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Public attitudes towards co-ethnic migrant integration: evidence from South Korea

Steven Denney and Christopher Green

Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

What can public attitudes towards the integration of co-ethnic migrants teach us about social integration in newly diverse societies? Research finds that South Koreans prefer co-ethnic migrants from culturally similar or desirable origins, but it says little about the integration of migrant groups. Existing data and qualitative studies suggest considerable barriers to fully incorporating otherwise preferred migrants. Focusing on integrating North Korean migrants in South Korea – a relatively privileged migrant group that enjoys substantial resettlement support but encounters barriers to full integration – this paper addresses the research gap by testing competing explanations of migrant incorporation. Informed by Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), the study examines how threats defined as realistic or symbolic shape native attitudes toward these migrants. Using a conjoint survey experiment to measure preferences for economic, political, and social integration, we find South Koreans favor North Korean migrants with extended residence in South Korea, which is a marker for diminishing realistic and symbolic intergroup threats. Conversely, migrants signaling stronger affiliations to North Korea or lacking diverse social ties in South Korea fail to alleviate intergroup threat concerns and consequently face discrimination. Our findings offer insights into integration policy and contribute to the migration and citizenship literature and contemporary Korean Studies.

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Introduction

What are public attitudes toward the integration of co-ethnic migrants in South Korea? From a baseline of low immigration and high levels of cultural homogeneity, the country's immigrant population has grown considerably over the last two decades, mainly due to co-ethnic migration. Whilst cross-national polling data shows that South Koreans harbor a relatively open and positive orientation towards social diversity (Boyon 2018; Poushter and Fetterolf 2019), questions regarding the social integration of these newcomers are understudied.[1] Research finds a co-ethnic preference (Ha, Cho, and Kang 2016;

CONTACT Steven Denney s.c.denney@hum.leidenuniv.nl; Christopher Green c.k.green@hum.leidenuniv.nl
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Yoon 2016) and strong origins-based preferences for migrants from culturally similar or higher-status countries (Denney and Green 2021; Seol and Skrentny 2009). Yet even co-ethnics from linguistically and culturally similar backgrounds who would otherwise be expected to integrate, such as migrants from North Korea, face significant barriers to incorporation (Ha and Jang 2016; Kim 2016; Youm and Kim 2011). The existing literature does not provide clear or complete answers as to why this group struggles to integrate fully.

This paper addresses the existing research gap by scrutinizing competing frameworks for understanding migrant integration, specifically aiming to improve upon the theoretical imprecision often associated with sociotropic and identity-based explanations. Informed by Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) (Stephan, Ybarra, and Rios 2009), we employ a choice-based conjoint analysis to assess the impact of various attributes of North Korean migrants – such as age, occupation, relationship status, time spent in South Korea, and political standing in North Korea – on the perceived potential for political, economic, and social integration in South Korea. These dimensions are operationalized as South Koreans' willingness to vote for these migrants in local elections, hire them for employment, and accept them as neighbors. Our findings reveal that South Koreans strongly prefer migrants who display clear integration cues, such as extended residence in South Korea, and who mitigate realistic and symbolic threats as outlined in ITT. Additionally, we observe moderate to strong age- and gender-based preferences, favoring middle-aged individuals and women, which align with prevailing social and cultural norms.

Our research is a significant empirical advancement in understanding the integration of North Korean migrants in South Korea, a subject that has hitherto been underexplored in multidimensional terms. Using a choice-based conjoint analysis administered to a native population, we comprehensively assess integration's economic, political, and social dimensions. This multidimensional approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the specific attributes and cues that facilitate or hinder the integration of North Korean migrants.

This study's insights are broadly congruent with existing research on immigration preferences in South Korea (Denney and Green 2021) and more broadly (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Johnson and Rodger 2015; Sobolewska, Galandini, and Lessard-Phillips 2017) that emphasizes sociotropic-based explanations for immigration attitudes. However, here we refine existing frameworks in immigration attitudes, addressing the very considerable theoretical imprecision often found in sociotropic explanations. By leveraging Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), we advance a more nuanced understanding of how realistic and symbolic threats shape public attitudes toward migrants. Furthermore, our study contributes to a growing body of work that employs experimental techniques to understand public attitudes toward social integration (Getmansky, Sınmazdemir, and Zeitzoff 2018). In doing so, we provide a more robust foundation for studying co-ethnic migration and the broader comparative immigration literature.

Immigration and integration in South Korea

The comparative immigration attitudes literature focuses primarily on North America and Europe, given that these regions have been and remain the primary destinations for

migrants (e.g. Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2016). However, a relative increase in the number of migrants resettling in East Asian countries and the expectation that these numbers will or should increase has resulted in a new focus on countries in the region (Jeong 2016; Kim and Kim 2021; Shim and Lee 2018), including studies specific to South Korea (Denney and Green 2021; Ha, Cho, and Kang 2016). Given the country's rapid population aging, low and falling birth rates, and the strain these trends are placing on public services (Joongang 2021), there is a perceived need in South Korea for migrants of all skill levels (Kang et al. 2015).

Accordingly, the country has sought to rebrand its national identity and, at least in part, overhaul its immigration and citizenship laws to make it more open to immigration (Chung 2020; Draudt 2019; Hundt 2016). The number of foreign residents has risen by over a factor of six between 1999 and 2019 (Joongang Ilbo 2016). By that time, upwards of four percent of South Korea's population (more than 2 million) was identified as foreign nationals. Thanks in large part to a visa regime that accords preference to applicants with Korean heritage, approximately one-third of the foreign population of South Korea are co-ethnics, with the majority coming from China.[2]

Ethnicity has an important but not determinative role to play in the immigrant preferences of South Koreans. Long a culturally and ethnically homogenous country (Alesina et al. 2003; Cederman and Girardin 2007; Vogt et al. 2015), research into immigration attitudes in South Korea finds fairly positive immigration attitudes as a rule but also shows that views are moderated by the ethnicity and origin of the migrant (Ha, Cho, and Kang 2016; Oh and Oh 2016). Above all, South Koreans prefer co-ethnic migrants from culturally similar, higher-status countries (Denney and Green 2021; Seol and Skrentny 2009). Such findings are in keeping with research into public attitudes toward co-ethnic or culturally similar migrants in Switzerland (Diehl, Hinz, and Auspurg 2018), Spain (Cook-Martín and Viladrich 2009), and the UK (Migration Observatory 2023), as well as nearby Japan (Tsuda 2003) and Singapore (Morita 2016).

Despite hailing from an underdeveloped country and one with whom South Korea remains in a state of hostility, attitudes toward co-ethnic migrants from North Korea are also generally positive (Rich, Bison, and Kozovic 2021; Watson 2010). Repeated survey cross-sections of the South Korean population find that most people see North Korean migrants[3] as part of the national community (*kukmin*) as opposed to an 'other'. In 2010, 71 percent of the population agreed. In 2020, this figure decreased by a significant amount, but at 61 percent, it was still comfortably more than half of South Koreans.[4] The co-ethnic preference for this group seems to counteract the negative effects of coming from an otherwise underdeveloped country. It sets them apart from other co-ethnic groups, like Chinese Koreans (Seol and Skrentny 2009). Such attitudes underscore the subjective nature of immigrant attitudes (Fraser and Cheng 2022) and the importance of identity-based or symbolic explanations.

