

# Train to Seoul: An Observation of Passengers During COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

With ever increasing cases and death tolls of COVID-19 pandemic across the world, the clinical science is at dilemma. However, very little is known as how people respond to various incidences in traumatic events or situations such as COVID-19. Thus, the objective of this paper is to investigate responses in behaviours and of psychology from critical juncture perspective of COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, action-oriented research method of close observations for a month has been made in a subway train of South Korea. The analysis shows that the old domestic passengers and the foreign passengers have been double-othered, whereas others are single-othered in behaviors and of psychology in response to various incidences that occurred in the subway train, reflecting into extreme use of a bad word such as shikya, which means son of a bitch in Korean language. Further, this study will contribute to theory-building of social distancing of behaviors and of psychology, especially in context of traumatic events or situations.

**Keywords:** Critical juncture perspective; COVID-19; Double-othering; Pandemic; Single-othering

## INTRODUCTION

External environment, which is always at flux, is inextricable part for human beings. In general, individuals with their cognitions respond to the external environment [1]. However, this is not always the case in times of traumatic events or situations. Amidst the deadly events, the individuals are at massive loss of psychological resources [2] and they need social support as coping strategy in bouncing back the lost resources [3]. However, getting to the latest outbreak of COVID-19, WHO, the governments of each country and larger or smaller organizations are asking to maintain social distancing as the most critical factor in minimizing the COVID-19 throughout the world. Thus, the puzzle is: what immediate behavioural responses are projected in the travelers in the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic while maintaining social distancing?

As COVID-19 has been pandemic throughout the world [4], South Korea (henceforth Korea for readers) is not the exception [5]. On 30th of January, 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared global health emergency, keeping in mind the risk of spreading COVID-19 in places with vulnerable system of health delivery [6]. Until recently, the confirmed cases of COVID-19 outbreak are 3822382 and confirmed death tolls 263658 in 215 countries, areas or territories across the world [7]. With the highly mounting infected COVID-19 patients, Korean government and the concerned authorities have been highly alert and disseminated measures of COVID-19 such as social distancing, use of masks and sneezing or coughing into one's own elbow through all the Medias

available [8], including the highly increased social media networks through the digital platform.

Fundamentally, the travellers from China were paid special attention. Despite the fact that the nature of symptoms of COVID-19 (similar to general flue) and immediate difficulty in diagnosing the locus of infection, the Korean government and the concerned authorities have held strong and effective measures of social distancing, fast tracking, speedy testing and facilitating treatment to all COVID-19 patients from the inception. Until now, there is no restriction of travel across Korea and the numbers of passengers are highly increasing for employment activities, whereas most of the countries are at lockdown situation now. This puzzle held me to investigate growing psychology in them and their reactions while travelling in a subway train from one place to the other.

Following this, the observations are made in a sub-way train from Suwon station through Hwagok in Seoul. It would best project research method in observing the activities of the passengers and the reactions of the counterparts with mindset of COVID-19 along with highly increased death tolls in Europe and the United States and the towering number of infected COVID-19 patients throughout the world. In the third section, this paper makes analysis out of the observations. In the last section, the paper makes a discussion, followed by conclusion with future research directions for COVID-19.

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## SOUTH KOREA INTO CRITICAL JUNCTURE PERSPECTIVE OF COVID-19

The first case of COVID-19 was reported of a Chinese woman aged 35 on her arrival at the Incheon Airport on 19 January, 2020 [9,10] and she was confirmed of having it on 20 January, 2020 [11]. The second case of COVID-19 was imported by a 55 year old Korean man who was working in Wuhan and was confirmed of COVID-19 on 24th January, 2020 [12]. The third patient was a Korean man of 54, who returned to Korea after he came back from Wuhan city of China [5]. He was by profession a worker in a clothing company of Wuhan Fashion Center. He later transmitted to his wife, son and his college of a church [5]. The COVID-19 broke out real when a Korean woman of 61, who belonged to the Shincheonji Church, was confirmed of COVID-19 on 23 February after she came back from the hospital funeral to home on the demise of the leader's brother [13].

The epicenter of the COVID-19 was the Shincheonji Church in a city of Daegu with 2.5 million population, which is in south-east of Korea [8]. The patient numbered 31 was the one, responsible in spreading the virus over the church. This was due to constant attendance of the Shincheonji Church despite the explicit symptoms of COVID-19 [14]. The number of infection highly increased to 3900 with a 55% in this city alone. Besides this major one, there were smaller clusters of cases like 118 cases in Chundo Daenam Hospital of Chungdo-gun, Gyeongsangbuk-do and 49 cases of a pilgrim to Israel in the very area and 92 cases of Cheonon gym hall in Chungcheongnam-do [8].

