Introduction

Caring across a Lifetime

When we immigrated to the United States, the relationship was more of a 180-degree type of thing. I became pretty much the parent to my parents and my younger brother. It meant that when we had documents to review and take care of [it was my responsibility]. My parents were not able to do that because their English was non-existent. I had to explain what it was that they were signing, whether it be school documents, documents from work, things like that. So the relationship was more business-like, more parenting the parent than the child that I was.

—Joel

In 1979, Joel's parents decided to emigrate from South Korea to the United States. They were seeking better opportunities for their sons, Joel, thirteen at the time, and his younger brother, who was eleven, and they settled in Los Angeles near other Korean immigrants. Both parents were college-educated. Joel's father had worked in Korea as a mid-level manager, and his mother had been a homemaker. After immigration, however, the family's life changed dramatically. His father faced downward mobility and his mother needed to find work to help support the family. While she found a job as a seamstress at a local Korean immigrant-owned garment factory, he worked as a laborer at a manufacturing plant. Reproducing a pattern common for immigrants, Joel's parents began to rely on their older son, the most fluent English speaker in the household, to interact with the dominant English-speaking American
society. Now in his forties, Joel reflects on how migration brought on major changes in the family, in particular the role reversals between his parents and himself. Although Joel’s story is that of a child of Korean immigrants, his narrative resonates with those of others who, like Joel, play a unique role that is intimately linked to their parents’ lives as immigrants.

Throughout childhood and into middle age, while negotiating various life transitions including careers, marriage, and parenthood, the children of immigrants serve their parents as brokers of culture and language. Their life paths are often impacted by their parents’ pre-immigration lives, which can include war or other forms of political and economic turmoil. Daily struggles with the realities of being immigrants—including racism and discrimination—affect not only the immigrant parents but also the children who act as their intercessors in the English-speaking world and especially in governmental, legal, educational, and medical institutions. Because their parents may have immigrated specifically to give the next generation a better life, the children of these immigrants also deeply consider their parents’ hopes and dreams as they make major life decisions of their own. Their successes are often seen within the family as the fulfillment of their parents’ sacrifices.

As they explore the meaning of their parents’ culture in the context of passing on certain aspects to their own children, the adult children of immigrants may also be entering another phase of their relationship with their now increasingly elderly parents, care-giver by providing financial assistance and health aid, and emotional care work. While children of non-immigrants may also see caring for their parents as recompense for the way their parents cared for them during childhood, children of immigrants have already played pseudo-parental roles in their families as they negotiated the English-speaking world on their parents’ behalf. And while children of non-immigrants may also have taken on parental responsibilities at a young age, their reasons for doing so differ from those of immigrant children, whose family histories have a distinct dynamic. When immigrant parents face declining health, their adult children become advocates, translators, educators, and care-givers. These roles take on a deeper meaning when an immigrant parent’s health starts to decline. Mee Jin, the youngest of three American-born sisters, had graduated from college and had recently been
promoted at work when her father was diagnosed with cancer. Mee Jin tried to juggle her new job and care-giving, driving about one hundred and twenty miles each day, but finally she quit her job and moved in with her parents in order to take care of her father full-time. She provided support to her dying father on many different levels, such as taking him to chemotherapy, interacting with doctors, and being present when her father passed on. She remembers:

You don’t ever think you’re ever going to have to go through that—to think about seeing your parents die in front of you. . . . You just think that everybody is going to be okay and then he’s going to die in [his] sleep or whatever. It’s a life changing event, that role reversal and having to help [your parents] go to the bathroom. . . . Seeing your parents take their last breath, it’s hard.

