

Unraveling Assumed Similarities: North Korean Defector Students' Navigation of Social Capital and Habitus in South Korean Education

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Abstract: This study examines North Korean defector students' experiences navigating social and cultural norms and expectations within South Korea's educational systems and institutions. North Korean defectors often strive to acquire and perform cultural capital and establish valid habitus in the new context, which can lead to feelings of alienation, exclusion, and discrimination. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and habitus, we analyze how these norms and hierarchies are maintained and reproduced, particularly within the context of assumed cultural and linguistic homogeneity between North and South Korea. We employ critical discourse analysis (CDA), recognizing discourse as a social and socially influenced process that shapes both individual experience and societal power dynamics. The findings suggest that North Korean defectors navigate their habitus and establish new cultural capital due to significant differences between North and South Korean cultures. This suggestion challenges dominant narratives in South Korean curricula that emphasize shared language and culture as a common ground for understanding and connection.

Keywords: North Korean defectors, cultural capital, habitus, critical discourse analysis (CDA), migration

The broader socio-political climate in South Korea has shaped the perception of and the social attention paid to North Korean defectors (Kim & Yoon, 2015; Yoo & Lee, 2014). Reflecting this dynamic relationship, the terminology used to refer to North Korean defectors has evolved over time. These shifting terms are closely tied to the roles and positions assigned to defectors within South Korean society, and they often carry ideological implications. For instance, in 1962, the first law addressing North Korean defectors since the Korean War, titled the Special Aid Act for National Meritorious Persons and South Vietnamese Defectors (국가유공자 및 월남귀순자 특별원호법), was enacted. During this time, North Korean defectors were granted a status equivalent to that of a national meritorious person who had sacrificed for or contributed to South Korea. In 1979, defectors started receiving governmental support and acknowledgment, as they were considered warriors who had escaped North Korea in pursuit of freedom and democracy (Ministry of Unification, 2024).

However, as the Cold War dissolved internationally and inter-Korean relations changed, the treatment of and support for North Korean defectors shifted. The Protection Act for North Korean Defector Compatriots (귀순북한동포보호법), enacted in 1993, framed North Korean defectors as subjects requiring governmental protection and lacking the capacity to maintain their basic livelihood and economic skills. Since 1997, when the Act on the Protection and

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Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors (북한이탈주민의 보호 및 정착지원에 관한 법률) was enacted, defectors have been referred to as North Korean defectors (북한이탈주민). As is evident from the defining of “North Korean defectors” in the laws, perspectives had been influenced by domestic and transnational circumstances and conditions associated with South Korea. The present South Korean context maintains complicated and varied perceptions and understandings of North Korean defectors (Yoo & Lee, 2014). These range from positive images reflecting a desire for unification, such as “the unification pioneers” or “bridges to unification,” to negative images connoting burdensome individuals from a hostile or impoverished country (Shin, Kim, & Wang, 2016). This complex and often contradictory view of North Korean defectors indicates the presence of social, political, and historical factors and relations associated with North and South Korea and beyond.

Shimizu and Yoon (2022) emphasize the limited opportunities available to center the voices of North Korean defectors. This absence is revealed in academic research trends, which similarly overlook the historical, political, and ideological contexts shaping North Korean defectors’ experiences in South Korea. For example, defectors are positioned from a deficit and othered perspective, while their narratives are often utilized to highlight the positive aspects of South Korea in comparison to North Korea (Kim, 2022; Shimizu & Yoon, 2022). This positioning portrays the defectors as second-class citizens striving to gain recognition for their efforts to adapt to South Korea (Lee, 2014). In other words, their voices are often selectively represented or distorted, as well as underrepresented, which impedes efforts to adequately describe and share their complex and nuanced experiences and thoughts, especially in regard to the experiences of exclusion and marginalization.

Recognizing these issues, we aim to explore the lived experiences of North Korean defectors in the South Korean context, focusing on their educational experience. We consider the examination of North Korean defectors’ experiences in South Korea’s educational systems and programs to be crucial for informing changes in curriculum and policy. Educational programs, such as Hanawon (하나원), are among the first spaces North Korean defectors experience upon their arrival in South Korea. These programs play a critical role in boosting the adaptation and social mobility of North Korean defectors in South Korea. In South Korean school systems, defectors’ interactions with peers and teachers are associated with South Korea’s values, norms, and skills, requiring defectors to negotiate their social positionalities, cultural practices, and values. In addition, as scholars have found, schools are places where dominant ideologies, norms, and values are reproduced and enforced, while marginalized voices and experiences are further excluded at systemic and individual levels (Jang, 2018; Mello et al., 2023).

Building on existing scholarship, this study aims to contribute to the field by exploring the lived experiences of North Korean defectors in South Korean education through Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *cultural capital*, as their voices remain overlooked, marginalized, or selectively appropriated in educational discourse. The following research questions guide us in exploring North Korean defector students’ (hereafter referred to as North Korean defectors) experiences in South Korea: 1) How do North Korean defectors navigate cultural norms, academic expectations, and social values in South Korea? 2) In what ways do North Korean defectors’ interactions with their peers and teachers impact their existing habitus and influence their cultural capital in South Korean educational contexts? 3) How do institutional practices and individual behaviors in South Korean social and educational systems reproduce inequalities and marginalize North Korean defectors’ voices and experiences? In the following section, we review the literature containing previous research on North Korean defectors in South Korea. We then review Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital. This is followed by an exploration of studies that have applied these concepts to educational and migration contexts.

