



## Online Series

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# Three Illusions on Unification Perception: A Focus on the Dunning – Kruger Effect<sup>1)</sup>

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People in the ROK exhibit a tendency explained by the ‘Dunning-Kruger Effect,’ called the ‘illusion of knowledge,’ when it comes to North Korean issues. While those with a higher level of knowledge about North Korea tend to underestimate their level of knowledge, those with a lower level of knowledge about North Korea tend to overestimate their knowledge level. Also, the level of knowledge about North Korea does not show a generational variance. This research suggests that those in their 20s tend to underestimate their level of knowledge, and the older generations overestimate their level of knowledge. This paper looks into the risks of the ‘Dunning-Kruger Effect and discusses policy implications.

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1) This paper was written based on the research findings of 2020 KINU research project entitled *Task and Implementing Strategies of Public Consensus on Peace in Korea*.

## Introduction

Humans are animals prone to illusion. Most people think of their level of knowledge, health status, and sociability as above the average. This ‘illusion of superiority’ serves as a motive to weather through adversities while maintaining self-esteem in the face of conflicts. However, this ‘illusion of superiority’ could function as obstacles to resolving the conflicts. An accurate understanding of oneself and the others is a prerequisite in resolving intractable conflict situations, such as inter-Korean relations. This paper illuminates to what extent people in the Republic of Korea (ROK) understand North Korea and how well they think they know about North Korea.

The knowledge about North Korea was measured on the ten questions below with the format of the O, X quiz.<sup>2)</sup> Respondents were then asked a question of how much they think they know about North Korea. Respondents estimated the number of answers they got right after answering those ten questions (hereinafter referred to as expected knowledge). The average of answers the respondents got right was 5.3, while the number of right answers they estimated was an average of 5.5.<sup>3)</sup>

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- 2) An online survey was conducted on 1,600 ordinary citizens from March to April 2020. The right answers to question no. 1~5 was “O,” and for question no. 6~10, “X.” The ten questions were presented randomly. The detailed statistics can be found in *Task and Implementing Strategies of Public Consensus on Peace in Korea*.
  - 3) The OX quiz format indicates that the likelihood of accidentally answering the questions right is 50% and that the average rate of right answers could be about 5. However, the interpretation that this result is a coincidence is not convincing enough given that the percentage of individual question’s right answer varies and that the respondents’ right answers follow the patterns of near-complete normal distribution.

&lt;Table 1&gt; 10 Questions Measuring the Knowledge about North Korea

No.	Right Answer O	% of Right Answer
1	North Korea's official state name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.	83.9%
2	North Korea's national anthem is the Patriotic Song ( <i>Aegukga</i> ).	15.1%
3	The top state position in North Korea is the Chairman of the State Affairs Commission.	60.1%
4	The primary foreign language is English in North Korea's educational curriculum.	30.9%
5	Although housing ownership is legally prohibited in North Korea, housing sales between individuals do occur.	66.6%
	Right Answer X	% of Right Answer
6	The national flower of North Korea is the azalea.	51.1%
7	Although North Korea has a marketplace, such as <i>Jangmadang</i> and farmers' markets, the North Korean authorities do not officially recognize the markets.	36.3%
8	North Korea does not observe ancestral rituals even though Lunar New Year's Day ( <i>Seollal</i> ) and Korean Thanksgiving Day ( <i>Chuseok</i> ) are national holidays.	60.5%
9	Kim Jong-un is the second son of Kim Jong-il.	82.1%
10	North Korea recognizes the lineage of the Korean Independence Army Government of Vladivostok, not the Shanghai Korean Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea.	47.2%

### Illusion 1. The Higher the Level of Knowledge on North Korea, the More Positive Perception One Must Have on Unification.