Mee Jin’s father’s illness and passing dramatically shifted the family dynamics from one in which independent parents and their grown children lived separate lives to one in which children advocated for an ill father and then cared for a grieving mother. Although one of her sisters moved in with their mother, Mee Jin notes, “My mom felt like I was the stronger one of the three daughters so she turns to me if she has a problem or doesn't know how to do something. . . . Whatever it is, she’ll call me first.” Even though her father’s passing was emotionally devastating for her as well, Mee Jin had to be strong for her mother who relied on her more than ever. The care work Joel and Mee Jin provide has been deeply informed by their parents’ lives as immigrants. Unlike their peers in non-immigrant households, the children of Korean immigrants play a major supportive role in their parents’ lives from childhood to adulthood by bridging communication gaps and negotiating the structural and institutional disparities that immigrants typically encounter. This book chronicles the reflections of adult children of Korean immigrants who, as children, have supported immigrant parents working long hours, struggling with language issues, racism and discrimination, and who, as adults, not only provide their aging parents tangible and emotional support but also work to ensure that cultural traditions are not forgotten and are revisited and passed on to the next generation.
Linked Lives: Care and Emotion Work of Children of Immigrants

This study is rooted in the theoretical concept of linked lives in which “lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships.” As this theory suggests, the challenges and successes faced by each generation are influenced by the preceding generation and impact the next generation. Each generation’s trajectory is interdependent and life-long. At the same time, individuals also construct their own human agency within the opportunities and constraints provided by history and social structures. Proposed by sociologist Glen H. Elder, Jr., the concept of linked lives derives from a focus on socio-historical factors and their impact on families in the context of the Great Depression. While it has not yet been applied to the issue of human agency on the part of immigrants and to the subsequent socialization of American-born generations in terms of a wide range of historical, cultural, and economic constraints, this theoretical construct does provide a basis for understanding how immigrant family members adapt, relate to, and care for each other. The concept of linked lives suggests that the hardships of immigrant parents in one generation, experienced through social inequities and cultural and language barriers, are interdependently linked with the struggles and successes of the next generation.

Inasmuch as the theory of linked lives provides a structural lens to examine families across generations, the various processes that link generations for immigrants and their children have not been fully studied. We suggest that the process of linking lives for immigrant parents and their children involves care work that comes not only in the form of tangible support but also through emotion work. In particular, we examine how this dynamic operates as parents enter old age. The literature of care work has traditionally focused on the role of women in looking after ill and older family members. Elaine Brody, in *Women in the Middle: Their Parent-Care Years*, documents how daughters have been the main caregivers to aging parents and how this role is fraught with juggling competing demands (spouses, children, and work) and causes exhaustion for the women in the middle. In *The Managed Heart: Commercializing of Human Feeling* and in other works, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild
argues that women do emotion work in their lives to elicit feelings in others and also to adhere to gendered “feeling” norms and expectations. Research has shown that mothers and daughters do this work, thus serving as the glue that holds families together over a lifetime. In immigrant families, emotional labor performed by children can take on forms similar to that performed by mothers in non-immigrant families. Both male and female children of immigrants serve as bridges for their parents in ways that not only entail cultural and language brokering but also involve emotional labor ranging from doing well in school in childhood to being present for aging immigrant parents in later life. We suggest that the children of Korean immigrants observe and recognize personal sacrifices and institutional disadvantages that their parents experience in American society and that trying to do well in school, attend top-notch colleges, pursue professional careers, marry a co-ethnic, have children, and observe and reinvent cultural traditions are all forms of emotional labor that they perform for their families over a lifetime.

Several insightful studies discuss intergenerational relations within the broad context of non-white immigrant populations who have arrived since the 1960s, and in particular the need felt by many children of immigrants to “give back” to their parents in old age. But since the majority of these studies focus on young adulthood, they do not consider how these feelings may develop over the life course, and how these intentions are fulfilled or challenged in middle adulthood. Meanwhile, studies that examine immigrant older adults and care-giving in the United States tend to focus on the population who are the grandparents of the children of immigrants. These studies leave unanswered questions and demonstrate a need for future research on the unique experiences of children of post-1960s immigrants who are entering middle age in the United States.

