What Does the Word "Unification" Remind You of?[1]

Park, Juhwa

(Research Fellow, Unification Policy Research Division)

This paper examines the discourses on unification and directions for peace-unification education by analyzing vocabularies that are recalled from the word 'unification.' South Koreans responded that the word 'unification' reminds them of words like 'North Korea,' 'peace,' 'division,' and 'integration/harmony.' These social representations of peace symbolize South Korean people's perceptions of unification as others-centric rather than self-centric, event-centric rather than procedure-centric, and value-neutral. Such dry perceptions point to the much-needed transition from a unification discourse with values centered around consensus and necessity of unification to a unification discourse focused on unification per se. Such transition requires the social recognition of doubts and questions regarding unification based on citizen competence on and confidence toward unification.

---

1) This report is a part of Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU)'s 2020 research project "Comprehensive Research Project on Peace in the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Cooperation."

What does the word 'unification' remind you of? For some, it might recall the Korean Unification Flag or the word 'bonanza (*daebak*).' For others, it might trigger anxiety. The various images, emotions, and vocabularies recalled by the word 'unification' remind us of the values, knowledge, and behaviors related to unification that are shared across the South Korean society. These are called social representations, which help introspecting the realities of our society. In other words, social representations of unification provide the basic elements for examining how our society perceives unification. The Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) conducted a survey on 1,600 participants about the social representations of unification.[2] Respondents were asked to recall three vocabularies when thinking about the word 'unification.' This report analyzes the social representations of unification and, based on their implications, provides policy suggestions.

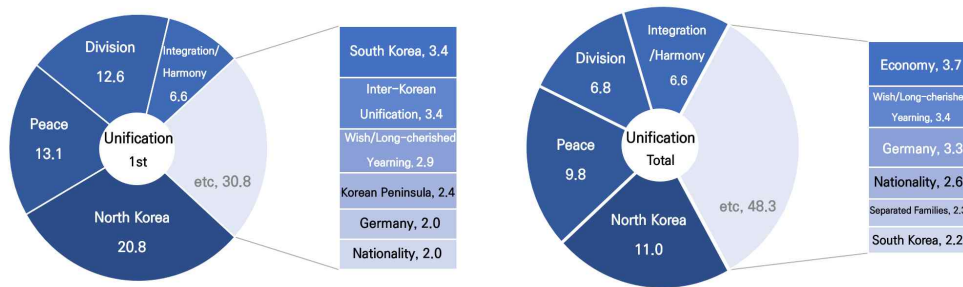## First and Foremost, Unification Reminds People of North Korea

The first word that respondents recalled from thinking about the word 'unification' was 'North Korea' (see Figure 1). From the 1,600 respondents surveyed, 20.8% recalled 'North Korea' first, followed by 'peace,' 'division,' and 'integration/harmony.' The same order persisted even when analyzing all vocabularies reported (1st, 2nd, and 3rd).[3] This result implies that South Koreans center their thoughts on unification around North Korea, peace, division, and integration/harmony.

---

2) The survey was conducted online by Nielson Korea on behalf of KINU from April to May of 2020. The proportional sampling accounted for gender, age, and region of the respondents.

3) The quantities on the figure were calculated based on counting the three words listed by, 1,600 responses – a total of 4,800 words. For example, 529 respondents listed North Korea at least once among their top 3 words recalled. This is 33% out of the 1,600 respondents and 11% out of the 4,800 words.
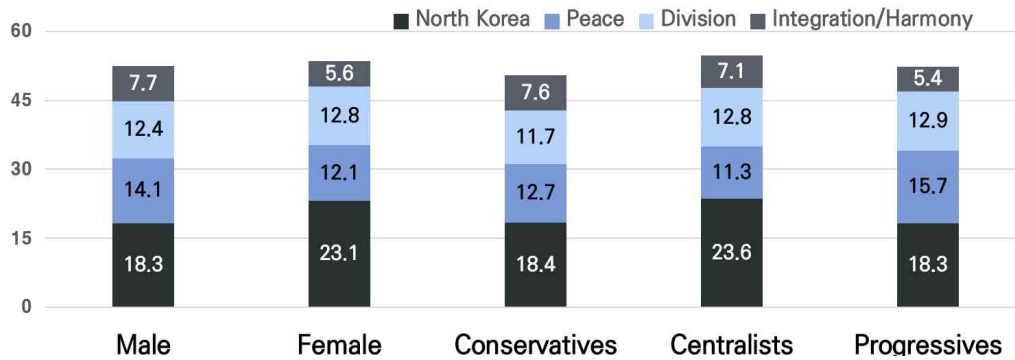
<Figure 1>