In addition to North Koreans hailing from a jurisdiction whose people belong to the same ethnic nation as South Korea (Shin, Freda, and Yi 1999), North Korea is also regarded by Seoul as sovereign South Korean territory. This has a clear impact on South Korean government policy, most notably that since 1996, its citizens have held a near-unconditional right to South Korean citizenship (cf. Greitens 2021).[5] At the time of writing, just under 34,000 North Korean migrants have taken up this right to resettle in the South.[6] While they are not a large group – considerably fewer in number compared to other co-ethnic

groups, especially Korean Chinese, to say nothing of comparison with migrant groups residing elsewhere in the world – migrants from North Korea are given an unparalleled degree of institutional support through the South's Ministry of Unification. The generosity of the support system has been adjusted several times, but for more than 15 years, it has been relatively comprehensive, including both universal and supplementary forms of financial and housing support, funding for vocational training and employment subsidies, and free secondary and tertiary education.[7] The number of arriving North Korean migrants in a given year has never surpassed 3,000, and as such, there has never been significant social or political contestation over the type or scale of the support on offer.[8] In a manner of speaking, the process of resettling co-ethnics from North Korea is akin to 'unification in action' between the two Koreas (Denney and Green 2018). Figure 1 shows the number of North Korean migrants resettled in South Korea.

Despite relatively positive attitudes towards North Korean migrants and a significant degree of institutional support for resettlement, significant challenges for integration remain. Despite a shared ethnicity and history, surveys show cultural and communication barriers present integration challenges (Hana Foundation 2020, 64). Differences in accents serve to 'other' North Koreans (Hough 2022). Children of North Korean migrants are negatively stereotyped and discriminated against in school as members of an 'out-group' (Kim 2016), and adults are more likely to be subjected to welfare chauvinism (Ward and Denney 2022). Studies, principally qualitative in design, show that North Korean migrants face considerable everyday discrimination because of their North Korean identity (Bidet 2009; Kim and Jang 2007; Youm and Kim 2011).

Evidently, shared nationality and/or citizenship rights are insufficient for integration. As observed in a 2019 survey, although most people agree North Korean migrants are

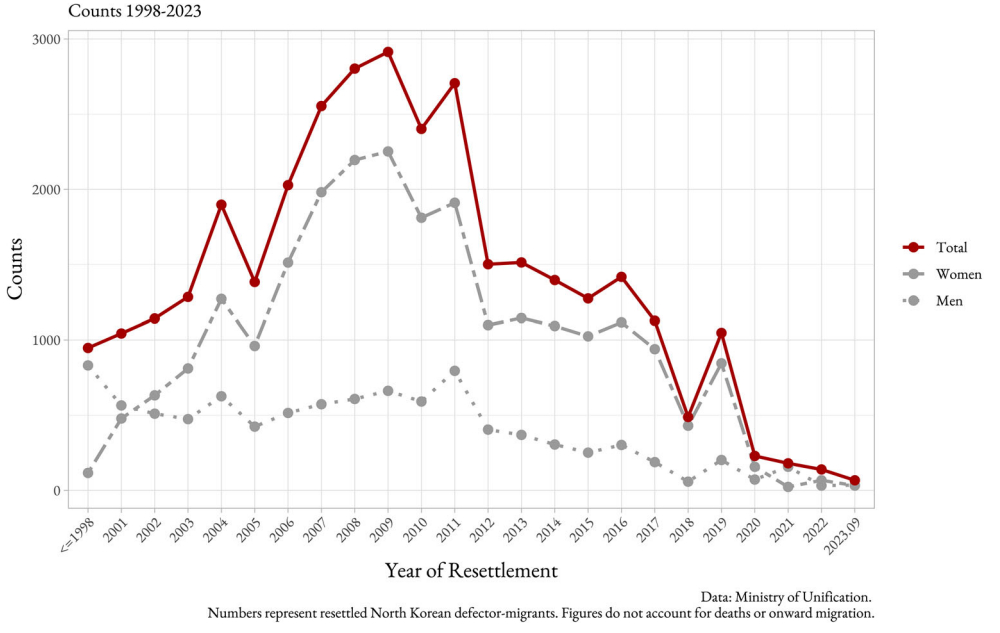


Figure 1. North Korean migrant resettlement in South Korea.

members of the national community ('our people' or *uri*), only nine percent are comfortable having a North Korean migrant as a son- or daughter-in-law, 40 percent expressed doubts about entering into a rental agreement with them, and only half would be willing to have them as a co-worker (Yoon 2021). In fact, the Social Integration Survey, administered by the state-funded Korea Institute of Public Administration, finds that nearly a quarter of the population in 2021 said they 'cannot accept' migrants in society at all, a figure nearly double what it was in 2018 (2021, 70).

There is a contradiction between the expectations given co-ethnic communitarianism and the state support North Korean migrants receive on the one hand and the social discrimination they sometimes face on the other. This contradiction underscores a significant knowledge gap regarding our understanding of co-ethnic migrant integration in South Korea, with implications for migrant integration generally.[9]

Comparative immigration attitudes: a critique and theoretical reorientation

Perspectives on immigration attitudes are bifurcated into two major strands: economic self-interest and sociotropic concerns. Economic self-interest theories posit that individuals evaluate immigration based on their perception of its direct impact on their economic well-being (Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007; Mayda 2006; Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Sociotropic concerns, on the other hand, are – problematically – much more encompassing, focusing on collective economic impacts and the broader cultural significance of immigration. Attitudes here are driven by concerns related to perceived strain on public resources and a nation's broader economic and social health (Citrin et al. 1997; Facchini and Mayda 2009) or by the values and beliefs of individuals toward immigration. Studies also suggest that sociotropic concerns can sometimes mask underlying prejudices (Solodoch 2021), which are sometimes attributed to concerns over linguistic (Hopkins 2014) or cultural differences (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; Rapp 2015). Prejudice and perceptions of social status and development also contribute to attitudes towards immigration. South Korea is routinely portrayed as a place where individuals discriminate strongly based on immigrants' origin, with newcomers from higher-status countries being significantly more welcome (Denney and Green 2021; Seol and Skrenty 2009; Ward and Denney 2022).

Research also finds negative attitudes toward immigrants are significantly related to identity concerns, especially regarding the perceived undermining or weakening of a national identity (Citrin et al. 1997; Schildkraut 2010; Wright 2011) or among those who have a weak national but strong local identity (Lee and Chou 2018). Schildkraut (2010) argues that making national identity salient reinforces boundaries and leads to the evaluation of newcomers based on their adherence to norms associated with a particular national identity, a finding in line with research that shows immigration attitudes are motivated by concerns over national identity and prevailing social norms (Theiss-Morse 2009; Wong 2010). The identity-based findings are sometimes considered separate from sociotropic explanations for immigration attitudes (e.g. Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014), but there is no clear distinction.