Immigrant Children and Their Parents

Children with at least one foreign-born parent now comprise almost one-fourth of U.S. children under age eighteen. Recent studies illustrate that in addition to financial hardships and limitations in English language proficiency, immigrant parents experience significantly higher levels of parental aggravation than non-immigrant parents and that they have less knowledge about supportive resources on parenting
as well. In the United States, immigrants continually struggle with belonging, psychological distress, and discrimination. Asian Americans, immigrant and non-immigrant, face racial micro-aggressions related to being perceived as “perpetual foreigners,” which can result in psychological distress. The children of immigrants, whether born in the United States or having arrived as young children, look at the world through such a lens. They are observers of and witnesses to the difficulties encountered by immigrant parents who must navigate a new language, new culture, new social networks, and new institutional structures. In a sense, as witnesses and observers, these children are linked to the hardships experienced by the immigrant generation.

In the context of studying how the intersections of culture, migration, class, language, and racism impact children of immigrants, one understudied area concerns how they navigate the concerns and needs of their families over the course of their lives. We do know that children, throughout their lives, serve as links to their immigrant parents’ past and present and that they support their parents’ well-being. We also know that those children of immigrants who become familiar with the English language and American culture faster than their parents and other family members provide significant work as language and cultural brokers, helping their parents and families adapt to and navigate life in the United States. From a young age, they contribute to their families by translating, interpreting, and writing legal letters and contracts; filling out business forms; accompanying their parents to doctors’ offices to interpret medical information; and interacting with various officials (e.g., lawyers, doctors) of authority and power. Children of immigrants, as language and cultural brokers, bridge and mediate gaps of communication and meaning between their non-fluent parents and mainstream social institutions and practices. Children may view these responsibilities as burdensome or stressful if they feel inadequate about their ability to accurately translate or interpret concepts and meanings. Conversely, brokering can build their self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and language abilities as they actively contribute to their families’ survival and well-being.

The narratives in this study provide a unique lens for examining intergenerational relations and cultural contexts in Korean American families as immigrant parents and children age. The notion of filial piety plays
a significant role in Korean and Korean American families. Although practices of filial piety are being redefined in South Korea in response to social and economic changes, children in Korea are still typically expected to care for parents in their old age. In the context of Korean and many Asian immigrant families in the United States, we argue that ideas of filial piety are not just cultural, but also structurally rooted in the documented everyday experiences of racialized immigrants—experiences that include prejudice, racism, and institutional barriers.

Understanding how older immigrants and their adult children navigate old age is important. From 1990 to 2010, the population of those aged sixty-five and older has increased from 29.6 million to 38.6 million, and is now the fastest growing segment of the population by age in the United States. Within this segment, foreign-born elderly persons make up an increasing portion of the population. Due to the language and cultural barriers that immigrants face, as well as the disparities they experience over their lifetime, their children's care work may begin earlier and may involve more and qualitatively different tasks than that for non-immigrant aging parents. This may be due to multiple factors, including a lack of extended family members in the immediate area as migration often results in geographic separation from kin. While cultural and linguistic brokering may start during childhood as they negotiate for their working immigrant parents, such brokering continues as a lifelong process as parents age and face health issues.

Core Questions

Framing the study of Korean American families in a life-course perspective, this book examines how adult children of immigrants view and make meaning of their experiences growing up in Korean immigrant households, as well as how they interpret the past and current concerns and cultural values of their parents as they make their own life choices. Specifically, the book answers the following questions:

1. How, and to what extent, does being a child of an immigrant shape life-course experiences from childhood to young and middle adulthood? What types of work do children of immigrants do for immigrant parents over their lifetimes? How does this work, especially cultural brokering
and care work, shift and change during different life stages, including childhood, college, marriage, and child-rearing?

2. How do children of immigrants interpret their childhoods in relation to the life experiences of their immigrant parents?

