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Coming-Out in the Intersections: Examining Relationality in How Korean Gay Men in Seattle Navigate Church, Culture and Family through a Pacific Lens

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Pacific Research Methodologies (PRM) to explore intersectionality in how Korean gay men navigate culture, family, and religion in relation to coming-out publicly in Seattle. By framing this study within a Pacific *itulagi* (worldview), I construct an argument that posits that Korean gay men in Seattle—due to the Korean American community being intertwined with the Christian Church—often find their sense of ethnic identity and family relationally co-constructed by a Christian one. Informants navigated this using Narratives of Convenience (NoC), whereby they reveal their sexual identity to a family member(s) and together, build a story that projects a heteronormative image of the self to the wider Korean American community. Contextually, a NoC helps avoid friction in wider familial and community circles, permitting informants to live gay lives openly with partners in US society. A full coming-out narrative by contrast often had a detrimental effect on other informants.

KEYWORDS

Korean gay men; coming-out; Seattle; Pacific research methodologies; Talanoa; relationality; LGBT; Sāmoa; Asian American; non-Western epistemologies

Introduction

This paper uses Pacific Research Methodologies (PRM) to explore intersectionality¹ in how Korean gay men navigate culture, family, and Church in relation to coming-out publicly in Seattle. Korean gay men appear to be invisible to communities both in South Korea and in the United States (US). Scholars have not only opined their reluctance to claim greater visibility in South Korea (Bong, 2008; Cho & Abelman, 2011) but have also theorized the complete erasure of their identity from the Korean public consciousness (Seo, 2001). So, what is it about the specific Korean experience and living in America that makes it difficult for Korean gay men to come out?

By positioning my methodological frame and analysis within a Pacific *itulagi* (worldview) I construct an argument that posits that Korean gay men in Seattle—due to the Korean American community being intertwined with the Christian

Church—often find their sense of ethnic identity and family, relationally co-constructed by a Christian one. Informants navigated these complexities through the use of what I have termed the construction and deployment of Narratives of Convenience (NoC), whereby they reveal their sexual identity to a family member(s) and together, build a story that projects a heteronormative image of the self. Deployed contextually, a NoC helps keep their gay identity hidden to the wider Korean American Christian Church (KACC) and extended family members where appropriate.

These narratives also allow family members to avoid friction in wider familial, social and community circles and permitted informants to live gay lives openly with partners in US society. Without the deployment of such narratives, a full linear coming-out narrative is unavoidable, which often had a detrimental effect and impacted their connectedness to their Korean identity.

This paper is drawn from a larger study that focused on the narratives of Korean gay men in a transnational setting; however, the data used here focus specifically on US-based and mostly raised informants that were part of the larger sample. Thus, the term Korean gay men in this paper unless otherwise stated refers to these informants only.

Selected literature review

In interrogating the lived experiences of Korean gay men in the United States (US), the majority of literature has grouped their stories under the umbrella term Asian American or API gay men (Chan, 1992; Chung & Katayama, 1998; Chung & Szymanski, 2007; Cochran, Mays, Alegria, Ortega, & Takeuchi, 2007; Harris, Battle, & Pastrana, 2017; Leong, 2014; Narui, 2011; Tsunokai, McGrath, & Kavanagh, 2014). The common theme identified in this literature is the existence of stock stories in dominant discourses that depict gay Asian American men in essentialized ways, often as a denigrated, ostracized group dominated by the hegemonic influence of the White masculine gay (Eguchi, 2011; Han, 2008a, 2008b). It also underscores the continuation of an emasculated Asian American gay male in mainstream discourses as feminine, with small penises (Fung, 2005) and ripe for White consumption (Han, 2007). Asian American gay men suffer from the perpetual pressures of the model minority myth (high-achieving, quiet, studious, law-abiding, academic and wealthy) where the paramount challenge for these men in exercising their sense of self is boxed by the image of the model Asian (Phua, 2007).

In dealing with coming-out experiences specifically, the literature highlights how Asian American gay males have their coming-out journey complicated by a deeply conservative immigrant Asian American community (Chan, 1992). This has been attributed to a combination of religiosity and cultural norms that

highlight the importance of carrying on the family name. A product of patriarchal normative constructs in social and familial structures, encouraging heterosexist and homophobic attitudes in Asian cultures (Chen & Georgiana Shick Tryon, 2012; Harris et al., 2017). Cultural expectations are thought to discourage individualism, which is seen as key to the linear coming-out process advanced by Cass (1979), Troiden (1989) and others.

Chung and Szymanski (2007) state that the personal realization of an Asian American gay sexual identity conflicts with Asian cultural values, and this tension is exacerbated by a lack of support and resources for Asian gay men. In the Korean studies literature, these social norms are often attributed to the power of Confucian familial norms, where Korea enjoys some of the most Confucian norms of all (Chang, 2010; Chung, 2015; Hwang & Lim, 2015). However, in the US context, this conservatism and group identity was also a product of the immigrant community narrative where social support and networks are nestled primarily in the family and building of ethnic communities (Kim, 2014). The Korean American community like many other immigrant communities has a strong historical connection to the Christian Church (Shrake, 2009). This was central in developing Korean communities all around the US (Hurh & Kim, 1990). Forming sites where Korean culture was kept alive through Korean language services/sermons and shared worship (Ebaugh, 2003). Moreover, building community networks that proved vital in providing social and even economic support for new Korean immigrants to America (Kim, 2014; Light, 1984).

