

## Research Article

**Cultural Discourses About Immigration, Mothering, and Disability in Korea: An Ethnographic Interview Study**

MinSoo Kim-Bossard, PhD  
The College of New Jersey

**Abstract:** This paper investigates ableism in the context of marriage-labor immigration in Korea, as demonstrated in the circulating discourses about mothering, cultural others, and deficits. I use examples from ethnographic interviews to underline the deficit perspective prevalent in Korean society, associating marriage-labor immigrant families with insufficiency, inferiority, and disability.

**Keywords:** Korea; Mothering; Disability Studies in Education; Critical Disability Studies

One windy afternoon in the spring of 2015, I sat down with the director of the Munsung Multicultural Family Support Center<sup>1</sup> in a small city located in the southeast of South Korea (“Korea” hereafter), Daeyang, over a cup of tea. I had just come back from interviewing Taejun, an employee at the center. As the director and I had talked about immigrant families in the Munsung province, of which Daeyang is a part, she had shared the perceived needs of the immigrants in the community, what the center was doing to address emergent problems, and her concerns about the immigrant families. In particular, the director expressed her worries about the well-being of children from immigrant families: “There are a lot of children with immigrant parents who have tic disorder.”

With the surge of immigrants, the children from “marriage immigrant families” have become a national concern in Korea (Kang, 2010; Lim, 2010; Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006). Compared with their Korean counterparts, children from marriage immigrant families have been recognized as a source that generates new challenges for the country in and out of school settings (Kang, 2010; B. S. Kim, 2008; H.-R. Kim, 2009; S. Kim, 2009; Y. Kim, 2012; Lee, 2013; Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006).

In this paper, I investigate how cultural discourses about mothering contribute to the presumed connection between immigration and disability in contemporary Korea. Examples from the interviews I carried out with different stakeholders of immigration in Korea underline the deficit perspective prevalent in Korean society, associating marriage immigrant families with insufficiency, inferiority, and behavioral and emotional disability. The two key informants whose stories are featured in this paper are: Huong, an immigrant mother from Vietnam, and Taejun, a Korean social worker employed at the Munsung Multicultural Family Support Center.

## The Context of Immigration to Korea: Marriage-Labor Immigration and Ableism

In the shadow of migratory precedents that have characterized Korea as a sending country, Korea in the late 20th and early 21st century has witnessed a large wave of immigrants moving to the country (Bélanger, Lee, & Wang, 2010). This period is one during which a rapidly industrializing Korea needed cheap and flexible laborers and spouses who would sustain family lineages and provide a new generation of workers to compete in the global economy (Kong, Yoon, & Yu, 2010). To address such needs, the Korean government was actively involved in creating a “marriage pipeline” in the beginning of the 21st century by sponsoring international trips to look for spouses in countries such as China, Vietnam, and the Philippines, as well as by easing immigration policy to facilitate marriage immigration (Freeman, 2011). International marriages facilitated through marriage immigration accounted for less than four percent of total marriages in 2000, but surpassed eleven percent within five years (Kong et al., 2010)<sup>2</sup>. The rapidly increasing immigrant population in Korea has caused many concerns about maintaining “Koreanness,” the country’s national cultural identity. Cultural unity through nationalism was emphasized at the cost of dismissing the diversity that already existed in the nation to bring together the Korean people against the “enemy” under imperialist and colonialist regimes (Kang, 2010; Yim, 2002). Such cultural attitudes infiltrated the ways Korean people perceived, experienced, and responded to the “cultural other” (Han, 2003, p. 25).

Unfortunately, Korean culture was not an exception to a pattern that McDermott and Varenne (1996) describe: “Every culture also teaches how to notice, handle, mistreat, and remediate those who fall short” (p. 108). In particular, ethnic homogeneity and normalcy played an important role in defining postcolonial and capitalist Korea in opposition to the threats of communist ideologies and economic poverty, “bracketing off disabled, poor, feminine, perverted, and racialized Others as outsiders” (E. Kim, 2017, p. 21). For example, when “mixed-blooded” children, being born between American soldiers and Korean mothers, were offered for adoption abroad, they were classified in the same category as children with disability (E. Kim, 2010).