3. As children of immigrants enter middle adulthood and make major life decisions, in what ways do these adult children recognize their parents’ histories and sacrifices, while also recognizing their own need for self-care?

4. How have adult children of immigrants experienced and viewed their affinity, attachment, and identity in relation to culture, and how have they been perceived by co-ethnics in these terms? How do children of Korean immigrants as adults carry forward and reinterpret Korean cultural traditions? In this process, how do they negotiate concepts of authenticity?

5. How and when do adult children of Korean immigrants step in to support relatively healthy immigrant parents dealing with aging and the various changes and losses it brings? Who among the siblings in a family do so?

6. How do adult children of aging immigrants adjust to their parents’ declining health? How do they navigate structural and economic barriers (e.g., racism, language, health insurance) for access to quality health care when aging immigrant parents are faced with chronic or debilitating health conditions and the prospects of dying?

**Methods**

This study draws from in-depth interviews with 137 Korean American adult children of immigrants in order to explore the questions outlined above. Our participants were recruited and interviewed between the years 2006 and 2012, and resided in the greater Los Angeles or San Francisco Bay metropolitan areas. At the time of the interviews, respondents had at least one parent aged fifty-five or older, were themselves age eighteen or older, and were either 1.5 generation or second-generation. Social scientists define members of the 1.5 generation as foreign-born persons who came to the United States before the age of thirteen (the term is similar to that of the “knee-high” generation used in the Japanese American communities in Hawaii), while members of the second generation are those born in the United States to foreign-born parents. We chose age
fifty-five of one or more parent as an eligibility criteria because parents were close to thinking about retirement and approaching the age of sixty, or hwangap, which in traditional Korean society signifies both completion of a significant life cycle and longevity, and thus is a milestone celebrated by family and friends. While we conducted many interviews and all follow-up interviews, trained undergraduate and graduate student interviewers also assisted under our supervision.

There has been an ongoing debate among social scientists about how a researcher’s positionality, including his or her race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and experiences, can pose unique “insider” and “outsider” challenges and possibilities in social science research. For more than a decade, we have researched disparities impacting the Korean American community, in particular the high rates of uninsured persons among Korean American immigrants. We also fit into the study parameters in being 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans with aging immigrant parents who have retired after decades of living and working in the United States. And thus we posit that our “insider” identities helped us recruit participants and gain entry into the lives of adult 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans who also juggle work, marriage, children, community engagement/activism, and/or aging parents. While we recognize that our insider status, ethnic and generational, may have helped us connect with our respondents in some ways, we also recognize that being as close to the subject as we are can present its own challenges, including enticing us to focus on those issues that are salient to our own situations. For example, as we examine the lack of retirement planning and low rates of health care access for Korean immigrants, we wonder how they and their adult children deal with their impending old age and with accompanying questions such as financial costs of care and living arrangements and acknowledge that as children of aging immigrant parents, we ourselves ask these questions, too. Our life decisions and celebrations, crises, additions, and losses in relationship to our own immigrant parents inevitably informed and shaped the questions we asked our respondents. Perhaps other researchers would have asked different questions and made different interpretations.

Most participants were more than willing to share their reflections and struggles; in fact, many agreed to participate because they wanted to affirm that they were not the only ones experiencing issues
with care-giving for their parents. As co-researchers, we brought different parental dispositions and immigration and health histories, as well as our own personal biographies into the project. Despite—or perhaps because of—these differences, our shared position as daughters of Korean immigrants provides a unique lens for understanding the lives of adult children of immigrants, who, like us, arrived as young children or were born in the United States and who navigate and care for their parents over a lifetime.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1, “Brokering Dreams,” explores the respondents’ childhoods in Korean immigrant households. Respondents discuss the pressures and challenges of growing up as children of parents pursuing the “Korean American dream” of financial and social stability, with much of their dreams pinned on and invested in their children’s educational achievements. This chapter sheds light on different types of care work that the respondents provided in childhood. Whether they immigrated as children or were born in the United States, these respondents often found themselves brokering their parents’ interactions with official worlds during their childhoods. This labor, visible (physical) and invisible (emotional), was sometimes not asked for explicitly, but was understood and observed by the children as being essential to the survival of their families and the well-being of their immigrant parents.

