"I Needed to Get Out of My Korean Bubble": An Ethnographic Account of Korean American Collegians Juggling Diversity in a Religious Context

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This ethnographic account highlights four Korean American students deciding between participating in a racially diverse campus fellowship versus an ethnically homogeneous group. Despite religious convictions about the importance of diversity, students experienced tensions between their ideals concerning diversity and the difficulty of actually implementing such values. Findings show how religion can mediate how students make sense of race relations and campus diversity. Implications for cross-racial interaction and the campus climate for diversity are discussed.

Multiple studies herald the benefits of student engagement with racial diversity and cross-racial interaction during the college years. Such benefits include enhanced critical thinking and interest in civic affairs (Antonio et al. 2004; Chang et al. 2004). Because students often attend racially homogeneous high schools, engaging with racial diversity during college can prepare students for citizenship in a diverse democracy. Despite research affirming the benefits of engaging with diversity, certain social enclaves of campus life, such as fraternities and sororities, tend to be more racially isolated (Sidanius et al. 2004).

Research on Christian student organizations, known as "campus fellowships," suggests that these groups also tend to be racially homogeneous regardless of whether or not they explicitly cater to a specific population (see Bramadat 2000; Kim 2006; Magolda and Ebben-Gross 2009). When religion comes to campus, it is shaped not only by existing campus racial dynamics, but also the legacy of racial divides in U.S. Protestant Christianity, where fewer than 10 percent of churches are racially heterogeneous (Emerson and Chai-Kim 2003). In this vein of inquiry, sociologists and anthropologists have examined the phenomena of Korean American participation in Korean American or Asian American campus fellowships, as opposed to multiethnic environments (Abelmann 2009; Kim 2000; Kim 2006; Park 2004). However, few studies to date have closely examined Korean Americans, let alone students of any ethnicity, while they are deciding whether to commit to a multiethnic environment versus an ethnically homogeneous environment: a transitional, yet critical, phase. The time at the crossroads between diversity and homogeneity may be brief, but this critical juncture in students' decision-making could benefit from close, ethnographic research on how college students negotiate values, beliefs, and actions around cross-racial interaction.

Korean Americans are a prime subgroup among whom to study the more subtle tensions and hesitations that students of all races may have around engaging with diversity. Unlike whites, they can verbalize a desire for wanting to be with fellow Korean Americans without the fear of being called racist, although they may be seen as isolationist. They may be more willing to acknowledge that race is visible and relevant in their lives because of landmark events such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots that are strong symbols of racialization and marginalization (Kim 2008). Thus, this ethnographic study examines Korean American collegians who were involved in KORE, a Korean American bible study
within the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) at California University (CU). KORE’s purpose was to support Korean American students as they became engaged with the diversity of the broader multiethnic, multiracial IVCF community. I highlight the stories of four KORE students who were previously involved in Korean American campus fellowships but who joined KORE because of their desire to become involved with IVCF. I examine their experiences and attitudes regarding intraethnic and cross-racial interaction to understand why and how some students join multiethnic environments while others eventually choose more homogeneous communities.

Literature Review

I begin by explaining the interconnections between ethnicity and religion in Korean American culture and identity. I then examine studies on Korean Americans in campus fellowships to understand why students often seek ethnically homogeneous religious communities on campus, and how they address the tension between the universalist values of their faith and their ethnically specific practice of it.

Linkages between Faith and Ethnicity for Korean Americans

Race and ethnicity are key concepts in this article; I refer frequently to students’ strong sense of ethnicity, but also note their hesitance to cross racial boundaries. Race and ethnicity are commonly referred to as “social constructs,” meaning that characteristics commonly associated with racial/ethnic groups are not a matter of biological determinism (Omi and Winant 1994). Race is not just a status that is held or observed, but it is also “a technique that one exercises” (Biolsi 2004:400). Borrowing Bilosi’s phrasing, in this article I also conceptualize “ethnicity” as a “technique that one exercises,” meaning that it is particularly salient when exercised, recognized, and cultivated by an individual or a group. Ethnicity is not always something exercised by conscious choice; ethnic salience or categorizations can operate at a more subconscious level and be imposed by outsiders (Bentley 1987). However, for the purpose of this article I am more interested in how Korean American students are exercising, understanding, and negotiating their sense of ethnicity within a religious context.

Historically, Christianity has been an integral part of how many Korean Americans exercise ethnicity and ethnic boundaries. Since the advent of Korean immigration to the United States in 1903, Korean American churches have played a vital civic role by preserving, cultivating, and transmitting a shared sense of ethnicity among Korean Americans (Min 1992; Yoo 2010). The social networks that churches incubated played a key role in the overseas resistance to Japanese imperialism (Yoo 2010). A telling joke goes, wherever Chinese are, they open a restaurant; wherever Koreans are, they open a church. Korean American immigrant churches continue to play a hybrid role as both spiritual center and social support hub, helping immigrants transition into American life (Min 1992). Churches nurture networks and relationships that transmit information and resources around education and business (Lew 2006). They pass on Korean culture by hosting language schools and cultural events. While not all Korean Americans attend church, there is no other civic organization that plays as large a role in the Korean American community. As both ethnicity and religion are practiced within the same site, they become intertwined for many (Chong 1998).

Because of trends in immigration, most Korean American students currently attending college are second generation Korean Americans: U.S.-born children of immigrants or those who immigrated as young children. A sizable segment can be classified as “1.5,” having immigrated during adolescence. While many second and 1.5-generation Korean
Americans grow up attending Korean churches with their immigrant parents, their attendance in Korean American and Asian American campus fellowships solidifies the relationship between their ethnicity and practice of Christianity into the college years (Abelmann 2009; Kim 2006). These groups actually work as sites for Korean American students to develop “emergent ethnicity,” a process through which various ethnic groups create and assert manifestations of ethnicity and its continuing salience in the United States (Kim 2006).

Ethnic-Specific Campus Fellowships: How and Why?

The existence of ethnic-specific fellowships for second generation Korean Americans seems counterintuitive for students who grew up in the United States, are native English speakers, and attend racially diverse institutions, unlike their immigrant parents, who had little option but to form their own churches. Challenging the notion that ethnicity holds little meaningful value for second generation Americans (Gans 1979), scholars have examined how Korean American college students express and negotiate the relevance of ethnicity in their lives in the environment of ethnic-specific campus fellowships (e.g., Abelmann and Lan 2008; Kim 2000; Park 2004). I focus on Kim (2006) and Abelmann’s (2009) studies of Korean American students because they are among the most comprehensive. In her study of a large, public West Coast institution with over a dozen Korean American campus fellowships, Kim (2006) identified three processes that contributed to the formation of Korean American fellowships as sites for Korean American collegians to develop and exercise emergent ethnicity. Each process combines individual and structural factors. First, the desire for community and a sense of belonging interacts with the racial/ethnic demography of college campuses. Because many college campuses have critical masses of Korean American students, these students can fulfill their desire for community by socializing mainly with peers of the same ethnicity. Second, the term homophily explains how people with similar backgrounds tend to attract people with similar backgrounds (McPherson et al. 2001). Homophily interacts with imposed racial–ethnic categorizations, where individuals often look for similarity and shared experiences with those from the same ethnicity. Third, because of their marginalization from the university and broader society, Korean American students often seek out venues where they can have majority status and exercise leadership, making ethnic-specific campus fellowships attractive to them.

