



North Korean women entrepreneurs learning from failure

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Abstract

Migrants' workplace experiences in their host society, including failure, shape their social adjustment, yet *how* migrants learn from failures is under-investigated. The study presented here examined how North Korean migrants struggling for a foothold in South Korea sought to learn from failures in their workplaces and everyday life. The article draws on nine months of ethnographic research in South Korean restaurants and cafés employing North Korean migrants. Data sources include informal conversations and loosely structured interviews with five purposefully selected women who started, or planned to start, their own enterprise. The findings reveal that these migrants perceived failure in five interrelated spheres: financial, relational, physical, psychological and professional. Participants developed perspectives to understand failure as an integral part of learning in a new society and adopting unfamiliar role expectations and responsibilities. They also applied knowledge they had acquired through their failures to change their approach to their career and to strengthen their personal and business capacity to obtain a legitimate social position. Paradoxically, failures that were beyond their control, such as legal problems, created opportunities to receive practical support from, and increase trust in, South Koreans. In addition to challenging the discourse that portrays North Korean migrants as deficient, these findings contribute to adult education scholarship on migrants' situated learning in their host societies.

Keywords Adult learning · Entrepreneurship · Learning from failure · Migration studies · North Korean migrants · Workplace learning · Situated learning

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Résumé

Les entrepreneuses nord-coréennes apprennent de leurs échecs – Les expériences des migrants au travail dans la société qui les accueille, y compris leurs échecs, forment leur adaptation sociale. On s'est toutefois peu penché sur la *façon* dont ils apprennent de leurs échecs. L'étude présentée ici examine comment des migrantes nord-coréennes luttant pour prendre pied en Corée du Sud cherchent à apprendre de leurs échecs au travail et dans la vie quotidienne. L'article s'appuie sur des recherches ethnographiques menées pendant neuf mois dans des restaurants et cafés sud-coréens qui emploient des migrantes de Corée du Nord. Les sources de données comprennent des conversations informelles et des interviews librement structurées avec cinq femmes choisies parce qu'elles ont monté leur propre entreprise ou projettent de le faire. Les résultats montrent que ces migrantes catégorisent les échecs en cinq domaines liés les uns aux autres : financiers, relationnels, physiques, psychologiques et professionnels. Les participantes ont développé des points de vue qui leur permettent d'envisager l'échec comme faisant partie intégrante de l'apprentissage dans une nouvelle société et des attentes et responsabilités liées aux rôles qu'elles doivent adopter et qui leur sont étrangers. Elles mettent aussi en pratique les connaissances acquises quand elles ont échoué à changer d'approche pour leur parcours professionnel et à renforcer leurs capacités personnelles et professionnelles en vue de conquérir une position sociale légitime. Paradoxalement, les échecs sur lesquels elles n'ont pas de prise, par exemple les problèmes juridiques, leur ont donné l'occasion de recevoir une aide concrète de la part des Sud-Coréens et d'accroître leur confiance vis-à-vis d'eux. En plus de remettre en question le discours qui dépeint les migrants nord-coréens comme des êtres inférieurs, ces résultats participent à enrichir le savoir de l'éducation des adultes au sujet de l'apprentissage des migrants dans les sociétés d'accueil.

Introduction

Paid work is one of the main ways for adult migrants to get to know their host society and become part of it. Due to the difficulty of finding and retaining employment, failure is an unavoidable aspect of workplace learning for many migrants, especially those who encounter vast social, linguistic, cultural, political and economic differences between their home and host countries. Although it is an established fact that workplace experiences, including failure, play a significant role in shaping migrants' social adjustment, what remains as yet under-investigated is *how* they learn from and respond to failures. For example, migrants can use failure to understand how they might change their thinking, behaviour, and adaptation strategies. Learning from failure is crucial for migrants who are or aspire to be entrepreneurs, since starting and running a successful business is a risky endeavour.

Practitioners and trainers explore ways to facilitate effective learning to avoid further failure in real-life situations, observe how individuals develop reflective thinking and resilience from negative emotions, and attempt to foster safe learning environments (e.g., safe-to-fail workplaces). While learning from failure has been explored by scholars in leadership and entrepreneurship (Lattacher and Wdowiak 2020; Nicolaidis and Poell 2020; Shepherd 2003; Shepherd, Patzelt and Wolfe

2011), research in the field of adult learning and education (ALE) is less frequent, and mostly confined to vocational and professional education with respect to problem-based learning and problem-posing education (Foley 2004).