Review of the Literature

Previous Research on North Korean Defectors in South Korea

Scholars have addressed the exclusion and marginalization that North Korean defectors experience in South Korea. For instance, Cho (2010) conducted a study based on interviews with North Korean defectors, focusing on their life paths in South Korea after defection from North Korea. The study highlights that, in the early phases of settlement, North Korean defectors tend to equate themselves with South Koreans while distancing or dissociating themselves from North Korea and their original cultural group, including other North Korean defectors in South Korea. However, over time, they often become more comfortable identifying as North Korean and develop a stronger sense of belonging within the North Korean defector community.

Cho (2014) explores the differences defectors recognize and experience in everyday peer interactions. The study finds that, in addition to linguistic differences—particularly accents—and cultural perspectives and practices, the challenge of navigating academic expectations plays a key role in highlighting cultural boundaries that differ from previous experiences. These differences often surface in peer interactions, such as in a common social game called the “communist party game,” in which participants mimic North Korean accents and expressions like *dongmu* (동무, meaning “comrade”) or *masilau* (마시라우, meaning “let’s drink”). North Korean defectors shared that such interactions made them feel othered and associated with communism because of North Korea’s ties to the ideology. Furthermore, in South Korea, North Korean defectors often face social and systemic exclusions that impact their opportunities. In one study, You (2007) addresses the lack of opportunities to obtain the economic, social, and cultural capital valued in South Korea—a situation that affects North Korean defectors’ ability to navigate the labor market and secure employment.

Scholars have also studied discrimination against North Korean defectors. For instance, Kim and Kim (2022) explore defectors’ anger and frustration toward discriminatory actions and the cultural superiority that South Koreans display. The study also shows that some defectors expressed ambivalence, justifying the discrimination they experienced by considering North Korean society and culture as inferior to that of South Korea. Cho (2015) uses grounded theory to examine North Korean women defectors’ experiences and perceptions of discrimination in South Korea. The study suggests that North Korean women view prejudice toward and stereotypes about North Koreans as the main contributors to discrimination. They also note that sociocultural differences make it difficult to trust South Koreans. For example, while North Korea prioritizes collective effort, South Korea values individual effort and competition. Defectors often find it challenging to adapt to this system. Additionally, defectors struggle with navigating South Korean cultural and linguistic practices, particularly how South Koreans indirectly express negative emotions and feelings. This causes North Korean defectors to perceive South Koreans as untrustworthy.

Bourdieu’s Concepts of Cultural Capital and Habitus

Theoretical Foundations.

Capital is a helpful concept in explaining social structure and its functions, as it serves as the foundation for the historical development of capitalism and for the operation and reproduction of economic systems and institutionalized values. Bourdieu’s concept of capital highlights how capital is accumulated through societal processes that individuals objectify and embody, and it has potentially produced profit and been reproduced in dominant power

structures (Bourdieu, 1986). The concept of habitus serves as an important background and medium for individuals' practices associated with social structures. Bourdieu explains that cultural capital, when acquired in the form of internalized dispositions, skills, and habits, becomes part of a person's identity. This indicates that, unlike material wealth, one cannot learn and quickly transfer cultural capital through individuals' efforts. While habitus is a product of past experiences, it also plays a critical role in shaping one's future practices, as it creates "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). Thus, when individuals move to different social contexts and spaces, their existing habitus may become misaligned with the dispositions valued in the new contexts, leading to tensions in navigating appropriate dispositions and practices (Resch, 1992, p. 217).

Applications in Educational and Migration Studies

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus have been appreciated, critiqued, and reinterpreted as scholars have explored them in their respective fields. In this section, we review previous research, using Bourdieu's concepts to understand educational, social, and migration experiences, as we found these areas informative in understanding the experiences of North Korean defectors in the South Korean context.

In educational contexts, the relationships between cultural capital and academic achievement are complex, and they challenge findings from previous studies. Cho, Kim, and Hong (2019) find a weak correlation between cultural capital and academic success in South Korea, a Confucian heritage country. Based on their findings, they question the notion of cultural capital being primarily related to "highbrow" culture—cultural tastes and practices traditionally associated with elite, intellectual, or upper-class status in Western contexts. This study suggests that cultural capital might operate differently in an Asian context, and therefore, it should be examined differently considering its different educational values and practices.

On the other hand, Loh and Sun (2020) challenge findings from studies that reinforce a static understanding of the East Asian context, suggesting the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement is weaker in East Asian contexts than in Western or non-Confucian heritage countries. Their findings further provide implications for studies in Asian contexts to consider values and dispositions that have been unrecognized and marginalized in the Western-centric understanding of cultural capital and habitus. Weng's (2020) study sheds light on how cultural capital and habitus mediate international students' participation in new academic communities, highlighting the unequal power dynamics that affect their socialization and integration into the field. The findings suggest that students with transnational identity and border crossing experiences not only acquire new cultural capital but also learn to negotiate rules and expectations that may conflict with their existing habitus.