While Kim identified these dynamics through closely studying students in a variety of different campus fellowship environments (e.g., fellowships that catered more to the “1.5” generation versus those that were more “Americanized”), Abelmann’s (2009) study foregrounds the role of an uncaring and alienating university environment during the late 1990s and early 2000s to explain why Korean American students felt limited and unsatisfied with their college experiences. Students flocked to a Korean American campus church for reasons similar to students in Kim (2006). Many of the students profiled by Abelmann (2009) idealized the “liberal university” experience, which they saw as being defined by diversity, independent thinking, and personal transformation during the college years. Most students saw this vision as being at odds with the close-knit, homogeneous Korean American (and, by default, Korean American Christian) community at the institution and thus felt constrained by the ethnic community. Concurrently, Abelmann contended that the university was unresponsive to students’ needs, which gave many Korean American students little choice but to cluster in ethnoreligious or ethnic subcultures, with little engagement in other spheres of university life.

Abelmann’s study reveals how many Korean American students, like students from all backgrounds, arrive at college with certain expectations and ideals about diversity, only to
find that the prevalence of ethnic-specific student environments is a double-edged sword. These communities provide students with a sense of belonging and a home away from home. However, the comfort that they provide can also inhibit students from crossing racial divides. Overall, Abelmans and Kim’s work contextualizes the crossroads that my students faced as they grappled with their ideals around diversity while acknowledging that crossing racial lines was difficult. The vast majority of their coethnic peers chose ethnic-specific faith communities for reasons like the students in Kim’s (2006) work, yet like the students that Abelmans (2009) profiled, my participants held “liberal dreams” about college as a time to experience diversity. As I will explain in more detail, they looked to IVCF and KORE as venues to help them engage in a more diverse community while receiving support and encouragement from fellow Korean Americans.

Christian Universalism and Ethnic-Specific Faith Communities

How do Korean American Christian students deal with the tension between their faith, which is supposed to be universal, and their ethnic-specific practice of it? The Christian Bible (hereafter “Bible”) challenges racial exclusivity and ethnocentrism: Matthew 28:19 commands Christians to “make disciples of all nations” and Galatians 3:28 states “there is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for all are one in Christ Jesus.” Christian universalism does not necessarily reject ethnic identity, although some Christians support a colorblind ideology (Emerson and Smith 2000). However, ethnic-specific religious communities and Christian universalism clash when such ethnic-specific communities are perceived as exclusionary or ethnocentric. While Korean American churches have worked to build bridges with other communities of color following events like the Los Angeles riots, “churches as institutions have been found to hyperethnicize Koreans to the point where group boundaries become difficult to cross, enabling prejudice to ripen” (Kim 2008:133).

How do students gathering in Korean American campus fellowships address this apparent contradiction? In past studies, students generally recognized some contradiction between the universalism of their faith and their ethnically separatist practice of it, but not all students saw it as exceptionally problematic (Kim 2006; Park 2004). Still, by and large, these students saw racial diversity as a positive and desirable outcome supported by the Bible, although some leaders in Kim’s (2006) study noted that ethnic-specific ministries could effectively reach students who would not be attracted to a multiethnic ministry. Students in Kim’s (2006) work recognized a pragmatic tension with ethnic-specific groups. They highly valued evangelism, but felt uncomfortable inviting non-Asian Americans to their group. Some campus fellowships even removed “Korean” from their group names in efforts to attract more diversity.

In Park’s (2004) study, Korean American students felt that Christianity transcended race and spoke positively about diversity, yet they felt resigned to the status quo of Christian students dividing by race. Park (2004) calls these mixed feelings “sociological ambivalence” regarding diversity. Students in Kim’s (2006) work negotiated the contradiction by reasoning that students of other races could attend other campus fellowships. Some students used their evangelical Christian beliefs in the sinfulness of humankind to justify their hesitation to leave the ethnic comfort zone with, as Kim observed: “Given the ‘sinful’ and ‘fallen’ nature of man, Evangelicals are not surprised that people have little trouble dealing with the apparent contradictions between their religious beliefs and religious practice” (2006:137).

Certainly, Korean Americans are not the only group that struggles with this tension, but they are more likely to grapple with it because of their visible racialization as a minority. It is telling that there is little, if any, anxiety or ambivalence around ethnic separatism exhibited by whites in the studies of predominantly or entirely white campus fellowships
However, the dilemma is more apparent for Korean Americans and other Asian Americans whose ethnic or racial separatism is more visible in a society that takes white self-segregation for granted (Emerson and Smith 2000).

**Theoretical Foundations**

I now turn to a discussion of theoretical perspectives that further contextualize the dilemma between ethnic separatism and religious universalism for Korean Americans. I draw on two sets of theories to enrich understanding of why some Korean American college students are drawn to multiethnic religious environments, as well as why most appear to join campus fellowships that are ethnically homogeneous. First, Allport’s (1954) work on conditions that facilitate interracial interaction provides a foundation for why some students might pursue racial diversity during college. Among the conditions are institutional support for diversity, equal status, and “pursuit of the common goal,” that is, the idea that gathering around a common goal helps individuals of different races bridge differences. I propose that a religiously based “common goal” provides a powerful rationale and motivation for students, Korean American and otherwise, to desire diversity and to seek to bridge racial divides, particularly in religious community. Because the Bible generally portrays diversity in a highly positive light (for instance, the idea that heaven will contain people from “all tribes and tongues”), students could presumably desire and pursue diversity in their campus religious communities.

However, social forces such as demography, homophily, and the desire for a sense of belonging contribute to the formation of ethnically homogeneous student subcultures like Korean American campus fellowships (Kim 2000; Kim 2006). Kim’s (2006) framework of emergent ethnicity, explained earlier in this article, provides a second theoretical lens to understand the competing pull of ethnically homogeneous campus fellowships. As detailed in the literature review, because of their experiences in immigrant Korean churches, Korean American students often already see ethnic and religious identities and practices intertwined even prior to college, adding to the likelihood that they will seek out Korean American campus fellowships that function in a similar manner.

These two theories suggest ways that religion can mediate ethnicity or how ethnicity can mediate religious practice. Allport’s (1954) work shows the possibility of how religion can provide a powerful motivation to bridge racial divides, moving one from seeing ethnicity as a boundary that separates oneself from others to viewing ethnicity as still salient, yet not exclusive; while Kim’s work (2006) points to how practicing religion in an ethnic-specific community can reinforce ethnic distinctions, tightening ethno-religious identity. My analysis examines how students negotiated competing desires between a faith that bridges racial–ethnic divides and their strong desire to be in community with peers of the same ethnicity.