In this paper, I use the term “marriage-labor immigrants” hereafter to refer to marriage immigrants who moved from East and Southeast Asia to Korea as a spouse to a Korean national. This is to highlight the connection between “ableism” and the labor that marriage immigrants daily engage in as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law (Kim-Bossard, 2017). While there are different definitions of ableism and multiple levels on which it could be manifested, ableism commonly idealizes able-bodied, independent, and productive citizens in local and national communities (Goodley, 2014). Immigrant mothers in Korea are valued for their labor and productivity, as they care for family members, continue the family lineage through childbirth, and generate the future workforce for the nation. Marriage-labor immigration in Korea is highly dependent on the availability of able-bodied young women, capable of reproducing a new generation and of caring for Korean family members, to uphold

the normalizing traditional values and practices.

While what immigrants do and produce is critical to Korean society, marriage-labor immigrants are ironically portrayed as inferior to their Korean counterparts. Marriage-labor immigrants are deemed as abnormal in relation to the normalized ideals of Korean society, and as a result, the immigrants are discriminated against and considered to be “lacking.” Discursive representations of marriage-labor immigrants and their children in the media, news coverage, and government reports are rooted in a deficit perspective, blaming immigrant mothers for producing and reproducing deficits in their children (For example, see Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006). This demonstrates a different way through which ableism manifests itself in marriage-labor immigration; that is, ableism encompasses social biases against those whose bodies and actions do not confirm to the “norms,” along with subsequent beliefs and practices produced in relation to biases (Gabel, 2005).

In this sense, marriage-labor immigrants are under the influence of ableism in two different, yet intertwined ways. The immigrants become wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law and labor to fulfill the preconceived notion of productive, able-bodied members of a community. At the same time, marriage-labor immigrants are seen as deviant, inherently lacking and never capable of achieving the idealized notion of “Koreanness.” Perceived from a deficit perspective, the immigrants are constructed as an anomaly of a society that adulterates the virtue of pure Korean national identity. The immigrants come under the influence of the hegemony of normalized bodies that reproduce, maintain familial and social hierarchy, and define what it means to be “Korean,” thus delineating the “other” (Said, 1979).

### **Disability and Mothering in Korea**

In this section, I contextualize disability in Korean society and briefly discuss the ways in which mothering relates to disability, as marriage-labor immigrants enact the role of traditional mothers in Korean society. The deficit perspective on disability has been dominant in Korea, considering disability as a pathology or disease within an individual (Wu, Ashman, & Kim, 2008). Traditionally, people have believed that disability is caused by supernatural influences, wrongdoings in the past, and misfortune (Yan, Accordino, Boutin, & Wilson, 2014). These “out of control” reasons have led to people with disabilities and their family members to feel a sense of shame, despair, and alienation (Yan et al., 2014).

Moreover, the intersection between disability and mothering makes visible the marginalization of disability in Korean society. While discourses about cure and eugenics have prevailed in classical and modern Korean literature, as well as contemporary cinema and popular media, mothering has functioned as a vehicle to fulfill the societal desire to keep disability in the margins (E. Kim, 2017). The efforts to “engineer nondisability” by “not passing down disability” associated with responsibility, knowledge, and morality, putting an immense amount of pressure on mothers (E. Kim, 2017, p. 80).

Situated in this cultural context, immigrant mothers are tasked with navigating the

complex terrain of cultural discourses at the intersection of Koreanness and disability. The responsibility to reproduce and raise “proper” Korean children, or culturally Korean and able-bodied children, is not an easy one to fulfill, particularly when their language skills, cultural knowledge, and even physical characteristics are already considered to be deficient and/or inferior. The fear of children from marriage-labor immigrant families having similar “deficits” or lacking “Koreanness” resonates with the societal stance towards disability: “[In Korea] reproduction has been framed within the notions of a nondisabled mother, of mothering nondisabled newborns, of family, and of morality in ways that forbid the continued presence of disability” (E. Kim, 2017, p. 79).

Ironically, many marriage-labor immigrant women in Korea fulfill the cultural discourses as mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law in which an increasing number of Korean women are refusing to partake (Hwang, 2009; Lee, 2012). In other words, the very population frequently shunned for threatening the racial, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity of the country, by bringing in cultures of the “other,” arguably support familial, cultural, and economic systems (Kwak & Kim, 2012; Lee, 2008; Lim, 2010). It is in this complex cultural climate about immigration that I examine the prevalence of the discourse of difference, deficit, and disability in contemporary Korean society.