First Associated Term (Left) and All Associated Terms (Right) on Unification
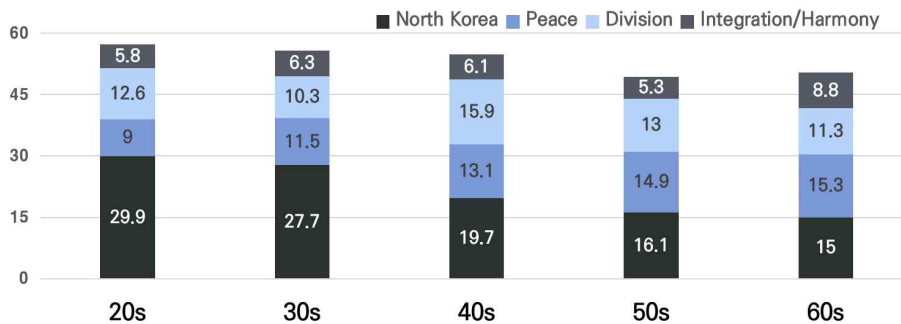

While social representation of unification centered around the four terms ('North Korea,' 'peace,' 'division,' and 'integration/harmony'), their relative significance varied by gender, age, and ideology. When considering only the respondents' top choices, North Korea appeared more frequently amongst females than males (see Figure 2). Social representations of unification also showed variance across age (see Figure 3). The proportion of responses from those in their 20s and 40s was in the order of 'North Korea>division>peace>integration/harmony.' For those in their 30s and 50s, it was 'North Korea>peace>division>integration/harmony.' For those over 60, it was 'peace=North Korea>division>integration/harmony.' Finally, while ideological differences did not lead to much variance, those in the center relatively emphasized the importance of 'North Korea' more while the progressives stressed 'peace' and the conservatives underscored 'nation' (see Figure 2).

<Figure 2> First Term Associated with Unification by Gender and Ideology

<Figure 3> First Term Associated with Unification by Age

The Discrepancies in Social Representations of Unification Lead to the Discrepancies in Attitudes on the Issues Surrounding the Korean Peninsula

Theoretically, social representations affect individual's evaluations, expectations, predictions, and behaviors. Attitudes can be determined by social representations. Then, what comes to mind first when thinking about unification (or, depending on social representation of unification) can help predict the differences in people's evaluations of inter-Korean relations and preferences on the means of reconciling the inter-Korean relations. Further analysis supports these predictions.

Those who first recalled 'North Korea' (the NK Recall Group) and those who recalled 'peace' (the Peace Recall Group) did not differ in their responses to how
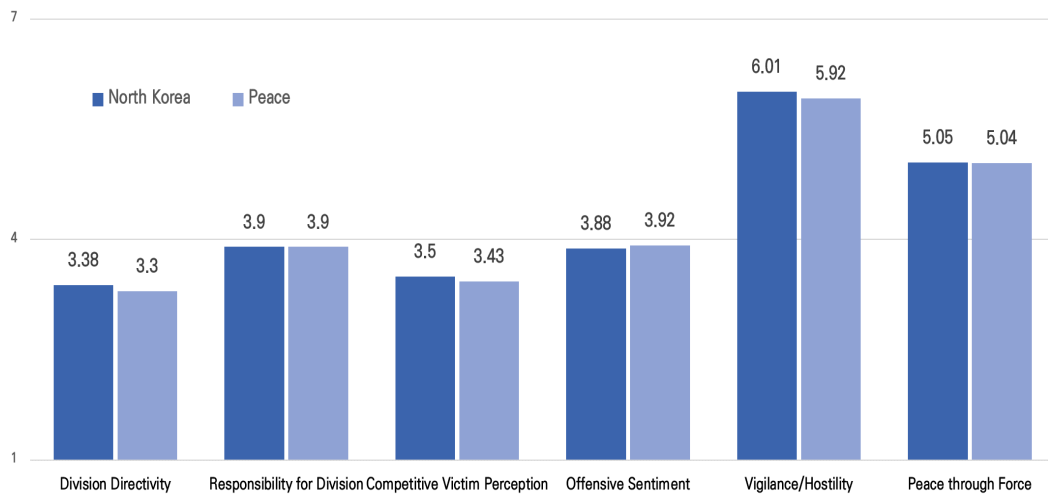
much they think national division is acceptable (see Figure 4: Division Directivity),[4] but they differed in their attitudes toward whether South and North Korea ought to form a unified country (see Figure 5: Unification Directivity). The Peace Recall Group had a higher unification directivity than the NK Recall Group. Also, while the two groups did not differ on whether North Korea bears the responsibility for division, the Peace Recall Group was more inclined to think that the national division had a significant impact on their lives.