In reference to coming-out among gay men in Asian communities, serious doubts exist about the appropriateness of coming-out in non-Western settings. Vivianne Cass (1984) recognized this cultural complexity herself in conceding that a homosexual identity can only emerge in those societies in which a homosexual categorization is acknowledged. A study by Bhugra (1997) on the coming-out process among South Asian Gay men in the United Kingdom concluded that “although the notions and stages of coming out among Asian gay men are fairly similar to those experienced by Western gay men, their ethnic identity plays an important role. External influences and pressures are culturally different and need to be studied in greater depth” (p. 555). Chacko and Balis (2016) in phenomenologically examining the coming-out experiences among second-generation South Asian American gay men found that some informants spoke of “caution around coming-out due to the possibility of highlighting generational and cultural difference regarding sexuality” (p. 142). For gay Asian American Identified Males, coming-out or “self-disclosure” can be termed both a privilege and burden (Takagi, 1996, quoted in Pongyingpis, Gutierrez, & Park-Adams, 2012, p. 54).

Moreover, a recent study by Chiang (2015) on the differences between Asian and Caucasian men in coming-out processes also challenged the idea that coming-out performatively is a necessary component or milestone for healthy gay identity development in Asian American gay men. Chiang argues that

“living in the closet” may not be associated with psychological distress. Speaking about gay men in Taiwan, Wang, Bih, and Brennan (2009) present the example of the Taiwanese Tongzhi Hotline Association that reminds its audience that “hiding in the closet can also be a good way of being gay” (p. 287).

For some Korean gay men, remaining closeted does not seem to be stunting their overall sense of identity development and conceptions of selfhood. Cho and Abelmann (2011), clearly demonstrated how some Korean gay men live full and complete lives by incorporating a gay identity into a heterosexual and married one. This corresponds with Hart’s (1984) critique of the essentialist viewpoint of sexual identity labels that sees individuals as inherently heterosexual or homosexual regardless of social or cultural context. Hart suggested, in fact, that “certain individuals are able to have both homosexual and heterosexual relationships without the conflicts that may be associated with an ‘essentialist’ view of sex-roles and sexual orientation” (pp. 44–45). As in other East Asian countries like China and Japan, Koreans valorize family not merely as an important social institution, which some have argued as a universal value, even among gay men in the West (Altman, 1997).

Thus, Cho and Abelmann’s (2011) assertion that Korean gay men, even those that had married, possessed a “homing instinct” (p.176) makes contextual sense. Especially when we consider as Cho explained, the married gay men in their study had an instinct to always protect the family. For all intents and purposes, these men found ways to rationalize and resolve a homosexual identity with that of a heterosexual one.

Despite attempts at mapping Korean American masculinities being published under the Asian American and API label before, to the best of this researcher’s knowledge, there exist no studies that have focused on the coming-out narratives of US-born Korean gay men in America specifically. Strayhorn (2014), found in his qualitative study of four Korean gay men at a college in the Midwest, that Korean gay men were motivated to go to a US college to live a more “open” life. Their study, however, did not separate Korean gay men born in the US from those who were born in South Korea.

Pacific research methodologies—*Talanoa* dialogue and the *Vā*

This paper represents the first attempt to deploy Pacific Research Methodologies (PRM) as its grounding methodological approach to knowledge generation in a Korean studies project. I posit that as a Sāmoan researcher, my positionality gives me unique opportunities to negotiate communication with Korean informants. Specifically, in Sāmoan social customs, there exists what we call the *Vā* or space where social interactions take place between people. Wendt (1996) explains that the *Vā* is the space in-between, the between-ness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities together. Sāmoa’s traditions and protocols explain the nature of a Sāmoan being as a relational being.

There is myself and yourself, through myself, you are given primacy in light of our collective identity (Tamasese, Peteru, & Waldegrave, 2005).

The concept of the *Vā* deals with holistic forms of identity formation predicated on co-belonging and relationship building (Refiti, 2008). Epistemologically, *Vā* is encoded with respect, service, and hospitality (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009 quoted in Simati, 2011). In reflecting on my own positionality as a researcher, it was impossible for me not to be foregrounded by the *Vā*. In particular, when “interviewing” participants, I took the active position that considered informants as relational subjects in which I, the researcher self, was also constituted.

The relational aspects of the *Vā*, and its role in identity formation, then, I connect to a Korean worldview that also suggests that a Korean identity or articulation of the self is formed relationally rather than individually. In particular, the Korean language demonstrates this symmetry, where the lexico-grammatical structure of Korean is formally dependent upon social and interpersonal factors such as symmetrical/asymmetrical relationships, kinship, gender, age, profession/vocation/trade as well as socioeconomic status (Kim & Strauss, 2018). As an example, Lee (2018) in the field of linguistics states that in presenting one’s self in conversation and social settings, Koreans select terminologies in their language that refer to the self and other in accordance with the expected honorific norms of Korean society. Where nearly two-thirds of pronouns for the self in Korean is self-denigrating (p.64). In Sāmoan language, respectful-deference accorded to others is considered an important part of respecting the *Vā*². This innate understanding of relationality provided me with a second sense in being able to understand the difference between relationally formed identities from an individualistic perspective.