### **Examining Cultural Discourses of Mothering Through Disability Studies**

Examining the discourses that emerged during a series of interviews, I take the position that a discourse cannot be separated from the contexts in which it is located, reflecting “a view of the world” (Morris, 1995, p. 97). Cultural discourses circulating in Korea display the society’s values, traditions, and beliefs. In other words, as an “ideologically saturated” means people utilize to communicate with one another, discourses are always socially and contextually constructed (Morris, 1995, p. 74).

In this paper, I extend the Disability Studies in Education (DSE) and Critical Disability Studies (CDS) literature by investigating how the national cultural identity in Korea functions as a dominant cultural discourse that disenfranchises immigrant mothers and their children as “cultural others” (Han, 2003, p. 25). As a theoretical perspective, DSE helps problematize taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about immigration, mothering, and disability in Korean society. The DSE scholarship has actively challenged underlying beliefs about underrepresented groups in society, rooted in a deficit perspective, and how such assumptions have contributed to the overrepresentation of minorities in special education (Artiles, Kozleski, Waitoller, & Luckinbeal, 2011; Baglieri & Moses, 2010).

While disability, deficit, and difference are often thought to be located within individuals, the DSE scholarship highlights the roles that the cultural contexts play in perceiving, experiencing, and negotiating disparities between “the normal” and “the abnormal” (Ware, 2004). Sleeter (1987) points out how the deficit lens on minority children has persisted, even though learning disability has replaced the rhetoric of the children being “retarded, emotionally disturbed, or slow” (pp. 231–232). Similarly to a number of DSE scholars, including Baglieri and Moses (2010), and Ferri and Connor (2005), who are troubled

by the fact that children of certain races, socioeconomic standing, and gender are overrepresented in special education classroom in the contemporary United States, I find it worrisome and even disturbing to see a similar rhetoric emerging in Korea with the surge in the immigrant population.

This paper is also informed by the literature in Critical Disability Studies (CDS), which actively engages issues of “race, racism, nationalism, and globalization” in contemporary society (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 64). As Goodley (2013) articulates, CDS conceptualizes disability as the contentious site where “a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all” intersect and manifest (p. 632). The CDS lens is highly relevant to the recent demographic shifts in Korea because emergent discourses about deficit and disability, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism, reflect values and points of contention in the larger society, rather than within individuals themselves. By examining the tension between who counts as “normal” and “abnormal,” I investigate ableism in the context of marriage-labor immigration in Korea, as demonstrated in circulating discourses about mothering, cultural others, and deficits.

### **Methodological and Analytical Framework**

This paper examines accounts from two key informants collected through an ethnographic interview study carried out in Korea between 2013 and 2015. The duration of my yearly trips to Korea varied, lasting two to four weeks, and the length of my interviews steadily increased over the years, going from 45 minutes for the first interview in 2013 to several hours for the last interview in 2015. The ethnographic interviews that I carried out engaged and re-engaged informants over a period of time, and this approach allowed me to build on the interviews conducted earlier and analyze the informant accounts from a different perspective (Tobin & Hayashi, 2017). This paper focuses on my ethnographic interviews with Huong and Taejun, two of the key informants who I interviewed all three years, in the city of Daeyang.

For the ethnographic interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014, I visited Huong and Taejun at their workplace and/or met with them at places of their choosing in their neighborhoods, such as a local coffee shop. Carrying out ethnographic interviews, I asked a series of semi-structured interview questions to engage informants in the process of constructing the data, and to remain sensitive to their culture (Heyl, 2001; Spradley, 1979). I conducted the final follow up interviews in 2015 using a version of the “go-along” method to address the limitations of a sit-down interview that stemmed from the rigidity of the interview settings (Kusenbach, 2003). By accompanying the key informants at their work, walking along in their neighborhood, and sharing a meal together, I was able to engage them in emergent conversations about their memories, routines, and challenges to situated in familiar places. The interviews were conducted in Korean, and I translated the interview transcripts to English.

