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Asian Immigrant Women's Emotional Reflection on Artworks

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the personal emotions and empathic responses to artworks expressed by a small group of F-2 Visa immigrant women. Women who follow their students-husbands to the United States are limited in their ability to engage fully in American society, due to the F-2 (i.e. immigrant spouse) status of their visas. Through the mediating screen of art images, the author investigated five Asian F-2 visa status women's feelings of uncertainty about their identities and social positions. Findings showed that the women were able to empathize with the subjects of the images, people in their new environment, and themselves through looking and talking about art.

Introduction

How do you feel when you are a new arrival in a foreign country? You might experience feelings of excitement or curiosity but also unfamiliarity or loneliness at the same time. The number of immigrants in the U.S. has increased from 9.6 million in 1970 to approximately 40 million in 2010 (Oh & Cooc, 2011). While considerable academic discussion has focused on the broad economic and cultural impacts of immigration (Contreras, 2002; De Leeuw & Urban Institute, 1985; Passel & Fix, 2001), there is a need for more educational attention and understanding of the emotional effects of immigration upon individual immigrants and their families.

In particular, immigrant women who are spouses of husbands studying in the United States may encounter difficulties with identity, cultural differences, and feelings of isolation and disconnection from social life (Alfred, 2002; Huisman, 2010; Lee & Sheared, 2002) that go unaddressed because of their marginalized status in the university community. As an Asian woman from outside the United States, these issues are of intimate interest to me. This study was initiated from personal experience. I met a Korean immigrant woman who followed

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her husband in the summer of 2010. She had to quit her job in order to come to the U.S. and often expressed her struggles and difficulties to live in the United States. When the summer ended, I went back my graduate study and couldn't meet her very often. After a few months, I heard she had decided to go back to Korea and considered a divorce. Although there were private reasons for her decision, I felt there was *something* familiar in the experiences of women in similar situations and wanted to know *the something* to help them. This initial impetus expanded into a research project through arts appreciation. I sought to investigate the personal sense of emotional well being expressed by a small group of immigrant women whose husbands are students of a large Midwestern university. These women are holding F-2 visas. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services states, the "spouse and unmarried children of a F-1 visa² are eligible for F-2 status, and may stay in the U.S. as long as the primary student remains in legal F-1 status" (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.). Women holding these spousal visas do not occupy a stable position in U.S.

In this study, I sought to provide ways of expressing F-2 visa status immigrant women's feelings in a space of relative psychological safety by showing them and asking them to describe their responses to images of works of art from their familiar cultural backgrounds and from U.S. culture. The participant women were encouraged to project their feelings about their lives and the experience of being an immigrant in the United States, on and through their *empathetic* responses to these images.

Theoretical Frameworks

Responses to artworks can highlight some of the emotional issues involved in migration and temporary residence, since each individual's way of seeing and expressing herself through art making is believed to reflect her life experiences and worldview (Foster,

² The F-1 visa defines the legal status granted to students coming from countries outside the U.S.

1999). Particularly during the process of looking at and appreciating artworks, multiple factors can influence the viewer's interpretation. Lanier (1968) describes factors such as social attitudes towards specific works, cultural worldviews of art forms, perceptual skills, recognition of formal qualities, knowledge of specific symbols, personal associations, historical identifications, judgments, and relationship of artwork to life as influencing responses to artworks. When an individual interprets an art image, he or she "absorbs from the many social milieus in which he [or she] matures" (p. 40), such as nationality, cultural background, and social status.

In order to explore research questions such as what the common emotions in the particular social or cultural group are, how their emotions are reflected in ways of seeing artworks, and what types and objects can be discovered through the process of appreciating artworks and popular images, this study utilized artistic empathetic experience. Over the last few decades, the role of empathy in cognition and learning has gained the attention of psychologists and aestheticians (Harton & Lyons, 2003; Lundy, 2007; Riddett-Moore, 2009). Empathy in art works to transfer emotional knowledge gained from viewing phenomena to behaviors enacted in real life relative to similar events (Goldstein & Winner, 2012; Jeffers, 2009). Researchers look, for example, at how art making may increase an artist's feelings of empathy for nature and social phenomena (Curtis, 2009) or her/his ability to draw connections between art images and actual experience (Ridett-Moore, 2009).

