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The (Partial) Memory of the Unified Korean Women's Ice Hockey Team at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics

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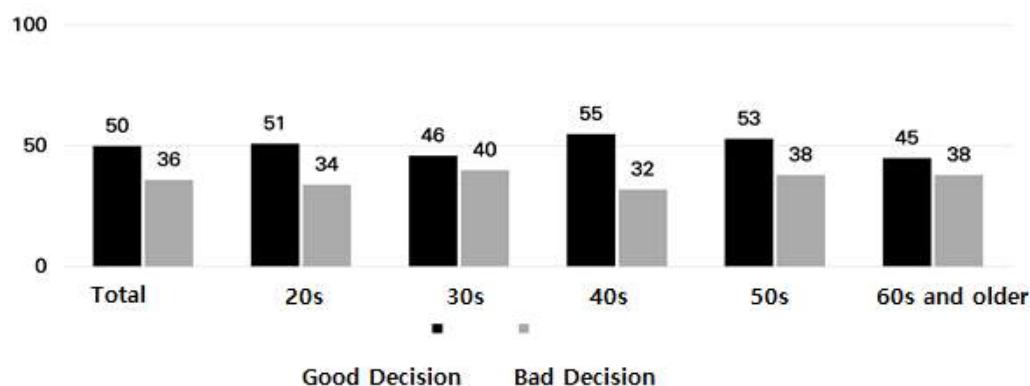
This study reassesses the public's attitude towards the formation of the unified Korean women's ice hockey team in February 2018. While two surveys were conducted at the time, only the results from the first survey is remembered. Negative responses outnumbered positive responses during the first survey conducted during the first week of February, but positive responses outweighed negative ones during the latter survey conducted during the fourth week of February. This study discusses the negative consequences of this partial memory, its potential causes, and the reasons behind the change in attitude towards the unified team revealed through these two surveys. The study suggests policy implications from the perspective of building the consensus on peace.

Two Public Opinion Surveys regarding the Unified Korean Women's Ice Hockey Team at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics

On February 23, 2018, Gallup Korea announced the results from its public opinion survey on whether the decision to compose the unified Korean women's ice hockey team (hereafter unified team) was good or bad.¹⁾ The results showed that the number of respondents who thought that the decision was good (50%) was greater than those

who believed it was bad (36%), with the gap between the two opinions well outside the margin of error. The number of respondents who thought the formation of the unified team was a ‘good’ decision outnumbered those who considered it a ‘bad’ one in almost every age group except respondents in their 30s. For example, 51% of respondents in their 20s called it a good decision, while only 34% thought it was a bad one.

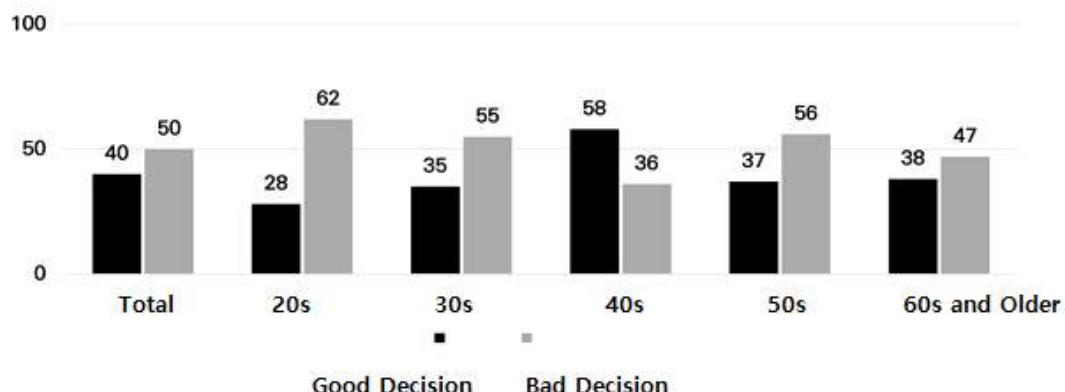
<Figure 1> Survey Results on Views of the Unified Team at the PyeongChang Olympics,
4th week of February, 2018