**Methods**

*Site Context and Description*

Findings come from an ethnographic case study looking at racial dynamics in a multiethnic, multiracial campus fellowship, the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) at California University (CU). IVCF at CU was a predominantly white group for decades, but beginning in the early and mid 1990s, students and staff took intentional steps to diversify the fellowship and make racial reconciliation and multiethnic core values of the group. In a document, IVCF staff used the following definition for racial reconciliation: “People of
different races forging relationships based on repentance, forgiveness, justice and love in order to address, heal and redeem the effects of personal and systemic race-based sin” (Tomikawa and Schaupp 2001:3). By the end of the 1990s, IVCF was a racially heterogeneous organization and by far the most diverse campus fellowship at CU, where most other fellowships were predominantly or completely white or Asian American in composition. With the passing of a statewide anti-affirmative action ordinance, Proposition 209, black and Latino/a enrollments dwindled at CU, and IVCF created ethnic-specific small groups to support underrepresented minority students.

It was in this context that KORE, a Korean American small group, started for a population that was not underrepresented at CU. In Fall 2007, Asian American students were the largest racial group at CU, composing 38 percent of the undergraduate student body in Fall 2007. Korean American students made up about 6 percent of undergraduates and 15.4 percent of the Asian American population at CU. Despite the large number of Korean American Christians at CU, in 2003, a student noticed that few Korean American students participated in IVCF. Believing that Korean Americans could both contribute to and learn from the diversity of IVCF, he formed KORE as a support group to encourage Korean American students to stay engaged with the broader IVCF multiethnic community while giving them a venue to experience some same-ethnicity community. While some students had mixed and even negative associations with being Korean American, others had seldom reflected on ethnic identity prior to college. However, the racial diversity of IVCF made them more conscious of how their experiences differed from those of other students, and they processed these observations in KORE.

Methods and Analysis

I spent nine months with KORE as a participant observer from October 2007 to June 2008. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork during KORE’s weekly bible studies, IVCF events, and informal times of hanging out, oftentimes over meals. I would jot down notes during events and then write a fuller, detailed field note as immediately as possible after each observation. I conducted semi-structured and informal interviews, and received permission to audio-record bible study during discussions that focused on the topic of race. In my analysis, I highlight four members of KORE who joined the group for the primary purpose of wanting to interact more with non-Koreans: Phil, Tommy, Sophia, and Minyong. (All names are pseudonyms.) I focus on these four because they were “on the fence” about whether the multiethnic nature of IVCF was for them. They were also the most consistent attendees, besides the two leaders of the group. By exploring their stories and experiences, including their participation in bible studies that KORE leaders used to communicate values around racial reconciliation and diversity, I shed light on their journeys of negotiating issues of diversity and faith. To enhance trustworthiness, all participants received the opportunity to review the draft manuscript and provide feedback, which was then incorporated into the final manuscript. Data collection and analysis took place in a dialogic fashion where I wrote preliminary analyses and interpretations of what was going on throughout fieldwork, as well as at key points throughout the course of the study when I wanted to synthesize broader themes, patterns, and hunches. After data collection was completed in June 2007, I developed a coding scheme based on patterns that I identified as reoccurring or distinctive in the data corpus. I then proceeded to code all field notes and interview transcripts. Using thick description (Geertz 1973), I wrote three vignettes based on field notes and transcripts of times when participants discussed issues of race—a Christmas party and two bible studies.
Role of the Researcher and Gaining Access

As a Korean American researcher, my ethnic identity was both an asset and a limitation during fieldwork. Studying Korean American students was actually not my original intention; I originally sought permission to shadow LaFe, the Latino/a small group at IVCF. The student leaders politely turned down my request; they faced some challenges that term and understandably, an outsider’s presence would feel intrusive. Because the black and South Asian American small groups were on hiatus, that left me with KORE. Fortunately the group was open to me to shadowing their community and our shared ethnic status likely facilitated their willingness to accommodate me.

Besides a common ethnic identity, I also shared a religious identity with participants. My familiarity with Korean American religious practices at times limited my ability to question the community’s taken for granted assumptions of everyday life, as ethnographers seek to do. As such, my study focused more on problematizing KORE students’ varying attitudes toward race, ethnicity, and diversity and less so with interrogating their religious beliefs, except in relation to issues of race and diversity. Still, my identity certainly shaped my observations and attempts to make sense of what was going on in KORE, and I grappled with how different facets of my identity influenced my perceptions of the group. For instance, as an educator, I felt regretful at the end of the study when some students decided to go back to Korean American campus fellowships, but as a fellow Korean American who was worshipping in a predominantly Asian American church at the time, I could understand why some students chose to go back to mono-racial environments. The final manuscript reflects my efforts to be critical, yet empathetic of students’ actions, while most importantly trying to shed light into how KORE students made sense of their world. Certain differences between KORE students and myself in age and life stage helped me maintain some critical distance. My own identity as a Korean American who grew up in the Midwest certainly differed from the KORE students, most of whom grew up in Southern California and identified more strongly with what we dubbed “Korean Korean” culture than I did. For instance, most of them were bilingual, while I spoke very limited Korean.3

Findings

In this section I introduce the members of KORE, focusing on four participants who were at a crossroads of deciding between staying in KORE/IVCF or going back to Korean American Christian organizations. I outline their attitudes on the challenges of engaging with racial diversity and their motivations for wanting it in their lives. I also showcase two vignettes of bible studies where students grappled with issues of diversity.

In Search of Diversity: Four Seekers

The number of students attending the weekly KORE small group meetings fluctuated, but six to eight students consistently attended. The leaders of KORE were Nancy and Jonathan, two seniors; their vision largely shaped the group’s direction. Both Nancy and Jonathan attended Korean American and Asian American campus fellowships during their first year of college and then joined IVCF and KORE. Both identified with IVCF’s commitment to racial reconciliation: Nancy had a number of close interracial friendships, and Jonathan mentioned that the weekly IVCF leaders’ meetings had expanded his social network from just Asian Americans to a more diverse group. Like Nancy and Jonathan, the four students that I focused on were all involved with Korean American campus groups before deciding to try IVCF and KORE. They stood at a crossroads between ethnic-specific
and multiethnic community; while they all generally attended KORE on a regular basis, they varied in the degree to which they felt comfortable in the greater IVCF community.

Minyong was a sophomore with a loud, infectious laugh. A confessed shoe addict, she always had on a different pair of bright colored sneakers. During her first year of college she joined Soul, a very small Korean campus fellowship. She first thought about joining IVCF after filling out a card with her contact information at an IVCF informational table. She was the webmaster for the biggest Korean cultural group on campus and kept us up to date the entire year on the progress of Korean Culture Night where she was playing poong’mul, a type of traditional Korean drumming. Sophia, also a sophomore, was involved in Korean Campus Mission (KCM), one of the Korean American campus fellowships, her first year but then started attending KORE and occasionally IVCF later on. She continued to bounce between the KCM and KORE/IVCF. She was loud, comical, and often the center of attention during meetings. Fluent in Korean, she identified strongly with Korean culture. Phil, a fourth-year student, was one of Jonathan’s roommates. Coming from a heavily Korean American high school and church background, he found it natural to attend a Korean campus fellowship but started checking out KORE and IVCF later on in college. Every weekend, he drove an hour to his home church to help with the youth group. Finally, Tommy was a tall, spiky haired, affable third-year student who was always practicing his Japanese phrases. He bounced between KCM and IVCF when he was a first-year student. When I asked him what made him settle in IVCF despite adamantly expressing that KCM felt much more comfortable, he responded simply: “I felt called.” He attended a Korean church about 30 minutes from campus on weekends.