This article responds to the call of adult education scholars (English and Mayo 2019; Guo 2010) for research on migrants' *informal* learning and to their appeal to frame failure as a "learning opportunity" (Webb 2015, p. 76) in real-life situations. In the study we present here, we use ethnographic data focusing on five North Korean women entrepreneurs in South Korea who transitioned from communist to capitalist economies. We selected them for our research because their social position in South Korean society differs from that of other migrant populations in South Korea and elsewhere. Specifically, North Korean migrants look like South Koreans and shared the same language before seven decades of division split the nations' dialects, accents and cultural understandings. The psychological challenges that North Korean migrants encounter in South Korean political, legal and economic systems are to some extent similar to those of Eastern Germans as "mental minorities" in unified Germany (Bleiker 2003, p. 408). The first author's everyday engagement with North Korean participants in their workplace provides insights into their realities and learning from failure.

Refugees and migrants from remote and rural regions encounter complex failures beyond their control because their internalised concepts of time and rhythm of life differ from what they face in foreign, urban situations (Tefera and Gamlen 2023). As a result of failure, migrants must cope with uncomfortable emotions such as desperation and frustration. These negative emotions, seldom discussed in the adult education literature, are integral to learning (Dirkx 2008). Like research on other migrant groups, the research on North Korean migrants is steeped in deficit discourses and documents the psychological impacts caused by accumulated adversity in their border-crossing experience and adjustment difficulties, including post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological, emotional and relational stresses (Kim et al. 2019). Few studies (Kim 2012; Ju 2016) have focused on North Korean migrants' perceived growth and thriving after overcoming adversity without explicating the mechanism of learning.

Drawing on situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) to describe migrants' learning from the periphery of a community of practice where South Korean culture was alien to them, we explore how accumulated failures induced deep learning and self-reflection about their core assumptions, their business, and life as a whole. Our study contributes to the adult learning literature by focusing on migrant women entrepreneurs' learning from failure. In this article, we argue that migrant entrepreneurs' attitudes towards failure positions them as lifelong learners who are capable of overcoming challenging conditions. Our findings can help support policy interventions and educational initiatives for migrants (including entrepreneurs) based on the recognition that failure can provide unexpected learning opportunities for personal growth and maturity.

Background

Over 33,800 North Korean migrants have arrived in South Korea since 1990, and over 71 per cent of them are women (MoU 2023). Despite the shared language and racial origins between the two Koreas, North Korean migrants have encountered barriers to integration due to the difference in economic and political systems, which started to diverge in 1948.¹ While North Korea has pursued a military-first policy and established an economically fragile party–army regime, South Korea achieved economic success (i.e., the “Miracle on the Han River”),² became a member country of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and is ranked as the 12th-largest economy in terms of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Koen and Beom 2020). In 2021, South Korea’s Gross National Income (GNI) was 57.7 times greater than that of North Korea (BoK 2022). Given such political and economic differences, it is not surprising that North Korean migrants’ adjustment to life in South Korea is like riding a “time machine”, as they negotiate experiences of extreme cultural differences (Kang et al. 2017 p. 3). North Korean migrants’ experiences of failure are an integral part of their learning to adjust in South Korea.

Literature review

Generally, failure refers to being unsuccessful in meeting desired goals and purposes (Vanderheiden and Mayer 2020). Failure is “the *conditio humana*” (Braun 2011, p. 38), a natural human experience we all encounter from time to time in our daily activities. Failure is an integral part of everyday activities through which people take actions and accomplish personal or collective goals, and scholars in diverse disciplines are attempting to explain how people learn from their failures.

Scholars working in the field of psychology (Darabi et al. 2018; Piaget 1977) explain that learning from failure results from balancing *cognitive disequilibrium*, which refers to a mismatch between one’s mental model and new situations (Piaget 1977). From this perspective, when people are challenged by unexpected situations and feel uncomfortable, they are motivated to fill those gaps in their mindsets either by assimilating new information or modifying their schema. This approach is useful to explain how people voluntarily learn to overcome failures in any given context. Yet, this model overly simplifies complex learning in emotional, social, and societal dimensions (Illeris 2004).

Other scholars working in the fields of leadership, business management and entrepreneurship (Shepherd 2003; Shepherd et al. 2011; Shepherd et al. 2020) have

¹ In 1945, the Korean peninsula was divided at the 38th parallel. After World War II, Japan lost its occupation over Korea, and the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea.