Exploring the ability of women to empathize with external and internal phenomena (Yakushko & Chronister, 2005) was foundational to my study. Because immigrant women (a group that sometimes includes refugee women) frequently struggle with emotional, financial, and health problems as well as depression, lack of social support, and social isolation (Barclay & Kent, 1998; Mechakra-Tahiri, Zunzunegui, & Seguin, 2007; Small, Lumley & Yelland, 2003), academics have explored general descriptions and sociological explanations of women's feelings about their struggles to adjust

to uncertainty in terms of their social status. Through this study, I sought to provide insight regarding the complex feelings women may experience as immigrants, as some of these feelings are articulated through empathetic response to works of art.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative case study. The strengths of the qualitative interview method are that it can help to obtain deep, qualified data and related subsidiary information and to identify reliable responses (Merriam, 1998). One-on-one interviews with five participants holding F-2 immigrant visa status in the U.S. were conducted.

Interviews

The interviews, which were conducted over a seven-month period of time, were held either in the interviewee's home or in a quiet space near the university where their husbands were enrolled as students. Each interview was conducted individually and lasted from one to one and one-half hours. Each interview was audiotaped and later transcribed. During the interviews, each woman was shown art images from Europe, the United States, and their home country, as well as images from popular cultural life in the United States. The participants were asked to describe the atmosphere, characters, related emotions based on color, structure, and objects of the artworks, and indicate how they understood the artworks in particular ways relative to their social and individual situations as spouses of university students living in an unfamiliar cultural or geographic country and community.

This flexible yet structured, open-ended interview method was used in order for a comfortable bond to be formed between the participants and myself. The method was intended to provide the participants a sense of psychological safety about expressing their feelings and emotions (Kvale, 1996). The interview responses were coded separately for each interviewee. Then all responses were organized

into categories that naturally arose from the data (Lebowitz, Vitulano, & Omer, 2011). Having reduced the data to categories, the similarities and differences of the responses within each category were reviewed for cross-case patterns. After reviewing these patterns, a series of key themes were identified.

Participants

The five participants of this inquiry were all Asian women with spousal visa status, living in the United States with a spouse who was a graduate student of a large university. The participants were limited to Asian women: one Chinese, one Taiwanese, and three Korean women. The women ranged in age from 30 to 37 and, at the time of our interview, had been living in the U.S. for one to four years. Two of the participants had prior experiences living in the U.S. for up to a year during their youth or adolescence. One had experienced living in many countries outside her homeland and the other two had not lived outside their homelands prior to coming to their current experience. One woman was the mother of a small child; none held jobs outside the home or studied at the university. All of the participants graduated from a university in their homeland and their majors were various but none of them was an art major. Three of the participants expressed that they had not been interested in the arts. One expressed her interest in the arts and had visited art museums frequently. The other one's spouse was studying art education and she had interests in the arts. She had also visited art museums many times. These last two participants took art classes at universities or art centers before coming to the U.S.

Instrument and Data Elicitation

Each participant was shown a series of seven visual images.³ Images of paintings by two 20th century U.S. artists, Jasper Johns and Edward Hopper, were first shown. Johns' *Flag*⁴ and Hopper's *Morning Sun*⁵ and *Hotel Room*⁶ were chosen to elicit participants' attitudes and thoughts toward life in the United States. Jasper Johns' *Flag* worked as a symbol of the U.S. to facilitate the participants' expression of their thoughts about the U.S. Although the interview questions didn't include any word of allusion to "loneliness," Edward Hopper's images were selected to see how the participants considered loneliness and how their emotions might be reflected in ways of seeing.

Next each participant was shown an image made by very well known eighteenth-century artists from her homeland. Each participant saw one image from her home country.⁷ The intent here was to explore how the participants' attitudes and emotions about their home country compared to their feelings about U.S. culture. Responses to Western society in general also were sought by showing the participants Auguste Renoir's *Le Moulin de la Galette*⁸ and asking them

to describe feelings that his work inspired. Finally each participant was asked to explain how she perceived her own experiences in the U.S. compared to two realistic visual images presented in *People*⁹ magazine. The cover images of *People* magazine were randomly selected. The interviewees are asked to expand upon reasons for their responses. In addition, extra questions were sometimes asked in order to more comprehensively interpret their reasons.