These results differ from common memories of the unified team showing that a greater proportion of the population thought that the formation of the unified team was a good decision, and that in particular the younger generation in their 20s and 30s had positive views. The unified team remembered by the people of South Korea will probably resemble the results from an earlier Gallup Korea survey announced on February 3, 2018, as shown in <Figure 2>.²⁾

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- 1) These were the results from the survey that Gallup Korea conducted on 1,002 adults nationwide from February 20 to 22, 2018, with a margin of error of $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level. More detailed information can be found at the homepages of Gallup Korea and the National Election Survey Deliberation Commission (NESDC).
 - 2) These were the results from the survey that Gallup Korea conducted on 1,002 adults nationwide from January 30 to February 1, 2018, with a margin of error of $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level. More detailed information can be found at the homepages of Gallup Korea and the NESDC.

<Figure 2> Survey Results on Views of the Unified Team at the PyeongChang Olympics, 1st week of February, 2018

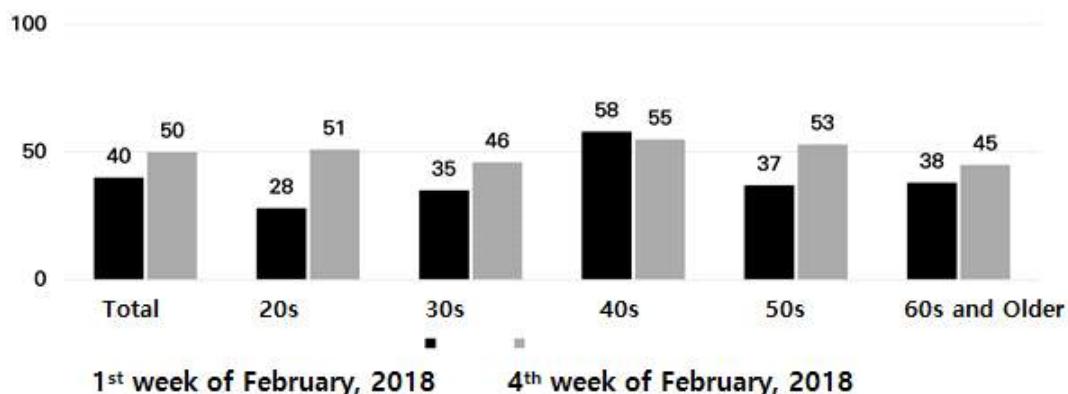


The ratio of respondents who thought that the formation of the unified team was a good decision during the survey conducted in the first week of February was 40%, lower outside the margin of error than those who considered it a good decision at 50%. In particular, 62% of respondents in their 20s and 55% of respondents in their 30s expressed negative views of the unified women's ice hockey team, and such findings drew considerable attention across society at the time.

Even though there were two surveys regarding the formation of the unified Korean women's ice hockey team at the PyeongChang Olympics and the results were markedly different, why do we only remember the results from the first survey? Specifically, even though views of the unified Korean women's ice hockey team shifted from being negative to positive in every age group before and after the Olympics, and even though the extent of this shift in perception was the largest among respondents in their 20s and 30s, with positive views increasing by 23% and 11%, respectively, it appears that there are few Koreans that remember this fact (Figure 3).

<Figure 3>

The Proportion of Respondents who Replied the Formation of the Unified Team was a Good Decision in February 2018



If we accept the results of the two surveys conducted before and after the PyeongChang Olympics at face value, it shows that the overall attitude towards the unified team became positive within a month. But the unified team is remembered not as an instance in which the attitude of the public turned positive but rather as an event that divided the nation, and this image is likely to persist in the future.

The Negative Effects of ‘Partial Memories’

It is clear that the discrepancy between the results of the survey regarding the unified team and the memory of the public, as well as the gap between facts and memories, will lead to negative consequences. First, it turned an incident that could have become a key episode of success for the spreading of the consensus for peace into a case of failure or, at the very least, a classic example of controversy. This not only affects the consensus for peace but can also exert pressure on policies regarding the Korean Peninsula. As of October 2021, North Korea’s participation at the upcoming Beijing Winter Olympics seems impossible, but the prospect of North Korea participating in the games can not completely be ruled out since the situation may change. Hypothetically speaking, if North Korea becomes able to participate in the Beijing Winter Olympics, items such as a joint entrance by the two Koreas