A second concept deployed is *Talanoa* dialogue. A method of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue, in *Talanoa*, one builds empathy with informants by sharing stories. A PRM rooted in oratory tradition, *Talanoa* overcomes methods that disempower informants by legitimizing researchers’ exchanging personal stories that explicitly express feelings with informants. Vaioleti (2006) defines it as a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal. In particular, it requires researchers to partake deeply in the research experience rather than stand back and analyze. *Talanoa* shares similarities with a narrative approach to research especially to the methods used to generate data; however, in *Talanoa*, culture is a central significant factor (Vaioleti, 2013). Thus, as a Sāmoan researcher, my own cultural interaction norms were centered in my research praxis to build connections with informants. This is what separates my approach from other phenomenological traditions such as feminist approaches to knowledge production.

In line with what Bryman (2016) states, in PRM, the researcher is necessarily implicated in the data that is being generated. This required me to exchange openly with informants all parts of my own positionality. Stories that related to my experiences as a Sāmoan New Zealander, living as a gay

male in South Korea 7 years prior and the fact that I had been in long-term relationships with Korean gay men in the past. My identity as a researcher was not primary to all our interactions, rather, what was emphasized was the relationality between my many identity points and theirs before a *Talanoa* took place.

As a Sāmoan New Zealander, the ideals that shape how I approached my *Talanoa* and social interactions, in general, cannot be meaningfully disentangled from that of the *Vā* specifically. Thus, I deployed *Talanoa* dialogue as an interview method and reflective lens designed to necessarily empower informants through my own validation of their narratives co-constructed in the *Vā* established between us.

I implemented the concepts of *Talanoa* dialogue in the following ways: 1. drawing on Pacific concepts to center the analysis and shape of the dialogue. that built connections with informants around Korean ways of knowing when expressing the self. In particular, I grounded my research practice in the Pacific understanding of relationality. 2. *Talanoa* were shaped by values of *alofa* (love), *fa'a'alo'alo* (respect), empathy. 3. Recognition of power-differentials in play. As Korean gay men occupy spaces of marginality, the analysis and *Talanoa* protocols address this by centering the informants' decisions necessarily as valid and unsanitized by the hegemony of Western epistemologies.

Analytical framework

The framework of analysis deployed here is a Pacific *itulagi* or worldview that highlights relationality above individuality. This relationality is the hermeneutic key. From a Pacific perspective it is less about methods to secure and examine abstract truths, as in academia, but rather about relational expressions of life, about how a person freely dialogs and connects with his/her whole *itulagi* (Va'ai, 2017). In other words, the narrative *Talanoa* that is presented here focuses on relationality as the basis for knowledge production. The relationships between informant and researcher, informant and culture, informant and religion, informant and family, informant with their wider community are presented in relation to their coming-out stories as co-constituted.

Recruitment and procedure

The methods for this research paper were approved by a major research university in the US. A total of 30 men were recruited for the study through a call for participants and snowball sampling. As the larger study was transnational in nature, I recruited 10 participants in Seattle and 20 in Seoul. This paper is based on the responses of only informants born in the US or who had spent over two-thirds of their lives there. Six of the 10 informants from Seattle fell into

this group. Data were generated from interview *Talanoa*. Drawing from prior literature, the *Talanoa* were shaped around six focus areas, *demographics/personal history, religious background, cultural affect, coming-out narrative, human rights/gay rights activism, and dating/sex experiences/preferences* all lasting between 50 and 90 minutes in length, and follow-up *Talanoa* were held when required. *Talanoa* were digitally recorded then transcribed after they took place.

Informants in formal interview/*Talanoa* settings were given the option to not only opt-out at any time during the sessions, but they were also required to give their permission at the end of the *Talanoa* for the information they had shared in the *Vā*, to be used by the researcher. Additionally, they were also informed that even after they had participated, that they were able to strike things off the record, or withdraw from the study altogether. The option to take things off the record was taken up post-interview but none chose to withdraw from the study (Table 1).

The Talanoa

Informants and the Korean American Christian Church (KACC)

My mum's a Deacon at that Church, it's the largest Korean Church in Seattle with a congregation of more than 1500. She's been singing in the choir for years.—
Barnabas

Barnabas had moved to the US with his mother back in 1980. He subsequently moved to Seattle in 1990 with his then partner, who was now his husband. They lived in a high-income neighborhood near downtown Seattle with their three children, two adopted, one conceived through surrogacy.

I met Mike at a sleazy bar in Manhattan, at the time my life revolved around family, God and Jesus, when I met him, he was a Presbyterian boy from small town [redacted]. That night we talked for about 2 hours, in this sleazy bar, and we talked about God. It was a Wednesday night and I was 24, really energetic, we talked about having a family, you know with other guys I met it was always, meet, sex, adios, but this other guy it was different.—Barnabas

Table 1. Summary of informant profiles.