Findings

Although the interviewees were asked to begin responding to the images by describing what they saw in the images and then move to analysis and interpretation, as is recommended by Barrett (2004) as a method of talking about images, analysis and interpretation sometimes occurred simultaneously and often referred back to description. The participants looked for details in the images and tried to figure out what these might mean. In the process of interpretation, the participants conjectured situations for the images, imagined social and cultural backgrounds of the figures in the works, proposed the reasons that artists may have had for making the paintings, and postulated why other viewers from the United States might like or dislike the various images. In this section, I categorized the interviewees' responses into five parts: their perception of U.S. society and life, their thoughts about themselves and their current lives, empathetic understanding of the artists or the people in the artworks, preferences for certain artworks, and inhibitions in discussing artworks.

Thoughts about U.S. American Society and Life

In general comments about images of art by Jasper Johns and Edward Hopper, and photographs from *People* magazine, the women expressed a complex mixture of positive feelings and neutral or negative emotional responses to U.S. American society and everyday life. They were knowledgeable and familiar with images of the

⁹ Cover images of *People* magazine, June, 2011 (Vol. 75, No. 22) and July, 2011 (Vol. 76, No. 1).

³ Five of the series of images were fine art painting images chosen to make the participants feel at ease in describing art. I felt that paintings would be more a comfortable medium than sculpture, video arts, or other media to people who were not familiar with art and art appreciation. Also, the images were from well-known artists in the U.S., Europe, and each participant's home country. Each artwork was selected because of its recognizability across cultures, ease of understanding and describing it, and popularity, although the era when the artworks were produced was varied.

⁴ Jasper Johns, *Flag*, 1954-55, encaustic, oil, and collage on fabric mounted on plywood.

⁵ Edward Hopper, *Morning Sun*, 1952, oil on canvas.

⁶ Edward Hopper, *Hotel Room*, 1945, oil on canvas.

⁷ Hong-do Kim, *Suh-dang*, 18th century, watercolor on paper, was shown to the Korean participants. Wang-Hui, *Datei*, 18th century, watercolor on paper was shown to the Chinese and Taiwanese women.

⁸ Auguste Renoir, *Le Moulin de la Galette*, 1876, oil on canvas.

U.S., such as Jasper Johns' *Flag*, referring to the symbolic meaning of its color, and recognized it as a spirit or symbol of U.S. American life. They conjectured the meaning of the flag based on their own experiences and knowledge of U.S. culture. For example, Jean¹⁰ stated,

I know this is the American flag. The stars and lines are beautiful. I already have enough information about this flag. The colors are pretty and make me feel good. I think [people] of Asia already [are familiar with] this flag image. We've been exposed to a lot of American culture. I think that we [Asians] have good feelings about America. (Jean, personal communication, October 27, 2011)

However, these images also prompted critical, neutral, and negative attitudes and opinions about life in the U.S. For example,

I don't dislike American life or society. I like the images that I saw today. I think I'm living well in this country but I still feel like an outsider. (Kim, personal communication, January 6, 2012)

[My attitude] would change when I go back my home country. Maybe I'll follow [the] general public's ideas toward America when I'm in my hometown. But these days, I want to see the positive sides of America when I'm in the U.S. (June, personal communication, May, 10, 2012)

One theme that the interviewees repeatedly mentioned in responding to the images was patriotism. For example,

This image [of Jasper Johns' *Flag*] seems to have been created to encourage

Americans' patriotic spirits. I think that it is important to strengthen patriotism in America because America is not a homogeneous country. (Jean)

Individualism was also identified as a theme, evidenced in statements about Edward Hopper's paintings and the *People* magazine images.