Recent scholarship tends to underscore the explanatory power of sociotropic perspectives, as well as hypotheses that derive specifically from this framework, in understanding attitudes toward immigration (Denney and Green 2021; Findor et al. 2022; Hainmueller

and Hopkins 2014; Sobolewska, Galandini, and Lessard-Phillips 2017). However, while this approach offers valuable insights, it suffers from abundant theoretical imprecision. The sociotropic concept, or sociotropic theory of immigration attitudes, does a poor job of distinguishing or disaggregating different facets of concerns, such as broader economic concerns from social and cultural attitudes. It also overlaps with conceptually similar but arguably different approaches, such as (national) identity-based concerns. The lack of differentiation hampers the development of testable hypotheses and the mapping of these theories onto research designs and construct choices.

Given these limitations, this study proposes a pivot toward Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) that dispenses with the category of sociotropy in favor of a more nuanced and empirically robust framework. According to Stephan, Ybarra, and Rios (2009), ITT posits that perceived threats from an outgroup can lead to negative attitudes and behaviors towards that outgroup. These threats can be categorized into two main kinds: realistic and symbolic. Realistic threats involve economic competition, resource scarcity, or physical safety concerns. Symbolic threats involve concerns about the erosion of cultural norms, values, or identity. Intergroup anxiety refers to the discomfort or unease experienced in intergroup interactions.

Accordingly, ITT provides a framework for understanding attitudes toward migrants by examining the role of threats at both individual and group levels. Realistic threats focus on tangible issues such as economic competition and resource allocation. These threats arise from the perception that migrants may threaten job opportunities, wages, and the overall economic well-being of the host society (Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006). Research has shown that individuals who perceive realistic threats are more likely to hold negative attitudes toward migrants (Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006).

Symbolic threats, on the other hand, are rooted in identity-based concerns and emphasize the potential erosion of cultural and societal norms. These threats arise from the perception that migrants may challenge or dilute the host society's dominant culture, traditions, and values. This can lead to fears of cultural homogenization or loss of national identity (Van de Vyver et al. 2018). Studies have found that individuals who perceive symbolic threats are more likely to oppose immigration and support restrictive immigration policies (Van de Vyver et al. 2018).

Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) offers a more nuanced and empirically robust framework for understanding attitudes toward migrants. By considering both realistic and symbolic threats, ITT provides a comprehensive understanding of how economic and identity-based concerns shape attitudes toward migrants. This framework allows for a more accurate analysis of the factors that influence attitudes toward migrants and can, in theory, inform the development of effective interventions and policies to address these concerns. We will use it to motivate our design and empirical expectations, which we outline in detail in the next section.

Data and methodology

How do we approach integration questions? Research that addresses the subject suggests several ways. Some approaches use migrant surveys regarding resettlement or subjective well-being to determine integration (Cheung and Phillimore 2014; Laurentsyeva and Venturini 2017), an approach used by NGOs involved in supporting North Korean

resettlement in South Korea (Hana Foundation 2022; NKDB 2021). Other approaches include the use of objective economic indicators such as employment and wages (e.g. Brell, Dustmann, and Preston 2020), political participation (Dancygier et al. 2015), or measures of social networks (Bailey et al. 2022; Martén, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2019). Another common method and the one followed here, is to use general population surveys about social integration to explore its determinants (e.g. Korea Institute of Public Administration 2021). Specifically, we follow more current research that uses experimental techniques to explore integration preferences for individual migrants (Getmansky, Sınmazdemir, and Zeitzoff 2018) and policy scenarios (Vrânceanu et al. 2021).

To empirically assess the influence of realistic and symbolic threats on South Korean attitudes toward North Korean defectors, we have employed a conjoint analysis, systematically varying attributes of a hypothetical North Korean defector. These attributes encapsulate various facets of realistic and symbolic threats, enabling a granular understanding of the mechanisms driving attitude formation. Through the lens of ITT, we consolidate these concerns, recognizing that a blend of realistic and symbolic threats influences South Koreans' attitudes toward North Korean defector-migrants.

We use a choice-based conjoint to measure South Koreans' preferences regarding defector-migrant integration in the Republic of Korea across political, economic, and social dimensions. A method derived from the marketing profession, its full-scale inclusion in the quantitative social sciences is relatively new (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). However, it is increasingly popular due to its suitability for causal inference in a multidimensional design. It is particularly well suited for studying attitudes towards immigration and, in this case, integration as it permits the researchers to consider the simultaneous impact of multiple attributes (e.g. Denney and Green 2021; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).

To complete the conjoint, we recruited 2,009 South Koreans using an online opt-in recruitment method from 26 August–27 September 2021, balanced by age, region, and sex to match population statistics. Table A.1 in the Supplementary Information reviews the sample in more detail. Respondents evaluated eight sets of two hypothetical migrant profiles across three dichotomous outcome variables, totaling 32,144 observations (2009 respondents * 8 tasks * 2 profiles). We employed robust standard errors clustered at the respondent level to account for the repeated measures design. Respondents were required to answer, and low-quality responses were removed and replaced during sampling. The approach aligns with the statistical framework developed by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014). We follow Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020) for subgroup analysis and rely exclusively on marginal means.

The conjoint design was a fully orthogonal, unrestricted choice-based conjoint, ensuring that all attribute levels had an equal chance of appearing in each profile. Respondents were asked to consider the resettlement of North Korean migrants in South Korea and, following the presentation of two hypothetical personal profiles, indicate which of the two they would prefer in three situations: when voting in a local election, hiring as an employee in their small business, and choosing as a neighbor.

We take the willingness to vote for a migrant as a measure of political integration. Whereas voting rights or citizenship are more formal rights granted to migrants, North Korean migrants already have both as citizens of South Korea. Who South Koreans are willing to accept as democratic representatives we use as a more substantive

measure. Similarly, North Korean migrants have the right to work in South Korea, but whether an individual would hypothetically be willing to hire a migrant to work is another substantive measure of integration but on an economic dimension. Lastly, we take preferences for migrant neighbors, or a willingness to live next to someone, as a specific measure of social integration. Our dimensions of integration should be read as different from objective and subjective integration measures as determined by the migrants' opinion of socioeconomic standing (Harder et al. 2018).

The ten attributes of the hypothetical migrant profiles include a mix of generic and North Korean migrant-specific categories. In the generic category, we state sex, age, relationship status, whether the individual has children, religion, and current occupation. The categories specific to North Korean migrants include the duration of time spent in China en route to South Korea, the amount of time spent since resettlement, and an attribute concerning legacy membership of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party.

We chose each attribute and level to test theoretically relevant characteristics that motivate public attitudes towards migrant integration as per the ITT framework outlined in Table 1, the ultimate point of which is to ensure construct validity in our design (McDermott 2017). As Brutger et al. (2023) discuss in detail, there is a trade-off between the specificity of the design, especially regarding the identity of the actor and the level of contextual detail, and generalizability. Given the focus on co-ethnic migration from North to South Korea, the context (migration on the Korean peninsula) and actor (co-ethnic migrants from North Korea) are highly specific to the unique circumstances of Korea. The design thus limits the generalizability of our findings, although they can still be broadly instructive. Table 1 shows all attributes and their respective levels.