Awkwardness, Parents, and a Desire for Diversity

One night in December, KORE had a Christmas gathering. Over cookies and cocoa, the conversation turned to the ever-present question of “Why are Koreans like that?” “That” referred to any number of traits that the students associated with being Korean, but the most common topic was why Koreans liked to stick together. They were all adamant that Koreans felt most at home with other Koreans, and after all, over a dozen campus fellowships at CU catered to Korean American or Asian Americans. When I asked them what it was like to attend IVCF large group gatherings, Tommy responded: “Very awkward.” Phil admitted: “I’d say I still feel a little uncomfortable, but I haven’t gone this quarter.” He laughed before correcting himself: “Well I’ve gone twice this quarter.” The Nutcracker suite played in the background and as Nancy went off to take some cookies out of the oven, I tried to probe them further: “Is it the awkwardness that you might feel going to any new place? Because sometimes just going to a new place can be hard.” “That’s part of it,” Phil conceded. I asked Phil to elaborate; he responded:

I come from a city which is, I’m not even kidding, 80% Asian. Coming to CU I’m like, “Where are all the Asians at?” It’s like 40-something Asian here, but 40% compared to 70–80%, I’m just like oh man. So I felt a little off the first year. . . . Being from a high school that was predominantly Asian, being with people of other races was something that I needed to get used to.

Having grown up in the Midwest, I marveled at the prospect of attending a high school that was 70 to 80 percent Asian! CU felt like it had a huge Asian population to me, but I tried to understand Phil’s perspective. I turned to Sophia, who had nodded earlier when Tommy said that attending IVCF felt awkward, and asked her why the group felt odd to her. As she decorated a Christmas card, she explained:

I think it’s weird because when I was growing up in elementary school I went to a diverse private Christian school but it wasn’t until junior high or high school that I went to a more predominantly
Korean school, so I think that it was just a different social setting. I guess coming back to a diverse setting is kind of awkward because most of my growing up was definitely like a Korean setting so to be in a different setting; that felt awkward. But I mean, I think it’s also awkward because I’m very Korean (laughs). I want to say that I’m more Korean, like I know my language; I know my culture, you know? And a lot of Koreans now, this generation, they don’t know it.

Phil nodded vigorously as she spoke. She continued:

They don’t even know the language; they suck at Korean. So yeah it was kind of awkward in the beginning, only because of how I grew up. And I think why Koreans go to a lot of Korean ministries is because Koreans, they’re really used to jung [i.e., Korean term for togetherness] this attachment. I realize like most normal people, they’re not like that and stuff but then Koreans even though you don’t like them, you don’t like each other, they stay. I feel like it’s their own skin kind of. Just because they’re Korean, it’s kind of complicated.

Embedded in these comments are background, culture, and language. Both Phil and Sophia spent much of their lives in predominantly Asian American or Korean educational settings. While Sophia grew up in a diverse elementary school, spending her adolescence in Korean-dominated settings made it difficult to transition back into multiethnic social settings during college. Sophia also expressed that IVCF’s diversity challenged her because she identified so strongly as Korean on a cultural level, and she referred to her Korean-speaking ability to distinguish herself from Korean Americans who had weaker ties to their heritage. Noting the term jung, she brought up the idea that Koreans would socialize with each other even if they did not like each other. Although hard to define in English terms, Choi and Choi (1990) listed four properties of jung: duration, togetherness, warmth, and solidarity. The term refers to a sense of togetherness or attachment that is highly valued by Koreans. Coincidentally but tellingly, the campus-wide Korean Culture Night show held later in the year was titled “Jung,” underscoring its role in Korean culture. In Sophia’s observations, the affinity of Koreans for socializing with fellow Koreans outweighed the preferences, likes, and dislikes that ordered social relations among “most normal people.”

Students also attributed their hesitation to engage across race to their parents’ influence. Phil suggested that many Koreans have a certain amount of fear when it comes to other races and the unknown. He elaborated:

Speaking from a more historical perspective, Korea is like one ethnic group . . . so I think Koreans are just afraid of other races in general. Like if my parents talk and stuff and [if] they see a black person, they get a little scared you know. Part of it I think is the ’92 LA riots, part of it is just fear of anything outside of Korean. And most of our parents’ generation had that sort of mentality and I think it gets passed on to us whether we know it or not.

In response, I asked, “So you think those parental views affect their kids in that way, how they see—” but Phil interrupted: “I know I’ve been affected, I don’t like to think that but I know I am.” In his comments Phil emphasized the homogeneity of Korea to contend that its relative insularity, combined with traumatic events like the 1992 Los Angeles riots, contributed to a fear or suspicion of the unknown within the Korean immigrant population. Over time, Korean parents passed on their fear to their children.

Given the many options for Korean American students to join Korean American campus fellowships, and KORE students’ admission that IVCF felt rather uncomfortable for them at times, I was curious to know why they had ventured outside of their comfort zones to join IVCF. Students identified two motivations: wanting to break out of a “Korean bubble” and a religiously based rationale. I asked: “So if you’re used to being around lots of Korean people and there are lots of Korean fellowships at CU, why aren’t you in a Korean fellowship?” Phil responded: “I was at one point, sort of, but . . .” Someone interrupted: “Which one?” He said:
CCM. [A Korean American fellowship] I tried going out to KCM but I dunno, even though I wanted to go to those places I knew that I needed to get out of my Korean bubble so I guess that’s why I started coming out to InterVarsity in the first place. Because I figured that all of my Korean stuff I get when I go back home I go to a Korean church and Korean fellowship-wise I get most of that at my home church and I was going to try to be a little more diverse in my encounters, that was my plan my second year. Yeah that’s my biggest reason for coming out to InterVarsity.

Jonathan added:

I’m the kind of person that likes new experiences, now that I’m comfortable with a cross-cultural environment just like everyone is different and I feel that there’s a bigger variety of experiences to draw from and that really appeals to me. . .I think if I just stayed in a Korean fellowship or wherever Korean people I’d feel isolated from the real world; the real world is not really like that.

Jonathan summed up the appeal of being in a diverse community, and joining IVCF seemed to be a deliberate step toward this vision for Phil. Even when he wanted to stay with Koreans, the broader ideal of a diverse community provoked him to leave the comfort of Korean fellowships. Also, he was not leaving Korean community altogether; he still attended a Korean church.

Religious motivations were another reason why KORE students affiliated with IVCF despite their discomfort. Sophia revealed her main reason for joining IVCF:

I grew up in a very conservative Korean church so I never thought that God loves the white people. I just thought that God loves the people in my church and God loves the other Korean Christians, I never thought of it in a broader perspective I guess, the bigger picture. It was very narrow minded how I thought all Christians are like Korean and it’s pretty exaggerated, like I’m not saying that I’ve never met a non-Korean Christian, but I didn’t meet that many. I think what really captivated me into this ministry was that it focuses on connecting everyone through God so I think that’s pretty amazing in itself that you can connect people from all over the place.