² After the Korean War (1950–1953), South Korea experienced rapid economic growth, transforming it from a poorly developed country to a developed country. Similar to Germany’s economic rebirth after World War II, often referred to as the “Miracle on the Rhine”, South Korea’s rise became the “Miracle on the Han River”.

examined learning from failure in business and organisational settings. Their studies suggest that certain conditions such as personal characteristics and emotional regulation are imperative for catalysing learning from failure (Bennett and Snyder 2017). In particular, research in these fields suggests that entrepreneurs expedite their learning because they develop ways to cope with the pain caused by loss and develop generative thinking to overcome failure (Cope 2011). By focusing on how entrepreneurs think and do things differently after failure, these studies reveal entrepreneurs' internal learning process, but pay insufficient attention to the sociocultural contexts in which work and learning occur.

Despite scholarly efforts to explain learning from failure, failure is perceived differently across social and cultural contexts because societies define it in multiple ways. Indeed, there is no universal way of understanding learning from failure (Vanderheiden and Mayer 2020). For instance, in a contract-oriented culture like the United States, a manager who does not meet a contractually agreed target may be perceived as a failure. By contrast, a Chinese manager who is from a high-context culture and values relationships over contracts, perceives not building *guanxi*, a set of internal connections, through informal conversations and networking, as a failure. These examples indicate that failure should be interpreted from both a personal and a sociocultural perspective because it is the learners who determine how they respond to failure while it is the social environment which shapes how failure is perceived. Although multiple experiences of failure can lead to anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts (Jaiswal et al. 2016; Silver and Teasdale 2005), learners' growth and maturity is influenced by how they solicit improvement opportunities and develop attitudes towards failure (Vanderheiden and Mayer 2020).

Failure is a natural part of migrants' informal learning. Migrants cannot help encountering multiple failures because of factors that influence their integration, such as socioeconomic conditions and the political environment of their host society (Lee et al. 2020; Tefera and Gamlen 2023). For instance, if the social safety net is inadequate and policies are not in place to support migrants, they are more likely to encounter employment failures, but not because of their lack of information or personal characteristics. In particular, their limited resources and social networks and (albeit not in our study) language barriers affect their failure (Datta et al. 2007). To avoid consequences – giving up and returning home, for instance – migrants continue their learning efforts as they struggle to survive under risk and uncertainty.

Scholars working in the field of migration (e.g., De Haas et al. 2015) have criticised simplistic views that sort migrants' learning to adjust into two categories: either integration into the host society (winners) or return migration (losers). This dichotomy insufficiently conceptualises migrants' learning from failure in complex situations involving individual, social and structural factors. Research documenting migrants' learning and growth from failure can help counteract the perspective that they are deficient employees who need re-education and training (Guo 2009). In this regard, scholars working in the field of adult education (e.g., English and Mayo 2019; Guo 2010; Webb 2015) call for examining the complexities and complications in migrants' learning as a locally situated practice that transcends formal education and training. These scholars emphasise the importance of research that explores the heterogeneity of migrants' experiences

and perspectives on their learning, focusing on individual and contextual factors that facilitate or hinder learning, beyond the dichotomy of success and failure.

Theoretical framework

This article applies the theory of *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991) to analyse migrants' learning as participation in a social practice. In contrast to the traditional understanding of learning as the cognitive acquisition of objective knowledge, situated learning views learning as an integral part of everyday life in social and cultural settings where people learn through practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Knowledge is therefore not abstract, but specific, relational and contextual. Learning begins with *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP), or being a newcomer or novice on the periphery. LPP refers to the development of knowledge and an identity that can be reproduced through participation in a *community of practice* such as a workplace. A community of practice is a group of people who have shared interests and activities to achieve mutual goals.

Situated learning explains learning as a constant dynamic among “agent, activity, and the world” (Lave and Wenger 1991, p. 33) within a community of practice that involves the whole person as they negotiate meanings and knowledge from the past and future, and construct an identity. Through participation in everyday activities such as work, people develop their own “repertoire” of “routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres, actions or concepts” (Wenger 1998, p. 83). Situated learning has rightly been critiqued for not attending to power (Fuller 2007); however, the focus of the present study is not on power relations between experts and novices in North Korean migrants' workplace communities of practice, but rather on how they learn from failure through their everyday practices at work.