Pseudonym	Age	Religion	Marital status	Disclosure (Family)	Disclosure (Community)**
Azariah	30–34	Christian	Engaged	Immediate only*	Partial
Barnabas	50–54	Christian	Married	Immediate only	Partial
Cain	25–29	Christian	Single	Full disclosure	Full disclosure
Ezra***	20–24	Christian	Partnered	Full disclosure	Full disclosure
Reuben***	24–29	Christian	Married	Immediate only	Partial
Simeon	20–24	Christian	Single	Full disclosure	Full disclosure

*Disclosure refers to *who* informants have chosen to reveal their gay identity to. Immediate refers to only parents, siblings or grandparents and does not include extended family members like cousins. **Community refers to the Korean American community and partial refers to informants who are “out” to members of mainstream American society, and are yet to disclose their gay identity to the Korean American community. ***Refers to informants who identified as biracial.

Barnabas's connection with his husband had been initiated by their shared experience through religious ties, something that was common to all informants that had grown up in America. For Barnabas, the connections he made at the Church ran deeper than just his meeting with his future husband. His whole life had revolved around the Church and when he made the difficult decision for him to commit to a life with Mike, and moved to Seattle from New York and start a family, it was the Church where he and his husband sought community.

When we first moved to this neighborhood, we lived two blocks away from this Presbyterian Church, so we decided to go one Sunday and we sat at the back. I was holding both our babies and there was a tiny old Caucasian woman, she turned around and asked me how old my babies were. I told her that my youngest was barely 3-weeks-old at that point. And she turned around again. So the whole congregation seemed OK, but I wasn't really buying into it at this point, after the service, Mike said to me, let's go back next week, I don't care what they say, I like building community. So, I said, sure, we'll come back. The next week when I came back, the woman had made our baby a quilt with her name on it. She said she had made a quilt for the past 35 years for every newborn baby in that congregation. She was single, never married, never had children and had been attending the Church ever since it was established in 1965, so it was really touching and we have been going ever since.—Barnabas

For Barnabas, after moving to a new city and starting a new family in Seattle, it was the Church where he felt the sense of community that he and his husband were able to ground themselves in. The complexity in Barnabas and Mike's story pertains to the fact that the Church itself was an important source of social support as they built community in a new city.

I believe that my parents were connected to a Church from since they first got to America and I was baptized in that Church.—Cain

Cain, another informant, spoke of the times they spent with their family in their Korean Church in wider Washington State.

It was a place where we could be with people who look like me, we would eat Korean food, although my group sessions were in English.—Cain

When I prodded about whether this was about protecting identity Cain replied:

Yeah, I feel like there's another big thing about Christian Churches in Seattle, where there's a loss of identity where it can be really White and mainstream.—Cain

Here, Cain touched on the struggles of growing up as a child of migrant parents. Specifically, identified the issue of coming up against a mainstream that centered on Whiteness and the Church. However, when I asked Cain about their family's adherence to Korean specific norms, this is what they had to offer about ancestor worship³:

We never did ancestor worship, it's something I had to reclaim for myself recently. I put pictures of my grandmothers in my room, my family completely adopted Christian rituals, it wasn't a picture of my grandparents hanging in our living room; it was a picture of Jesus, White Jesus nonetheless.

Cain's responses to the questions of ancestor worship not being something their family practiced anymore was important in that a Christian norm had infiltrated the space occupied by traditionally a Confucian and by-default, Korean one. The relationality between the two factors is clearly evident. Cain's attempt to reclaim the tradition here can be seen as an attempt at asserting their own Korean identity. But what this response shows is that the Church itself is the referential in which a Korean American identity orbits around and relates to.

Azariah another informant had been living in Seattle for 8 years prior to our *talanoa*. He would later meet his fiancé in Seattle, go to Law School in Seattle and find stable employment practicing law there too. Azariah, who was born outside WA, helped provide important insights into one of the largest Korean American communities in the United States (Los Angeles).

I grew up in a Presbyterian Church, our family went every Sunday and we ate lunch like every Sunday at the Church.—Azariah

His responses added another dimension as he was one of the only informants who grew up in the US to inform me that he had attended Korean school on the weekends, which was connected to the Church community too.

But I mostly went for the free donuts.—Azariah

Unlike Cain, Azariah outlined to me how Confucian norms were very much kept alive in their household by his mother who would even drive out to his College, which was 40 miles away from his hometown with *songpyeon* (rice cakes) just to celebrate *Seollal* and *Chuseok* with him. This suggests that within Korean American families, the role of Christianity and how it affects familial practices vary. Whilst Cain's family shunned ancestor worship and all rites associated with *Seollal* and *Chuseok*, Azariah's family seemed to be synthesizing both. Again, the emphasis relates to the role of the KACC as a site of relationality.

The next two informants, Reuben and Ezra, were also immersed in the Church growing up. For Reuben, a child from a mixed marriage, where his father was of White-American stock and his mother Korean, it was his maternal grandmother who maintained a strong connection to the Korean Church in his hometown.

She only started attending Church when she got to America, funnily enough.—
Reuben

Reuben would tell me in a follow-up conversation:

I guess it was where she was able to feel connection and build her own sense of community.—Reuben

Reuben would also touch on similar issues that Cain and Azariah did in relation to their own personal faith. What Reuben's insights provided was a link between the KACC and his maternal grandmother's integration into American society after migrating to the US. This was something that was identified in the prior literature that showed how Korean migrants often found a community within the KACC.