After the spiked number of COVID-19, Kwon Young-Jin, the Mayor of Daegu city, asked the city inhabitants not to visit outside [15] and made all the concerned bodies strong to fight against the rapidly mounting infections across the country. The most effective method of disseminating information of the Korean government was an alert message through telecoms in that the number was assigned for the COVID-19 infected patients and informed that which places they visited before they were caught for treatment. The public places such as gym halls, clubs and religious places were asked to close for 15 days [16] and seemingly other public places of high risk, temporarily [17]. However, public travel was/is on the continuum along with marts and shops providing daily stuffs to the public. The number of death tolls and infected patients is very low in comparison to the European countries and America. There appears no more lockdown in Korea. Despite the fact that the daily life is getting better in Korea, the objective of this paper is to unveil as how mass psychology at this critical juncture of COVID-19 is evolving, especially in the passengers of subway train as the representation of the population at large.

## METHODS

However, I had full time teaching of 9 hours a week at Calvin University in Yongin City, I wanted to have proxy university teaching classes and accordingly made a travel to Seoul for interviews time and again. I hardly paid any attention to things happening around owing to COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, I happened to make this observation-based (action-oriented) research once I got selected for part time university teaching job for Master and PhD students in KC University in Seoul. Although universities were closed for reason of COVID-19 pandemic, professors were asked to prepare

online video classes and of the assignments, accordingly. Apart from this, I was asked to engage in an empirical research project in a group. For this reason, I needed to make a travel at least a couple of days every week to KC University in Seoul.

With the increased mass fear in the public across the world including Koreans, I decided to carry out this research project based on close observations of the Koreans and others while traveling in a subway train. This research project best suited for me as I had to travel time and again as part of online teaching and research. Despite fear going around of transmission of COVID-19, it was an opportunity and right time that I could do it, getting actively engaged in this action-oriented research project. So, I decided to have at least for a month of close observation from the day of my appointment from 16th of March through 10th of April, 2020. During the period, I could confirm 8 distinguished cases of observations, which were from normal to moderate to quite unique incidences in them. The observations were held during travel of a subway train from Suwon station through Hwagok station in Seoul.

### Observation 1

On 16th March, I took a rapid subway train from Suwon station at 8:25 AM for Hwagok in Seoul. This was the first day of my observation. As I got into the subway train, I was afraid to an extent, but more excited to observe the passengers as how they would respond each other in the subway train. Most of the passengers were with medical masks of KF80, except very few of them. None of the special behavior was observed on the first day of observation.

### Observation 2

On 20th March, I got into local subway train this time at 8:02 AM from Suwon station for Hwagok in Seoul. As I held into a subway train, after near about 10 minutes of my travel I noticed passengers moving here and there in the cab. They were unlikely to sit close by, rather when they found the empty place with no travellers nearby they moved to that place, immediately. All these movements were indicating that they were trying to maintain social distance from each other. This was the first notice of the incidence out of my observation.

### Observation 3

On 23rd March, I had a rapid subway train of 9:04 AM again from Suwon station for Hwagok in Seoul. I was in one of the cabs of subway train. A male Korean almost after 20 minutes of my travel sneezed with a mask; passengers nearby him stared at him. This was the second incidence that the passengers nearby were very sensitive of sneezing or coughing.

### Observation 4

On 27th March, I caught local subway at 9:23 AM from Suwon station for Hwagok in Seoul. After I had boarded into the train, after near about 30 minutes a male Korean without a mask sneezed, passengers around him stared at him, angrily. This showed that the passengers were very sensitive of people sneezing without the mask on. The angry look at him was kind of warning, not to make it again during the travel.

### Observation 5

On 31st March, I had a rapid train at 10:29 AM from Suwon station for Hwagok in Seoul. This time I was eager to notice some new observation. Immediately after I held into the subway train, I noticed the old passengers. The young passengers were not around them. I wanted to reconfirm the very situation as why this was happening. As I transferred subway train at Singil station for Hwagok, I observed the similar old passengers in their reserved seats. The same episode got revealed this time as well. But before COVID-19 pandemic, there used to be many passengers around old passengers hanging with pivoted grab handles.

### Observation 6

On 3rd April, I had a local train at 9:23 AM from Suwon station for Hwagok in Seoul. I made a travel for experience of new thing happening in the subway train this time. I couldn't notice so special until the transfer at Singil station. In between 10 minutes-15 minutes after transfer for Hwagok, I could observe two Koreans with masks, facing each other near the cab entrance of the subway train. The Korean, who was the first on my left side sneezed with a huge noise (he was wearing a mask, though), the other facing at him immediately responded with a very bad word as shikya. The guy, who sneezed said nothing, and got silenced.