In the sections below, I analyze excerpts from ethnographic interviews to make

ableism visible, illustrating “Koreanness” as the norm. While neither informant in Daeyang is a representative of all marriage-labor immigrant mothers or Korean social workers in Korea, my interviews with them function as a discursive space of contention, where cultural discourses about immigration, mothering, and disability intersect with one another. As I carried out a close reading of the interviews, I used the ideas of DSE and CDS scholars articulated in the previous section to organize, interpret, and guide my analysis of ableism, thriving under the disguise of normalcy and traditions.

## Results and Discussion

### Huong as a “Lacking” Mother: Set up for Failure

Huong, currently a naturalized Korean citizen, is one of many immigrants who have moved to Korea through international marriage with a Korean man. Born and raised in a small rural town in Vietnam, she first considered getting married and moving to Korea because of her parents’ suggestion: “My mom asked me whether I would consider [marrying a Korean man].” During our first interview in 2013, Huong explained that there are many reasons why immigrants like her come to Korea. Korea was an attractive option for Huong because she thought there were many cultural similarities between Korea and Vietnam, and for that reason she thought she could transition more smoothly.

As a mother of two young children, Huong was sensitive to the challenges her children might experience at school and local communities. Being aware of how children from marriage-labor immigrant families were often marginalized, she had fears and concerns about sending her children to schools with which she was not familiar. During the interview carried out in 2014, she shared about her children’s transitions from home to school:

“But because I need to send children to school—there were no [children from marriage-labor immigrant] families in school before—but there are more nowadays. There are maybe five kids? Less than 10 kids per school ... Honestly, when it comes to children [from marriage-labor immigrant families], the moms are rather lacking, in terms of the language and the social relationships. Then I wish that people shared information so that the other side [marriage-labor immigrants] can do things [by themselves].”

As a mother, she was concerned that her children would be a “minority” at school and how this might influence their school experiences. Identifying her children as different from their peers and calling immigrant mothers like herself “lacking,” Huong positioned her children and herself within the deficit perspective prevalent in Korean society. While she adhered to the cultural discourse that put her and her children in a vulnerable position, she aspired to become more independent by avoiding relying on available help from various resources. Still, her words implied that immigrants could not easily do things on their own without the help of Korean people, regardless of how much the immigrants’ labor is valued in households, local communities, and society.

As Huong partook in the deficit perspective to explain herself as a mother and the ways she related to her children, Huong as an immigrant mother was fully aware of how she was being perceived as a “lacking” mother, not as competent as a Korean mother in the local and national communities (Kim, N. H.-J., 2009). In the cultural context within which she was situated, what she brought with her as an immigrant was not acknowledged as valuable.

Here, it is important to clarify that Koreanness is not necessarily a static set of qualities people possess. Rather, it is a relational tool that positions people through normalcy rooted in customary practices. This is demonstrated in how Korean people are not guaranteed to be fully “Korean.” For instance, Korean women who refuse to accept the traditional values that ask them to embody the ideals of mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law are labeled as too liberal and progressive, making them inadequate vessels to continue Korean traditions and values on familial and national levels (Hwang, 2009; Lee, 2012). Yet, in the context of marriage-labor immigrant families, Koreanness is used as a means to degrade them into an inferior position.

The lack of “Koreanness” of immigrant mothers was constructed as an obstacle that keeps them from becoming competent mothers, regardless of the significance and the intensity of the labor they perform. The 2006 report by the Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources, *Educational Support for Children from Multicultural Backgrounds*, provides one reason why children with immigrant mothers may not speak Korean fluently: their mothers “lack in these abilities” (p. 6). As this example demonstrates, immigrant mothers in Korea are put in the difficult position of being held responsible for their children’s language education, specifically for the Korean language. This task is undeniably challenging because immigrant mothers are expected to teach their children Korean, which for them is a foreign language. Consequently, this expectation within a Korean cultural context positions immigrant parents as “insufficient mothers” and leads them to “prove themselves” as inadequate.