Ezra, another informant, provided an interesting counterpoint to Reuben's, yet, his narrative came to underscore the same theme of belonging and connectedness that Reuben's grandmother appeared to be tapping into relating to the KACC. In stark difference to Reuben, Ezra felt very little connection to his Korean heritage.

I don't really claim my Korean side, the only thing Korean about me are my features.—Ezra

Reuben's connection to Korea came through his Korean father who was adopted from an orphanage in Korea, and the complexity in his story was illustrated by the fact that despite his father not being able to speak Korean made them all attend Korean Church.

It was surprising; my dad doesn't speak any Korean. I don't speak any Korean either. And I've only ever been to the airport on my way to the Philippines—Ezra

Yet, Ezra felt it was where his father felt some connection to being Korean. Therefore, we can see that for informants' family members the Church is also an important site of identity preservation or place of reconnection for Ezra's father. For Ezra in particular, when we spoke after our formal *talanoa* many times, he often felt his outsider status as a mixed Korean Filipino, and at least at the moment where he attended Korean Church, he felt some sort of connection back to his Korean heritage. The complicated nature of his father's story has been mostly redacted here at Ezra's request. However, what it also stories is the intense complexities for Korean adoptees who were taken from Korea at a young age, and face the reality of being a racial other in the United States. His father was stripped of cultural reference points that could have helped to define an ethnically coded experience within a Korean identity. A process that led to Ezra's father gravitating toward the KACC.

Moreover, the importance of Christianity in helping shape the identity of informants is also revealed by Azariah in this excerpt:

I've always identified as a Christian, from more of a spiritual sense, [...] to love other people as much as humanly possible, and for that love to be unconditional, so I get something to aspire to be. [...] But beyond that I don't agree with the treatment of people who don't follow exactly the teachings of the Church, I don't agree with like, teachings of judgment.—Azariah

He later confirmed that he was referring to the Church's stance on homosexuality. For Azariah, although the Church was the site where he derived his moral compass, it was also the site where his confusion came from, in that he had to try to resolve his homosexuality with that of the teachings of a Church he disagreed with. Thus, I argue that the informants' Korean identity could not be separated meaningfully from their Christian ones. In other words, the relationality between the two meant that to be a Korean American often meant being a Christian as well.

Informants and the coming-out process

The first day she (his mother) got to Seattle I decided to tell her so that we would have the week, in my head it sounded like a great idea [laughter], that we'd have the whole week to talk it out and then it ended up being an incredibly awkward week. [...] We agreed not to tell my Dad, so she went back home and I guess she was so physically and emotionally and visibly depressed, my dad had asked about it and he found out like the day she arrived and booked a flight for the following weekend. [...] He came with a stack of papers that he printed and there was this incredible article about how, like the problems of choosing to be gay, it was put out by some organization that is along the lines of something like the 'Center for Keeping Families Wholesome' or something.—Azariah

In this excerpt, Azariah stories the way the Church related to the way his parents reacted to his disclosure of his sexual identity. Namely, it caused panic and strategizing on both their parts in trying to figure out the best way to deal with Azariah not complying with Church teachings. The impact of the Church was further strengthened later in the interview at Thanksgiving when Azariah returned home for the holidays after he had come out to his mother:

I went home and found my Mom had circled all these passages in the bible with post-it notes, I think it was to try and give her strength.—Azariah

Azariah also detailed how his father reacted:

Finding out that I didn't necessarily fit what his probable expectations were, for my future and having kids, like, he probably had so many questions, but he didn't really have a mechanism to ask those questions.—Azariah

His father's reaction which he had explained as being a product of a desire for him to have children and carry on the family name is very much in-line with Confucian norms that center patriarchal continuity of familial lines. With cisheteronormative patriarchy a feature of Christianity as well, the overlap between the two can be easily inferred. The interwoven nature of Confucian and Christian forces was also something demonstrated by Cain in their responses. Cain described how the relational nature of Christianity and Confucian norms in their household affected the coming-out process.

Cain: I came out to my parents in 2014. This was after college, back at home, fed up with the idea of them not knowing who I was. It was really disastrous. I felt like what hurt them more, was the fact that I stopped going to Church. That was more painful to my mom and dad, these factors coming together, you know the bible talks about not being gay. Yeah it was definitely a hodge-podge of judgments placed on me at the same time, thinking I went to college in California and came back this heathen, a raging homosexual who lost his way.

Researcher: Do you think for your family; it was also to do with the expectations of a son in the Korean culture?

Cain: Oh, yeah, the term filial piety, that was a big thing I was struggling with. Especially with being American, and that not being a prominent value, at least I don't see it as a prominent value. So it's like: "well you guys brought me to America, I'm just trying to be an individual, how this culture teaches me to be.

Researcher: How do you feel about that, do you feel like that you should be allowed to integrate more with American culture/norms, versus holding onto Korean culture and its norms?

Cain: That's the gold question, I feel like American culture is problematic in a lot of ways. In terms of rejection of family, 18, you move out; I find a value in family ties, that's your original support network, it's also helped form my identity. That's a really important question, especially now because I ask myself: What is my duty to my family, my community, my Korean identity? But also, what is my duty to my queer family, to my queer brothers and sisters? How can we reconcile the two? Yeah, so those are the big questions, I don't have an answer for you.

