



Online Series

2018. 01. 30. | CO 18-03

Why Unification Perception of the Younger Generation in Their 20s and 30s Is Different from the Older Generation?

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The unification perception of the young generation in their 20s and 30s has caught people's attention as the result of a recent opinion poll showed their high opposition for a single women's ice hockey team formation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. There have been a growing concern over their unification perception as it is analyzed to be a major contributor to the negative public opinion on the formation of inter-Korean women's ice hockey team.

This paper sets out to delve into the unification perception of that younger generation, an issue raised by a recent controversy over inter-Korean women's ice hockey team in the Winter Olympics, based on *Survey of People's Opinions on South-North Integration 2017*, published by Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) and present policy implications.

Candid Thought on Unification

The older generation has carried around a sense of social obligation of having to be positive toward unification, subjecting themselves to what is desired in society and imposed self-censorship that has restrained them from expressing a negative opinion on unification. On the other hand, those

in their 20s and 30s have been free from the social obligation that restricts them from expressing a negative attitude toward unification.

A common trait found across generations is that as the effect of unification on one's personal life becomes more visible, meaning that a question addressed to the public becomes less abstract, the number of respondents in favor of unification dramatically decreases. For example, the survey shows that to a question of "I am willing to share a burden in exchange for unification," the number of positive answer was 8.0% for those in their 20s, 9.6% for 30s, 8.2% for 40s, 13.1% for 50s, and 15.8% for 60s and over. The result indicates that if the necessity for unification is defined as whether they are willing to accept the personal sacrifice for unification, the level of consensus on the necessity for unification in our society is overwhelmingly low and the generational gaps are not meaningful in that sense. While people in their 20s and 30s candidly expressed their negative opinion toward unification that requires a personal sacrifice, the older generation faces a criticism for their unification perception given that they are striving for a goal that will realistically never be met - achieving unification without any personal sacrifice.

Complex Nature of Unification Perception

The first principle in asking a question that indirectly measures human psychological representation is that all respondents should have the same psychological representation for a question addressed to them. It means that respondents should think of the same unification when asked "How much do you think unification is necessary?" However, chances are that what those 20s and 30s think it takes to achieve unification might be different from that of those 40s and older.

If so, what is unification in the minds of the younger generation? According to KINU's *Survey of People's Opinions on South-North Integration 2017*, 21.3% said that unification is possible without building peaceful inter-Korean relations and 47.2% said the opposite. However, a subtle generational gap was found in an answer

to a question “Is unification possible without building peaceful inter-Korean relations?” The percentage of those who believed that unification is possible without peaceful inter-Korean relations was 25.1% for people in their 20s, 19.7% in 30s, 19.3% in 40s, 20.6% in 50s, and 22.0% in 60s and older.

Dilemma of Ethnicity-based Unification Discourse

The 20s and 30s’ low support for the argument that we should achieve unification because we are of the same ethnicity is cited as a major basis for opposition to the formation of single inter-Korean women’s ice hockey team in the Winter Games. Half of this claim is right and half wrong. The number of those who explicitly opposed the idea of the two Koreas sharing the ethnic root was 6.3% in those 20s, 5.6% in 30s, 3.4% in 40s, 5.6% in 50s, and 2.5% in 60s and over. In other words, those 20s and 30s have a highly keen sense of ethnic homogeneity and that applies to all generations showing a very little generational gap. The percentage of those who chose ethnic homogeneity as a rationale for unification was 26.9% in those 20s, 24.2% in 30s, 29.5% in 40s, 28.1% in 50s, and 48.6% in 60s and older.

Younger generation in their 20s and 30s believes that although the South and the North are of the same ethnicity, the ethnicity-based unification discourse cannot be a sole rationale for achieving unification. The fact that there is a strong opposition to the argument of achieving unification simply for the sake of ethnicity clearly shows the limitation of ethnicity-based argument as an unification discourse. However, the percentage of those who believed that the South and the North share the same ethnic root was high across all generations, which indicates that ethnicity-based unification discourse is still valid.

Linkage between Single Inter-Korean Team and Unification Perception: Default Option

Then, what is a linkage connecting those 20s and 30s' psychological representation for unification and the controversy over the formation of single inter-Korean women's ice hockey team? One can take a hint from a default option described in the best-selling book *Nudge* written by Professor Richard Thaler, who won the 2017 Nobel Prize for Economics. The default option indicates an option that is automatically selected if not instructed otherwise. It is highly likely that the controversy over a single inter-Korean team may stem from a generational gap of how differently people perceive the default option in inter-Korean relations, especially in sports events joined by both Koreas.

The default option for the older generation seems to be the formation of single inter-Korean team and joint cheering squads and joint entrance in the opening ceremony. Although their default option is the formation of single inter-Korean team, it does not necessarily mean their support for it. It simply means that people will automatically be given a choice to support or oppose the formation of single inter-Korean team. On the other hand, the default option for those 20s and 30s is likely to be the participation of North Korea, separate from South Korean team.

The difference in default option lies in a gap of historical experiences. The image of North Korea in the eyes of those 20s and 30s is quite negative owing to its provocations of nuclear weapons and missiles, the Cheonan sinking, the bombardment of Yeongpyeong, the blast triggered by North Korean wooden-box mines, the assassination of Kim Jong-nam, etc. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there is no positive recollection of South and North Korea doing something cooperative in their memory.

Policy Implications

A negative public opinion of people in their 20s and 30s suggests that ironically PyeongChang Winter Olympics can become an important opportunity for compensating for the default option gap identified across generations and narrowing the gap created by different experiences. It indicates that the younger generation will get to know North Koreans through the formation of single inter-Korean team, joint cheering squads, joint entrance in the opening ceremony, and various cultural events in the Winter Games.

Second, there should be a consideration for the default option. The controversy over the formation of single inter-Korean team in the Winter Olympics illustrates that the default mode of the young generation of those 20s and 30s is different from that of the older generation. There used to be no need to explain this difference but there will be more areas that need to be explained in the future. In that context, a social consensus on the clear definition of peace and unification is required now more than ever and the consensus needs to be built by providing the younger generation with expanded experiences.

Lastly, one should be wary of the danger of self-fulfilling prophecy in regards to unification perception of those 20s and 30s. Self-fulfilling prophecy indicates people's tendency to adjust their thoughts and behavior in a way that meets the expectation of others. The growing negative view on the unification perception of those 20s and 30s induces this generation to act and think accordingly. In short, this tendency creates a vicious cycle, under which a concern over their unification perception repeatedly decreases their interests for unification. It should be recognized that the unification perception held by the younger generation is simply different from that of the older, not wrong, and that a change in their unification perception can only come about, not through a lecturing, but through an understanding of how their unification perception has become what it is today.

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