In other interviews, IVCF students commented on how the fellowship’s racial diversity paralleled their conceptions of heaven being a place for all people. Similarly, Sophia liked how IVCF sought to connect “everyone through God.”

Following Sophia, Phil laughed: “I think part of it is the jung that Sophia is talking about; I’ve kind of grown attached to KORE.” For all of the attachment that KORE members felt for each other, did they develop this same jung for IVCF and for non-Koreans? Even with their vision and ideals around multiethnic community, these four students stood out to me because they struggled to integrate into the larger IVCF community. In joining KORE, these students signaled some sort of desire to engage with the diversity of IVCF, but they also struggled to make the transition to the broader IVCF community. The following section discusses how KORE leaders tried to encourage members to step out of their comfort zones and cross racial lines.

**Working through Race: Examples from Two Bible Studies**

During the early days of my KORE fieldwork, there were no formally scheduled discussions about the issue of race. However, starting in the new year, student leaders decided to address race and diversity more directly. Almost every week’s meeting incorporated analysis of bible passages grappling with ethnicity or culture. In this section I
present two instances when race and ethnicity were the primary foci of the KORE meetings. In this vignette, I highlight how KORE leaders used a bible study to assert that Christians are called to cross ethnic boundaries:

After dinner, Nancy passes around clipboards, pens, and paper. She instructs: “Okay, I’m going to ask you to get into small groups to answer these questions. Number one. How do you feel when you see a crowd of Asians sitting together on campus?” Minyong interjects: “Like on Oldham steps?” The room bursts out laughing—I think that’s a common point of reference: I instantly visualized the large group of Asians who often occupied the area during the lunchtime. “Number two. How do you feel in a crowd of people who are ethnically different from you? Do you play down or emphasize your ethnic identity? Number three. How do you feel when your parents speak in their native tongue around people who don’t understand? Number four. How do you feel about Asian ethnic-specific fellowships?” Nancy asks us to share with a partner. The room buzzes with conversation until she brings everyone back together: “So today we’re going to see what the Bible has to say about multi-ethnicity.”

Nancy distributes sheets with the text of Genesis 11:1–8 on them and we begin asking questions about the Tower of Babel. In the passage, people united to build a tower to reach the heavens, but their plans were thwarted and God scattered the people. Also, they could not understand one another because they began to speak different languages. In contrast to the earlier discussions, there’s a lot of silence during the actual bible study. People slowly raise a few questions about the passage: “In verse four, it says they didn’t want to be scattered but they ended up scattered anyway. Why?” “In verse six, if God didn’t stop them, could they have built the tower to heaven?” “Why did God confuse the languages?” Nancy responds happily: “These are good questions! They’re the same ones that I’d have so yeah, God is definitely here.”

As we start to answer these questions, it seems like we’re going around in circles. Why did God scatter the people? Why did they want to build the tower? I’ve heard this passage preached many times, or heard it taught as a parable. Minyong offers a common explanation that I had heard my entire life during sermons: They were punished because they tried to go to heaven without God and also because of their pride in wanting to make a name for themselves. “Why would they scatter?” Nancy presses us. “Or why did they fear scattering?” “Maybe they were reproducing really fast,” Tommy offers and the room bursts into laughter. “That’s good!” Nancy comments with delight. “Okay, hear this from Gen 1:28. ‘Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air.’ “ “I mean, no one wants to be separated,” Minyong reasons.

Even though my presentation of the discussion may make it seem like a quick sequence of answers, it was slow and deliberate. The entire bible study took over two hours. Sometimes it felt like Nancy was pulling proverbial teeth probing for answers. The students appear engaged, but it is clear that we still haven’t given her the answer that she is looking for.

I think we’ve nearly exhausted Nancy’s patience. “So in terms of why they didn’t want to scatter and why that was bad... let me reread Gen 1:28. It says that God told them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the WHOLE EARTH. But in 11:4, it says that they didn’t want to scatter” [Genesis 11:4 reads, “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.’”]. Everyone exclaims: “OHHHHH!!!” “I get it!!!” “Trick question,” someone jokes. Suddenly the link to KORE and the earlier questions about Asians sticking together on campus is apparent. Genesis tells the story of one race that did not want to scatter, despite God’s command for them to fill the whole earth. As a result, after the Tower of Babel, God caused the many racial groups (or ethno-linguistic communities) to scatter. Nancy uses the story to explain why as Koreans, the students have to “scatter,” if not across the entire earth, at least on the CU campus. “They were like, ‘Let’s settle here.’ If they didn’t scatter, what would have happened?” Nancy asks. Phil suggests: “We wouldn’t be as diverse?” Jonathan plays devil’s advocate: “Is that bad? It’s not like you don’t grow, even if everyone is the same.” Nancy replies, “They were trying to stay in the same area, not spread out like God told them to. It was direct disobedience. God had mercy by coming down and intervening. If he hadn’t, we’d all be dead.” Following that grave statement, she smiled sweetly at us, which struck me as funny. She explains: “Back then if you sinned, you died. But now we have redemption through Jesus. Scattering us was God’s way of having mercy on us.”

Nancy continues: “I know sometimes you see hostility between different cultures... I mean, not so much at CU, but it’s just not common to see Asians with other cultures! It’s something to think about, how comfortable you feel, how you grew up. How is God challenging you about racial reconciliation and cross-cultural friendships? Or maybe it’s your ethnic identity, maybe you need to reconcile within your own culture... like with Koreans, sometimes it can be either an extreme patriotism versus a self-hatred type of thing. Yeah. Anyway, just think about those things... how is God speaking to you or challenging you in those areas?” Nancy asks attendees to share their own experiences with issues of race. Minyong offers an account of how she was trying to expand her circle beyond Koreans: “It feels really warm and safe, being with Koreans. At the same time, I felt like I got trapped in this bubble, like sucked into my comfort zone, but I got...[ lines cut off on next page]
Jonathan adds: “So our vision is to seek God’s plan beyond the bounds of culture, to be more outwardly focused in ministry. I mean, we’re all Koreans but we’re in this bigger multiethnic fellowship. As part of it, I think we should lean more towards being with diverse ethnicities. That’s our focus and vision for the quarter.” As a way to apply today’s lesson, we all pick countries and are supposed to bring in something and share during our next meeting. Tommy enthusiastically picks Mexico: “La Raza!” It feels funny to hear that coming from a Korean guy. Nancy mentions that you can also look at how that country’s immigrants are dealing in America and pray over them. We discuss plans to eat dinner with LaFe, the Latino/a small group. The group begins to disband; it is late. Right before she leaves the apartment, Minyong yells: “Nancy, you have to take me to large group!” Despite large group still being “reaaaaally” uncomfortable for Minyong, she is still giving it a chance. [Field notes, January 16, 2008]

That night Nancy presented a biblical rationale against excessive ethnic clustering through the Tower of Babel story. The people had been commanded earlier in the book of Genesis to “fill the whole earth” (Genesis 1:28) but then the people who built the Tower of Babel did not want to “scatter.” As a result, God had to thwart their attempts to stay in one place, resulting in the dissemination of different languages and cultures. While we took two hours to figure out why God scattered the people after the Tower of Babel, there was little discussion of Nancy’s key point once she unveiled the answer that she desired. This lack of follow-up discussion may have been because the students were tired, but nobody disagreed with her conclusion. Everyone seemed to be on the same page; the entire room appeared to have a collective a-ha moment when she presented her interpretation of the text—that God scattered the people for not following the mandate to fill the whole earth.

