Los Angeles Riots as Intercultural Medicine

Grace Kim

Chapman University
I. Introduction

As the daughter of Korean immigrants, the way in which I have grown to view the world has largely been shaped by my ethnic identity and historical differences with others. The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 is an event that marked a watershed moment in American history and thus has greatly influenced the social and political reflections Korean Americans have today. Although, Korean Americans played a central role, the event was over simplified as being just a “Korean and Black conflict.” The media showed signs of difficulty in accurately and completely interpreting both groups during the aftermath. According to Kim (1999), while the “white-dominated mass media focused on race, African American and Korean community leaders explained the tension in terms of culture” (Kim, 1999, p. 8). This implied the emergence of a new breed of intercultural conflict among minorities that many dominant groups failed to recognize before. And more importantly, the unfortunate event has greatly shifted the Korean American political experience from underrepresentation to a more active civic engagement. As a result, the Los Angeles riots were able to shed light on the trajectories of the transforming inter-minority relations in order for America to become a more harmonious intercultural nation.

II. Story

The South Central Los Angeles unrest was the most destructive urban occurrence in American history. The event reportedly began Wednesday, April 29, 1992, at 4:00 p.m. when the four policemen who were videotaped beating motorist Rodney King in 1991 were found innocent (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1996). By 6 p.m., peaceful demonstrations escalated into rock throwing in front of the Los Angeles police department. At 6:30 p.m., crowds formed at the intersection of Florence Avenue and Normandie Street where Reginald Denny, a Caucasian truck driver, was dragged from his truck and beaten on live television (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1996).
By night fall, Los Angeles was paralyzed by rioters causing damage to more than two thousand family owned businesses predominantly owned by Korean immigrants (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1996).

DiPasquale and Glaeser (1996) documents that the world witnessed the riots that raged for three days until the National Guard intervened (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1996, p. 2). The civil disturbance resulted in 52 deaths, 2,499 injuries, and over $800 million in Los Angeles property damages (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1996). Of the damaged buildings, 377 were completely destroyed and 222 were seriously damaged, many of which were commercial retail stores (DiPasquale & Glaeser, 1996, p. 2).

But years before the explosive riots, the conditions in the South Central Los Angeles area showed signs for imminent disaster. For one, Koreans Americans were politically powerless with no Korean American judges, political officials, or advocacy groups; the Korean America was yet to be born. Oh (2010) reports that inter-minority tensions also rose from the Rodney King verdict that shocked the “public’s confidence in the criminal justice system” (Oh, 2010, p. 40). Other factors such as the rise in unemployment with no apparent signs of relief for the poor and the change in demographics created “micro-aggressions” between the influx of the Korean immigrant business owners and the residentially poor African American consumers. As tensions and conflicts grew, the imminence for disaster could not have been more close.

In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots, millions of dollars were raised to aid victims of the riots. The Korean American Grocers Victims Association was also created to support small store owners who were affected, bringing modest relief to the area for a few years. There were meetings among politicians, scholars, and philanthropists whose resources were given to rebuild
the city, not the affected businesses and neighborhoods. The LAPD was also investigated and the public education was to be reorganized.

III. Theoretical Framework

Gergen (1985) defines the social constructionist perspective as the changes in the way people come to describe and account for the world in attempt to move beyond culture dualism and reach positive social interchanges (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). The perspective implies that intercultural relationships embrace change and creativity in allowing communication to create a new script in human practices. The riots, although was an unfortunate event, brought together activists and community members to build coalitions and thus shift to the mentality of the social constructionist perspective.

In addition to the change-promoting social constructionist perspective, the critical perspective allowed for the acceptance in diversity and cultural differences. According to Jia (2011), the critical perspective gives minority groups power (Jia, 2011). This perspective shows why minority activists needed to engage in active political participation to change the face of ethnic groups that have long been silenced and underrepresented. The power in the voices of dominant groups in America had reached its peak in being the only source of social agreement. Therefore, the riots were a domestic case that called for a shift from the traditional perspective to the more accommodating social constructionist and critical perspectives.