Scholars have also applied Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus to the study of migration experiences to provide insights into cross-cultural transitions. Marshall and Foster (2002) and Fernández de la Reguera (2022) utilize the concept of habitus in their study on migration, exploring the experiences of migrating individuals and members of migration-receiving communities. They describe how migrants must renegotiate their habitus in new contexts, including educational settings, where cultural capital different from their own plays a critical role in social integration and identity formation. In other words, migration involves not only geographical relocation but also significant restructuring of habitus in regard to new social rules, values, and expectations. Kim's (2018) study on migration-facilitating capital explores Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in the context of international migration. The author argues that capital is not simply a resource but a form of power that migrants utilize to leverage themselves within unequal social contexts. This study reveals that migrants' existing cultural capital may be devalued or overlooked in new contexts, requiring the migrants to navigate strategies to transform capital and accumulate new cultural capital.

Theoretical Considerations

Scholars have addressed the issue of studies that misunderstand or simplify Bourdieu's frameworks. For example, Lareau and Weininger (2003) critique the common misinterpretation of cultural capital and suggest that the concept be better used to explore how individuals' knowledge and skills intersect and interact with institutionalized dominant values and systems. Edgerton and Roberts (2014) examine how research often discusses habitus and cultural capital in isolation, thus providing a limited understanding of what these interconnected concepts could offer in regard to educational inequality. Specifically, the authors suggest that discussing the two concepts together is crucial to understanding how cultural capital and habitus work as part of a cohesive structure.

To us, the literature suggests that cultural capital must be explored in relation to the dynamic nature of contexts and individuals' relationships with those contexts. Furthermore, the process of habitus transformation involves individuals' negotiations between existing dispositions, present circumstances, and perceived realities. In this study, which explores North Korean defectors' educational experiences in a new context, we draw on these concepts to examine the complex ways in which participants have navigated and internalized their migration and borderland experiences, along with the insights that emerged during the interview process.

Methodological Approach

This study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a mode of inquiry in analyzing North Korean defectors' experiences of exclusion and marginalization in South Korea. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that views discourse as socially constructed and socially influenced (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 3). Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) highlight that discourse serves as an opaque instrument of power in society, embedding power dynamics in language. Van Dijk (2015) conceptualizes CDA as an inquiry into the overt and covert ways dominance is perpetuated not only through direct and explicit discourse but also in social practices taken for granted.

Additionally, we draw on poststructural and decolonial perspectives in analyzing interviews with North Korean defectors. Scholars have expanded CDA by using decolonial approaches, critiquing traditional Western-centric frameworks for masking biases and privileging universalism and positivistic representation (Ahmed, 2021; Maniglio & Barboza Da Silva, 2021). A poststructural approach to CDA views language not merely as a reflection but as an active participant in creating the "real" world (Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021). From this perspective, discourses are fluid, pervasive, and often difficult to perceive, yet they provide space for resistance and change. Przybyla-Kuchek (2021) states that poststructuralist discourse analysis defines "truth" as constructed through context rather than representing an objective reality. For example, feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) explores discourse focusing on individuals' identities in relational terms without assuming a singular "truth" (Baxter, 2008). Khan and MacEachen (2021) emphasize the capacity of Foucauldian discourse analysis to problematize accepted truths without proposing an alternative definitive "truth." Instead, this approach guides researchers in inquiring how power shapes identities through disciplinary expectations of social norms (Khan & MacEachen, 2021).

Research Ethics Statement

This research was reviewed and approved by Ball State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) under protocol number 2145800-1. This protocol has been determined by the IRB to meet the definition of minimal risk. All data collection concluded before Author 2 transitioned to the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, ensuring no data were gathered after IRB approval.

Context

This poststructural discourse analysis study draws on semi-structured interviews with five North Korean defectors in South Korea. Given defectors' tendency to conceal their identities in South Korea (Kim, 2022), Kim asked community organizations and professional networks—including a private online forum called the North Korean Kakao Community, accessible only to North Korean defectors—to share the recruitment message. The selection criteria were 1) adults aged 18 or older, 2) individuals who identify as North Korean defectors and/or have direct familial ties to defectors, and 3) those with at least one year of educational experience in South Korean schools. These criteria were established to investigate the experiences of North Korean defectors in the South Korean educational system.

Table 1 below represents participants' information, including their ages, number of years living in South Korea, and current affiliations. All names in this paper are anonymized. While the number of participants may be considered small, we resist framing this as a weakness from a positivist perspective that equates validity with generalizability or replicability. Instead, we emphasize discursive depth and complexity, grounded in dialogic and reflexive engagement with participants.

Table 1.

Background Information of Study Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Duration of Residence in South Korea	Affiliation/Occupation	Area of Residence
Shin, Hayoon	22	4 years	College student (1st year)	Seoul
Kang, Seohyun	25	4 years	College student (3rd year)	Seoul
Yoon, Seojin	24	12 years	College student	Seoul
Bae, Eunsoo	20	5 years	College student (1st year)	Seoul
Han, Soyul	29	6 years	College student	Seoul

All but one participant defected directly from North Korea to South Korea; one has a familial relationship, as her mother defected from North Korea. All participants are women in their 20s, living in the largest metropolitan area in South Korea. They have diverse migration, educational, and personal backgrounds; however, we do not claim their experiences represent those of all North Korean defectors. While participants vary in the number of years they have resided in South Korea, we do not view this as a comparative variable or indicator. Our poststructural orientation enables us to examine how their experiences are situated and discursively constructed, rather than regarding them as reflections of linear developmental trajectories. Furthermore, considering the sociopolitical sensitivity and the risk that participants may experience, we have anonymized their names and disclosed minimal personal information to prioritize their safety and anonymity.