Situated learning has been applied in research aiming to understand how migrants learn through participation at work (Evans 2014; Shan and Guo 2013; Williams 2006; Williams and Baláz 2008). Migrants bring their existing skills and knowledge to their host society and engage in opportunities to develop new meanings, knowledge and understanding to fit in (Morrice 2007). Learning, therefore, involves (re-) construction of the self, a process which interweaves identity and agency in a new situation as a way of becoming and being, and in turn changes the community of practice. Peter Alheit and Bettina Dausien's “idea of the ‘biographicity’ of social learning processes” (Alheit and Dausien 2002, p. 3) takes a similar view of situated learning; it involves both the changes of the self and the world by recognising and enacting the unrealised potential of one's biographical knowledge. Knowledge that is grounded in the lifeworld can promote voluntary activities to shape and transform existing social structures.

Methodology

Data for this article were drawn from field work for a dissertation on informal learning among North Korean migrants in South Korea. The study was approved by Penn State's Institutional Review Board, and the first author obtained all

participants' informed consent. In this article, we address the following questions: (1) What kinds of failure did migrant participants experience? (2) What did participants learn from these failures? Answering these questions with extreme examples (Pettigrew 1990) experienced by North Korean migrants, who faced drastic changes between life in their home country and in South Korea, can provide rich conceptual and practical insights into the lived experience of learning from failure.

The first author chose an ethnographic research design for several reasons. Most studies about North Korean migrants in South Korea are conducted by South Korean scholars using surveys or interviews. However, the migrants are usually cautious about revealing personal information and suspicious towards other people for political and personal reasons. Hence, survey and structured interview studies (without any prior relationship-building) are more likely to produce thin, and possibly inaccurate, data. By contrast, an ethnographic investigation involves building trust and rapport, interacting with participants in their everyday lives, and collecting multiple types of data; as such, an ethnographic study can provide deeper, multi-faceted insights into North Korean migrants' realities (Adler and Adler 1987).

This study is based on nine months of ethnographic research in South Korean service industry workplaces (e.g., restaurants and cafés) that employ North Korean migrants as part of a social enterprise to help them gain workplace skills and becoming integrated into South Korean society. The first author conducted the study in a large city, in four workplaces where she served as a part-time barista and waitress. As a South Korean woman and native Korean speaker, she communicated with migrant participants in Korean. In situations where North Korean participants used unfamiliar terms, she received interpretation assistance from key informants both during and after fieldwork. Her part-time employee position allowed her to be immersed in everyday business settings (Wolcott 2008). This participant observation allowed her to explore migrants' daily routines, build rapport and personal relationships with the women, and experience first-hand what their workplaces were like.

In addition to participant observation, data sources for this article include informal conversations and loosely structured interviews (Patton 2015) to minimise the possibility of standardised and fixed responses (Jeon 2000). A key limitation of this study is the small number of participants, although the number is within the norm for ethnographic studies that do not seek to generalise their findings. The study sample comprised five purposefully selected women who had started, or planned to start, their own enterprise. Participants' characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Our ethnographic approach is well suited to listening to migrants' voices and interpreting the meanings of learning from failure in the context of daily routines. Each of the women were interviewed for one to three hours, and the interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. As participants narrated their life stories during the study, they often referred to the content and context of their failure and learning grounded in lived experiences. Our unit of analysis is participants' perceptions, and descriptions of failure events and activities that they viewed as failures. Depending on the participant, they referred explicitly to failure and/or used related terms such as (financial) liquidation, bankruptcy, falling down, betrayal, and hitting bottom.

Table 1 Participants' characteristics

Pseudonym	Arrival in S. Korea	Age (range)	Marital status	Region of birth	Educational attainment	Work experience
Heajin	2002	50–55	Single	Hamhung	College	N. Korea: telephone operator China: antique sales, medical hub business S. Korea: restaurants, inns, motels, insurance planning company, karaoke (business owner, failed), pet shop
Jungnam	2014	35–40	Married (Chinese)	Hoeryong	High school	N. Korea: teacher China: housewife (forced marriage) S. Korea: restaurants, catering
Kyonghee	2008	50–55	Married (S. Korean)	Musan	High school	N. Korea: factory worker China: tourism business, translator, restaurant S. Korea: sewing factory, restaurants, Chinese instructor
Songja	2004	55–60	Married (S. Korean)	Hoeryong	High school	N. Korea: chef China: sewing, restaurants S. Korea: restaurant, catering (business owner, failed)
Sunhee	2003	40–45	Married (S. Korean)	Hamhung	High school	N. Korea: merchant/trader China: housewife S. Korea: restaurant, sales, factory, restaurant (business owner, failed), marriage brokerage (current business)