Traditional views that rational human's attitude is based on facts and knowledge suggest that the knowledge on unification and North Korea would make up the foundation for changes in unification perception. This is attributed to an expectation that objective knowledge of North Korea, understanding North Korea as it is, could

be a starting point for changing unification perception. However, the statistical analysis results reveal that such an expectation is an illusion. A correlation analysis which shows the relevance between knowledge on North Korea and unification-orientation and division-orientation illustrates that knowledge about North Korea is not relevant for both unification-orientation and division-orientation when it comes to inter-Korean relations (correlation with unification-orientation = 0.03, correlation with division-orientation = 0.01).<sup>4)</sup> Instead, expected knowledge is the one that has relevance with attitudes toward unification and division. In other words, people's perception of unification turns out to be better explained by the subjective belief that they know well about North Korea, not by the level of objective knowledge of North Korea.

&lt;Table 2&gt;

Correlation between Actual Knowledge about North Korea and Expected Knowledge and Attitudes on Unification

	Expected Knowledge	Unification-orientation	Division-orientation
Knowledge about North Korea	0.01	0.03	0.01
Expected Knowledge	-	0.13**	-0.05*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

### Illusion 2. We are Well Aware of the Level of Our Knowledge.

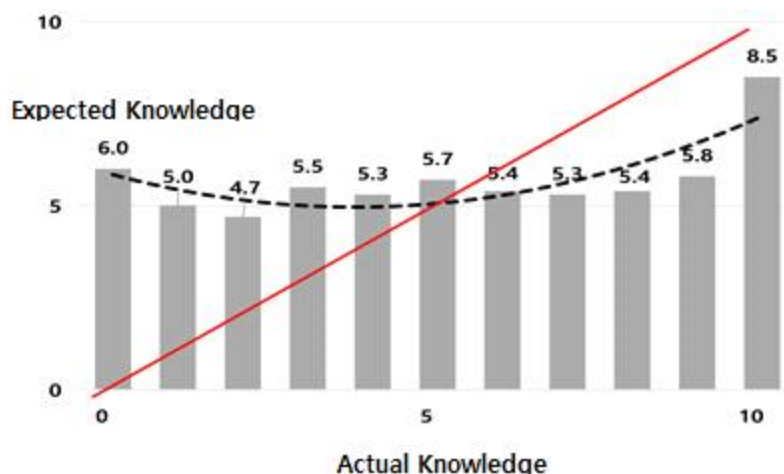
If unification perception is influenced by the belief about one's level of knowledge, not by the objective level of knowledge, it is necessary to look into the accuracy of self-evaluation on the level of knowledge. South Korean people appear to be

4) Unification-orientation refers to a favorable attitude toward South and North Korea forming a unified nation and was measured by six questions. Unification-orientation indicates an attitude favorable to peaceful coexistence, not unification, and was measured by three questions. The details of the questions can be found in *Task and Implementing Strategies of Public Consensus on Peace in Korea*.

relatively accurately cognizant of one's level of knowledge when only considering the average mentioned above (actual knowledge: 5.3, expected knowledge: 5.5). However, this result reveals an 'entrapment of the average' that was a combination of characteristics of the group that underestimates their knowledge and the one that overestimates their knowledge.

<Picture 1>

The Level of Actual Knowledge about North Korea and That of Expected Knowledge



The X-axis of <Picture 1> refers to the number of right answers to ten questions regarding North Korea (actual knowledge). At the same time, Y-axis points to the expectation (expected knowledge) about the assumed number of right answers. If people in the ROK accurately assess their level of knowledge, then the relations between actual knowledge and the expected knowledge will be marked in a straight red line. However, people's self-assessment turned out to be far from "accuracy."