The civil unrest also exposed the importance of embracing the salad bowl model because of the undesirable consequences of the melting pot concept or assimilation. The melting pot concept is a metaphor for a heterogeneous society becoming more homogeneous. It figuratively means to “melt” away the differences to become united at the sacrifice of diversity, particularly to describe the assimilation of immigrants to the United States. Also known as assimilation, the
concept employs the vision where “immigrants and ethnic minorities are expected to assimilate themselves socially and culturally, so as to become functional in the American society” (Kim, 2009, p. 207). The incomplete reporting from the media after the event of the crisis demonstrates the state in which Americans of all backgrounds could not survive and coexist on just the mindset of the melting pot concept and assimilation alone. Thus in this context, Korean immigrants used the approach of homogenization and assimilation to partially adjust to the differences on U.S. soil.

In contrast, the salad bowl model suggests the integration of a variety cultures like a salad. It challenges the notions of assimilation in promoting messages of pluralism (Kim, 2009, p. 209). The pluralist message replaces the melting pot concept with newer metaphors like “mosaic”, “quilt” and “salad bowl” (Kim, 2009, p. 209). Pluralism or the salad bowl model “uphold group identity as vital…highlighting a fact of life that we are different ‘types’ of persons defined by social categories such as race, ethnicity, language, culture and national origin” (Kim, 2009, p. 209). It is different from the governing power of the melting pot or assimilation concept because it advocates “status equality, a demand for equal results in the interest of ‘emancipation’ of specific groups that are historically oppressed or presently in need of institutional support through remedial laws and public policies” (Kim, 2009, p. 209). However, African Americans and Korean Americans struggled to integrate this theory into practice.

IV. Analysis

This paper specifically explores inter-minority relationships of the Los Angeles riots relative to the perspectives of the social constructionist theory, critical perspective, melting pot concept, and salad bowl model, all which give reasons and discernments into the emerging and evolving identity of Korean and African Americans.
During the 1990s the Korean-African American conflicts aroused because of the limited misperceptions from both minority groups. Kim (1999) believes in order to understand the riots, we must analyze the role of “middlemen” Korean Americans played between the white dominant and African American subordinate demographic (Kim, 1999, p. 39). Korean immigrants had assimilated by adopting the globalized American values of democracy, Christianity, meritocracy, and individualism during the aftermath of the Korean War. The melting pot concept in this sense resulted in many immigrants to arrive on U.S. soil already with negative predispositions of African Americans. In addition to the adoption of western ideologies, in Korean culture, social status is determined by educational background. Kim (1999) supports that many Korean immigrants also looked down on African American residents in South Central Los Angeles given the lower education level (Kim, 1999, p. 44). This compartmentalization in viewing the African American community reveals the failure of the melting pot concept at the domestic level.

In the African American situation, their racial consciousness led to the downfall of the salad bowl model when interacting with Asians and other racial groups; this was another leading and contributing cause to the riots. In a survey, Kim (1999) indicated “92 percent of African Americans in Los Angeles wanted more African American-owned business in their neighborhoods…Korean Americans are often accused of ‘planning to take over African American neighborhoods and extract maximum profits’…Contrary to this belief, the majority of Korean business in the United States is not located in African American neighborhoods” (Kim, 1999, p. 46). This difference between thoughts and actuality shows how negative attributions of another race can easily form a veil or a cloud in embracing diversity or the salad bowl model.

As minorities, especially as politically powerless minorities, both groups have long remained invisible in the public eye resulting in a partial understanding of the “riots”. It was thus
critical for America to engage in the social constructionist and critical perspectives in the aftermath of the riots. The social constructionist perspective, which involves changing communication to allow a new script in human practices, has been demonstrated through popular culture and mediation efforts. The critical perspective, which promotes change in the power structures, is reflected through the growth in the political leadership of Korean Americans today.

For one, Dreier (2003) states Korean and Black radio stations also “became the organ of news and information about what to do in the midst of nonresponse to calls for help” (Dreier, 2009, p. 42). On a larger scale, however, two cross-cultural concerts took place in Chicago in December 1991 and 1992. “More than six hundred Korean American and African American people were present…[adding] to the cultural experience that became deeply embedded in the collective memory of the Korean American community” (Kim, 1999, p. 185). A cross-cultural concert provided a rare opportunity for Korean merchants to improve their tainted image. To both sides, the Korean Americans and African Americans who were involved naturally did not see the surface differences in language, food, and customs of each other. To redress this need in mutual understanding of the distinct historical cultures, the growth in pop cultures and mediated communication from both groups has heavily influenced and served as an intense site for interracial and intercultural negotiations.

