

NORTH KOREAN WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS LEARNING FROM FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

Migrants' workplace experiences in their host society shape their social adjustment, yet *how* migrants learn from failures is under-investigated. This study examined how North Korean migrants in South Korea sought to learn from failures in their workplaces and everyday life. The paper draws on nine months of ethnographic research in South Korean social enterprises (restaurants, cafes) that employ North Korean migrants. Data sources include informal conversations and loosely structured interviews with five purposefully selected women who started, or planned to start, their own enterprise. The findings revealed that migrants experienced failure in five inter-related spheres: financial, relational, physical, psychological, and professional. Participants developed perspectives to understand failure as an integral part of learning in a new society and adopting unfamiliar role expectations and responsibilities. They also applied knowledge from their failures to change their approach to their career and strengthen their personal and business capacity to obtain a legitimate social position. Paradoxically, failures that were beyond their control, such as legal problems, created opportunities to receive practical support from, and increase trust in, South Koreans. These findings contribute to adult education scholarship on migrants' situated learning in their host societies and challenge the discourse that portrays North Korean defectors as deficient.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, Migration studies, North Korean defectors, North Korean migrants, Workplace learning

INTRODUCTION

Migrants' workplace experiences in their host society shape their social adjustment, yet *how* migrants learn from failures is under-investigated. Due to linguistic, cultural, political, and economic differences between sending and receiving countries, failure is an inherent aspect of migrants' learning. In particular, migrants are likely to experience failure in their current or previous workplaces, sites where they are likely to interact with host citizens. Migrants, however, can use failure to understand how they can (or cannot) change their thinking, behavior, and adaptation strategies. Learning from failure is especially crucial for migrants who are or aspire to be entrepreneurs, since starting a business is a risky endeavor. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore how five North Korean women migrants in South Korea sought to learn from failures in their workplaces and everyday life.

RELEVANT LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Some migration scholars (e.g., De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015; Wang & Fan, 2006) have criticized simplistic views that categorize migrants' adjustment as either integration in the host society (winners) or return migration (losers). These scholars call for research on the heterogeneity of migration experiences and perspectives, focusing on individual and contextual factors that facilitate or hinder adjustment beyond the success-failure dichotomy.

Learning from failure has been examined by scholars and practitioners in leadership and business management, career and organizational studies, and entrepreneurship. These

studies suggest that not every failure promotes learning; rather, certain conditions such as personal characteristics and emotional regulation are needed to catalyze learning (Bennett & Snyder, 2017; Fang He, Sirén, Singh, Solomon, & von Krogh, 2018). This paper draws upon entrepreneurship literature that emphasizes how coping with multiple failures can engender deep learning both about oneself, including core assumptions, and one's business (Cope, 2011; Shepherd, 2003).

We also build on the few studies that have investigated North Korean migrants who have transitioned from communist to capitalist economies (e.g., Jung, Dalton, & Willis, 2018; Lankov, & Kim, 2014). Findings from these studies suggest that North Korean women used their skills as housewives (e.g., selling household items, sewing) and advanced their entrepreneurial pursuits in the informal market through trial and error.

Second, this paper uses situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to identify migrants' learning as a social practice that begins through legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), or being a newcomer on the periphery. LLP refers to the development of knowledge and identity that can be reproduced through participation in a community of practice (CoP) and, in turn, transform CoP. Before arriving in South Korea, North Korean women have engaged in informal market economies for personal and family survival from their position on the margins of North Korean and Chinese societies (Jung, Dalton, & Willis, 2018). Through participation in illegal and informal markets, they develop new knowledge and skills to expand their business, such as ability to understand supply-demand, market trends, and profitability. This paper examines the learning process and outcomes when North Korean women migrants participate in businesses where they have limited access and are at the periphery of cultural acceptance due to lack of sociocultural and business knowledge, discrimination, or other factors. In such instances, they encounter various kinds of failures as a consequence of participating in social activities.