Informants and the importance of family

Cain's responses demonstrated the importance of family in relation to how they narrated their sense of selfhood. Overall, the embeddedness of family and Church is already well telegraphed in informant responses, but the feelings of duty to family were something that also stood out as a major theme in informant responses. This excerpt from Barnabas' and I's *Talanoa* explains how important this relational aspect to his narrative is in describing how he made the choice to inform his mother of his decision to move away to Seattle:

I had a monetary motivation to help feed the family in a way, I wanted to make things happen in America; it was to make money, buy a penthouse, get a key for my mum—in the meantime find someone to love. Maybe I might. I dated women before. I wanted to please my family, the relationship between my sister, me and my mom was so strong; we were inseparable. So, I wrote a 10-page letter to my mom, she's a fourth-generation Presbyterian and we were so committed to Church. I said to her in the letter that I wanted to take a chance to find my life somewhere besides New York. I folded it in parts and left \$1000 cash in her bedroom, snuck it under her door and I left at 4 in the morning, on my birthday.—
Barnabas

This excerpt also demonstrated the immigrant narrative of struggle. Where he casts his family's story in the US as one of the financial struggles in trying to "make it" in America. The important factor is that even when deciding to move out, Barnabas still centered on how it would impact his mother:

You know for Asian, Korean families, unless there's a death, or some other pivotal moment it's really hard to break that relationship, and you know how Korean moms treat their sons, basically spoon feed them from birth. I think she cried for 3 months.—Barnabas

In this way, I argue that for Barnabas, the reluctance to come out to his mother was not necessarily a fear of rejection alone, rather, his fears were also related to the possibility that he may not be able to fulfill his role as a son within the family. The fact that he felt so strongly about providing for his mother and helping his family make it financially in America was also a product of his family's history. His mother had come from a wealthy family with *Yangban* or aristocratic roots. However, after the land reforms following the Korean War upturned Korea's social class order, she was forced to marry a poor man and they migrated to the US with next-to-nothing.

My mother's family practically owned most of (name of town redacted for confidentiality), but after the Korean War, my grandfather's land was mostly taken away. My father, he was a poor man, and with my mum being the last of them to be married, my dad went to ask my grandfather to marry my mom. My grandfather said: "you, come here," pointing to my mom, "just go." And that was it. [laughter], he was really brave to do that, thinking about it now, she was the daughter of a higher up, everything had changed.—Barnabas

In addition to this, for Cain, the KACC was where his family developed a major part of their ethnic identity. Cain intimated to me their gratitude for having this network in place when they were growing up where they were able to develop and appreciate a greater sense of their Korean ethnic heritage.

Yeah they (family) really helped to foster the aspect of my Korean identity that I still hold today and I'm really grateful for that. I've heard experiences of other Korean Americans where their parents shunned, completely rejected their Korean identity, like refusing to teach them the language, and 'you should learn English.' My parents were good at straddling that line between American and Korean culture. We always ate Korean food, my mom was and still is an amazing Korean cook. Really keeps our culture alive through the food, fermenting things, sent me to Korean school when I was young, we went to the biggest Korean Church in Seattle.—Cain

The term "straddling," words that Cain chose themselves to use, demonstrates their awareness of the duality of an experience that has family and Church firmly placed in one camp as a migrant experience, whilst looking outward into an adopted homeland and trying to fit in there too. However, with family being the place they derived their sense of security and identity from, it also becomes an

important site for Cain to protect, as was demonstrated by their statements referenced earlier in the paper.

The importance of family and how it functions as a support mechanism for informants is also demonstrated in Reuben's story of coming-out to his mother. His was a staggered coming-out, where he told his sister first, followed by his father and finally his mother.

My mom was the most emotionally affected by it. She cried when I came out to her, she was pretty upset, she was more worried about me, she felt sorry for me. {,} She was sad for the life that I would have, that it would be hard for me, or she was sad for the fact that my life had been hard up to that point, harder than a straight person.—Reuben

This quote emphasizes the multi-dimensional aspect of relational-based familial complexities. Here, according to Reuben, his mother's distress was not focused on her son having violated the religious norms of her family's values system, rather, he interpreted it as a mother's instinct to protect her son. The opportunity to realize this has been denied to her by the existence of a sexual identity in her son that is marginalized by society. This nuance could be interpreted as heterosexism, but clearly, Reuben's mother's concern here is not that her son is in violation of heteronormativity, rather, that she has not been able to protect him as much as she has felt obliged to as part of who she is as a Korean mother.

Navigating the complexities of relationality—narratives of convenience (NoC)

The importance of family and specifically the embeddedness of informants' families within the KACC is what I postulate facilitated the development of a NoC. A NoC is an adaptive strategy that presents a heteronormative story to select members of the Korean American community to ensure that informants and/or their families are able to continue to remain part of social and wider-familial structures. This also allowed informants to reveal their sexual identity to key members of their family and live as openly gay men to wider American society.

Take the example of Barnabas. Despite Barnabas and husband having lived together for many years which included raising three children, two who were now teenagers, Barnabas revealed to me that his marriage was not common knowledge in the Korean American community.