I think Americans like individualism. Americans look like they want to protect [their] individualism, like the women in this image [Edward Hopper's *Hotel Room*]. (Kim)

[T]his image [Edward Hopper's *Hotel Room*] represents the fact that Americans think that their own life is the most important one, rather than [being] tied up [by] household chores or families. (Lee, personal communication, January 13, 2012)

Individualism in America seems interesting. They [Americans] seem to know about other people's private lives, similar to other nations' people, but they don't want to [personally] dig into other people's life . . . individualism and chatting about gossip topics are interestingly combined in American life [Comment in response to a photograph from *People* magazine.] (Laura, personal communication, November 20, 2011)

Yet, the interviewees' emotions may have been projected onto and reflected by these images of U.S. American life. When people experience visual images, they tend to express their emotions and find meanings through externalization (Petrillo & Winner, 2005). In the following section, I explain my interpretations of the participants' thoughts and emotions and how they expressed them directly.

Emotions Regarding the Interviewees Themselves and Their Current Lives

Viewing images may have allowed the women in this study to project their inner emotions and thoughts onto the subjects in the images and further onto the people of the United States in general. It also permitted the study participants to directly describe their own thoughts and feelings. For example,

The flag image [Jasper Johns] could not be mine because I'm not a real member of this society. (June)

These images [Edward Hopper] make me think of my family in

¹⁰ All names are pseudonyms.

my hometown. It makes me miss them. I'm [a] little lonely when my husband goes to school. (Lee)

This image [Edward Hopper] is uncomfortable to me . . . Maybe the reason is that the woman looks like I do when I am depressed. (Jean)

The participants expressed the feelings of alienation, loneliness, depression, and willingness to communicate with others. Beyond expressing their emotions directly through art appreciation, the participants reflected their inner thoughts about the artists or the women in the artworks.

Empathetic Understanding of the Artists or the People in the Artworks

The interviewees expressed empathic understanding of the artists and people presented as content of the images. The interviewees used words such as "understand," "like me," "similar to me," or "empathize with" in guessing at the artists' situations, purposes, or emotions when creating the artworks. For example:

This artist [Edward Hopper] had similar emotions to me about American life. It seems that the artist wanted to express the sense of loneliness in American society. (June)

On the other hand, the interviewees also conjectured or created stories related to the situation portrayed in the artwork or the characters' feelings, and incorporated the imaginative stories and situations from them into their own experiences:

[Referring to two of the people in Renoir's painting] They look like mother and daughter, like my mother and me. I really miss my mother. (Kim)

The woman [in Renoir's painting], who is wearing a white dress and dancing with a man, represents me. I'm relying on my husband now because I have the F-2 visa. (Lee)

This woman [in Renoir's painting], who is at the center of the group and wears a blue striped shirt, seems to make her own space. I don't want to count on my husband, even though I followed him [here]. I want to build my own life and space wherever I am. I want to be the center in any group like her. (Lee)

This [Renoir's painting] is a situation of a social gathering. Living in [a] foreign country sometimes requires this type of social gathering. If this image really reflects this type of social gathering, I totally empathize with it. I am also under pressure of the needs-based social gathering to avoid being lonely. (Lee)

I think people reflect their feelings when they are reading books or seeing artworks. [Reflecting on both Renoir's and Edward Hopper's paintings] (Jean)

While expressing empathetic understanding with the artists or the people in the artworks, the participating women addressed their own sense of loneliness, isolation, homesickness, and desire to communicate and belong.

Preference Among the Artworks

All of the interviewees expressed emotions of familiarity, comfort, and happiness when they saw images made by artists from their home country. They had experiences of seeing the images when they were in their home country. Each participant compared the image from her home country to other artistic images made by U.S. American and European artists; however, each interviewee showed their preference for different artworks. For example:

Although Hong-do Kim's art feels like mine, the situation is not similar to my own life. But the second and third images [Edward Hopper's image] show women like me, and I found myself and my current emotions and situations in the second and third images. I can see myself reflected in them. They also seem to represent current days. (June).

I've seen this image [Hong-do Kim's image] so many times when I was in my home country. Feels like I'm home. This makes me smile. (Kim).

I'm so pleased to see Wang-Hui's artwork here. But the colors of fifth image [Renoir's image] make me more comfortable though it is not very fancy. I don't know arts well but the colors make me happy. (Laura).

It was difficult to find thematic similarities among interviewees' preferences although the participants described their choice of preference based on colors, the situation in the images, or familiarity.

Inhibitions in Discussing Artworks

Responding to works of art did not seem an easy or spontaneous task for the interviewees. The interviewees also expressed a greater level of difficulty in discussing fine arts than discussing popular visual images.