By beginning and ending the study with students’ personal experiences regarding ethnic clustering, Nancy coaxed them to see parallels between their own lives and the Tower of Babel. While not everyone present may have viewed ethnic clustering as a uniformly negative behavior, all of the students present expressed interest in being part of a more diverse community, even if they were not active in the greater IVCF body. In that way, the bible study and its message that God actually punished one example of ethnic clustering confirmed that their attempts to leave the Korean comfort zone were steps in the right direction, even if such attempts were not always successful. Minyong’s comments revealed the inner-conflict that most of these students felt—a strong affinity for being in majority Korean environments, but a desire to change and not be “sucked” into a comfort zone.

While the students did not indicate any disagreement with the vision of multi-ethnicity that Nancy presented, another discussion during a bible study opened the door for differing opinions. That night, Nancy distributed papers with the words from the second chapter of the book of James, which denounces favoritism and preferential treatment toward the rich. Everyone sat in silence as we read jotted down observations from the passage. My account of the rest of the bible study is as follows:

The students list their observations. “Favoritism is compared to discrimination,” Minyong states. Tommy points out the emphasis on not mistreating the poor. There’s some confusion and disagreement about whether the rich are somehow worse than the poor, or if James is actually showing extra favoritism to the poor. Tommy argues against favoritism towards the rich: “When you’re showing favoritism, you’re straight out breaking the law ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ So it’s like one, you’re breaking the law and two, you won’t get anything out of it by sucking up to the rich.”

He continues, tying the conversation to race without any prompting: “It doesn’t seem like favoritism is that big of a deal. But I went to a predominantly Latino school and honestly in middle school, I just didn’t like Mexicans. They straight up jacked us. And then especially our parents, they’re straight up racist, and we learn it from them. But [James] says, when you see favoritism, that’s like similar to murder. [He is referring to a verse from the passage, ‘But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.’] So don’t treat it lightly.” This is the most I have ever seen Tommy talk in a bible study; he is usually pretty quiet.
Jonathan probes the students on how favoritism is prevalent in the Korean church and students share anecdotes of their own experiences seeing certain groups of people being favored in the church. Sophia brings up the role of human limitations: “As humans we should be dependent on God but we depend on people . . . because we don’t depend on God, we depend on the next best thing. But it’s hard, because I always play favorites! And not just with money.” Tommy responds in a half joking, but also half serious tone: “God sees it as murder.” Sophia quickly retorts: “God needs to CHILL!!.” The students burst into laughter.

Sophia continues: “Even Korean Americans show favoritism towards other Korean Americans. I know we’re supposed to embrace differences, but if I have to choose one weekend hanging out with Koreans or non-Koreans, I’ll pick Koreans because it’s just more comfortable.” The room was quiet. Nancy stepped in to diffuse the slight tension, humorous as it was. The discussion soon came to a close with Nancy giving a short commentary on how as the future of the Korean American church, KORE members needed to be conscious about stepping outside of racial and ethnic boundaries in the church. [Field notes, February 12, 2008]

The passage from James sparked discussion that showed that KORE students felt differently about their personal capacities to cross ethnic boundaries. Tommy applied the passage, about not showing favoritism to the rich, to argue against ethnic favoritism. He was forthright about how his negative interactions with Mexican Americans growing up and his parents’ racism influenced him. After all, racial favoritism was part of everyday life. Yet he saw the passage, which ends by saying that all sin is equally serious, as equating such favoritism with murder. He was resolute in rejecting this form of ethnocentrism.

Sophia responded initially by joking off the gravity of the scenario that Tommy proposed (“God needs to CHILL!!”) but then admitted that socializing with Koreans was simply more comfortable for her. In this context, the word favoritism from the bible passage that sparked the discussion became especially fitting. While KORE students had experienced discrimination themselves in certain settings, they were less inclined to respond by actively discriminating against other racial/ethnic groups. Instead the temptation was to favor other Korean Americans, preferring their company to other races or even ethnicities. Nancy regrouped the KORE members, challenging them to reach out across ethnic lines as the future leaders of the Korean American church. KORE members responded differently to her challenge. While no students challenged the bible study on the Tower of Babel that Nancy used to explain why Korean American students needed to branch out across ethnic lines, this time there were signs of dissension on whether they could realistically apply the lesson to their own lives.

By this time, about a month after Nancy’s bible study on the Tower of Babel, I sensed a growing sense of resignation among some KORE members like Sophia around whether they could really find a home in IVCF. About half of the members had stopped attending IVCF large group meetings altogether. Why willingly put yourself in an uncomfortable situation when there were a multitude of comfortable settings readily available in Korean American or Asian American campus fellowships? At the same time, Tommy was becoming more involved in IVCF. He was now a regular at the IVCF weekly large group meetings and become involved in the team of students who set up the audio equipment before the meetings.

Four Seekers, Two Paths: KORE Students at the End of the Year

The KORE students chose different paths by the end of the year. During the winter and spring months, Phil experienced a spiritual crisis, expressing some doubts about his faith and also constant academics worries. He first took a break from serving at his home church and then stopped attending altogether, attending churches closer to the CU campus on the weekends, some of which were multiethnic. By the end of the year he seemed less anxious, and participated in the end of the year senior showcase sponsored by IVCF seniors.

During the last quarter of the year Tommy joined the worship team as a keyboardist. The team had three Korean American students, two black students, and one white
student; he told me how the team constantly discussed how to make worship culturally accessible. He attended a spring break trip with LaFe, the IVCF Latino/a small group, to learn more about immigration issues at the U.S.–Mexican border. As a junior, he lived in a cluster of apartments that was known for being populated by almost all Koreans, but he chose to live in an apartment with IVCF members for his upcoming senior year. Even though they were all Asian American, he felt that it would be a big change for him. He also became a leader in the IVCF ministry that supported students living in the off-campus apartments.

Sophia consistently attended KORE until the end of the year but decided to accept a leadership position in KCM for the following year. The big Korean Culture Night show kept Minyong busy and we rarely saw her spring quarter; she even spent spring break on campus to practice for the performance. Eventually she started going to KCM on a more regular basis. Toward the end of the year we met up for breakfast and she shared some of her reasons for leaving KORE and IVCF. Part of it was logistics and scheduling, but then she expressed how she never felt at home at IVCF large group:

The reason why I didn’t go to InterVarsity is . . . I always felt really uncomfortable when I did come out because I didn’t have any friends and stuff. I already knew a lot of people in KCM because a lot of them had done Korean Culture Night, and so then they helped me meet a lot of people in KCM, whereas in InterVarsity I always clung onto Nancy and I felt more like a tagalong than like someone who could become a member or something.