Table 2 shows an English-language example of what respondents see when doing the experiment. For each pair of hypothetical migrants, the design fully randomizes two profiles for respondents based on the attribute values. Respondents are then asked to make a choice between them for each of the three outcomes. They do this task eight times in total. For a robustness check, respondents are asked to rate each profile from one (definitely do not prefer) to seven (definitely prefer) after each forced-choice question. As a manipulation check for data quality control and additional robustness checks, respondents are also asked to provide explanations in open-text answers for each of their three choices.[10]

The resulting data is used to estimate the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs), which shows the impact of each attribute level relative to a reference level on the probability of being chosen over the effects of the other attributes, as per Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2013). We also estimate Marginal Means (MMs), which generate the mean outcome of all attribute levels averaged across all other levels without concern for reference category sensitivity. MMs are best used for conditional average treatment effects and term interactions, as advised in Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020).

Findings

Figure 2 shows the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) for the baseline model. Generally, we see significant effects on respondents' preferences for all attributes except family status (children, no children), time spent in China, and religious affiliation.

Table 1. Attributes and corresponding threats as per Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT).

Attribute	Levels	Threat Type	Explanation and Expectations
Age	18, 27, 35, 47, 65	Realistic and/or Symbolic	Age functions as one of four dual indicators in our ITT framework. Younger migrants, often viewed as more adaptable and economically contributive, alleviate realistic threats related to resource competition (Bleakley and Chin 2010), while older migrants may heighten these threats due to perceived burdens on social welfare systems. Symbolically, younger migrants are likely considered more culturally malleable, thus mitigating threats to the host country's identity and values, but they might also be seen as a potential social nuisance, in particular young men.
Has children	No, Yes	Realistic	The expected effects of children on natives' attitudes are not clear. Children might signify greater demands on public resources such as schooling and health services, but could also be seen as a national good, especially in countries like South Korea that face demographic concerns driven by low birth rates (Ahn 2023).
Current Occupation	Unemployed, Convenience store clerk, Office worker, doctor, Computer programmers	Realistic	Occupational status often correlates with economic contributions and thus integration (White, Bilodeau, and Nevitte 2014), with higher-skill migrants being preferred, while unemployed status could be viewed as a potential economic and national burden (Denney and Green 2021; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014) or even a source of labor market competition with natives (Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Margalit 2015).
Time spent in South Korea	Newly arrived, 3, 7, 12 years	Realistic and/or Symbolic	Length of stay after resettlement is another dual indicator of integration, addressing both realistic and symbolic threats. Longer periods of resettlement are likely to be associated with economic and social integration, reducing realistic threats regarding welfare burdens (Facchini and Mayda 2009). It also implies greater cultural assimilation, mitigating symbolic threats to natives' identity (Newman, Hartman, and Taber 2012)
Sex	Man, Woman	Symbolic	Gender and sex-based norms and societal expectations can shape perceptions around cultural and social integration. Given South Korea's demographic imbalances, especially in rural areas, we expect respondents to have some preference for women. Men are seen as a greater social threat, especially unaccompanied young men (Herz 2019), thus women may be more preferred generally.[a]
Relationship Status	Single, Married, Married to North Korean defector-migrant, Divorced	Symbolic	Marital status is a symbolic litmus test for cultural assimilation into South Korean society. We expect as a rule that married migrants will be more desired over those who are single, although marriage to a North Korean defector-migrant might be viewed unfavorably by South Koreans, given in-group favoritism and homophilia that generally prevails among natives (Carol 2013).

Former Korean Workers' Party Member	No, Yes	Symbolic	Political affiliations can signify deep-rooted ideological differences, potentially threatening South Korean democratic values. The North Korean ruling party is likely seen by many as an institution hostile to the South Korean state and a signifier of sympathy for the North Korean political regime.
Religion	No religion, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Muslim	Symbolic	Religious affiliations serve as markers of cultural integration in South Korea, with Islam notably emerging as a contentious identity issue and a religious affiliation viewed unfavorably (New York Times 2018, 2022; Korea Joongang Daily 2022; Gusciute, Mühlau, and Layte 2020).
Time spent in China After Defection	Less than one year, 3, 7, 12 years	Realistic and/ or symbolic	A dual variable particular to North Korean migrants to South Korea, duration in a third country (China) could be linked to socio-economic status and thus perceptions of assimilation challenges, potentially influencing job prospects or resource allocation or even associated with the adoption of undesirable values from China, an origins country from which immigration is strongly opposed (Song 2014).
Social Networks	A few close colleagues, Only North Korean defector-migrants colleagues, Only South Korean Colleagues, South Korean and defector-migrant colleagues	Realistic and/ or Symbolic	The composition of a migrant's social network can serve as a proxy for their level of acculturation and economic integration (Doucerain et al. 2015; Yue et al. 2013). A diverse social network that includes both South Korean and North Korean colleagues may signal successful integration and potentially influence native attitudes toward these migrants positively. Conversely, a social network limited to only North Korean defector-migrants could be interpreted as a lack of assimilation, thereby affecting native perceptions negatively.

[a]We note that more than 70 percent of migrants are women, and representations of women migrants, therefore, predominate on South Korean television (Epstein and Green 2013, 2020).

Table 2. The experimental design.

1/8

In this exercise, we will ask you to think about North Korean defector-migrants in South Korea. That is, those who left North Korea and have resettled in South Korea. We will provide you with several pieces of information about two different personal profiles. For each pair of people, please indicate which of the two you would personally prefer to vote for, employ in a company, and have as a neighbor. You will be shown eight pairs in total.

This exercise is purely hypothetical. Even if you aren't entirely sure, please indicate which of the two you prefer.

	Profile A	Profile B
Sex	Man	Woman
Age	18	27
Has children	No	Yes
Relationship status	Married	Divorced
Current occupation	Office worker	Doctor
Former KWP member	No	Yes
Time spent in China after defection	Less than one week	3 years
Religion	Protestant	No religion
Time spent in South Korea	Newly arrived	3 years
Social networks	Only South Korean colleagues	A few close colleagues
Which of the two people would you vote for in a local election?	Profile A ◯	Profile B ◯
If you were a business owner, which of the two people would you hire as an employee?	Profile A ◯	Profile B ◯
Which of the two people would you prefer to have as a neighbor?	Profile A ◯	Profile B ◯

Preferences for voting, hiring, and neighbor tend to vary similarly across attribute levels. If one level moves the preference positively or negatively for voting, it does the same for hiring preference, but not entirely. Some differences across the political, economic, and social integration dimensions are specific to the profile attributes. We review these general and dimension-specific findings throughout this section.

First, the duration of residence in South Korea is a pivotal factor in reducing the impact of realistic threats, such as economic competition and resource allocation. Relative to newly resettled migrants, those who have been in South Korea for '3 years' or '12 years' are progressively more favored across all dimensions – political, economic, and social. At '3 years resettled', a migrant is ten percentage points (pp) more likely to be chosen for voting and 8pp more likely to be selected as a new employee or neighbor. By '12 years resettled', meant to indicate a level closer to fully resettled, the effects are considerable: 20pp for voting, 16pp for hiring, and 17pp for a neighbor. These findings suggest that time spent in South Korea serves as a proxy for successful integration, thereby reducing perceived realistic and/or symbolic threats. We believe this is one of the more notable empirical and theoretical findings, and we will explore it in more detail in the section below, where we disaggregate how exactly it moderates the two types of ITT threats identified.