In chapter 2, “Giving Back,” adult children of Korean immigrants in their twenties, thirties, and forties share how they are navigating and remembering their parents’ traumatic, war-inflected pre-migration histories; giving back for their parents’ challenges and sacrifices as immigrants; and pursuing their dreams for themselves and their children. Significantly, this chapter illustrates how the immigration experience intricately links American born and/or raised adult children to the traumatic war histories of their immigrant parents. Finally, this chapter discusses how adult children recognize their own feelings around obligations and duty to their parents as they reflect on their own dreams, passions, and needs for self-care.

Chapter 3, “Caring about Culture,” delves into how respondents practice cultural traditions while also reclaiming and re-making their culture and interpreting it in new ways that provide meaning in their Korean
American contexts. Although the cultural experiences of reclaiming and remaking what is Korean vary, a unifying theme related by respondents is their deep desire to retain the value of respect towards elders and to care for their parents in old age. This chapter further explores how respondents re-make culture for their own children—the third generation—especially in relation to respecting and caring for older adults.

In chapter 4, “Gender at Work,” the focus turns to how adult children become more aware of changes and losses happening in their parents’ lives, including retirement from work, selling businesses, marital difficulties, and death of close friends and family members. In our study, adult daughters, both near and far, are more acutely aware of and responsive to changes happening in their parents’ lives. Adult daughters do emotion work by maintaining close ties with their parents, but are also more aware of and empathetic to changes their parents experience as they age. This chapter also explores the negotiations that take place between spouses and among siblings in providing financial and other types of support to aging parents.

Chapter 5, “In the Midst of Caring for Ill Parents,” explores how respondents navigate health care options for their parents, many of whom have lived in the United States for decades but still face language barriers. In considering the personal limitations and challenges that individuals face in caring for their parents, this chapter also examines how the respondents fulfill the roles of advocate and intermediary in order to secure health care and wellness for their parents.

Finally, “Linked Lives: Where Do We Go from Here?” looks at intergenerational costs and benefits of linked lives, and examines how adult children of aging immigrants find meaning through caring across lifetimes, while functioning at maximum capacity. Given that the older adult population is increasing in racial, ethnic, and generational diversity, the impact this is having on families, communities, and local, state, and national budgets and policies is a complex issue that requires dialogue within and beyond the family. Hence, this chapter explores policy implications and the importance of community and support in the face of the cultural, political, and structural challenges facing older immigrants and their adult children.

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This book chronicles experiences of Korean American families from the perspective of the 1.5 and second generations and analyzes the often invisible work children of immigrants provide from childhood into middle adulthood. The goal of this book is that it will reveal the work that children do in immigrant families. Immigrants experience disruptions in culture, language, status, friendships, and family relationships; they also encounter racism and prejudice. Witnessing and responding to these difficulties, children of immigrants also give back in recognition of these hardships.

For Korean American adult children, experiences caring for immigrant parents in their childhoods lay the groundwork for the types of care that they continue to do into middle adulthood. Emotion work and other forms of care work learned early on, such as language and cultural brokering, continue throughout lifetimes to preserve and pass on culture, understand parents’ past, and support them as they face retirement and losses in their lives. The journey of children’s care and concern for immigrant parents starts at migration and is not without its ongoing frustrations, conflicts, and ambivalence. Nonetheless, intergenerational relations do change as immigrant parents and children age, even as they remain linked. As the narratives of respondents illuminate, children of immigrants in their middle adulthood continue to serve as brokers for their parents’ dreams and their futures, and in the process, help redefine social, cultural, and political life in the contemporary United States.