affected North Koreans living in the city. Although some organizations and individuals refused to speak about the policy itself or the experience of defectors in Toronto, eventually I was able to speak to enough participants to fairly represent the issues facing North Koreans in Toronto.

My research was limited to the testimony of one North Korean defector living in Toronto. That individual's story cannot be considered representative of the entire North Korean defector community and is considered to be a limitation of this research.

Recommendations for Future Research:

Scholarly research on the overall North Korean defector experience outside South Korea continues to be scarce. More research is required that focuses on the specific issues facing defectors who attempt to start a new life outside the common choice of South Korea.

In order to properly gain direct insight from the defector communities in Toronto and elsewhere, methodologies that allow for completely anonymous and bilingual (English-Korean) data collection will be required. Much of the North Korean defector population is reluctant to speak up about their experience for various reasons. Allowing respondents to divulge personal information anonymously and in their native language would result in valuable insight into their experiences.

Further research on refugee policies within Canada and throughout the world related to North Koreans would be greatly beneficial. North Korea is one of the worst refugee producing countries in the world, with a seemingly small number of countries willing to open their borders and provide them a safe home.

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Appendix A:

A link to this film will be made available within 12 months (before publication of this document)