Conversely, symbolic threats, often rooted in ideological or cultural differences, are evident when migrants maintain strong ties to North Korea through a former party affiliation or having only North Korean colleagues. For instance, former members of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) or those who only associate with North Korean colleagues are significantly less preferred, indicating that these attributes trigger symbolic threats related to national identity and values. If the person is known to be a former

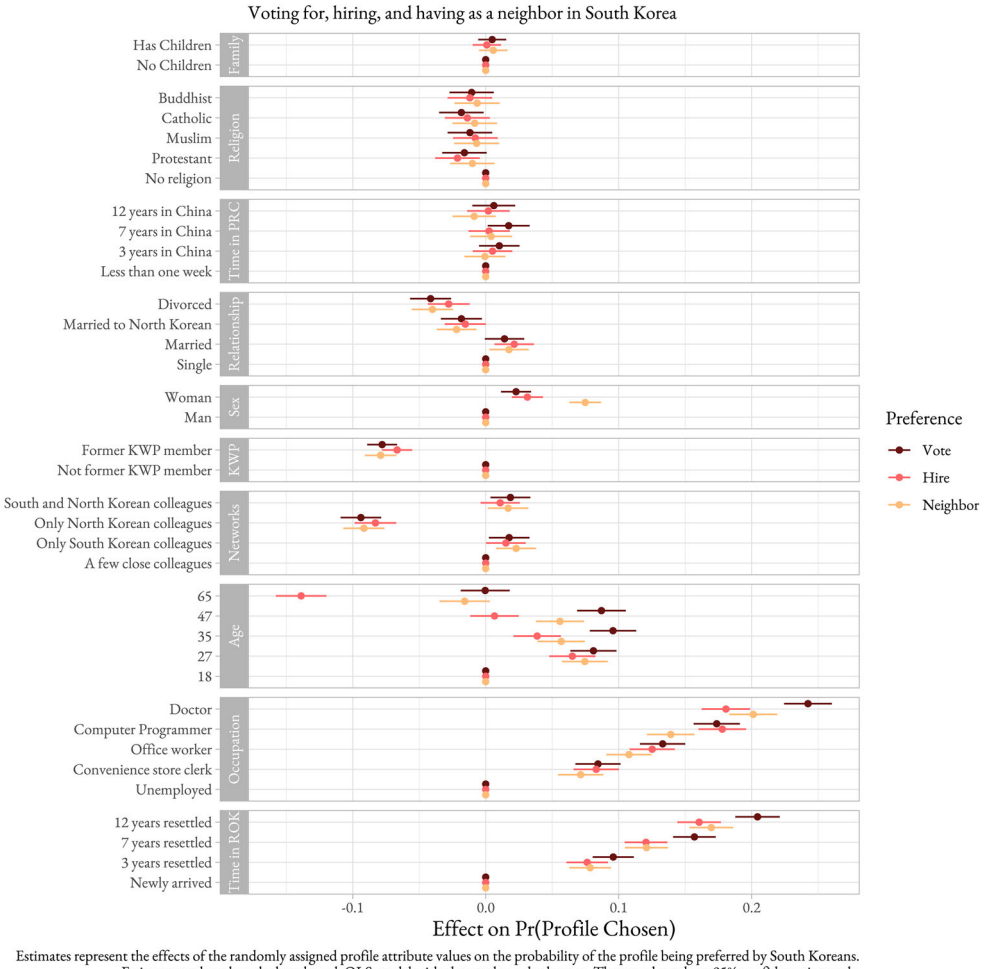


Figure 2. Effects of North Korean migrant attributes on native preferences

Korean Workers' Party (KWP) member, they are 7-8pp less likely to be selected than if they were not a former party member. Given long-standing South Korean animus towards communism, this is not surprising. But irrespective of past KWP activities, if the migrant is known merely to have *only* North Korean colleagues, a second indicator that they are not integrating entirely into South Korean society, they are similarly less preferred. Moreover, there is also a small and negative effect for all three dimensions for migrants married to North Koreans. However, at only −2pp relative to being 'single', the effect should not be considered substantive. Those who are 'married' with no indication of the partner's origin are *more* preferred but by a meager 1-2pp.

Second, the skill level and occupation of migrants serve as indicators that can either exacerbate or mitigate realistic threats. Highly skilled migrants, particularly in professions like medicine, are strongly preferred, aligning with ITT's notion that economically contributing migrants are less likely to be perceived as threats.

With North Korean migrants, we are looking at an already culturally similar group for whom we know there is a high baseline of support relative to other migrants. We find additional support for our expectations regarding realistic threats in that those with more highly skilled and desirable occupations (e.g. doctor) are more preferred as political candidates, employees, and neighbors. Relative to the reference category ('unemployed'), being a doctor means the migrant is 24pp more likely to garner a vote, 18pp more likely to be considered for a new job, and 20pp more likely to be chosen as a neighbor. Overall, the more skilled the occupation, the more desirable the migrant.

Lastly, age and gender preferences also align with our ITT expectations laid out above. Middle-aged migrants are perceived as less of a realistic threat, likely due to their potential for economic contribution and social stability. Women are generally preferred, possibly reducing the perceived realistic and symbolic threats by conforming to societal norms and expectations. On average, they are somewhat preferred to men at 2-3pp for voting and hiring, but they are significantly more preferred regarding who respondents want as their neighbor (7pp). For age, we see effects that are to be expected. Migrants between the ages of 27–47 are more likely to receive a vote relative to youth (18 years old), and they are also more likely to be chosen as a neighbor, indicating greater trust. Hiring preferences decline after 27, and elderly candidates (age 65) are considerably less likely to be hired than everyone else (−14pp).

To confirm that our main findings are not simply an artifact of forced-choice measurement, we use the ratings-based measure as a robustness check. Ratings-based questions allow respondents to express mutual preference or opposition for any given profile rather than being forced to choose. As an alternative measure of preferences across the political, economic, and social dimensions, we take the median (four) on the seven-point scale as indicative of an affirmative choice and then re-estimate our AMCEs. Figure 3 shows the results. We see that there is no substantive difference in opinion based on the ratings-based measurement. Additional analysis and robustness checks, including the use of open-text data, are provided in the Supplementary Information, all of which corroborate the findings presented here.

For a presentation of the substantive meaning of the conjoint findings, Figure 4 shows the predicted probability of a migrant being chosen for office, as an employee, or as a neighbor across the minimum, 25th, 50th, 75th, and maximum percentiles of the distribution as per the *voting preference* baseline model. We choose to show the probability of someone being preferred for political office as it is a consequential decision and a meaningful measure of integration. The probability of the selected profiles being preferred as a neighbor or for hire will not completely align with voting. Still, given that preferences across the three dimensions largely co-vary, they are similar.