METHODOLOGY

This paper address the following questions: (1) How have North Korean migrants in South Korea experienced failure in the workplace and their lives? (2) How do they conceptualize and articulate their failures? (3) What and how do migrants learn in response to their failure experiences? The study is based on nine months of ethnographic research (Fetterman, 2010; Wolcott, 2008) in South Korean service industry workplaces (e.g., restaurants and cafes) that employ North Korean migrants. The study took place in a large city and included five workplaces. They were all social enterprises, which means that they aimed to provide opportunities for North Koreans to integrate into South Korean society.

This paper focuses on five purposefully selected women who started, or planned to start, their own enterprise. Data sources for this paper include informal conversations and loosely structured interviews (Patton, 2015). The interviews covered topics like failure due to differences between North and South Korea, which allowed me to elicit participants' own views and definitions of failure. Depending on the participant, they referred explicitly to failure and/or used related terms (e.g., liquidation, bankruptcy, falling down, betrayal, hitting bottom). Descriptive phenomenological analysis was used to examine how participants forged meaning structures (Giorgi, 2009; Zahavi, 2003). Systematic reductions and imaginative variation were used to identify the essence of learning from failures (Giorgi, 2009). Participants' characteristics are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics.

Pseudonym	Arrival in S. Korea	Age (range)	Marital status	Work experience
Heajin	2002	50-55	Single	N. Korea: Telephone operator China: Antique sales, medical hub business S. Korea: Restaurants, inns, motels, insurance planning company, karaoke (business owner, failed), animal cafe
Jungnam	2014	35-40	Married (Chinese)	N. Korea: Teacher China: Housewife (forced marriage) S. Korea: Restaurants, catering
Kyonghee	2008	50-55	Married (S. Korean)	N. Korea: Factory worker China: Tourism business, translator, restaurant S. Korea: Sewing factory, restaurants, Chinese instructor
Songja	2004	55-60	Married (S. Korean)	N. Korea: Chef China: Sewing, restaurants S. Korea: Restaurant, catering (business owner, failed)
Sunhee	2003	40-45	Married (S. Korean)	N. Korea: Merchant/trader China: Housewife S. Korea: Restaurant, sales, factory, restaurant (own business, failed), marriage brokerage (current business)

RESULTS

This section describes participants' experiences of failure and explicates how they learned from and used these failures to change their thinking and behaviors in a new society.

Experiences of Failure

Participants experienced failure in multiple, inter-related domains: financial, relational, physical, psychological, and professional. Together, these experiences engendered tangible consequences and losses, including bankruptcy, separation and divorce, illness, depression, and isolation, among others.

Financial.

All participants experienced some degree of financial failures such as debt and bankruptcy in South Korea. The reasons for financial failures as stated by participants were fraud, ignorance, and insufficient understanding of balancing saving and spending. Two participants were swindled out of their money by other North Koreans: "Who can defraud North Koreans? Only North Koreans." Sunhee became indebted after paying her broker's fee (money charged for entering South Korea) and remittance money. Songja closed her restaurants twice because business was not profitable. Heajin "went completely bankrupt" when she invested in a foreign stock market, losing her savings, credit, and car: "I went from the floor to the top [earning money] and then went back to the floor [bankruptcy]. Yet, after falling down to the ground, I realized ah, money is not everything." Their financial failures stemmed from inadequate economic resources, coupled with their ongoing financial support and commitment for family members (sending remittances) and limited knowledge of financial systems in South Korea.

Relational.

Participants' relational failures spanned their previous and new family relationships in North Korea, China, and South Korea. They felt they had failed and guilty when they could not connect with or support their parents, siblings, and/or children (Choi, 2018; Ko, Chung & Oh, 2004). For example, Kyonghee felt she had failed to fulfill her family responsibility because she couldn't financially support her family, and experienced an emotional breakdown as a result. Four participants also considered that they failed in their forced marriage in China because their husbands were unfaithful. Jungnam felt she had failed because she could not afford to bring her daughter from China. The emotional turmoil engendered by these relational failures also caused physical and psychological problems.

Physical and psychological.