Data analysis constituted two phases. First, the first author read the interview transcripts multiple times and then conducted inductive thematic analysis. This involved line-by-line readings and highlighting meaning units related to learning from failure. The first author identified major themes and sub-themes which we then labelled, categorised and conceptualised. Next, she used descriptive phenomenological analysis to examine how participants forged meaning structures (Giorgi 2009). While interpreting the data, she paid attention to persistent meanings in participants' lived experiences rather than verifying facts and accuracy (ibid.).

Findings

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

Experiences of failure

We found that participants experienced failure in multiple, interrelated domains: financial, relational, physical, psychological and professional. Together, these experiences engendered tangible consequences and losses, including bankruptcy, separation and divorce, illness, depression, and isolation, among others.

Financial failure

All participants described some type of financial failure such as debt and bankruptcy in South Korea, which they described using terms like “*bin-teol-teol-i*” (stone broke), “*geo-ji*” (beggar), “*nal-lyeoss-da*” (blown up), and “*mang-haess-da*” (blew it). They provided various reasons for these financial failures, including fraud, ignorance, extravagance, and insufficient understanding of balancing saving and spending. For example, two participants were swindled out of their money by other North Koreans: “Who can defraud North Koreans? Only North Koreans.” Sunhee³ became indebted after paying her broker's fee (money charged for entering South Korea) and sending remittances home to her family. Songja closed her restaurants twice because business was not profitable and she could not pay operational costs. Heajin “went completely bankrupt” when she invested in a foreign stock market and lost her savings, credit, and car:

“I went from the floor to the top [earning money] and then went back to the floor [bankruptcy]. Yet, after falling down to the ground and suffering from depression, I realised: ah, money is not everything.”

³ All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Their financial failures stemmed from inadequate economic resources, coupled with their ongoing financial support and commitment for family members (sending remittances) and limited knowledge of financial systems in South Korea (Jeon 2000). Regarding the unfamiliar financial system, Songja referred to paying taxes:

“We failed to factor in bureaucratic tasks. We bribed officials in North Korea, yet did not have the concept of tax and I forgot to pay taxes.”

This account indicates that they were unfamiliar with the concept of paying taxes because North Korea does not levy domestic taxes; this limited financial knowledge created financial problems in South Korea.

Relational failure

Participants' relational failures spanned their ongoing family relationships with relatives located in North Korea and China, and new family relationships in South Korea. They believed they had failed and felt guilty when they could not connect with or support their parents, siblings, and/or children (Ko et al. 2004). For example, Kyonghee felt she had disconnected (*kkeunh-eo-jyeoss-da*) and failed to fulfil her family responsibility because she was unable to financially support her family in North Korea; she experienced an emotional breakdown as a result. Four participants also considered that they had failed (*sil-pae-haess-da*, *mang-haess-da*) in their forced marriages in China because their husbands were unfaithful. Jungnam felt she had failed because she could not afford to bring her daughter from China to South Korea. The emotional turmoil engendered by these relational failures also caused physical and psychological problems.

Physical and psychological failure

Physical failure was embodied in health problems such as chronic diseases (e.g., heart problems) and insomnia due to nightmares, which appeared to be connected to their traumatic border-crossing journey under difficult material conditions when they left North Korea. For example, Heajin and Kyonghee indicated that their relational failures, the sense of disconnection and being cut off, caused them to suffer from psychological and physical failures (e.g., depression) as other research has reported (e.g., Ko et al. 2004; Choi 2018). For Jungnam, psychological failure originated from feeling desperate about the present and lacking hope for the future. These findings indicate that physical and psychological failings were strongly connected; however, participants considered psychological struggles to be more serious because they believed their physical health depended on mental health. That is, their “*Jeong-sin-lyeog*” (spirit power), which had sustained them throughout the border-crossing journey, had meanwhile weakened, affecting their body.