The least desired profile (minimum probability of being selected for office) is a newly-arrived 65-year-old divorced man with no children. He is Protestant, has a Korean Workers' Party background, spent less than a week in China, and associates exclusively with North Koreans. This profile embodies realistic and symbolic threats under the ITT framework: his age and unemployment status raise realistic concerns about the economic burden. The Workers' Party background and exclusive social circle of North Koreans pose symbolic threats to South Korean identity. Consequently, this profile has a mere

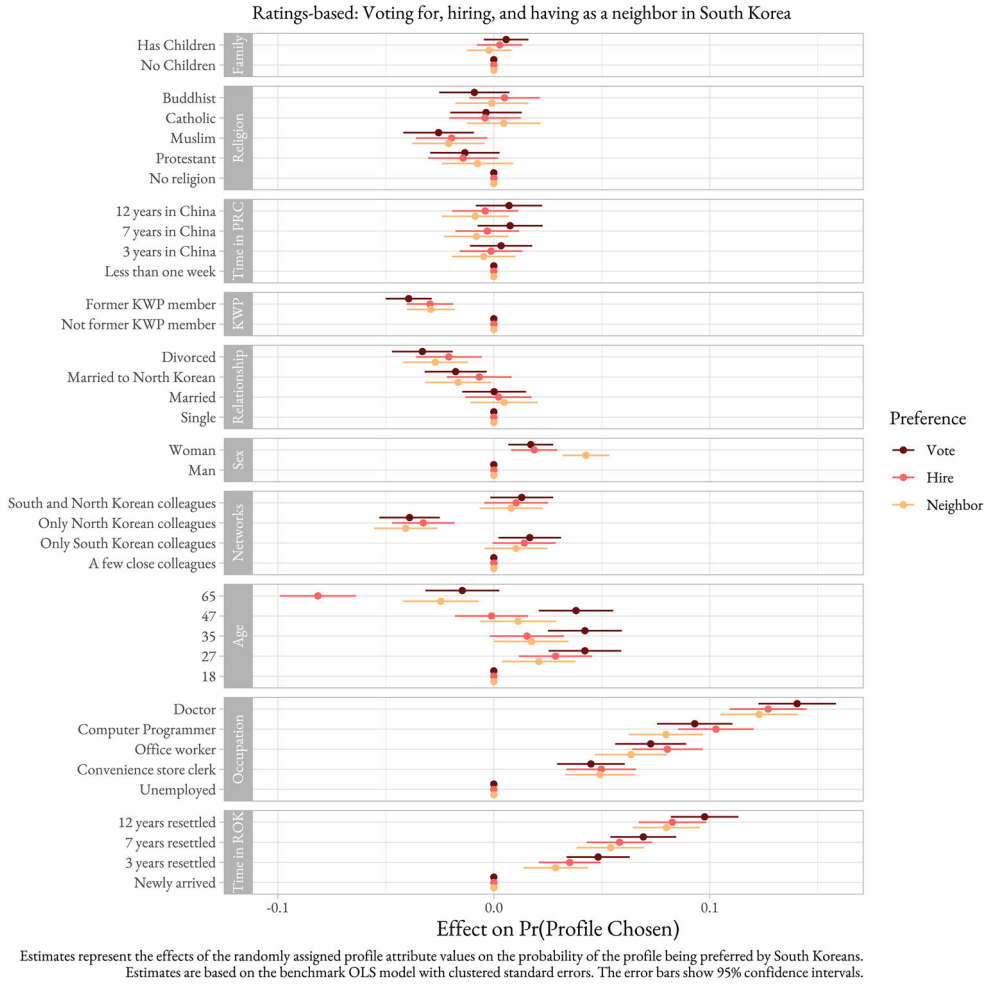


Figure 3. Effects of North Korean migrant attributes on native preferences.

3 percent chance of being selected for voting, 2 percent for employment, and seven percent for neighbor.

Conversely, the profile with the maximum likelihood of being chosen is a 47-year-old female doctor, married with children, non-religious, and without a Korean Workers' Party background. She has resided in South Korea for over a decade and has only South Korean colleagues. The profile effectively mitigates realistic and symbolic threats: her high-skilled occupation and long residence alleviate realistic concerns about economic contribution. A social network comprised of *South* Koreans and the absence of a Workers' Party background mitigate symbolic threats.[11] As a result, there is an 87 percent probability she would be chosen for office and a similarly high probability of being picked as a neighbor (85%). There is some discrimination in hiring preferences observed, which is driven by age, but at 77 percent, the profile is still highly favorable. Additional profiles indicate preferences at the 25th, 50th, and 75th percentiles.

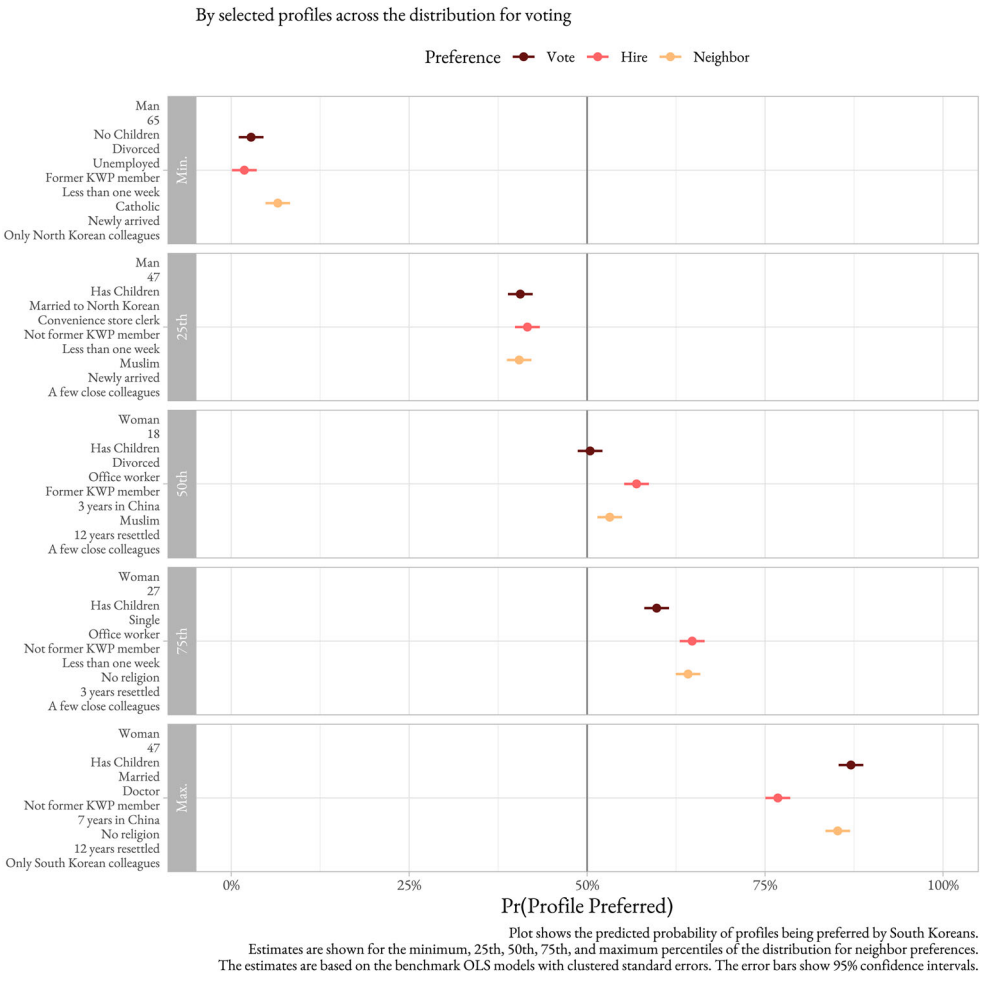


Figure 4. Estimated probability of person being preferred.