Physical failure was embodied in health problems such as chronic diseases (e.g., heart problems) and insomnia due to nightmares. All five participants used terms like "losing heart", "weakened spirit," or "suicide symptoms" to describe their experiences with their mental health status. For example, Heajin and Kyonghee indicated that their relational failures caused them to suffer from depression for about one year (Ko, Chung & Oh, 2004). For Jungnam, psychological failure originated from feeling desperate about the present and lacking hope for the future. The findings indicate that physical and psychological failings were strongly connected; however, participants considered psychological struggles to be more serious because they believed their physical health depended on mental health.

Professional.

Professional failure was associated with job-mismatch, insufficient management skills and knowledge, and limited networking due to different social and legal systems. For instance, upon entering South Korea, Jungnam did not accredit her high school graduation with the National Intelligence Service and therefore had limited career choices with her middle school degree. North Koreans are required to verify their educational credentials, but Jungnam and Songja withheld this information from South Korean authorities, which later created problems in their job applications and employment. Heajin, Sunhee, and Songja also experienced professional failure when they had to close the small businesses (e.g., restaurant, bar, karaoke) they had opened with other North Korean defectors. Heajin, the owner of a karaoke

bar, was unable to run a profitable business, and Songja, who co-owned a restaurant, was forced to close because "our [North Korean] people do not know what to do without orders [in the workplace]." She realized she should separate social ties with North Koreans from her business decisions.

Conceptions of Failure

Participants faced being on the socio-cultural periphery due to insufficient knowledge of credentials, regulations, and networks needed to maintain successful personal and professional lives. Given the accumulated experiences of marginalization and previous failures in China and South Korea, the participants considered failure as a natural part of their lives that they ought to bear and overcome. For example, Sunhee described failure as a familiar experience that she eventually learned to manage:

Failure was very familiar to me because I always felt I failed. First time when I failed, it was painful and I didn't want to get up because I know that when I got up, I will fall down again. But finally, I learned how I could fall down well and about the method to get up.

Sunhee conceptualized her failure as falling down. Her other comments during the interview suggested that failure accompanied mental and physical pain. Her understanding of failure was augmented by a two-fold realization: first, accepting failure as an integral part of her life, and second, knowing the importance of learning from failure. Sunhee was able to reduce and supplant her emotional turmoil with the understanding of failure as a means of learning.

By contrast, Heajin discussed how she separated herself from failure and resisted labeling herself a failure:

I separate myself from understanding of my failure. I may fail to perform a role to be successful yet that does not mean I failed or I am a failure. Because of multiple failure experiences, we [North Koreans] sometimes consider we are a failure. Yet, failure is natural when we take too much role responsibility that we cannot perform.

Heajin rejected failure as an essential part of North Korean identity. Rather, she attributed her failures to the unfamiliar system and culture that made it difficult to fulfill proper role expectation. This idea helped her to buffer pain from failure and distance her failure from herself.

Learning in Response to Failure

Failure helped participants to change their perspectives and approach towards the social world, themselves, and others. They developed knowledge of capitalist society and adjusted their problem-solving approaches to remain competitive in their businesses. They also clarified their goals and direction to build social position by maximizing their work capacity. Lastly, they noted that failure created opportunities to build trust.

"South Korean system is the opposite of North Korea."

Failure in business helped participants better understand capitalist systems and change their approach to push their businesses to be successful. Songja, a former North Korean chef who served North Korean military officials, opened her restaurant and catering service partnering with other migrants, but had to close her business within six months. Her failure shifted her understanding of how to run a business in capitalist system:

I closed my business twice in South Korea. At that time, I was ignorant and courageous. Although I did not know much about South Korea, I was confident about my cooking expertise. I was full of myself; I

did not listen to others' opinions. Yet, the South Korean system is the opposite of that in North Korea; here it's capitalistic and in the North it's communism. I did not know much about competitive market industry, dividing the role with different expertise. After the closure of my business, I admitted my ignorance in a capitalistic system and neither did any of my co-workers. I am determined to work with South Koreans who know about what I do now know. So, I can focus on my expertise, cooking, and let others care for other tasks.

Songja realized that neither her cooking expertise nor collective labor was sufficient to guarantee a profitable business because the responsibilities of business owners in South Korea were more complex. Understanding the concept of the division of labor (the business owner's responsibilities and the multiple tasks needed to run a business), she worked with a South Korean partner who could supplement her lack of local knowledge, communication, and business expertise (e.g., documentation and networking) in South Korea.