We, the researchers, are South Korean educators who were born and raised in South Korea. Kim has over 11 years of experience working with North Korean defectors since college

and is actively involved in supporting and advocating for peace and unification education, raising awareness on issues related to North Korean defectors. Author 2 was a teacher in South Korea and has experience working with students who have North Korean defection backgrounds. Both authors are considered part of the social majority, as our identities and backgrounds are seldom marginalized in South Korean contexts.

We recognize the partiality of the information that participants disclosed, given our different experiences and positionalities. As we do not have firsthand experience with or relationships to migration from North Korea, our backgrounds inevitably shape our understanding. We are wary of simply viewing our positionality as a limitation requiring correction for a positivistic notion of objectivity. Instead, we view our positionalities as constitutive of the research process, informed by a poststructuralist perspective, which requires us to engage reflexively with our inquiry. We practice reflexivity as a methodological commitment to examine how our positions shape the analytical possibilities available to us. This approach acknowledges that knowledge production and analyses are situated within specific discursive formations and power relations (Khan & MacEachen, 2021; Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021)

We conducted the semi-structured interviews in February 2024 via Zoom. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in Korean. The interview consisted of 11 questions, including themes such as participants' experiences living in Korea, perceived cultural, social, and educational differences between North and South Korea, and memorable experiences or memories that participants and their families have encountered in South Korean society. Interview questions included: 1) How would you describe your experience living in South Korea? 2) Have you experienced cultural, social, and educational differences between North and South Korea? If so, when do these differences manifest the most in your daily lives and/or schooling experiences? and 3) What challenges or difficulties have you and/or your family encountered in South Korean society?

The interview questions were informed by research questions used in studies on North Korean defectors (e.g., Kim, 2022; Cho, 2015). We developed the questions to be more open-ended, thus creating space for participants to select and share their stories, rather than directing them toward certain answers or details. This approach aligns with a poststructuralist perspective, recognizing the fluidity of meanings as well as participants' agency in constructing their stories during the semi-structured interview process. Rather than seeking data saturation, we prioritized depth and multiplicity of interpretation, as the poststructural perspective encourages us to recognize that knowledge and meaning are always partial, contingent, and situated (Baxter, 2008).

The interview transcripts were generated using ClovaNote, an AI-powered transcription tool, and the original Korean transcripts were translated into English using Papago, a multilingual machine translation cloud. Both authors cross-checked the translations to ensure clarity and fidelity of the transcription and translation, so that the final transcripts accurately reflected the participants' meanings and nuances.

Data Analysis

We transcribed all audio-recorded interviews for analysis. In line with poststructural discourse analysis, we view the data not as transparent reflections of an objective reality, but as discursive and relational constructions that reveal how knowledge, identity, and power are negotiated in certain contexts (see also Przybyla-Kuchek, 2021). We engaged in a recursive reading process and a reflective open-coding approach, which we refer to as categorizing, to note emerging themes using Dovetail software. The category labels included racism, exclusion, hope/desire, assimilation, differences, appearance, language, and accent. Using Dovetail helped

us organize connections between categories and allowed us to recategorize and merge quotes as we progressed in our analysis. This approach led us to pay attention to tensions, contradictions, and disruptions in participants' narratives, as well as to the broader sociocultural values and perspectives through which their experiences are constructed and articulated (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). In this process, we were particularly conscious of gaps and aspects that prior research on the exclusion and marginalization of North Korean defectors has not adequately represented. In the early stages of analysis, we identified three tentative themes, which often overlap: 1) ideological differences, 2) racism without color—addressing the limitations of Western-centric theories and frameworks, and 3) optimism for social mobility and the belief in meritocracy.

We paid attention to the untold and unspoken experiences of exclusion that North Korean defectors implicate and experience in ordinary daily interactions and moments in educational settings (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). This approach prioritized complexity, contradiction, and multiplicity, rather than seeking triangulation or saturation. The concept of habitus helped us examine the racialized experiences and exclusions that North Korean defectors face. These issues are difficult to articulate, as concepts are primarily developed in the U.S., where race is more visible. At a glance, North Korean defectors and South Koreans are often difficult to differentiate based on physical appearance and cultural practices. We established the trustworthiness of this study by being transparent about our positionality, ethical commitments, and theoretical and methodological alignment with a poststructural understanding of knowledge and experience.

Findings

Korean, But Not Quite the Same: Linguistic Habitus and Politics of Accent.

The South Korean curriculum and textbooks describe how South and North Korea share the same language—the Korean language—despite differences in accents, grammar, and vocabulary. Jeong and colleagues (2015) state that the differences in Korean languages are often regarded as easier to overcome compared to other cultural and sociopolitical differences that have emerged since the division. However, North Korean defectors consider the linguistic differences as something to overcome; they believe adapting to the Korean used in South Korea would reduce instances in which their identities and backgrounds are questioned and discriminated against (Shin & Oh, 2020). For North Korean defectors, their linguistic habitus—the embodied disposition constructed in North Korea—often does not align well with the cultural capital valued in South Korea. Specifically, participants mentioned that the North Korean accent easily reveals their identity as North Korean defectors, so they feel obligated to “correct” their strong accent (Cho et al., 2006). Seojin stated,

When someone from North Korea comes here at an older age, it's not easy for them to correct their way of speaking. Just from their accent, you can tell if they're foreigners or North Korean defectors...So, I just think I need to work harder.