While Huong was specific in pointing out how immigrant mothers are lacking in “language and social relationship,” it is also questionable whether “lacking” immigrant mothers are ever capable of becoming “good enough” through their own efforts. Should or can Huong embrace Korean ways to the extent that she is perceived as “Korean enough”? As an immigrant mother who falls short of expectations and was in need of “improving herself,” Huong was set up to pursue a difficult path to fulfill familial and cultural needs.

### **The Responsibility of Korean Mothers: Educational Opportunities and Language Skills**

The interviews with Taejun, a Korean social worker working for the Munsung Multicultural Family Support Center in Daeyang, Korea, highlighted some of the conflicting discourses in Korean society that link “lacking” immigrant mothers (and their mothering) with the various levels of deficits in their children. In particular, the perceived cycle of immigrant “others” passing on and/or producing deficit through inadequate mothering was demonstrated in Taejun’s discussion of the Korean government’s recent interest in promoting bilingualism in marriage-labor immigrant families during the 2015 interview.

According to Taejun, raising children from marriage-labor immigrant families in a bilingual home environment was being increasingly recognized as a necessity in Korea. Nevertheless, circulating cultural discourses that positioned immigrant mothers as the source of the inadequate “Koreanness” of their children made it challenging for the mothers to teach their children the language(s) of their home country. For instance, the wife of Taejun’s cousin, an immigrant woman from Vietnam, was encouraged by Taejun, with some reluctance, to teach the child Vietnamese at home, but she was hesitant to do so. Taejun thought that this was the case because the blame would be placed on her if the child was not fluent in Korean:

“My nephew [the child of Taejun’s cousin] is Vietnamese. [The mother] is an immigrant woman. So I told my cousin’s wife in passing, ‘I think it would be okay if kids use Vietnamese starting when they are young,’ without being convinced about it myself. ... If the child does not speak Korean well enough, my cousin’s wife would take the responsibility since the mother is Vietnamese. So [immigrant parents] have a tendency to mother using their broken Korean.”

Taejun shared that his cousin’s wife and other immigrant mothers were sensitive to the pressure that was put on them by Korean society regarding their children’s language skills. As a Korean man, Taejun also implied that he was fully aware of this pressure by pointing out how he could not strongly encourage his cousin’s wife and how he was not so sure about what he was recommending. While Taejun first identified his cousin’s child as Vietnamese, because the mother is from Vietnam, he ultimately confirmed that the child needed to speak good Korean in order for the Vietnamese mother to be recognized as a “good enough” mother.

Here, I would like to emphasize that it is neither my purpose nor intention to criticize Taejun for partaking in a discourse that points to challenges and difficulties immigrant mothers face as they navigate their lifeworlds in Korea. Rather, under the assumption that cultural discourses are constantly recycled and recirculated (Morris, 1995; Tobin, 2000), my goal is to articulate the multiplicities of discourses that complicate and contradict one another in the context of rapidly transforming demographics in Korea. Taejun’s words, coming from the perspective of a Korean man, a father, and one of the few male employees at the center, are valuable because they help materialize a cultural discourse about what is expected of mothers in Korea. I interpret Taejun to be denoting the significance that Korean culture places on the role of mothers in facilitating their children’s educational opportunities, as well as the subsequent expectations that immigrant mothers do the same.

In the case of Taejun’s cousin’s family, the cultural discourse that privileged “Koreanness” is not only a hindrance for their child becoming bi or multi-lingual, but it also functions as a mechanism to blame the mother. It is important to take into consideration how a child’s performance is used to measure how “good” a mother is in Korean culture (You & McGraw, 2011), and language competency is a part of the performance. What immigrant mothers are navigating is the ableist power dynamics that emphasize the societal need for the productive labor of immigrant mothers.



## ADHD, Autism, Behavioral and Emotional Disability as a Label

During a series of interviews with Taejun, a number of cultural discourses about work and mothering were brought up that endorsed a deficit perspective on immigrant parents and their children in Korean society. Going beyond exploring the contended space between “Korean” and “multicultural,” these emergent discourses attributed the children’s deficit to their immigrant mothers. Specifically, the discourses pointed to working immigrant mothers.