"Maximized my capacity."

The experiences of failure and loss in overlapping dimensions such as relational and professional realms inspired participants to maximize their personal capacity by focusing on recovery and rebuilding. Referring to life without legal protection for family and work, participants strengthened their new and legitimate social position, for example, by earning degrees and certificates in South Korea. Kyonghee, for instance, said that failure helped her to expand her personal potential, using all available resources even from past failures:

When I failed in my forced marriage with Chinese-Korean husband, I fled to South Korea, leaving my daughter in China. In South Korea, I maximized my capacity: I started my study at 4 a.m. to complete my cyber university degree program in hotel management, and worked in a restaurant temporarily and visited my daughter in China. After six years, I acquired a bachelor's degree and invited my daughter to live in South Korea. With my Chinese knowledge working in service industry for four years and my university credentials, I will run a business to serve Chinese tourists in South Korea. Although my life in China was depressing, it helped me to know two societies and serve both customers with my strength.

Failure motivated Kyonghee to strengthen herself and develop strategies to build a better career and family life in South Korea. Particularly remembering her illegal status in China, she did her best not to waste time but rather to improve her socio-economic position through dedicated work and education. She further applied her insights and knowledge from both countries to reproduce and transform a service business for Chinese-origin people in South Korea. Kyonghee was not an exception. Each participant had strong family commitments toward children in China (Junnam, Kyonghee) or family and relatives in North Korea (Heajin, Songja, Sunhee) that, along with a sense of responsibility and the will to improve their lives, inspired them to increase their work adaptability and remain competitive (Fong, Busch, Armour, Heffron & Chanmugam, 2007). For these participants, failure provided clear direction for pursuing success and inspired them to maximize their potential and capacity for their careers.

"Learn to trust others."

Sometimes extreme financial failure created opportunities to receive financial, emotional, or professional support from South Koreans, and in turn, to develop more trust. For instance, when Heajin worked as insurance planner and consultant for other migrants, she was sued for stock market losses. At this time, she turned to a South Korean pastor for help:

We [North Koreans] don't trust South Koreans. Yet, when I failed in my investment [and career as a consultant], I was desperate for help. A pastor, who I knew for three years yet, I never trusted, connected me to a lawyer [the pastor's church member] and lent me some money out of his insufficient

financial conditions. I felt there might be some good South Koreans and his support might be unconditional. It changed my perspective towards South Koreans and I learned to trust others.

Heajin's desperate financial situation compelled her turn to a South Korean for help, and an unintended consequence provided opportunity to trust South Koreans. Similarly, when Songja failed in her restaurant business and had a recipe stolen by a North Korean, she received a help from a South Korean partner who helped her obtain a patent on one of her North Korean recipes. These kinds of failures created opportunities for North Korean migrants to receive assistance to overcome obstacles that they could not solve on their own.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study elucidates how North Korean migrants who are or hope to be entrepreneurs learned from failure in their workplaces and daily life. In particular, this study shows how these migrants processed and interpreted their failure to be more successful in their current workplace or future business venture. Findings revealed that migrants experienced failure in five inter-related spheres: financial, relational, physical, psychological, and professional. Participants developed perspectives to understand failure as an integral part of learning in a new society and adopting unfamiliar role expectations and responsibilities. In addition, they applied knowledge from their failures to change their approach to career and strengthen their personal and business capacity to obtain a legitimate social position. Paradoxically, failures that were beyond their control, such as legal problems, created opportunities to receive practical support from, and increase trust in, South Koreans.

This study builds on migration studies literature (De Haas et al., 2015; Szkudlarek, Nardon, Osland, Adler & Lee, 2019) by presenting a case of migrants' learning from failure. In addition, this study demonstrates how migrants adapt their failures to change own perceptions and participation in new communities of practice, particularly in the workplace. These findings challenge the discourse that portrays North Korean defectors (or other refugees and migrants) as victims or deficient. Future adult education research should further investigate how other migrant groups convert failure into opportunities for learning and the conditions that shape their ability to do so.

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