When my mother found out that he was more than just my roommate she broke down in tears, it was hard for me to tell her, you know what it's like [...] so she tells everyone in the Church that he's my roommate and together we support and adopt kids who are needy.—Barnabas

This narrative was something that Barnabas complied with in allowing his mother to have the opportunity to preserve her position within the KACC. In

doing so, he is respecting the relational aspect of his identity as a Korean son. And this was important considering that she also ran a business that also relied on the patronage of Korean Americans in her community. KACC are also vital sites for economic exchanges that help to establish Korean businesses. A well-documented feature of Korean businesses in the US is how other Koreans became patrons of other Korean American businesses, and the Church was an important site where these connections were made according to my informants. This was something both Barnabas and Azariah talked about and is also present in the previously reviewed literature⁴.

NoCs were also negotiated and deployed in situations where it required interacting with extended family members that often included having other members of the immediate family enacting particular roles of deception. When Barnabas took his family to South Korea during the summer, his husband stayed behind, but his children and mother went with him.

So everyone on my mother's side has passed away except her eldest, so all her cousins came. So, my eldest (adopted of Chinese heritage) he's a good looking kid, and everyone was like, 'Oh he's the Park, he instantly gets \$100 [...] and they said to me, 'oh your wife must be White,' [...] I didn't say anything but my Mum said, yeah, she's working at home. [...] The relatives said, 'she's a good wife,' my kids didn't know what was going on, although my redhead calls me mummy, the relatives didn't really understand what she meant by that.—Barnabas

This was also something that Azariah experienced when he traveled with his fiancé to South Korea coincidentally during the same summer.

Before we travelled, we sat down and talked about how we would be introduced to and who would we be introduced to. It was decided that he would just be introduced as *chingu* ("friend") [...] and when I came out there was an understanding that I would not be coming-out to anyone in my extended family. Over the years, my mum's side all know now, but my dad's side, still nobody knows.—Azariah

It turns out that for Azariah it was his maternal grandmother who was key in taking leadership on his mother's side for allowing that side of the family to accept his gay identity. The reason why his father's side was kept in the dark was to ensure peaceful relations were maintained between his father and the rest of his relatives.

They're extremely judgmental people, my father feels a lot of pressure from them.
— Azariah

For Reuben, a NoC was also set up in protecting his Korean grandmother who connected him the most with his Korean side. When he came out to his mother as quoted earlier, her reaction was very emotional. But later he assured me that she was at peace with it now. When we talked about his grandmother who he called a "3rd parent," he said he would never tell her.

She was typical in the sense for a lot of Korean immigrants they need a community to get help from, and the Church is that for the Korean American community.—
Reuben

Thus, Reuben's decision not to tell her protected her from having to be dislocated from this community in the event of his coming-out upsetting members of the KACC.

Informants rejecting a NoC

For Simeon his choice to come out to everyone meant that he no longer wanted to be associated with the Korean American community:

Saying that it's the Church is an excuse, you have to be braver and accept who you are as a gay. I don't really associate myself with Koreans anymore. I am proud to be gay and I have a lot so say about that.—Simeon

Simeon's *Talanoa* was characterized by a great deal of angst he felt toward the Korean gay community in Seattle for not embracing their sexuality more openly. Tellingly, however, by revealing that he had engaged in full-disclosure and subsequently was not able to build any sense of gay Korean community, he intimated some kind of loss of community that informants who had deployed narratives of convenience had not. He later confirmed that his relationship with his parents was also very strained as a result of his choice to opt for full disclosure.

My parents and I don't really talk about my sexual identity at all. They're not happy with me being openly gay, but I know they love me. They have to just deal with it. It took me a long time to come out to them. But I didn't want to live my life as if I were lying to them, you know what I mean? So I did it and all hell broke loose. Now it's just something that's not spoken about.—Simeon

When I spoke to Simeon about his social circle it appeared that he did not socialize with many gay Korean men either. His gay social circle was ethnically diverse but tended to have Korean gay men absent. He maintained though that this was not by deliberate choice, rather a product of their lack of visibility. He had also dated a lot of Asian and White men but had not dated any other Koreans.

It's not like I avoid Korean guys, it's just that they're just not likely to be out I find. And seeing I'm openly gay, and a lot of Korean gays are too scared that they'll be found out if they hang out with other gay guys, Korean guys who know I'm gay and open about it probably just avoid it. But like I said, they need to be proud to be gay. Otherwise we're just going nowhere.—Simeon

Simeon's narrative offers an interesting counterpoint to some of the other informants in the study as he was born in the US and spent no time in Korea. For he openly claimed his Korean American identity clearly demarcating

a difference between “they” as Korean gays, versus him as a Korean American gay. What he meant by this distinction was never really explored in our *Talanoa*. This additional excerpt from our subsequent conversation may provide further insights.