As an experienced social worker, Taejun understood the struggles many immigrants were facing, acknowledging that immigrant parents were under pressure to work and provide for not only their immediate family, but also their parents back at home. He added that the immigrants were also concerned about saving up enough for the future because many of their spouses were older than them and would retire when their children were still young. Still, it was difficult for Taejun to understand how some immigrant mothers would prioritize work over their children. He interpreted the situations of immigrant mothers working and not being able to spend enough time with their children using diagnostic language:

“During this time when children are sensitive and need love, the mothers work over time until late at night, because the money is big ... Then there is no mother’s care, even though mothers are the primary caregivers. Then children are disturbed emotionally, and there are children who are autistic, even though they don’t have autism. What is it called? ADHD? There are children who can’t concentrate. My nephew [whose mother is Vietnamese] has some tendency toward that. So, I don’t think that’s a normal environment for raising children...”

While it is debatable what he meant by a “normal environment,” Taejun was clear in saying that mothers play a key role as primary caregivers. As Taejun described what he had observed in children from immigrant families using various diagnoses, including autism and ADHD, he implied a strong causal relationship between the deficits found in children and immigrant mothers’ time away from home. Taejun’s words suggested that emotionally disturbed children and children with learning disabilities were produced by working immigrant mothers. In particular, I interpreted his comment about “autistic children who don’t have autism” as reflecting how he grappled with the gap between what he observed and the circulating label of autism to describe children’s behaviors. While contemplating various factors that could contribute to the reasons why the children act in certain ways, I sensed that something was amiss when certainty about the “diagnosis” or “what the children have” is problematized.

In this example, the discourse of mothering that promotes traditional beliefs and practices in Korean society resurfaced as a point of contention, in relation to how the immigrant mothers pursue work opportunities. The tension that came from discourses about working immigrant mothers were based on patriarchal and hierarchical values embedded in Confucian beliefs, advocating for a traditional view on mothers and wives (Kim, Chang, & Kim, 2008; Yoo, 2006). In other words, the traditional Korean discourse about a particular type of mothering was being forced on immigrant women, even though more and more Korean women were refusing to conform to them (Constable, 2009; Hwang, 2009; S. Kim,

2009; Lee, 2012).

Positioned as “interfering” or “competing” with raising children, the economic activity of immigrant parents, particularly mothers, is seen as dangerous and even detrimental to a child’s upbringing. Framed as a dichotomous choice, working immigrant mothers are positioned as “bad” mothers who are not making wise decisions for their children. Taejun’s words led me to consider what it could mean if all children with working mothers suffer from or obtain deficits or disabilities.

Unfortunately, putting the blame on immigrant mothers for their children’s acquired “learning disabilities” was a disturbingly familiar discourse. For instance, the Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources (2006), as well as Cho (2006) and Kang (2010), correlate immigrant parents’ lack of Korean language skills with their children’s slow and below-average language development, as I discussed briefly in an earlier section. In particular, *Educational Support for Children from Multicultural Backgrounds*, a 2006 document from the Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources, associated low academic performance, emotional disturbance and learning disabilities with language development:

“Children from women immigrants tend to have a disadvantage in Korean language development and adaptation, as their early years are spent with mothers who also lack in these abilities. Naturally many students experience difficulties in keeping up with school studies, suffer from excessive emotional negativism, and even show signs of violence and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)” (Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources, 2006, p. 6).

This example illustrates cultural assumptions and attitudes in Korean society towards mothers, especially immigrant mothers. By specifically referring to the influence of immigrant mothers on their children’s language skills, socialization, academic achievements, emotional and behavioral tendencies, the example assumes that mothers have a stronger impact on their children than other family members, the local community, and the media. This means that it is easy for immigrant mothers to be criticized and targeted for their children’s perceived shortcomings. The immigrant mothers, whose family’s financial needs require them to work, are particularly in a contentious space on the verge of being “bad” mothers as they struggle with their childcare responsibilities.

At the same time, immigrant mothers who spend time with their children at home are ironically blamed for passing their deficits onto the children. The earlier excerpt from *Educational Support for Children from Multicultural Backgrounds* (2006) points out how children from marriage-labor immigrant families are in a disadvantaged position “as their early years are spent with mothers who also lack in these abilities” (p. 6). This logic overgeneralizes the influence of immigrant parents on children and the ways children respond to external influences. Being seen as inadequate and negligent mothers, marriage-labor immigrants negotiate their position on a daily basis.