Art is difficult and makes me have a headache even though the images are funny. It makes me feel to avoid them. (Lee)

It is difficult for me to say "I don't like this artwork" because saying it like that means to me that I'm not smart. (Jean)

I think it is difficult for people to say that they don't like [an artwork] even though they can't understand it. Because people think they have to pretend to understand or like art in order to not be ignored. However, I think people can present their preferences for gossip magazine images easier than for fine arts. (Laura)

This [visual cultural image] is funnier than fine art images. When I look at fine art images, I feel I'm under pressure, that I have to comprehend the artist's purpose, but this [magazine image] doesn't give me that pressure. (June)

Regardless of the participant's age, nationality, educational

background, or prior experiences in looking and talking about artworks, the interviewees sometimes asked to be appraised of "right answers" in terms of their responses, even though there was no right answer implied. In addition, they expressed fears about demonstrating ignorance regarding the artists or artworks. Although the participants were sometimes hesitant to impose their interpretation on works of art because they did not feel knowledgeable about the artists or the artworks shown, they described, interpreted, and analyzed well. Other research indicates a similar finding, that ordinary people have the ability to critique artworks with profundity and astuteness when reflecting upon and filtering these critiques through life experience (McLaughlin, 1996).

Reflections

The process of appreciating art can influence viewers positively or negatively, pleasantly or unpleasantly (Petrillo & Winner, 2005). The visual images' various features and elements of a work of art might call forth feelings about one's current situation. Viewing specific art works can provoke individuals to remember experiences in the past or present, regardless of whether or not the experiences are obviously or directly related. In this study, for example, seeing flag image symbols of the country in which they currently live triggered memories of the interviewees' childhoods or lives when they were in their home countries. The flag symbol also inspired thoughts about their current life situations. Lee, for example, who has experienced life in several countries besides the United States, not only recalled her past when she saw Jasper Johns' flag image, but also described the flag as a symbol of the unstable situations influencing her current life in the United States.

The process of art appreciation encouraged the interviewees to recognize their unconscious feelings and thoughts (Petrillo & Winner, 2005) and externalize them in the process of responding to works of art (Pellegrini, 2010). There may have been an intuitive awareness among the interviewees that they might reveal themselves and

their true emotions as they responded to these artworks, which might account for their initial cautiousness about doing so. In their hesitations, they sought clues for “right answers” and expressed reluctance to speak about artworks and artists with whom they were unfamiliar. Nevertheless, when they did respond to the works, they gave voice to their inner thoughts and feelings. When one of the participants, Jean, spoke about the flag image and Edward Hopper’s images, she suggested that U.S. Americans seem to be lonely people. “Americans look lonely,” she said, after which she stopped speaking and looked at the art image for several seconds without saying anything. When she began speaking again, she said, “But no... Maybe I’m lonely. I think I am okay but maybe it is wrong. I’m not okay.” She stopped and looked at the images again. “I just keep telling to myself I am okay and I’m not lonely. But maybe I’m lonely so I keep finding that [loneliness] in these [the visual images].”

After declaring “I’m lonely,” and acknowledging that feeling, she continued by adding that she felt better. She was able to externalize her internally conflicting emotions through the experience of talking about works of art, and perhaps empathize with herself by identifying with the figure in the image. Thus, art can provide an empathetic interaction between what is seen externally and what is experienced internally. In this way, engagement with works of art might help viewers ameliorate or come to terms with conflicting emotions and enhance mood valance (Petrillo & Winner, 2005). This may be because visual art images present elements such as colors, symbols, or brightness; imply stories; or suggest the artist’s intentions, any of which might resonate with moods, vignettes of experience, or life scenarios that are deeply and personally relevant to the viewer.

Symbols can be individually and privately analyzed by individuals, regardless of whether the method of interpretation is endorsed by the art world as an academically appropriate way of reading or critiquing visual art. Features of a work that are noticed and the way they are interpreted indicates what resonates with the viewer, or what stimulates in the viewer an empathetic connection. Further studies

can be conducted to explore how ways of seeing artworks reflect viewers’ cultural and social situation and how artistic empathetic connection works in other cultural and social groups.

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