City of Irvine Mayor and Korean immigrant, Sukhee Kang, has also come to acknowledge the derogatory cycle of name calling and labeling of African Americans. Kang states, “The Korean people’s general mentality [is that] there’s a lot exclusivity among Koreans. We look down on blacks. We look down on Japanese historically…For example, we call black people ‘gang doong yee.’” Gang doong yee is the Korean negative connotative term that expresses distaste and ethnocentricism when speaking about people of color. Although the same
word, it was used perversely during the Korean War but now has become old jargon due to the intercultural environment.

Second, the Korean American Grocers Victim Association, Korean Youth Center, Korean American Family Service Center were responses to the desperate need for political representation. There were organizations such as the Korean American Coalition in Los Angeles founded by Ton Soo Chung, a Harvard educated lawyer and local activist with the Democratic party. He broke barriers by placing himself on the ballot and leading second-generation community activists for more political access. Sukhee Kang, another prominent Korean American leader, was heavily affected by the Los Angeles riots, which inspired his work as the first Korean-American to serve as Mayor of a major U.S. city.

V. Discussion

The Los Angeles riots tested the American capacity to move beyond the one-dimensional racial conflict between blacks and whites to a foreign inter-minority conflict. It was not until the multicultural unrest of the riots that greatly redefined the kind of presence and representation that American minorities had in relation to the preexisting dominant groups.

Minority consciousness of both groups undoubtedly prolonged and intensified the conflict. African Americans felt that the increasing number of immigrants was attacking and competing with them economically. Thus, the competition for their livelihood and survival could have only resulted in severe hostility. However, even though there are black prejudices among Korean merchants and misunderstandings rooted in cultural differences, from my observations it has been the structural contradictions of some Korean stores that largely account for the strains, tensions and disputes between Korean merchants and black customers. Many Korean immigrants who came to the United States were college educated in Korea. But their
Korean educational status did not function in the American labor market, and so by default, self-employment, or running small businesses were the next best viable option. This holds true for my family when my parents immigrated to the U.S. in 1986 and when my older sister was one year old. The higher education my parents received in Korea meant nothing in the U.S. due to the language and cultural barriers that forced them to build something from nothing. They have worked extremely hard to give my family what we have today: a home, food, education and healthcare, all of which were seen as luxuries to my parents when growing up.

Furthermore, racial, ethnic, or minority consciousness has affected perceptions and interpretations on both sides. The search for status and thus assimilation opened a very small window in the minds of Korean immigrants regarding other races. The attitude for compensation and blame on racial discrimination clouded African American perceptions further flaming the gross misperceptions from both sides. However, to say that this simply equation between African and Korean Americans led to the riots, would not be accurate in telling a complete picture of the story. Latinos, European immigrants, and Anglo communities were also key players in the origins of the uprising and post-resolution.

Regardless of these cultural and ethnic tensions, we are currently witnessing intercultural marriages and relationships grow in numbers in America today. Relationships among the millennial generation are becoming far more diverse. I listen to my peers speak open-mindedly of the Korean culture in my interactions. Students consider Korea, Japan, and China as viable options for studying abroad. Experiencing the language, lifestyles and food of these foreign countries has been a window of opportunities for people to experience something other than what they have grown up to identify with themselves. There is also a growth in immigration to the U.S. as the world economy recovers and technology allows for humans to cooperate globally.
America will be the most diversified and culturally enhance country in the world and with this comes strength from not just numbers but from the plethora of thoughts and ideas that come from various cultures.

The social constructionist perspective and critical perspective augmented the possibilities for differing cultures to bring diversity and unity in balance. The story also shows that neither the melting pot concept nor the salad bowl model views alone can adjust to the constantly changing demographics.

VI. Conclusion

To understand the dynamic process of the Korean-Black conflict, I focused my study on the preexisting conditions for the South Central Los Angeles communities, the reactions from the public during the riots, and the aftermath effects of the riots. Through openness towards intercultural communication, Korean Americans were able to mobilize, build coalitions, and discern unknown truths within themselves and their counterparts to mend the post-riot effects and foster new ways in expressing identity. After making positive transformations in power constructs, communication methods, and falsifying any singular way of thinking, the Los Angeles riots taught America the deeper meanings of peaceful coexistence.
References


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