Minyong never felt independently comfortable at IVCF. In contrast to Tommy, she did not join any of the IVCF teams that did the behind-the-scenes work and because she joined KORE and not a small group based in a residence hall, she had little opportunity to befriend IVCF members outside of KORE. However, the peers that she befriended through Korean Culture Night enabled her to find a community more quickly at KCM. She explained the group’s appeal:

Another thing I like about KCM is, I don’t know if it’s the best thing, but yeah, it’s part of my comfort zone. Like everyone there is Korean and all of them are Korean American and so we have similar backgrounds and that helps for interactions because I feel like I don’t have to explain myself when I do certain things, like mannerisms and stuff. It reminds me of my youth group, which is Korean American . . . you know, you can tell your stupid Korean jokes and people laugh and stuff and you can refer to your parents as ohma and ahpa [Korean words for mom and dad]. I think it’s those little things that I start to take note of when I’m not with Korean people and I feel myself having to control my words so I don’t slip and say ohma instead of mom or something.

While she noted that she did not know if it was “the best thing” to be in her comfort zone, having a shared experience with other Korean Americans appealed to her. Recalling Minyong’s earlier testimony about her desire to leave her comfort zone, I wondered how she reconciled the comfort she felt in the Korean community at CU with her ideals around challenging herself. I found an implicit answer in her other comments on what she liked about KCM:

I never felt challenged by the messages at InterVarsity, but at KCM, these speakers, they say things that I wouldn’t hear at church. I guess the biggest thing to me is that it challenges me and it forces me to think critically about my faith and it doesn’t just keep me in the shallow end of the pool I guess. KCM, so it stands for Korean Campus Missions because their biggest thing is short-term summer missions, so they focus a lot on missions and a lot of the messages are about making disciples of all the nations and stuff and that’s something I never really considered or never thought that I would do. Like I said, I’m always challenged and so I feel like maybe I should do it next summer and stuff. Every Friday, they do EV, which is like evangelism and I’ve never gone with them, but then they have little testimonies sometimes during general meeting; I’m impressed by how much that they do as students.
While the diversity of IVCF challenged Minyong, she stated that she never felt challenged by the messages delivered at weekly large group meetings. In contrast, the challenges presented by KCM speakers and KCM’s focus on evangelism and missions excited her. While being with fellow Koreans might be one comfort zone, she was still being challenged in other ways to take risks, perhaps assuaging her worries that she was not challenging herself enough. KCM still made Minyong think “critically” about her faith, preventing her from wading in the “shallow end of the pool” and giving her a justification to leave IVCF.

Discussion

Overall, findings present some of the tensions that students grappled with as they considered whether crossing racial boundaries was a non-negotiable aspect of their faith or not. This study uniquely contributes to the research on racial diversity in higher education by showcasing students at a transitional point between deciding to invest in an ethnic-specific versus multiethnic community, and the complexities and contradictions inherent in such a decision. It also shows how different components of students’ identities can influence how they make meaning of the world around them (Abes et al. 2007). In this case, religion mediated students’ sense of ethnic identity, as well as their understandings of racial diversity. For Tommy and Phil, KORE supported them while they took tentative, and then more confident steps toward joining the multiethnic IVCF community, while Sophia and Minyong decided to return to Korean American campus fellowships. Present throughout the narrative is the difficulty of choosing challenge over comfort when it comes to diversity. KORE leaders did their best to situate diversity and crossing ethnic boundaries in the context of the Bible, and both Sophia and Minyong found IVCF’s diversity attractive. Still, even more powerful was the sense of belonging that the students associated with same-ethnicity community.

This finding does not suggest that ethnicity is merely primordial, based in gut feelings or an innate sense of affiliation. Instead, the contexts of life experience (forces that shape a collective sense of memory and experiences such as patterns of immigration, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and residential or school demography) shaped the sense of belonging that they associated with all-Korean environments and simultaneously, their latent or more explicit hesitation to cross racial boundaries. Phil commented on how the Los Angeles riots influenced his parents’ fear of black people, and numerous scholars have commented on tensions between black and Korean residents and merchants (see, e.g., Kim 2008; Park 1996). Lee (1996) also documented cases where Korean immigrant parents discouraged their children from associating with Southeast Asian Americans. In this study, second generation Korean American participants were less likely to attribute their hesitation to cross racial boundaries to out-group hostility than they were to in-group preference. Interestingly, Minyong and Sophia, who rejoined KCM, both explained their affinity for fellow Korean Americans as an issue of comfort (“I’ll pick Koreans because it’s just more comfortable.” “It feels really warm and safe, being with Koreans.”) while Phil and Tommy, who stayed with IVCF, were more upfront about their past prejudice toward other minorities who were racially distinct from them (“I just didn’t like Mexicans. They straight up jacked us.”)

Race and ethnicity have a complicated relationship in this narrative. Students mainly used ethnicity as a frame of reference to explain what felt familiar and comfortable to them. The way they exercised ethnicity influenced this dynamic, such as Minyong’s example of how she liked being about to make Korean jokes at KCM without having to explain herself. These ethnic boundaries were reinforced by their participation in ethnoreligious environments prior to college. However, it was IVCF’s racial, not ethnic, diversity
that was most novel and challenging to students. Ironically, Tommy and Phil’s willingness to acknowledge their racial prejudice may have influenced their decisions to stay in IVCF. They had a problem—residual racial animus—and IVCF’s diverse community offered a solution, a chance to build relationships across race. In contrast, Minyong and Sophia did not openly admit to any racial prejudice; instead, they asserted their preference for their own ethnicity. Their problem was possibly not problematic enough, or at least they did not acknowledge it as such. They wanted to leave their comfort zones and try new things, but as Minyong showed, Korean groups could also offer ways for students to leave their comfort zones (i.e., missions) without leaving the safety of the ethnic community. Their “problem” of ethnic affinity–exclusivism was problematic, but not problematic enough to make them to leave the ethno-religious community.

Tommy did not see his racial prejudice as just a problem; he saw it in religious terms—as *sin*. Contrasting Tommy’s interpretation of sin with students from Kim’s (2006) study provides insight into how different students use religion to frame the problem of racial divisions. As mentioned earlier, Phil and Tommy openly admitted that they had harbored negative feelings toward other racial minorities. Tommy framed such prejudice as sin, comparing racial prejudice to the class prejudice condemned in the book of James. In doing so, he felt convicted to reject and condemn his prior racism and ethnic favoritism in general. In contrast, in Kim’s (2006) sample, Korean American students also used religious discourse to label racial prejudice and ethnocentrism as sin. However, instead of condemning such behavior as unacceptable, they framed it as regrettable but basically inevitable because of the fallen nature of humankind. The distinction is subtle but significant, reflecting two approaches to understanding the weightiness and ramifications of sin. Perhaps Tommy’s explicit confession of harboring animosity toward Mexicans in the past compelled him to reject ethnocentrism more definitively. To use religious jargon, he seemed more “convinced” about addressing ethnocentrism as a serious sin, instead of shrugging it off as inevitable and an acceptable part of human nature. There is no way to make a causal link between Tommy’s comments and his later decisions to invest in interracial community, but the contrast between these two responses to framing ethnocentrism as sin illuminates different ways that religious frameworks for understanding human behavior potentially influence individuals’ perceptions of social problems and their subsequent behavior.