Disaggregating threat types: the moderating role of resettlement duration

What emerges in the analysis here is the importance of the duration of time a migrant has resettled in South Korea. Occupation, as a clear measure of skill and economic integration potential satisfying a realistic threat, is more straightforward. Still, here we take on the challenge of discerning the dual role of resettlement time in attenuating realistic and symbolic threats as posited by Intergroup Threat Theory. Specifically, how can we empirically validate that the length of time a North Korean migrant has spent in South Korea alleviates both types of threats in the eyes of South Koreans?

To empirically validate the dual role of 'length of time in South Korea' in mitigating realistic and symbolic threats, we employ interaction effects with attributes distinctly categorized under these threat types. For instance, occupation clearly indicates a realistic threat, given its direct implications for economic well-being. If the time spent in South Korea significantly moderates the effect of occupation on native attitudes, this would

substantiate its role in reducing realistic threats. Specifically, diminishing the importance of occupation in shaping attitudes with longer stays would indicate a reduction in perceived economic threat.

Conversely, membership in the Workers' Party serves as a distinct marker of symbolic threat, encapsulating ideological and cultural discordance. If the length of time spent in South Korea moderates the negative impact of Workers' Party membership on native attitudes, this would validate its role in mitigating symbolic threats. In this case, the diminishing importance of party membership in shaping attitudes with longer stays would suggest a reduced perceived symbolic threat.

Figures 4 and 5 report the Marginal Means of the interactions between the length of resettlement and occupation (realistic threat) and a Korean Workers' Party background (symbolic threat). In a forced-choice conjoint design, marginal means represent the average utility values associated with different levels of a particular attribute, holding all other attributes constant. A mean greater than .5 indicates an increased favorability towards profiles containing that attribute. An attribute value with a .45 marginal mean indicates a 45 percent probability that the respondent would choose the profile containing it, and .55 means a 55 percent probability, and so on.

We see in Figure 5 that South Korean attitudes towards differently skilled North Korean migrants move positively the longer they have been resettled across all occupational levels. Focusing on 'doctor' to illustrate the meaning of the findings, we see that at 'newly arrived', all three preferences are at or around .5, meaning that a highly-skilled, low-realistic threat migrant is not necessarily viewed unfavorably but is not preferred either. However, after many years of resettlement, the high-skilled doctor migrant is strongly preferred. At '7 years' and '12 years', between 60 and 70 percent of profiles are preferred as political candidates, employees, or neighbors. The same cannot be said of lower-skilled migrants. If one is a convenience store clerk, it takes a full 12 years of

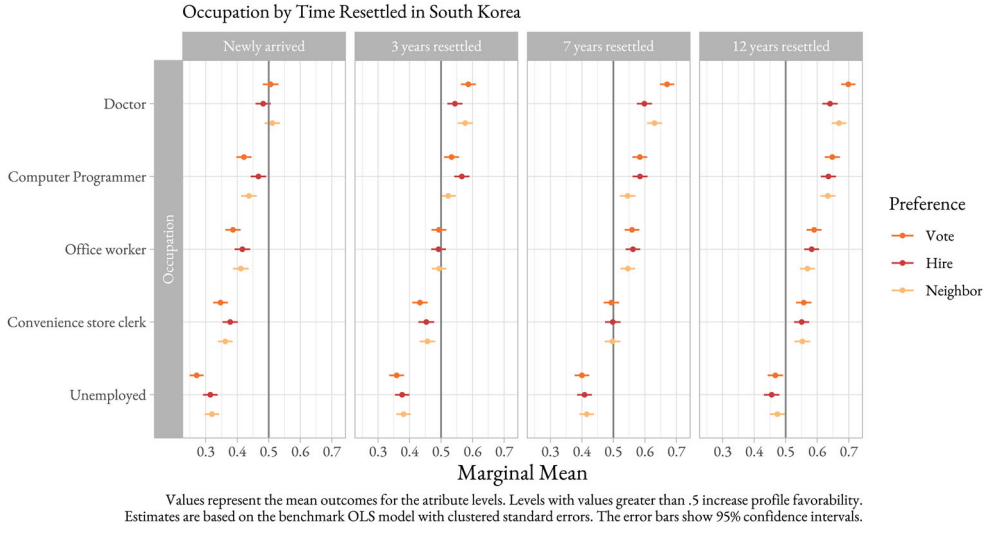
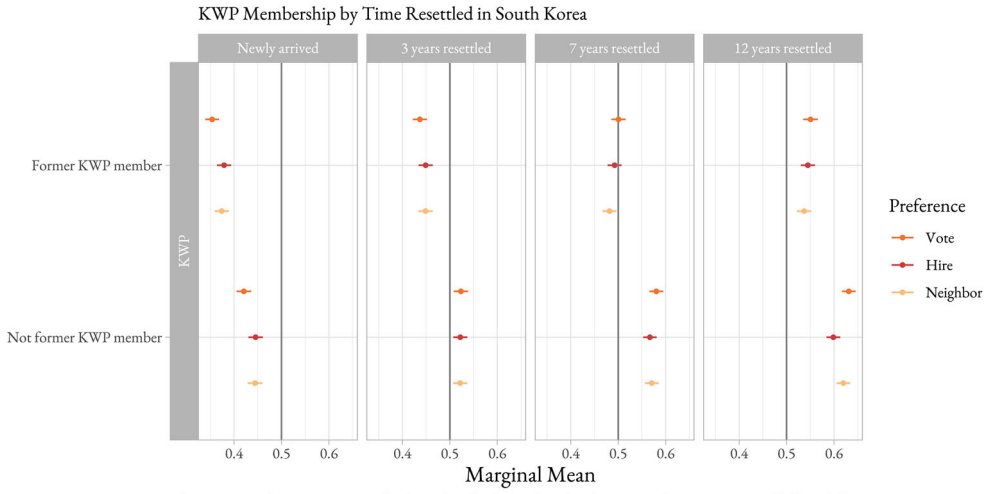


Figure 5. Marginal means of North Korean migrant attributes on native preferences.



Values represent the mean outcomes for the atribute levels. Levels with values greater than .5 increase profile favorability. Estimates are based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors. The error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 6. Marginal means of North Korean migrant attributes on native preferences.

resettlement before the profile is favorable, and even then, only approximately 55 percent of migrant profiles containing this occupation level are preferred.

For those unemployed, which is an ambiguous skill set but sends arguably the strongest realistic threat signal, we see that at no point across the resettlement time distribution are such migrants preferred.