### Observation 7

On 6 April, I boarded into a local subway train at 8:38 AM from Suwon station for Hwagok in Seoul. To my surprise, I could notice a foreigner from Africa continent. As I made a quick observation, he was alone there in the seating row. Surprisingly, passengers were hanging with pivoted grab handles far from him. This incidence was of high alertness of the travellers that the foreigners might bring the virus and spread to the people around.

### Observation 8

On 10 April, I took a rapid subway train at 9:04 AM, this was the final day of my observation. Like earlier, I started my subway travel from Suwon station. This time I wanted to observe a new case, if possible. This time I could observe a Korean person selling masks in the train. He was explaining the importance of masks and of the lowest price of 1000 KW (which is roughly \$1), which was in fact 3000 KW (nearly \$3) online. However, he hardly was able to sell his products in the train (however, those kinds of sellers earlier were able to sell stuffs in larger scale). Passengers were less interested this time to buy medically unproven masks. The other thing was that people were reluctant to have such transactions and interactions in the public place like a subway train.

## ANALYSIS

The observations made earlier for 4 weeks indicate the following things. In the first observation, most fundamentally passengers seemed to travel with a kind of compulsion mostly for employment, using masks. In the second observation, they were trying to maintain social distance from each other. In the third, the passengers showed reaction to sneezing with a mask. In the fourth observation, they had moderate hatred towards the passenger who sneezed without a mask. They all reflected kind of fear of COVID-19 in them and

this was kind of psychology of single-othering due of increasing fear of COVID-19. In the fifth observation, the passenger facing the guy who sneezed showed strong reaction of single-othering. In the eight observations, passengers in the train were unlikely to have any of the transactions-be it verbal or manual. Instead, it seemed they were more concerned with using medically proven masks in such traumatic situation. This scenario also reflected of single-othering due to COVID-19.

In the sixth observation, the old passengers were double-othered-one in terms of generation gap and the other in terms of mindset developed on account of massively infected number of COVID-19 patients and of the increased death tolls of old people, mostly over the age of 60. In the seventh observation, the foreigners were perceived in the same way of double-othering-one in terms of cultural distance and the other in terms of the carriers of COVID-19 into the home country of Korea.

## FINDINGS

The interest of the research came up with an idea that transportation was on the continuum without complete lockdown across Korea, except for a short period of time in Daegu area in the initial period of COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the fact that the number of COVID-19 patients was sharply rocketing across Korea, the action research was held to navigate responses in behaviors and of psychology from critical juncture perspective of COVID-19 pandemic. The initial finding is that the passengers were single-othered from each other in most of the observations. There decreased tractions or interactions between each other among the subway train passengers. Secondly, the most surprising finding is that the old passengers were double-othered in terms of generation gap and of increased rate of COVID-19 infection and of towering death tolls in other parts of the world. Seemingly, foreign passengers were double-othered, from cultural and of behavioral perspective due to COVID-19, respectively.

## CONCLUSION

The case study reflects the hitches faced by subway train passengers in Korea because of thoroughly increasing transmission of COVID-19. Employment in this traumatic situation is vulnerable such as decreasing trend of turnover intentions and layoffs in neo-liberal economies in many parts of the world. Compulsion of continuing the existing job for living has held people make travel no matter how higher risk of transmission of COVID-19 in them is. For reference, travel in the subway train for the passengers indicates as how important a job is for people in Korea, which is similar in other parts of the world. Thus, despite the fact that massive transmission of COVID-19 is on the go, the recent evolving mass psychology has held increasing trends of social distance among people, old generations and of the foreigners, creating kind of mindset of otherness at the critical juncture of COVID-19 pandemic.

This is simply a case study in a subway train in Korea, which is likely applicable in other parts of the world in different forms. Thus, this study encourages researchers to have more empirical research in the similar contents at this critical juncture of traumatic situation of COVID-19 pandemic or such a kind. Similar type of behavioral reactions and of psychology would be the validity of this research. Most importantly, this study would contribute to theory-building

of social distancing of single-othering and of double-othering from behavioral and psychological perspectives in traumatic events or situations like COVID-19 pandemic in the future research. Further, I would invite the future researchers to get into discussions or discourses about increasing otherness in terms of behaviors and of evolving psychology from the critical juncture perspective of COVID-19 pandemic, substantially.

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