Overall, findings include cases where religion mediated students’ understanding of ethnicity or decision to cross racial–ethnic boundaries (Phil and Tommy) as well as examples where ethnicity and an affinity for same-ethnicity community mediated students’ choices for religious community (Minyong and Sophia). The two arenas are not totally exclusive, but advance our understanding of how the frameworks developed by Allport (1954) and Kim (2006) illuminate students’ willingness or reluctance to cross racial boundaries. Reflecting Allport’s work on how the pursuit of common goals can facilitate interracial interaction, the current study shows how for a minority of students, a religious rationale for diversity can challenge them to cross racial boundaries. In search of a more diverse college experience, students joined KORE in hopes of being able to transition into IVCF. They saw the multiethnic, multiracial community as being consistent with Christian values and beliefs. However, my findings also show that while religion can be a powerful starting point for students to explore the possibility of leaving an ethnically homogeneous comfort zone, religion will not automatically motivate someone to abandon more comfortable options.

To compete with the pull of homophily, multiethnic communities have to foster a strong sense of belonging and togetherness, or as Koreans might put it, a sense of *jung*. Jung is a socially constructed influence, one that could possibly be recreated with peers of different race–ethnicities under certain conditions. Phil and Tommy established a faith-based *jung*
in IVCF as they made social ties that connected them to the community. Tommy became more involved with IVCF by working with other students on the audio set up team, and he eventually became more comfortable in the community. Shared experiences like retreats and summer projects also fostered tighter social bonds across racial lines for IVCF students as they pursued a common goal of advancing their faith as college students.

I should note that crossing racial/ethnic lines is not simply a matter of one’s willingness to stick it out in an environment that might initially be uncomfortable. Such decisions are imbedded in multiple social contexts and structural dimensions, including but not limited to campus demography and the campus racial climate. Being part of the largest racial group on campus was both advantageous and detrimental to Korean American students’ ability to cross racial boundaries. Their demographic status was a privilege in that even when they crossed racial/ethnic boundaries by joining IVCF, there were other social or academic settings where they could be part of the majority group. On the other hand, the structural conditions of CU could also work to discourage cross-racial interaction for Korean Americans, given that a lack of racial heterogeneity in a student body is associated with significantly lower levels of cross-racial interaction (Chang et al. 2004). CU’s unbalanced racial demography, in part a ramification of anti-affirmative action legislation, did little to counteract the abundance of opportunities for Korean American students to surround themselves with coethnic peers. Thus while the current article focuses on individual students’ sense making processes around committing to racially homogeneous or heterogeneous communities, it is important to remember that such decisions are situated in various structural dimensions.

Conclusion and Implications

Overall, the KORE story reveals several implications for higher education institutions. First, KORE affirms that there can be value in creating opportunities for peers of the same race/ethnicity to congregate apart from multiethnic community, even when they are part of the majority racial/ethnic group. Giving students space and time for reflection and discussion can provide rich opportunities for learning and personal development. KORE provided a critical touch point for Korean American students to reflect on their ethnic identities as well as process the new experience of being in a multiethnic community. The group was a stepping-stone to the larger multiethnic IVCF community for Phil and Tommy, allowing them to have the benefits of both monoethnic and multiethnic community. It also eased some of the culture shock as students transitioned from practicing their religion only amidst coethnic peers to being involved in a racially diverse community. Giving students space to process in same-race–ethnicity groups within broader multiethnic communities is especially important because of how multiethnic communities can make differences more salient. KORE students told me how they felt like proverbial fish out of water attending IVCF, and the group’s diversity made them realize parts of their culture and upbringing that they had taken for granted. In a similar way, during fieldwork I encountered white students who participated in an IVCF bible study that discussed a book on white ethnic identity, Being White (Harris and Schaupp 2004). This group and KORE are examples of how mono-ethnic sub-communities can constructively facilitate dialogue about race. Relatedly, throughout this article I have referred to the issue of crossing racial boundaries or racial divides. The nature of the word crossing implies a linear process where someone goes from one side to another (from ethnic homogeneity to ethnic diversity, for instance), and the term is useful to describe KORE students, who were specifically interested in trying to participate in a multiethnic, multiracial community of IVCF. Still, the process may be more multifaceted than the term suggests. Findings indicate that when students do engage in racially diverse environments, they may balance such engagement with participation in more homoge-
neous environments. Tommy attended IVCF, but he also attended a Korean American church on the weekend with another Korean American IVCF student who was not a part of KORE. Further research can examine how some students juggle participation in multiple subcultures inside and outside of the university, and the implications of their experiences on their understandings of race and diversity.

Findings also show how advocates for racial diversity can use religion as a starting point to engage certain students of all races around issues of diversity and race. Emerson and Smith (2000) argue that the colorblind philosophy advanced by white evangelical Christians is a key impediment to advancing a societal understanding of race. This is an example of how religion could hinder efforts to encourage students to think critically about race, but as KORE students show, religious values can also be a powerful way to spark discussion on race and facilitate reflection on ethnicity. In KORE, I saw students who probably would not have taken an Ethnic Studies class or attend a workshop on diversity embrace discussions on race when they were linked to the context of faith. These dialogues are not limited to Christianity, and educators should explore how diverse religious and spiritual perspectives might be able to embody Allport’s (1954) conceptualization of how working toward common goals, religious or otherwise, can spur cooperation and dialogue across racial difference.

Finally, the students in this study illuminate the tension that students experience between their ideal of diversity and the reality that monoethnic options often feel more comfortable. Findings point to the need to foster a strong sense of belonging within diverse subcultures of the university to counteract the strong pull of homophily. Most students never explicitly acknowledge the oft disconnect between their espoused value for diversity and actual patterns of social relations, and educators could challenge students to reflect critically on their actual engagement with diversity during the college years. Educators can also challenge students to understand how their participation in mono-ethnic or multiethnic subcultures of the university are more than a matter of personal preference, encouraging them to examine the structural and political conditions that contribute to the socially constructed feelings of jung that students, Korean American and otherwise, may take for granted.

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Notes

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1. Korean Americans use the term Sa-i-gu to refer to April 29, 1992, the riots that broke out in the aftermath of the acquittal of officers involved in the Rodney King beating. An estimated 2,000 Korean-owned businesses were destroyed.

2. I use the term Christian universalism to describe how Christianity is a “universal” faith that is open to all racial/ethnic groups.

3. Still, I know that I harbored my own assumptions and biases of what “Koreans” were like. I delighted in times when these stereotypes were challenged. One time during a discussion on interracial friendships, a Korean student who immigrated during high school was present. He was not a frequent attendee, and in my mind I silently dismissed him, not expecting him to have anything to contribute to the conversation. To my surprise, he spoke poignantly about his friendships with Armenian students during high school and how they opened his eyes to the Armenian genocide.

4. These same options did not exist for black and Latino/a students at CU, and there were different costs for these students to consider as they decided whether or not to join IVCF (Park in press).
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