Next and finally, in Figure 6, we see how a symbolic threat to the South Korean nation is moderated by the length of time after resettlement. For those migrants who are defined by a strong previous connection to the North Korean state by their previous membership in the Korean Workers' Party, we see that it takes more than a decade before this symbolic threat is fully moderated such that profiles containing this attribute level are favorably chosen. Even at the '12 years resettled', the probability such a profile is chosen is never greater than 55 percent. However, indicating no such strong connection to the North Korean state means that such profiles are viewed favorably after the initial resettlement period. A symbolic threat of nature measured here is strong and shows how important identity-based drivers of migrant integration are.

Conclusion and discussion

This paper addresses the question of how public attitudes toward the integration of co-ethnic migrants can serve as a lens for understanding broader issues of social integration in increasingly diverse societies. Expanding the geographical focus of existing literature, which has been predominantly centered on North America and Europe, this study turns its attention to East Asia, specifically North and South Korea. Given the demographic urgency of an aging South Korean population amidst declining birth rates, the study is timely and essential. Despite the assumption of co-ethnic unity and the considerable state support extended to North Korean migrants, their integration into South Korean society remains a complex and understudied issue.

Using a choice-based conjoint design informed by Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT), this study specifies factors influencing the integration of North Korean migrants across political, economic, and social dimensions by realistic and symbolic threat types. Our findings reveal that both types of threats shape South Korean attitudes. Migrants who effectively mitigate realistic and symbolic threats, as evidenced by prolonged residence in South Korea and professional qualifications, garner favorable attitudes across all dimensions of integration. In contrast, migrants who fail to mitigate these threats – either by maintaining strong ties to North Korea or lacking a diverse social network – are subject to discrimination.

The study makes significant contributions both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, it fills a gap in the comparative immigration literature and provides insights into the specific challenges of North Korean migrant integration in South Korea using a choice-based conjoint design. Theoretically, it advances the field by resolving the theoretical imprecision often found in immigration attitudes literature, which tends to rely on broad sociotropic and identity-based explanations. By employing ITT, we offer a more precise framework for understanding the multifaceted criteria by which migrants are evaluated, focusing on their ability to mitigate realistic and symbolic threats.

Regarding research limitations and future research directions, several areas warrant attention. First, despite the theoretical advancements made by employing ITT, there remains a need for further refinement to achieve greater theoretical precision. The conjoint design used here permits researchers to disaggregate overlapping effects more effectively, as was done with the length of resettlement and types of ITT threats. We see this as one way to address concerns regarding ambiguity in explanations or in the mechanisms that seek to explain, in this case, the determinants of (im)migration attitudes. However, the ITT framework's central bifurcation into realistic and symbolic threats remains imperfect.

Second, this study focuses predominantly on the attitudes of host populations toward migrants, a perspective that omits the experiences and self-perceptions of the migrants themselves. Future research should aim to understand how these migrants perceive their own integration challenges and opportunities, thereby offering a more holistic view of the integration process. In line with the foundation work of Hur (2023), which examines the psychology of national belonging among North Korean migrants, especially concerning the formative function of their migration experiences, it would be instructive to examine whether and how migrants' motives and aspirations for belonging align or do not with the native population's preferences and attitudes (see, e.g. Fittante and Barry 2022).

For instance, while this study finds that the length of resettlement in South Korea serves as a critical proxy for integration potential in the eyes of the native population, it remains an open question whether migrants' duration of stay is, in fact, associated with integration outcomes – positive or negative. Studies like those conducted by the Hana Foundation (2022), which assess both objective and subjective integration indicators such as employment, life satisfaction, and income, provide essential baseline data. However, to comprehensively understand integration dynamics, these should be complemented by variables considered in this research, such as symbolic threat indicators, which can be observational or experimental explored.

Lastly, given the unique political and historical context of North-to-South Korean migration, future studies should strive for more generalizable research designs to build upon these findings. This study frames the question of co-ethnic migration as one that is not specific to Koreans of North Korean origin. This is important not only because North Korean migrants constitute only a relatively small group of migrants but because South Korea will continue to seek immigration policy liberalization (Chung 2020) and will likely continue to court co-ethnics from across the world, as it has done thus far (Seoul and Skrenty 2009; Denney and Green 2021). This will facilitate a more robust, universally applicable understanding of migrant integration, thereby enriching both the comparative literature on citizenship and migration and the field of Korean Studies.

Notes

1. We approach migrant integration as it is understood by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which defines it as "the two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and host societies in which migrants are incorporated into the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the receiving community" (IOM: 2).
2. This measurement excludes tourism and visa-free entries. Ministry of Justice figures are uploaded regularly to the immigration statistics section of the ministry website: https://www.immigration.go.kr/immigration/1569/subview.do.
3. Many different terms are used to refer to those who leave North Korea and migrate to South Korea. The unauthorized leaving of North Korea for resettlement elsewhere, or "defection," is a political act. Migrants from North Korea are thus often referred to as "defectors," which is written in Korean in several different ways (e.g., *talbukcha* or *talbukmin*). But many do not, in fact, intend to remain abroad indefinitely, and so this term is not always accurate. There are several other terms used to refer to resettled North Koreans, including "defector-migrant," "new settler" (*saetomin*), and "*bukhan ital jumin*" ("resident [of South Korea] who left North Korea"), each with its advantages and detriments. North Korean migrants are also referred to as and can be considered refugees. While it is recognized that various terms are in use, "migrant" is used exclusively in this paper with no intention to convey any overt political meaning.
4. See data for the Korean Identity Survey from the East Asia Institute (EAI): http://www.eai.or.kr/main/program_view.asp?intSeq=20196&code=70&gubun=program.
5. Article three of the constitution of the Republic of Korea states, "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands," thus laying claim to all North Korean territory. See: https://www.law.go.kr/lsEfInfoP.do?lsiSeq=61603#. The legal case confirming the right of North Korean citizens to South Korean citizenship is Nationality Act Case 12–2 KCCR 167, 97Hun-Ka12, August 31, 2000. For the full legal decision, see: http://search.ccourt.go.kr/xmlFile/0/010400/1/pdf/e97k12_1.pdf.
6. Ministry of Unification data on migrant numbers are uploaded regularly to the statistics section of the ministry website: https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/. Those deemed a security risk may be denied entry, but this is the only condition that is applied.
7. A detailed rundown of the financial and practical support systems available to North Korean migrants at time of writing is on the Ministry of Unification website: https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/settlement/System/.
8. The number of arrivals peaked in 2009, when 2,914 North Koreans entered the South.
9. Especially where co-ethnics are or can be considered refugees, as is the case with North Koreans, the migration literature focuses little overall on co-ethnic integration. Sakib and Ananna (2021) is an exception.

10. Respondents are prompted to provide a rationale for their vote choice after the seventh profile, for hiring choice after the third, and for neighbor preference after the fifth.
11. It is important to note, as explained in Figure 2, that the difference in effects for social networks comprising of both South and North Koreans and those only of South Koreans are effectively the same.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are available at: https://github.com/scdenney/north-korean-migrant-integration.

ORCID

Steven Denney http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6542-1055
Christopher Green http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2025-7631

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