Professional failure

Professional failure was associated with recertification, insufficient management skills and knowledge, and limited networking opportunities due to different social

and legal systems (see English and Mayo 2019, on job mismatch). After they have entered South Korea, North Korean migrants' educational and professional credentials are recertified during the South Korean government's investigation and review of their asylum application.⁴ Because the migrants in this study had limited and unreliable information about recertification, they had feared revealing personal information and faked their past credentials, which had then prevented their recertification (see Guo 2009, on credentials assessment). For instance, upon entering South Korea, Jungnam did not accredit her high school graduation with the National Intelligence Service and therefore had limited career choices with her middle school degree. North Koreans are required to verify their educational credentials, but Jungnam and Songja withheld this information from South Korean authorities, which later created problems in their job applications and employment. Heajin, Sunhee and Songja also experienced professional failure when they had to close the small businesses (restaurant, bar, karaoke) they had opened with other North Korean migrants. Heajin, the owner of a karaoke bar, had been unable to run a profitable business, and Songja, who had co-owned a restaurant, closed her business because "our [North Korean] people do not know what to do without orders [in the workplace]". She realised she should separate social ties with North Koreans from her business decisions.

Conceptions of failure

Participants faced being on the sociocultural periphery due to insufficient knowledge of credentials, regulations and networks needed to maintain successful personal and professional lives. Given the accumulated experiences of marginalisation and previous failures in China and South Korea, our participants considered failure a natural part of migrants' lives that they ought to bear and overcome, also identifying it as "rich source of learning":

"Being North Koreans in South Korea, we came here empty-handed and started from the bottom. I went through a lot of failures, but I think going through failures in a new environment is natural. I came here without anything, so I had nothing to lose. I could easily get over my failures and move on. Then, my failures became a rich source of learning that nothing could replace. Textbooks are just textbooks, and they cannot always give you a real-life lesson. Yet, my failed experience is my wealth because it teaches me about what I really need in real life."

This quotation illustrates how participants forged personal meanings and conceived of failure as a steppingstone for growth, one that cannot be earned through formal schooling. This finding aligns with the view that failure is a "blessing in disguise"

⁴ After entering the country, North Korean migrants receive interim protection while their case is under investigation. The National Intelligence Service interrogates migrants' personal and political background, their motivation to defect, and their socio-political status in North Korea. Depending on the rank of the migrants, this process takes between a week and several months.

(Webb 2015, p. 76), as illustrated by Susan Webb's research with an Indian migrant woman in Australia.

The metaphors that participants used to describe failure also reveal how they made sense of and sought to cope with failures. Sunhee, for instance, described failure as a typical experience that she eventually learned to manage:

“Failure was very familiar to me because I felt I always failed. The first time I failed, it was painful, and I didn't want to get up. It was because I knew that even if I got up, I would fall again. But as time went by, I finally came to learn how to fall well and how to get up again.”

Sunhee conceptualised her failure as falling down, which always necessitated getting back up. Her other comments during the interview suggested that failure involved mental and physical pain, and her use of metaphor provides opportunities to cope with her own imagination – how to think and handle her own attitudes. Her understanding of failure was augmented by a twofold realisation: First, accepting failure as an integral part of her life, and second, knowing the importance of overcoming failure because it becomes a natural response, as she demonstrates through her use of metaphor of falling down and getting up, in a host society where there is no back-seat. Through this realisation, Sunhee was able to reduce and supplant the emotional turmoil of her border-crossing journey.

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

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

Heajin rejected failure as an essential part of North Korean identity. Rather, she attributed her failures to the unfamiliar system and culture that made it difficult to fulfil the expectations for her role in her new community of practice. Her awareness of “economic and social constraints” (Shepherd et al. 2020, p. 9), which negatively nuanced her normal functioning and contribution at work helped to buffer pain from failure and distance her failure from herself. Heajin chalked up her failures to being a newcomer in a “new cultural context” – that is, her status as a novice, peripheral participant in Chinese and South Korean societies – rather than an inherent personal trait.

Learning in response to failure

Failure inspired participants to change their perspectives towards their host society, themselves, and others (Shepherd 2003). In particular, they developed knowledge of South Korea's capitalist society and adjusted their problem-solving approaches to remain competitive in their businesses. They also clarified their goals and direction to ensure their successful adjustment by maximising their work capacity. Lastly,

they noted that failure created opportunities for building trust. Situated learning theory does not adequately examine what causes newcomers' learning in LPP; our findings indicate that failure was an important source of learning, particularly for novice workers.