I never spent any time in Korea so I don't know what that's like, I'm American in the way that I was born and raised here, so all I know is American life, but I was brought up in a Korean household by Korean parents who I don't really understand sometimes when it comes to their ways of thinking about my life. Like Koreans themselves are kinda too conservative for me to understand in many ways and I don't really like to hang out with too many of them in general.—Simeon

Cain, the other informant who was born in the Washington state area also shared similar sentiments with Simeon regarding the differences that existed between their parents' expectations and what their own desires were regarding living out their own sense for personhood. Cain chose the full-disclosure route. It was a decision that led to them being kicked out of home as they refused to abide by their family's request to keep their queer subjectivity invisible in familial spaces, however, since then they had moved back home to live under strict regulations:

I stayed at people's houses, even stayed at a park, but once they cooled down I got the message they still cared for me, but they couldn't accept that identification of me, that queer identity, I once put up a rainbow flag and that didn't go down well, so that's the rules we're playing with now.—Cain

Concluding discussion

Informants in my study demonstrated that Korean gay men are not a homogenous group in themselves and are affected by multiple discourses that circulate around familial and cultural normative structures, conservatism, migrant struggles, sexual identity, coming-out narratives, and racialized social structures. Korean gay men born in the US are brought into a unique intersectional environment that shapes their identity in specific differentiated ways. Where religious and ethnic marginalizations are mapped against culture, are then also infiltrated by socio-historical factors. Although this is not something that is new to the Asian American literature, what this study has demonstrated is that for Korean gay men, the specificity of their context varies in praxis. The fact that they often navigate their marginality in relation to their ethnic community and Church sets their narratives apart from others that have been documented in the literature previously.

Moreover, by approaching the narratives of my informants using a relationality frame, one accessed by this researcher via their PRM approach to knowledge production we can clearly see that informants navigated the complexities of coming-out from a perspective of relationship preservation and building, not just one of the individualistic agency alone. In other words, for informants, being gay mattered, but it was not the *only* thing that mattered.

This resonates with a Pacific-way of knowing from an *itulagi* perspective, where one is not just an individual that added together with other individuals makes up part of a whole, one is part of the whole as an individual, where their relationship with others is vital to the preservation of the whole (Va'ai, 2017). Thus, for informants protecting their family and family members is an exercise in relationality, even if their sexual identity contravenes the norms of their community. Thus, rather than choosing to come out to everyone in their families, informants often chose to strategize, by building NoCs.

In deploying a NoC, informants were able to protect the integrity of their family structures in two ways. For informants such as Barnabas and Reuben, they used them to protect key members of their families from friction that may have come from within the KACC. For Barnabas, it allowed his mother to stay connected to the KACC and ensured that he was also able to live his life with his husband and family without the stressors of homophobic attitudes being brought into their family environment from some within the KACC. Barnabas's mother was a Deacon in the KACC. For Reuben, the decision to deploy a NoC was also a good way to protect his maternal grandmother. For Barnabas and Azariah, the deployment of a NoC when they returned to South Korea to visit friends and family was vital in ensuring harmony prevailed on their travels. For Ezra, despite his father not being able to speak Korean, he still went to a Korean Church as it was where he felt connected to his Korean identity. For people in which relational aspects of their identity matter, this should be seen as a valid way to navigate the complexities of familial, religious and cultural normative structures.

In addition to this, a NoC allowed to facilitate a more culturally appropriate gradual reveal of an informant's gay identity. For Azariah, by choosing to just refer to his fiancé as his *chingu* on their family trip, he was able to allow his extended family space to be able to process the possibility of his gay identity on their own. I interpret this from a Sāmoan perspective known as to "*teu le vā*" which literally means to "nurture the space"—or to respect the relationality between people. By allowing his extended family members to ponder on their own the possibilities of his and his fiancé's relationship, Azariah is, in essence, taking care of the space between him and his family. By respecting this space, he is recognizing that if he was to cause distress by focusing on his own needs alone, he would be injuring their relationship and in-turn himself, as he is co-constituted in relation to those around him.

In contrast, Simeon had chosen to take a full-disclosure route. Without a NoC—which I argue is more sensitized to the relationality reality of the Korean-specific understanding of identity formation—Simeon in effect had chosen to distance himself from his ethnic community. In addition, when reviewing Cain's coming-out narrative, their decision to come out in college came after being away from their home environment for an extended period of time. Thus, when they made the decision to pursue a full coming-out

narrative, without a sensitized adaptive strategy, it led to not only psychological distress but threatened their material safety as well.

Informants deployed narratives of convenience when necessary in order to preserve familial structures, but this often did not prevent them from living fully realized gay relationships, marriages, and families in some cases. For all intents and purposes, my informants were happy, well adjusted and lived full lives. Those in this study who did suffer from emotional distress were those who followed full coming-out narratives advanced by Western sexuality norms. Therefore, I posit that using NoCs should also be seen as another type of adaptive strategy to gay marginalization and a fully valid form of viewing gay futurity in particular temporal and cultural contexts.

Notes

1. Intersectionality with genealogical roots in Black Feminist literature was coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989) and begins with the premise that focusing on single markers leads to a false classification of people that simply does not reflect lived realities. This paper focuses on relationality specifically from a Pacific perspective, but the overlap between intersectionality and Pacific relationality is clear and helps connect analyses around the complexity of identity for Korean gay men in the US with a Pacific *itulagi* (worldview).
2. For a more extensive review of the concept of the *Vā* see Anae (2010, 2016).
3. Ancestor worship or *Chesa* in Korean culture is often practiced at *Chuseok* (Korean Thanksgiving) and *Seollal* (Korean New Year).
4. This Church's role in providing significant social and psychological support for migrant communities in low-socioeconomic areas is well documented already (see Hirschman, 2004).

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