While people with a lower level of knowledge about North Korea (the number of right answers: 0~4) overestimate their level of knowledge, those with a higher level of knowledge about North Korea underestimate their knowledge level. The findings of the research lay bare at least two types of ignorance: people who do not know

that well about North Korea are not aware that they do not know well about North Korea, and those who know well about North Korea are not aware that they know well about North Korea. Such findings are accurately explained by the ‘Dunning–Kruger Effect’ in which the most underachiever tend to overestimate their capacity the most. When the ‘Dunning–Kruger Effect’ occurs in political issues, in other words, when political discourse is discussed based on one’s ignorance or knowledge, political polarization deepens, and the social consensus becomes challenging.<sup>5)</sup> The ‘Dunning–Kruger Effect’ found in this research unveils a clue as to why social dialogue on unification does not lead to social consensus.

### **Illusion 3. Generation 2030 would not Know Much about North Korea.**

While the second illusion about unification perception is about oneself, the second illusion is about others. As <Picture 2> indicates, the level of knowledge about North Korea among those in their 20s and 30s was not that different from that of the older generations. However, those in their 20s and 30s, particularly the former, tend to underestimate their knowledge level, while the older generations tend to overestimate their level of knowledge.<sup>6)</sup> Why the older generations overestimate their level of knowledge then? One possibility is that their interests in North Korea and the hopes for unification could be recognized as the feeling that they know about North Korea.

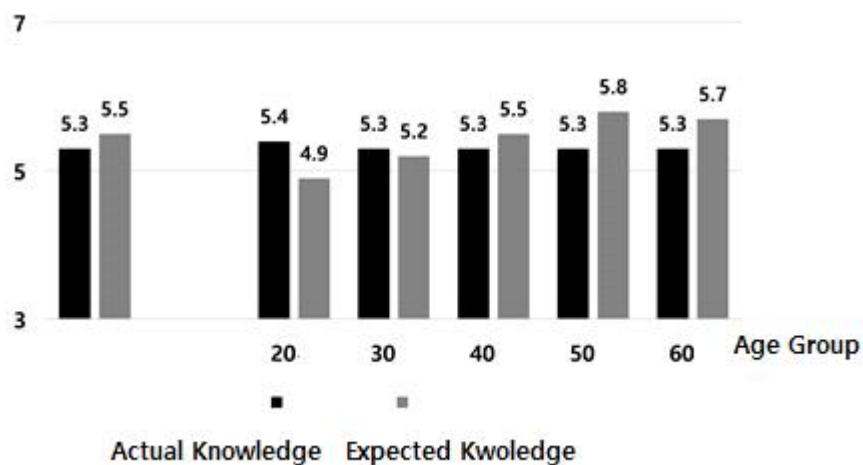
On the other hand, <Picture 2> demonstrates well why our society thinks that those in their 20s and 30s do not know very well about North Korea. The older generations would likely evaluate those in their 20s and 30s based on the illusion

5) Ian G. Anson, “Partisanship, Political Knowledge, and the Dunning-Kruger Effect,” *Political Psychology*, vol. 39, no. 5 (2018), pp. 1173~1192. Overview of this paper can be found in the article as follows: “The more one does not know about politics, ‘the more one knows about politics,’” *Nownews*, April 23, 2018, <<http://nownews.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20180423601005>> (date accessed: January 23, 2021).

6) Not much difference in the two types in their 30s and 40s. Although additional analysis is required, the interests about North Korea might likely increase in those generations as the generational issues of job, marriage prevalent among those in their 20s are resolved.

they know well about North Korea, not their actual knowledge level. At the same time, it is also highly likely that those in their 20s and 30s take into account the criticism of the older generations, not their actual level of knowledge, in self-evaluation. Thus concerns are raised as to whether ignorance about ignorance, The ‘Dunning–Kruger Effect,’ distorts the objective reality of recognition about North Korea and unification more broadly and whether such a distortion would give rise to diagnosis and prescriptions far from reality.