The two groups also showed both similar and discrete perceptions on inter-Korean relations and North Korea. The two groups did not have discrete perceptions on the competitive victim perception – whether South Korea suffered more damage from the division compared to North Korea. On the other hand, the NK Recall Group more strongly perceived the inter-Korean relations as a zero-sum kind. The two groups did not differ in their hostile perception and offensive sentiment that implies aggressive behavior like hatred, anger, and despair (see Figure 4). On the other hand, the Peace Recall Group had higher sentiment scores on their cooperative perception and defensive sentiment and that implies conciliatory behavior like anxiety, fear, and worry (see Figure 5).
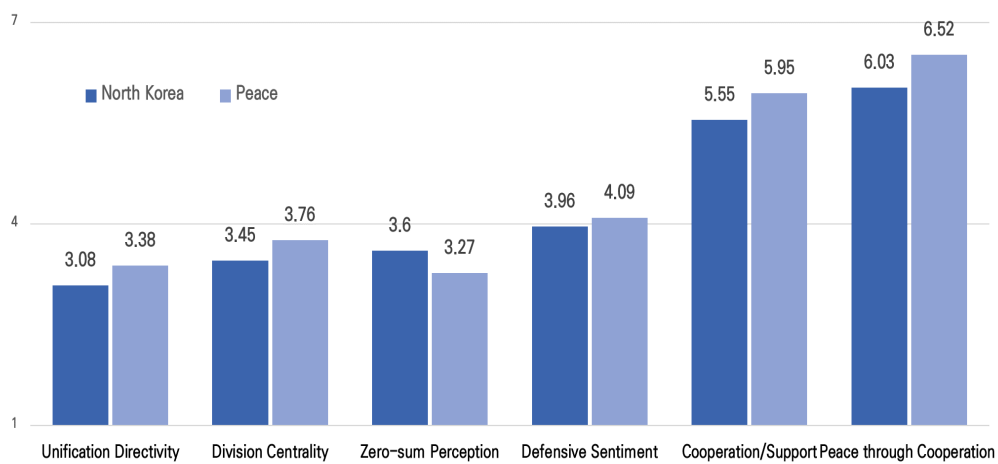
Finally, the groups had similarities and differences on the measures for achieving peace in the peninsula. The two groups did not differ on how much they thought peace should be achieved through the exercise of force. However, the Peace Recall Group more strongly favored achieving peace through cooperation.

---

4) All comparisons were conducted through a t-test with the significance level at p-value of 0.05. Specific questionnaires on each attitude will be listed in *Comprehensive Research Project on Peace in the Korean Peninsula and Inter-Korean Cooperation*, forthcoming (December 2020).

<Figure 4>
Attitudes that Do not Differ between the NK Recall Group and the Peace Recall Group

<Figure 5>
Attitudes that Differ between the NK Recall Group and the Peace Recall Group

Implications and Challenges: North Korea-Centered, Event-Centered, and Neutral Unification Representations

Implications for this study's findings are as follows. First, social representations of unification center not around 'I' or 'we' but around 'them' – North

Korea. Recalling North Korea is a natural phenomenon considering that unification is a cooperative undertaking between South and North Korea. However, to recall North Korea most strongly and for the proportion of that recollection to be more than five times larger than those who recalled South Korea is unnatural. This implies that South Koreans perceive unification not as the present and future of South Korea but, rather, as the present and future of North Korea. According to the 2019 KINU Unification Perception Survey, 56.2% of respondents agreed to the proposition that 'whether or not unification takes place will not strongly affect my daily life.' This finding supports the interpretation that unification is separated from the life of South Koreans and that there is a strong tendency among South Koreans to think of unification as largely irrelevant.

Second, representations of unification are focused on events rather than procedures, visions, and values. Both among the first associated term and all associated terms, 'peace' and 'integration/harmony' are the only value-driven associated terms. Generally, specific events tend to be easier to recall compared to abstract values. Also, considering that unification is a hypothetical event of the future, people are more likely to perceive unification in an event-based manner rather than in a value or vision-based manner. However, considering that initial unification discourses commonly emphasized the necessity of, values in, benefits from, and procedures of unification, event-centered representations of unification were unexpected results.

Third, representations of unification are neutral. Terms associated with unification are neither positive nor negative. Representations of unification need not be positive, and negative representations are no sources of worry. However, what does the neutrality imply? It may mean that unification does not hold much meaning to South Koreans. This interpretation is in line with the first interpretation. Approaching unification from a third-person perspective may arouse weak emotional responses. Another possibility might be that South Koreans are reluctant to express their opinions on unification. Unification and North Korea are issues that directly reveal one's (political) identities. Hence, the issues might have triggered political correctness. Finally, some respondents might have indirectly expressed their like

and dislike for unification through North Korea, peace, and integration.