and the formation of a unified team will emerge as major issues between South and North Korea. The memory of the unified team will obviously be the first thing that is recalled. And the debate within the South Korean society will not begin from the ‘fact’ that views of the unified Korean women’s ice hockey team have actually changed, but rather the ‘memory’ of negative views of the unified team shown in the survey conducted during the first week of February and the subsequent social conflict and controversy. The political and social costs caused by the gap between the two starting points can have easily been avoided had policies to spread the consensus on peace properly functioned. Considering how the memory of PyeongChang can be recalled whenever there is a disagreement in society about the government’s inter-Korean policies, the ‘partial memories’ of PyeongChang will be a very painful point in history.

Second, the shift in the public’s attitude towards the unified team made possible a better understanding of the mechanisms which drives the changes to the perception of the nation. But that opportunity has now been lost. What changed the negative views of the unified team into positive ones? As much as the society-wide attention paid to the issue, the shift in attitude among the people was also unusual. Has there ever been an instance during the history of division where negative perceptions regarding an issue related to the Korean Peninsula were transformed into positive ones within a month?

Third, the half-hearted attention that the South Koreans paid to the issue became a factor that further solidified the stereotypes of the generation in their 20s and 30s or the ‘2030 generation.’ It is well known that discussions regarding the consensus on unification and peace focus on this generation. This is due to the concern that the 2030 generation lack interest in the question of unification and peace on the Korean Peninsula. Again hypothetically, how might have the perception of the 2030 generation changed had the South Korean society shared the outcome that the proportion of respondents in their 20s who thought the formation of the unified team was a good decision had increased from 28% to 51% before and after the PyeongChang Olympics? Perceptions of this generation regarding issues on the Korean Peninsula might not have changed much considering how there are strong stereotypes within our society. On the other hand, however, there might have been

efforts to look for the next unified Korean women's ice hockey team that would similarly influence the 2030 generation. At the very least, the belief that the perceptions of the 2030 generation can be altered will have been greater than it is today.

Mechanisms for Changes in Perception

Why did the negative opinions observed during the 1st week of February change to being positive by the 4th week of February? Three hypotheses appear plausible. First, numerous experts explained the negative attitude towards the unified team expressed by the 2030 generation revealed by the survey conducted during the 1st week of February from the perspectives of fairness and justice, or from the perspective of national identity. But can these claims explain the survey results from the fourth week of February? Regardless of whether or not they are applicable, the attempt to interpret changes to the attitude of the public from the perspectives of fairness, justice, and national identity is meaningful in itself. This is because at least it allows for the verification of the validity of the perspective of fairness and justice, and national identity.

Second, it might also be explained through the contact hypothesis. Given how the people of South Korea were able to watch the unified Korean women's ice hockey team compete at the PyeongChang Olympics on their TV screens, their change in attitude might either be explained by the contact hypothesis,³⁾ or the indirect contact hypothesis,⁴⁾ both of which are popular explanations for reconciliation and the reduction of prejudice. Lastly, social desirability may also have played a role. The possibility that the 2030 generation learned the mechanisms of self-censorship due to the social controversy that occurred as a result of the survey from the first week of February can also not be ruled out.

There is not much meaning in trying to assess which of these possible explanations

3) Gordon Allport, translated by Kiyoung Suk, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Seoul: Kyoyangin, 2020), pp. 415~445.

4) Fiona A. White, *et al.*, "Beyond Direct Contact: The Theoretical and Societal Relevance of Indirect Contact for Improving Intergroup Relations," *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 77 (2020), pp. 132~153.

is the most accurate when almost three years have passed since the Olympics given that there are essentially no methods of verification. What is clear, however, is the fact that the mechanisms of the change in attitude precipitated by the unified team have been lost to the unknown, which means that the opportunity to explore key mechanisms through which the consensus on peace can be broadened has been lost as well.