<Picture 2> The Level of Actual Knowledge and Expected Knowledge by Age Group



### Policy Implications

This research findings that ‘the level of knowledge about North Korea has no relevance for the perception on unification and the division’ are not compatible with the traditional approach premised on viewing humans as rational beings. A lack of knowledge and information is a condition under which rational actors do not change their attitude. These research findings affirm that a change of attitude is not determined by the level of knowledge and information but by evaluating their level of knowledge and information, meta-cognition. Therefore, there needs to be not only the interests in what we should know about unification and North Korea but also

a social space that makes us recognize what we know and do not know. An issue can be raised, legitimately, on the ten questions utilized in this research, which asks whether those questions contain the knowledge that the public should know about North Korea. Starting from that question can be one way to go. Contemplations on what we should know about North Korea for changed attitude on North Korea and unification could be another starting point.

Authors of the book, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, Philip Fernbach and Steven Sloman, pointed out that ‘ignorance about ignorance’ and community’s interactions are worsened by the risky social mechanism.<sup>7)</sup> Social dialogue and discussions on North Korea being held without meta-cognition about North Korea, the condition under which one is not even aware of what they know and do not know about North Korea, could incite social conflicts contrary to expectations. Group polarization is inevitable if the hopes and interests on a particular issue are translated into feelings that one understands a specific issue. Despite those social risks, a solution to strengthening meta-cognition for political issues is not clear. Simply being exposed to accurate information seems to be a weak solution.<sup>8)</sup> Although causal explanation on issues is effective, it is estimated that causal thinking is not an effective solution for ethical judgment and viewpoints, such as unification. Efforts are required on recognizing one’s own bias and assessing meta-cognition of oneself and the community.

What kinds of changes can one expect when our meta-cognition on North Korea and unification improves? Although more contemplation and research are required to answer that question, at least one change can be expected given the findings of this paper: It will be a change of view for those in their 20s and 30s, which will lead to changes in the framework of social dialogue on unification. It cannot be denied that the focus of expanding “unification consensus” and “peace consensus” has been

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7) Philip Fernbach and Steven Sloman, translated by Hee-Kyung Moon, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (Seoul: Sejong Book, 2018), p. 228.

8) Hyung-woo Kim and Jong-hyuk Lee, “Ignorance about Political Ignorance,” *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies*, vol. 64, no. 4 (2020), pp. 210~246.



on the younger generations of the 20s and 30s over the last two decades. This stems from the recognition that “those in their 20s and 30s” are the problems, not “us.” Such recognition is entirely in sync with the expected knowledge presented in this research. If “unification consensus” and “peace consensus” are viewed from the perspective of actual knowledge, not expected knowledge, then a change to an approach targeting the ‘entire generations,’ not just those in their 20s and 30s, will be inevitable.

The younger generations in their 20s and 30s might have a groundless feeling of withering and being indebted once the issues on North Korea, unification, and the Korean Peninsula come up. It is probably attributed to the social pressure on the younger generations of the 20s and 30s. However, the findings of this study show that social pressures on the 20- and 30-generations could be a result of the illusion of the older generations. Dunning, who suggested the “Dunning-Kruger Effect” pointed out that the problem of individuals is that ‘one is not cognizant of their own potential’ just as the younger generations in their 20s and 30s do not accurately assess their level of knowledge.<sup>9)</sup> What the younger generations in their 20s and 30s who underestimate their level of knowledge need is to accurately grasp their capacity. And the starting point should be on clearly assessing the own knowledge and capability of the older generations.

Lastly, this paper reveals tasks required for social dialogue on unification in the future. It is necessary to squarely face the limitation of unification-orientation, which simply relies on knowledge and passion, and put in place a mechanism through which the knowledge and passion could function in a complementary manner. In particular, a discussion based on issues such as knowledge and expectation in terms of generational communications could become a useful asset through which generational gaps would strengthen the unification-orientation. ©KINU 2021

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9) “The Anosognosic’s Dilemma: Something’s Wrong but You’ll Never Know What It Is,” New York Times, <<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/20>> (date accessed: January 24, 2020).



“One of the scars of this era is that those with confidence are ignorant while those with a sense of imagination and understanding are doubtful and hesitant”

– Bertrand Russell

※ 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).