Soyul shared her experience of others recognizing her different accent, which required her to reveal her identity and background, as well as her current linguistic practice, through which people cannot recognize her North Korean background:

When I first joined a computer program, the teacher there immediately knew that I wasn't from South Korea. The teacher mentioned that their parents enjoyed watching a TV show featuring many North Korean defectors, and they said my way of speaking was exactly the same as the people on that show. So, they asked, “Ms. Lee, where are you from?” I answered, “I'm from North Korea.”...At the time, speaking

was really challenging for me, and expressing myself felt overwhelming. But now, unless I specifically mention it, most people don't realize I'm from North Korea.

As we see, linguistic differences are not just a matter of communication; they also disclose North Korean defectors' backgrounds, immediately positioning them as Other upon their use of Korean with a North Korean accent. Cho and colleagues (2006) observe that the repeated experience of speaking in a manner that reveals their background makes it difficult for individuals from North Korea to feel comfortable and safe speaking Korean, and this could impact their interpersonal relationships. This phenomenon demonstrates the social implication of linguistic habitus and how it continues to affect North Korean defectors' experiences of belonging and exclusion.

Despite the presumed linguistic and cultural commonalities, the differences between North and South Koreans are more significant than what curricula and popular discourse emphasize in their shared cultural and ethnic roots. North Korean defectors struggle to participate in peer interactions and build close relationships, especially while embracing their North Korean accents and cultural practices (see also Kim, 2006). Eunsoo shared,

At that time, I used a lot of North Korean dialect, so I didn't talk very much. I didn't want to use the dialect because I was afraid of my peers asking, "Why do you talk like that? Where are you from?" and then having to answer, "I'm from North Korea." I didn't want to lie, so I preferred not to speak.

To avoid disclosing her identity and background as a North Korean defector, Eunsoo avoided situations where her background would be questioned and where she would have to answer, as she knew this would further highlight differences between her and her South Korean peers. Through the lens of Bourdieu's concept, Eunsoo's silence can be seen as a response shaped by her socialization as a North Korean defector as well as her position as an outsider within the South Korean context (Kim, 2006). Eunsoo's decision to avoid these situations reflects the tension between her habitus and the dominant cultural capital valued in South Korea related to linguistic fluency and cultural conformity. By choosing silence, Eunsoo resists the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1999)—a subtle, often unnoticed imposition of dominant cultural values—that exposes her difference and judges it against South Korean norms. Therefore, in this case, silence is not merely a sign of exclusion but also a form of agency and resistance to discrimination. In addition, it may reveal the pervasive yet under-recognized discrimination that North Korean defectors experience.

One can theorize that these experiences are a form of double othering, as North Korean defectors are positioned as outsiders due to both their linguistic background and their cultural background. Another factor—their migration and borderland experiences—also positions them as Other in the South Korean context, even though South Korean education and society maintain the claim of shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds with North Korean people.

Between Two Worlds: Embodied Histories and Cultural (Dis)continuities.

North Korean defectors' identities and experiences are shaped within the borderland, spaces where multiple cultural, social, and political boundaries interact and intersect (Anzaldúa, 1987). Despite the geographical proximity of North and South Korea, the over-70-year division has resulted in limited temporal and spatial interactions, occasionally intensified by censorship and differing sociopolitical ideologies, as well as transnational relations. In this context, Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus offers a useful lens for exploring the struggles that North Koreans face in developing a valid habitus in the South Korean context. According to Bourdieu, habitus generates individual and collective practice in alignment with historical contexts:

The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought, and action, tend to guarantee the “correctness” of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms. (p. 54)

As Bourdieu states, habitus develops over time and embodies history through accumulated perspectives and actions influenced by different experiences and associated with power dynamics (p. 56). This perspective helps explain why North Korean defectors perceive the differences between themselves and their South Korean peers as gaps, requiring them to “catch up,” while their South Korean counterparts may be unaware of or indifferent to these differences.

North Korean defectors often rely on their physical appearances—indistinguishable from those of their South Korean peers—to blend in, despite significant cultural and experiential differences. They frequently choose to conceal their backgrounds and distinctions, yet their interactions with peers continue to highlight their feelings of exclusion. Hayoon shared an experience of feeling left out in peer interactions:

After exams, when I hung out with friends, I thought games and stuff like that were really fun. But those games were naturally a bit difficult at first since I had no experience with them. Also, when we went to a friend’s house to hang out, they often talked about cartoons they watched when they were younger. But I hadn’t watched those cartoons, so I couldn’t relate to those conversations. The same goes for movies or dramas from childhood. They also talked a lot about their elementary school days, like “Remember when we did this in elementary school?” For example, smartphones have changed a lot compared to the past, and we used different things back then. When they talked about those things, I felt a bit left out because I didn’t know what they were talking about.

Hayoon’s story illustrates the differences in embodied histories between her and her friends. Having limited shared knowledge and memories of popular culture and past experiences in a certain temporal and spatial context makes it difficult for her to participate and feel included. While the authors, born and raised in South Korea, might not be familiar with every aspect of popular culture, we do not feel excluded. Instead, we perceive such differences as variations in interests and feel comfortable expressing our unfamiliarity, listening to conversations, or steering the discussion to related subjects. The concept of habitus explains this difference: Because the authors possess a habitus that is recognized and validated in a South Korean context, we can engage in these practices with minimal effort. In contrast, North Korean defectors must actively negotiate and adapt their habitus to align with dominant norms. Often, they must exert greater effort to ensure their thoughts and actions are considered “reasonable” in the South Korean context.