## Conclusion and Reflection

I opened this paper with a short account of my encounter with a director of an immigrant family support center who expressed deep concerns about the well-being of children from marriage-labor immigrant families in Korea, specifically in regards to assumed deficits in the children. The cultural discourse that associates deficits with marriage-labor immigration and mothering practices prevails not only among social workers who work closely with immigrant families but also in media, government reports, and scholarly literature about the demographic transformation in contemporary Korea (for example, see Cho, 2011; Y. Kim, 2012; Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development, 2006). This discourse, exemplified by what emerged in my interviews with Huong and Taejun, blames immigrant mothers for failing to fulfill “Korean” beliefs and practices in mothering through a sense of hierarchy between Korean people and newcomers. In this context, even Huong, as a marriage-labor immigrant parent, participated in the discourse, ascribing a version of a deficit perspective onto herself and her children.

In this paper, I propose alternative ways of perceiving, relating to, and interacting with immigrant parents and their children in Korea by examining complexities and contradictions made visible at the intersections of immigration, disability, and mothering. By analyzing emergent accounts through the lens informed by DSE and CDS scholars, I investigate the role an ableist perspective plays in both facilitating immigration and marginalizing the immigrant population in Korea, bringing attention to the power dynamics between the “Korean” and the “others.” I further argue that such a perspective does not take into consideration the role played by cultural values and customs, disregarding assumptions ingrained in a discursive landscape of local and national communities.

The findings from this study suggest tentative, but significant implications that make visible the tension between what counts as successful mothering in Korea and the cultural discourse that blames immigrant mothers for their own and their children’s deficits. As a starting point, more attention needs to be paid to the role immigrant mothers play in local and national communities, recognizing the ways in which ableism manifests itself through marriage-labor immigration. Immigration to Korea functions as a site where many taken-for-granted beliefs and practices are contested in the midst of the nation’s rapidly transforming demographics. As a result, immigrant mothers are caught in the middle of efforts to maintain a Korean cultural identity, which pressures them to assimilate to and perform the “Korean” way at the expense of their own experience and knowledge in mothering (Bélanger et al., 2010; Kang, 2010). What immigrant mothers are actually expected to do, then, is not simply accept and fulfill the role of “a good mother,” but confirm and fulfill pre-existing cultural norms that meet the needs of Korean society.

Moreover, the findings can be interpreted as a basis for challenging the prevalent causal logic between immigrant mothering and deficit. As demonstrated in the earlier sections, immigrant mothers are, ironically, held responsible for both not spending enough time with their children and for passing down their deficits to their children by spending time

with them. This contradiction reveals not only the complexities of circulating cultural discourses of mothering, with which immigrant mothers grapple on a daily basis, but also how they are positioned to carry out a task in which they cannot be successful. If challenges that immigrant mothers face in raising their children are recognized and contextualized further, the simple assumption of immigrant mothering as a cause of their children's deficit could be overcome through a consideration of multiple factors that influence the children from marriage-labor immigrant families.

The demographic landscape in Korea is transforming rapidly, yet prevalent preconceptions about immigration, cultural values, and mothering practices continue to marginalize marriage-labor immigrants and their families in Korea as cultural "others." In an attempt to articulate an emergent issue in Korean society, this paper is a call to further examine the intersection of immigration and disability through cultural discourses on mothering.

**MinSoo Kim-Bossard** received her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction (Early Childhood Education) and Comparative and International Education from The Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Kim-Bossard's research and teaching combines the fields of educational anthropology, Reconceptualist scholarship in early childhood education, and studio-based pedagogical practices borrowed from art education. Prior to joining The College of New Jersey as an Assistant Professor, she was a preschool teacher and art educator in Pennsylvania.

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## Endnotes

1. To ensure confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for all the names of people, institutions, and demographic regions in this paper.
2. In addition to marriage immigration, a number of immigrants moved to Korea to find employment. The low birth rate in the country, as well as the shortage of labor for low-end jobs in the manufacturing, construction, fishery, and service industries, produced a need for low-wage immigrant laborers who were in search of better paying jobs (Kong et al., 2010). As a result, in 2007, 60% of the entire foreign population in Korea consisted of labor immigrants (Kong et al., 2010).

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