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

Failure in business helped participants better understand South Korea's capitalist system and change their approach to push their businesses to be successful (Cope 2011). Songja, a former chef who served North Korean military officials, opened her restaurant and catering service in South Korea by partnering with other North Korean migrants, but had to close her business within six months because it did not produce enough financial benefit. Her failure shifted her understanding of how to run a business in a capitalist system:

"I closed my business twice in South Korea. At that time, I was ignorant and courageous. Although I did not know much about South Korea, I was confident about my cooking expertise. I was full of myself; I did not listen to others' suggestions and recommendations. Yet, the South Korean system is the opposite of North Korea; here it's capitalist and in the North it's communist. I did not know much about competitive market industry or dividing the roles with different expertise. After the closure of my business, I admitted my ignorance of the capitalist system and the importance of networks. I am determined to work with South Koreans who know more than I do about certain subjects. This way, I can focus on my expertise, cooking, and let others care for other tasks."

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

This illustrates how failure prompted a newcomer to collaborate with more experienced members of society. Indeed, failure allowed Songja to reflect on herself and identify necessary skills for business management, develop tacit knowledge of the cultural and social gaps, and collaborate with South Koreans in a new business endeavour.

Maximising capacity

The experiences of failure and loss in overlapping domains (relational, professional, etc.) caused our participants to focus on rebuilding what they had lost and maximise their potential because they had to work hard and sometimes go beyond their limitations. They strengthened their new and legitimate social position, for example, by earning higher education degrees and certificates in South Korea. Kyonghee, for

instance, said that failure had helped her to expand her personal potential, using all available resources even from past failures:

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

Failure motivated Kyonghee to strengthen herself and develop strategies to build a better career and family life in South Korea. Remembering her illegal status in China, she did her best not to waste time but rather to improve her socioeconomic position through dedicated work and education. She further applied her insights and knowledge from both countries to reproduce and transform a service business for Chinese-origin people in South Korea.

Kyonghee was not an exception. Each participant had strong family commitments towards children in China (Jungnam, Kyonghee) or family and relatives in North Korea (Heajin, Songja, Sunhee). These commitments, along with a sense of responsibility and the will to improve their lives, inspired them to increase their work adaptability and remain competitive. For these participants, failure provided greater direction for pursuing success and inspired them to maximise their potential and capacity for their careers.

“Learn to trust others”

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

“We [North Koreans] don’t trust South Koreans. Yet, when I failed in my investment [and career as a consultant], I was desperate for help. A pastor, who I knew for three years yet never trusted, connected me to a lawyer [the pastor’s church member] who lent me some money even though he did not have a lot of money. Afterwards, I felt it was possible that there were some good South Koreans and his support could be unconditional. It changed my perspective and I learned to trust South Koreans because of complete failure.”

Heajin’s desperate financial situation compelled her turn to a South Korean for help, and an unintended consequence provided the opportunity to trust South Koreans. Similarly, when Songja failed in her restaurant business and had a recipe stolen by a

North Korean colleague, a South Korean partner helped her obtain a patent on one of her North Korean recipes.

These kinds of unanticipated failures created unanticipated opportunities for North Korean migrants to receive assistance to overcome obstacles that they could not solve on their own. In this case, failure allowed migrants to seek help and develop trust in local citizens, actions that may not otherwise have taken place because of migrants' self-sufficient behaviours.

Discussions and conclusions

This study elucidates how North Korean migrants who are or hope to be entrepreneurs learned from failure in their workplaces and daily life. In particular, our study shows how these migrants processed and interpreted their failure so they could be more successful in their current workplace or future business venture, and our participants described changes in their knowing and being. Our findings reveal that these migrants experienced failure in five interrelated spheres: financial, relational, physical, psychological and professional. Participants developed perspectives to understand failure as an integral part of learning in a new society and adopting unfamiliar role expectations and responsibilities in their peripheral participation. In addition, they applied knowledge emerging from their failures to change their approach to their career and strengthen their personal and business capacity to obtain a secure workplace. Paradoxically, failures that were beyond their control, such as legal problems and bankruptcy, created opportunities to receive support from, and increase trust in, South Koreans.