North Korean defectors noted that many norms, values, and expectations are not explicit and often contradict formal and written rules, making it challenging to navigate social and academic practices and relationships in South Korea. In response, they often chose to remain silent during moments of dilemma, exclusion, and misunderstanding, as they believed silence could help them avoid embarrassment and unwanted spotlights. Eunsoo shared an awkward moment during a class when she did not possess the same historical knowledge as her peers and failed to perform the expected emotional response:

There was a time when I chuckled when I shouldn’t have. I have a habit of smiling when uncertain because people usually respond better to

someone who is smiling. It was connected to a sad historical event, but I smiled because I was unaware. I didn't realize it was a tragic historical event. North Korea doesn't teach much about history, and there's often significant distortion as well.

Eunsoo's strategy of smiling during the recalling of a serious historical moment did not meet the expected emotional response. However, for her South Korean peers, the historical moment and the appropriate response to it are ingrained in their habitus, which means they are accustomed to the correct practices. This is not the case for Eunsoo because not only was she unfamiliar with the historical event, but the perspectives and knowledge she acquired in North Korea did not serve her in the South Korean context.

The expectation that North Korean defectors will assimilate into South Korean society mirrors the broader social narratives embedded in the national curricula, which does little to address the assumptions and discrimination they face. It perpetuates stereotypes rooted in ideological narratives that South Korea has been constructing and maintaining (see also Kim, 2022). Soyul's narrative demonstrates this conflict:

I am a North Korean, coming from North Korea. While I now have South Korean citizenship, I am still North Korean. However, often, I can't say that I am from North Korea because there is a strong expectation that I must adapt to South Korea. By not saying that I am from North Korea, I live a double life—pretending to be South Korean in school. People say that I don't have a North Korean accent anymore, but my true self is different. Being unable to live as my true self and being aware of people's perceptions is the hardest part.

Soyul's account reveals how North Korean students must navigate the pressure to adopt a valid habitus in South Korea—obtaining citizenship, eliminating their North Korean accent, and hiding their North Korean backgrounds. This adaptation may be perceived as a form of achievement, but it constantly denies their lived histories and values as North Koreans, preventing them from embracing their complex and interwoven identities. The experiences that defectors are positioned to erase or the perceived need to downplay their backgrounds to gain acceptance can be understood as misrecognition, as it highlights South Korean systems' and individuals' exclusivity regarding North Korean backgrounds. It is important to note that this not only marginalizes the defectors' historical narratives and understandings but also creates an exclusive and distorted ideal of who they are allowed to be in South Korean society.

Meritocratic Narratives and Masking of Structural Inequalities.

This section explores how North Korean defectors navigate the context of systemic exclusion and discrimination alongside opportunities they perceive in South Korea. Seojin shared her perception of South Korean society:

I don't think people are particularly discriminated against based on their background in South Korea. If a person has the abilities that the company wants, they will be hired, regardless of their background. You can often tell if someone is a foreigner or a North Korean defector just by how they speak. However, companies still hire them despite these differences, which shows that there is no discrimination based on that. So, I don't worry about it. I just think I need to work harder. If I feel that I'm still not enough, I need to grow more, and that's my concern.

This statement reflects Seojin's understanding of meritocracy, an idealized value that operates as a dominant discourse in South Korean society (Kim & Rousseau, 2019). Other participants also frequently demonstrated meritocratic optimism toward their future, believing

they could achieve their personal and professional goals through hard work. From Bourdieu's perspective, meritocracy in South Korea can be understood through the concept of capital, as Seojin frames success as depending on her ability to accumulate and perform the cultural capital that South Korean society values. However, it is important to note that this view fails to address the structural inequalities in South Korea, where some capitals are more easily accessible to people with certain social positions than to North Korean defectors. Therefore, while this optimism can be seen as an expression of personal agency, it may also obscure systemic inequalities in South Korean society. By focusing on individual effort, defectors may unintentionally reinforce dominant meritocratic narratives that mask exclusions and marginalization.

In other words, the optimism Seojin expresses can be considered a habitus shaped by her social position as a North Korean defector who strives to adapt to the norms and values dominant in South Korea. Through the socialization process, a habitus aligned with South Korea's emphasis on individual effort and the myth of meritocracy constructs this optimism, but it overlooks the systemic inequalities and exclusions that further marginalize those who lack the dominant forms of capital.

The temporal and spatial contexts in which the participants live and with which they are in relationship are crucial to understanding their optimism. North Korean defectors perceive South Korean society as being less of a stratified society, or as an unstratified society, compared to North Korean society. They regard South Korea as a place where higher education is typically a means of achieving social mobility and success. Soyul's account highlights that, in the North Korean context, higher education is a privilege reserved for a select few—the social elite of a higher social class whose career paths are likely to require or directly benefit from higher education. Soyul explains,

In my case, my parents didn't have prestigious jobs or high social status. They were just ordinary people. So, even if I wanted to pursue higher education in North Korea, there were limitations in terms of my potential. If your parents have a higher social status and strong connections with the authorities, you must study to become someone who can work for the government or the state in the future. That's why many elite people study a lot. In my high school class, there were 27 students. Among them, only three went to college. Most of the others started working right after high school, with most male students going to the military and female students either helping with their mother's business or working elsewhere. North Korea doesn't have a high preference for higher education. And honestly, don't we need to have a goal and motivation to study?