Mechanisms of ‘Partial Memories’

Considering this, why did the government, experts, and the media fail to pay close attention to the survey results from the fourth week of February? First, there is a need to examine inter-Korean relations following this period. Two days after the announcement of the survey results on February 25, the North Korean delegation attended the closing ceremony of the Winter Olympics, and all the focus was drawn to whether the North Korean delegation would meet with White House senior advisor Ivanka Trump. Then a South Korean special envoy visited North Korea on March 5, which resulted in the announcement of the inter-Korean summit to be held in April 2018 two days later. In other words, it can be thought that interest in the unified team relatively declined because the attention of the society had shifted to inter-Korean relations. But considering how the change in attitude towards the unified team, the symbol of inter-Korean cooperation displayed at the PyeongChang Olympics, could have further contributed to progress in inter-Korean relations at the time, additional explanations seem necessary.

In addition to such changes to the societal-political context, indifference towards the survey results from the fourth week of February can also be attributed to societal-motivational aspects. First, there is a possibility of confirmation bias. This refers to the likelihood that the South Korean society only focused on evidence that supported preexisting stereotypes of the 2030 generation and unconsciously disregarded evidence that disproved them. While the results of the survey from the first week of February directly matched our society’s preconceptions of the 2030 generation, the results from the fourth week’s survey clashed with stereotypes of the 2030 generation as it showed that their attitude towards the unified team was no different from that of the older generation. The general sense within the South Korean society that the 2030 generation turns a blind eye to issues of the Korean Peninsula may have precipitated the lack of interest in the shift of attitude towards

the unified women's ice hockey team.

Another societal-motivational aspect is hindsight bias. Simply put, hindsight bias refers to the human tendency to believe they already knew that an outcome would occur once it actually does; it is to think that "I knew that would happen." When the survey results were announced in the first week of February, the overall reaction was to explain the response of the 2030 generation as natural and obvious. Though various explanations based on individualistic values, fairness and justice, as well as national identity were suggested, these claims all shared the belief that this was 'expected from the 2030 generation.' Hindsight bias reflects confidence in the causes of outcomes, induces justification, and weakens one's ability to consider the prospect of being wrong. Self-monitoring of an individual's explanations and forecasts can not be hoped when there is an 'all-knowing attitude.'

What to Do?

First, there is a need to correct the partial memories of the unified Korean women's ice hockey team at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics that the South Korean society possesses. It is true that there were negative views of the formation of the unified team, which the first survey from the first week of February revealed. But it is also true that public opinion turned positive by fourth week of February and the second survey. It is important to remember the fact that there were two surveys conducted at the time, and also remember the results of these polls as they were. Excessive interest in the reasons for this shift in attitude may also risk other forms of confirmation bias and hindsight bias. Moreover, there is a need to be cautious about placing too much meaning on the shift in attitude among the 2030 generation. It is important to begin by simply remembering the survey results by the numbers, and that there was indeed a shift in attitude. It is necessary to closely observe the public's opinion of, and attitude towards, Korean Peninsula issues based on complete memories of the unified team.

Second, there needs to be consensus-building policies not *for* peace and unification but *on* unification and peace. To do so, changes need to be made to the consensus-building discourse that focuses solely on the need for unification. The people view the Korean Peninsula issue from the perspective of division, the perspective of universal values, the perspective of strength and prestige of the

country, the perspective of peace, and the perspective of a desirable future on the Korean Peninsula. The dichotomous approach of distinguishing between support for or opposition against unification is insufficient in understanding the complexities of the public's opinion and attitude on the unified team and, more broadly, the Korean Peninsula Peace Process.

In order to broaden the consensus on unification and peace, it is important to provide opportunities for the people to think about these issues. There need to be policies for broadening the consensus based on debates within society that allow the public to hear alternative viewpoints and reduce gaps in opinion through deliberation. The society-wide conversations that are being hosted by the Ministry of Unification and the Seoul Metropolitan government need to be expanded.

Lastly, governance that analyzes the long-term trends in the people's attitude towards Korean Peninsula issues is required. The spread of the consensus on peace and peace education has an inherent risk of being overlooked because they offer the longest-term solutions to the most immediate problems. But as witnessed through the partial memories of the unified team, the lack of interest in the attitude of the people regarding matters on the Korean Peninsula led to an opportunity resulting in failure. Close policy attention is necessary to ensure that a similar case resembling the partial memories of the unified team does not occur again. ©KINU 2021

- “One lives by memory ... and not by truth.” -

Igor Stravinsky

* 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).