Fourth, representations of unification are affected by experiences. North Korea's nuclear crisis that had lasted for the recent decade might have affected the unification representations of those in their 20s and 30s. The importance of experiences is also visible in the 5% of responses from the 50s group that chose 'Germany,' those in their 50s who experienced the unification of Germany during their younger years. Representations of unification also affect people's specific attitudes on unification. This study shows that what kind of definition and image unification arouses can determine attitudes toward North Korea, perceptions on inter-Korean relations, and favored attitudes of choosing ways to achieve peace.

Policy Agendas

First, unification per se, rather than achieving social consensus on unification, should be given the priority. According to this research, the image of unification for the South Korean public is merely 'an event of becoming one country with North Korea.' Compared to the images of 'family,' 'politics,' or 'economics,' unification holds a very parched image. Such parched image of unification stems largely from the societal effort to create a social consensus on unification. Especially, peace and unification education is not free from the criticism that it focuses too much on the legitimacy and necessity of unification rather than on free discussions and debates on what it means for the South and North to become one and what kind of processes exist on the way. Such fallacy resembles a history class teaching about the importance of history rather than historical contents. More reflections on whether we have focused too much on unification 'being necessary vs. unnecessary' and 'being beneficial vs. not beneficial,' a yet very abstract concept, are required.

Second, policy must be geared toward strengthening our understanding of North Korea. Especially, it should promote a better understanding of the daily lives of the North Korean people. If North Korea is what comes to people's minds first when thinking about unification, accommodating that interest is an important task. When it comes to unification, North Korea is a double-faceted and contradictory

subject. According to 'Peace and Unification Education: Direction and Viewpoint,' a dichotomous and contradictory perception that North Korea is a cause for alarm and a subject of cooperation at the same time is an inevitable one deriving from the special, post-war, and unification-seeking relationship. For those under a dichotomous political and military worldview of looking at others as either an ally or an enemy, it is impossible to balance such a contradictory perception. Recognizing contradiction and balancing alert and cooperation are two different tasks.

This does not mean that political and military information and discourses on North Korea are unnecessary. Instead, the problem is that understanding North Korea is too entrenched in the realm of politics and military. This research also examines the stereotypes on North Korean people. The results show that stereotypes are mostly filled with negative perceptions such as 'pain,' 'gloomy,' 'anxiety,' 'depression,' 'agony,' 'fright,' 'anger,' and 'disenchantment.' Anyone living with such a dehumanized perception of another would be deemed unfortunate. Even worse is the image of unification, which would mean living with the dehumanized others. An important first step toward peace is to perceive a foe as a human being. Such a transformation of perception begins with understanding others' lives. There needs to be a process of understanding the daily lives of the North Korean people in order to recognize that they, too, are human beings.

Third, policy should promote a social atmosphere that allows free discussions on unification and North Korea. In a country that developed into a top-tier economic power despite a national division and that has routinized the sociopolitical atmosphere of national division, questioning unification sounds inevitable. However, those questioning unification must bear the uncomfortable social judgment. Such judgment fundamentally stems from the fear that questioning unification might lead to anti-unification sentiments and perpetual maintenance of unification. Might it be that the judgment paradoxically portrays our society's lack of confidence on the unification issue?

For example, teachers fear the instances when students suggest negative opinions toward unification. They must decide whether to change the student's mind or to accept the student's argument and proceed with the discussion. The teacher

fear that colleagues, parents, or even the society might criticize her for teaching anti-unification the moment she allows the student's negative arguments.[5] The accusation clause in the Unification Education Support Act also exacerbates this fear.[6]

Free discussions on unification require trust in the power of the citizens. Doubts and questions may bring forth distrust. However, doubts and questions are essential for reaching a conviction. We must be confident that free discussions on the image of unification will result in a conviction toward unification. Doubts and questions also engender creativity. We must reflect on our social atmosphere by asking whether the stalemate in the inter-Korean relations and the lack of creativity to push through were because we did not allow doubts and questions.

We are constantly reminded of the power and open-mindedness of our citizens in the time of COVID-19 crisis. South Korean citizens are pushing through this national crisis under open democracy, communication, and transparency. We need to have faith that free discussions on and continued questioning of unification will ultimately lead to convictions on unification. ⓒKINU 2020

"The key to wisdom is this – constant and frequent questioning, for by doubting we are led to question and by questioning we arrive at the truth."

– Peter Abelard

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

---

5) Over 43% of teachers feel burdened by peace and unification education becoming a topic of political debate, and about 5% of teachers worry about potential conflict between teachers and parents over the issue. See Institute for Unification Education, *2019 Report on Unification Education in Schools,* Seoul: Institute for Unification Education, p. 162.
6) Unification Education Support Act Clause 11 (Accusation): When a person has provided unification education, the content of which constitutes infringement of the basic order of free democracy, the Minister of Unification shall request the correction thereof or lodge an accusation against him/her to an investigation agency, etc.