Her quote illustrates the two Koreas' different social norms and perceptions of higher education, which are not only classed but also gendered. In South Korean society, pursuing higher education is common; over 70% of high school graduates enroll in higher education (Korean Educational Statistics Service, 2024). In North Korea, however, there is a predetermined stratified limit depending on the current social status of one's family. In this context, the social status of Soyul's family limited her ability to gain the symbolic capital that could grant her access to higher education (see also Bourdieu, 1999). In contrast, the defectors believe South Korea is a place with more possibilities and that their potential is not limited by social class and gender—traits they are born with and over which they have little control. This belief aligns with the dominant habitus of South Korean society, where hard work and self-determination are often emphasized as the paths to success, while overlooking systemic inequalities and exclusions.

Furthermore, we observed that the views of North Korean defectors on their opportunities and achievements in South Korea frequently involve social comparison with other

North Korean defectors. This appears to occur as they strive to accumulate cultural capital and establish a habitus in South Korea based on the dominant values and norms. Soyul noted,

North Korea, where I lived, and South Korea, where I am now, are so different that I realized I couldn't bring everything from North Korea into this society...I barely met any North Korean friends because I was busy and didn't initially feel the need to meet them. After a year, I found everything so different. I'm not sure if it was because I had changed a lot or because my friends were still the same, but the difference was significant.

Soyul's distance from North Korean-ness and her pursuit of South Korean culture and language reflect her effort to accumulate cultural capital in the new context. However, her quote implies that Soyul affirms her achievement through comparison with other North Korean defectors based on how she is currently different from others. She positions herself as "different" or "better adapted," and in doing so, she unintentionally devalues the North Korean cultural identity in the South Korean context. This hierarchical view suggests that defectors experience pressures to conform to dominant norms at the expense of their cultural backgrounds and the identities associated with North Korean-ness. In other words, navigation of habitus in South Korea not only forced them to adapt to the dominant values and cultures but also constructed symbolic boundaries between defectors. In this process, individuals distance themselves from their cultural identities and backgrounds to obtain legitimacy and access to dominant forms of capital.

Discussion

This paper analyzes North Korean defectors' experience of alienation and discrimination in South Korean society and educational systems associated with linguistic and cultural differences. The findings suggest that the linguistic and cultural differences between North and South Korea are tied to identity, sense of belonging, and discrimination. This challenges the dominant narratives in South Korean textbooks and curricula that emphasize the shared language of the two Koreas—the experiences of North Korean defectors significantly conflict with this premise. The cultural and linguistic differences and the social exclusion rooted in them operate as barriers for North Korean defectors in terms of navigating and adapting to the new environment and feeling a sense of belonging.

We draw on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which includes the knowledge, language, culture, attitudes, and behaviors valued within a society, alongside habitus, to understand how social norms and hierarchies are maintained and reproduced. From this perspective, certain cultural experiences—such as popular culture and shared school experience—normalize linguistic aspects and practices, and implicit social norms serve as crucial cultural capital for North Korean defectors when it comes to feeling a sense of belonging and avoiding the perception of difference in South Korea. When North Korean defectors fail to acquire and perform the dominant cultural capital of South Korea, they feel alienated not only because of others' responses but also because of their own internalized perception of inadequacy, as they come to view themselves as lacking the qualities necessary to belong or succeed in society. For instance, as illustrated in Soyul's and Hayun's cases, the lack of shared cultural experiences—including the shared knowledge and emotionality associated with certain topics—should be viewed as a form of exclusion, not merely as a difference. A lack of alignment with the cultural capital valued in the South Korean context can affect peer relationships and social participation, as seen in Hayun's case, where she opted to remain silent during conversations.

In terms of habitus, North Korean defectors migrated to South Korea with a linguistic and cultural habitus constructed in North Korea. However, the conflict they experience between South Korea's linguistic norms and their habitus is a significant discrepancy, revealing the need to learn an entirely new language. For instance, North Korean defectors try to correct their accent to avoid discrimination, because the accent functions as a marker of identity, divulging their backgrounds. Given that the standard linguistic norms and practices in South Korea greatly influence opportunities and access, these efforts represent more than language learning; they also seek to construct a new habitus that aligns with values and norms in South Korea.

It is important to recognize that the effort North Korean defectors make to eliminate their accents constitutes a violent silencing of their linguistic identity and forces them to conceal their background. In this context, linguistic norms in South Korea are not just tools of communication; they should be understood as symbols of social superiority, so we can better understand how North Korean accents exacerbate defectors' social exclusion and marginalization. Yet, despite their experiences with exclusion and violence, North Korean defectors tend to maintain a positive attitude toward the opportunities and possibilities they believe are available to them in South Korea. This reflects the belief in meritocracy, which is persistent in South Korea, emphasizing individual effort and achievement. However, the perspective overlooks systemic inequalities in South Korea and compels defectors to downplay or hide their North Korean identities. We argue that if these issues remain unaddressed, defectors may continue to feel pressure to conform to the dominant cultural and linguistic norms in South Korea to gain opportunities and achieve success while perpetuating the processes of internalizing and marginalizing their habitus and identities that were established in North Korea.