North Korean participants' workplace learning in South Korea is aligned with the common challenges that international border-crossers and migrants encounter, particularly for those who migrate from poorer to wealthier nations, such as OECD member countries (English and Mayo 2019). Often those migrants suffer from misinformation and struggle to be recognised as "active beings" rather than "passive consumers of knowledge being fed from above" (ibid., p. 226). Situated learning provides a lens through which the breadth and complications of migrants' informal learning in situated practice can be acknowledged. Migrants are likely to experience failure as a consequence of participating in unfamiliar cultural activities and a new set of relations among citizens of the host society. Failure, then, is unavoidable for novice migrant entrepreneurs who have insufficient knowledge and understanding of existing practices, especially in the workplace.

The pervasive view of migrants as incompetent, inferior workers, and a social burden (Guo 2010; Webb 2015) ignores how they learn from failure. Situated learning helps to show that migrants' learning is not limited to skills acquisition; the predominant focus on migrants' acquisition of language, literacy and workplace skills is too simplistic because it overlooks their invisible learning about the self, others, and their host society through new social relations and practices such as opening a business and building trust with host citizens. The current study offers a more complicated, heterogeneous portrayal of migrant entrepreneurs – in this case, North Korean women, who were at least able to speak and read Korean, – and how they learned

from failures and used them as learning opportunities to transform themselves into active citizens (Guo 2015) able to contribute to their host society.

Theoretically, the current study supplements the insufficient explanatory power of situated learning by describing how real-life learning occurs in individual learners (Fuller 2007). Migrants developed knowledge and identities that they applied to a new set of relations, while failure motivated and triggered new learning. Our findings show that newcomers conceptualised their failures as tools (Wenger 1998), clarified their awareness of what they should know, and took steps to change how they acted and related to others in the host society. Through successful separation of the self from their struggles of failure, migrant participants expanded their understanding of who they are, what they must know, and how to receive help from others. This differs from a situated learning perspective, which argues that knowledge is a by-product of context, activity and culture and is therefore impossible to transfer between tasks and social contexts (Brown Collins and Duguid 1989).

This assertion, however, can be challenged through how we define knowledge and learning. Migrants who experienced failures in their border-crossing learned to manage these failures by developing attitudes towards and knowledge about failure in life situations, which transformed how they responded to failure and enabled them to re-emerge as a stronger person (e.g., Cope 2011; Shepherd et al. 2020). In this respect, focusing on migrants' learning as encompassing more than a skill set recasts them as people who are capable of overcoming challenging conditions.

Our findings suggest that adult education and workforce training for migrant entrepreneurs should help them anticipate various kinds of failure in different life domains and accept mistakes and failure as a natural part of human growth and cross-cultural adjustment. This preparation is particularly important for minorities from different political and economic systems, such as former East Germans after the reunification of their home country with West Germany. They "were simply overwhelmed with the question 'what am I still worth, how can I manage to live in these new circumstances?'" (Bleiker 2003, p. 2, quoting psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Hans-Joachim Maaz). North Korean migrants are often urged by South Korean educators, social workers and trainers to accomplish success (e.g., economic adjustment) and become role models, without sufficient understanding of potential failures (Ju 2016). Yet, the preoccupation with success may create unrealistic expectations and undermine migrants' ability to learn from challenges and difficulties.

To help migrants anticipate failure, adult educators and social workers can consider inviting successful migrant entrepreneurs in various fields to share their stories of learning from failure with newly arrived migrants. Their stories of challenges and overcoming emotional, relational and financial struggles can help new migrants expect failures, help them reduce the likelihood of similar mistakes and failures, and motivate them to use failure for self-reflection and development. Social workers and educators can also create opportunities for migrant learners to experiment with small business projects within the re-education institutions run by the South Korean government that support migrants' early adjustment stage. Providing a safe space and opportunities to explore financial and social constraints that often contribute to failure can help migrants cope with fear, anxiety and depression and enable them to talk to others facing similar struggles.

Finally, this study has implications for migrants' communication with family and friends remaining in their country of origin. Since their family members have often made sacrifices for the migrants' border-crossing journey, migrants may feel pressure to present a rosy picture of their adjustment. Our study suggests, however, that North Korean migrants should be open about their failures and successes with family and friends remaining at home. In so doing, they can prepare future migrants for both hardships and opportunities and help them anticipate failure as a normal part of resettlement; in turn, this more accurate information could help mitigate the mental and psychological challenges of migration by reducing the distance between expectations and reality.

In conclusion, the findings of this ethnographic study challenge the discourse that portrays North Korean migrants as hapless victims or somehow deficient people. Future research should further investigate how other migrant groups attempt to convert failure into opportunities for learning and the conditions that shape their ability to do so.

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