Bourdieu (1999) defines the concept of symbolic violence by describing how the dominant culture and norms are taken for granted and legitimized, while individuals with marginalized backgrounds internalize these values. The linguistic and cultural differences North Korean defectors experience resonate with how symbolic violence is justified and reproduced. For example, Eunsoo hesitated to participate in conversations after expressing what were deemed "incorrect" emotions about a South Korean historical event. This illustrates how defectors internalize societal expectations and view their linguistic practice and behavior as inappropriate. However, simultaneously, such silence can be viewed as a form of resistance to, and a means of coping with, symbolic violence and exclusion. For North Korean defectors, silence may be a strategy to protect themselves from the dominant norms and exclusive expectations in South Korea, as well as a choice to avoid situations of discrimination and exclusion.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Our study is based on interviews with recruited participants with whom the authors have limited relationships. Considering North Korean defectors' tendency to be cautious about sharing their lived experiences and thoughts due to safety concerns, we understand the importance of fostering reciprocal and collaborative relationships with participants. We suggest that future research deepen collective reflections and the co-construction of knowledge based on trusted and sustainable relationships, rather than treating participants merely as samples for research.

We also suggest that future research engage with other positionalities, spatialities, temporalities, and relational aspects that extend beyond the scope of this study. A longitudinal study would provide valuable insight into North Korean defectors' lived experiences over time. Intersectional analysis, such as analysis focused on gender, social class, and religious backgrounds, would also contribute to understanding how defectors' experiences are shaped in relation to various aspects of their identities and relationships with multiple contexts.

Implication and Conclusion

This study challenges the longstanding narrative in South Korea's curricula, which emphasizes linguistic and cultural similarities between the two Koreas. The findings demonstrate how this approach overlooks and simplifies the differences, tensions, and conflicts that North Korean defectors experience as they navigate their lives in South Korea. We argue that, without an acknowledgement of these differences and their association with dominant power and institutional norms, it remains challenging to foster discussion and create an inclusive and equitable environment for diverse habitus and cultural capital.

This study also offers an implication for studies concerning discrimination and marginalization, i.e., that they be context-specific and nuanced, given that the academic discourse on discrimination, especially racial discrimination, is commonly known to occur only in the presence of differences in race or ethnicity. This study illustrates how shared ethnic or racial backgrounds do not preclude the construction of marginalization and othering. Instead, systemic and individual discrimination and marginalization are still constructed through cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical hierarchies and dominant societal norms. In other words, this study challenges the conventional understanding of discrimination and exclusion by complicating the understanding through sociopolitical and historical contexts.

Based on our research, we offer the following implications for future research, policy, and curriculum. We encourage scholars to continue developing more nuanced theoretical frameworks and theorizations of lived experiences that reflect marginalization and discrimination in seemingly homogeneous groups. This study contributes to the existing literature by addressing how Western-centric theories of racism and cultural studies may lack insights when it comes to understanding "racism without color," with exclusions and marginalization occurring despite a lack of noticeable physical differences.

Considering that this study is situated within the complexities of an emerging field that addresses these topics and themes, we invite researchers to conduct longitudinal studies that engage with North Korean defectors' experiences in South Korean contexts. This approach will help scholars better understand how the habitus of North Korean defectors evolves, as well as their negotiation of cultural capital in their borderland experiences and identities (Fruja & Roxas, 2025). Furthermore, we consider it important to adopt an intersectional approach to understanding North Korean defectors' experiences, as, during our interviews, various factors and relations intersected in the construction of participants' experiences. Because of our research focus, we did not include this in the study.

We also believe this study offers helpful implications for educational policies as well as other policies that influence North Korean defectors' experiences in South Korea. As for education policy, this study challenges assimilation-focused integration approaches applied to North Korean defectors. It is important to recognize defectors' linguistic and cultural diversity as their cultural capital and to foster environments that support multiple backgrounds and experiences, rather than expecting defectors to catch up with South Korea's dominant linguistic and cultural practices while downplaying their identities and experiences. Given that teachers and peers play significant roles in determining North Korean defectors' experiences, educational policy should provide opportunities and resources for teachers and students to understand systemic discrimination and marginalization, as well as how they behave within individual and interpersonal interactions (Scolaro & Tomasi, 2025).

Our findings also emphasize that the longstanding discourse and belief about North Korean defectors' assumed similarities should be disrupted in the curriculum and teaching. South Korean curricula should move beyond simplistic and stereotypical representations of North Korean individuals and North Korean contexts. Instead, it is important to provide pedagogical space for students and teachers to approach learning through historical and

sociopolitical perspectives that embrace shifting, complex, and complicated means of engaging with experiences and relationships. Our findings highlight how history education and discourse often rely on a dominant historical narrative and understanding, typically associated with assumed collective emotions and memories. Thus, an inclusive and equitable history curriculum requires the development of pedagogical approaches and space for North Korean students' perspectives and interpretations, as well as the integration of marginalized historical perspectives and narratives. Dialogic curriculum and pedagogy that guide students in unpacking and questioning normalized values, beliefs, and emotional responses is also a critical and much-needed space for inclusive and equitable curriculum practices.

Lastly, systemic and individual support for North Korean scholars to document, interpret, and theorize their experiences and narratives is crucial. While we maintained critical reflexivity regarding our positionality as South Korean researchers, we acknowledge potential harms that we and this study may reinforce. As we continue our scholarship in this area, we will continue seeking ways to collaborate with North Korean defectors and build sustainable relationships, as well as work together to center their voices in scholarship on North Korean defectors and beyond.

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The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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