

Diagnosing autism and teaching neurodiversity with So Hyun “Sophy” Kim

The Korea University professor on her path to autism research and studying in the United States.

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This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity; it may contain errors due to the transcription process.

[opening theme music]

Brady Huggett

All right. Here we are, another episode of “[Synaptic](#).” Welcome. Thanks for joining. This is our show that looks at the people, the research, and the challenges of the neuroscience space. This is episode 15. My name is Brady Huggett, and I host the show.

[transition music]

Brady Huggett

OK, let’s get to it. Today, let’s go back to 1994, and let’s go to Korea. That year, North Korea announced that its leader, Kim Il Sung, had died, reportedly of a heart attack. His passing was [an issue] for both North and South Korea to consider. That year, there was also a deadly bridge collapse in Seoul, South Korea. Part of the Seongsu Bridge, which spans the River Han in Seoul, suddenly fell into the water, and 32 people died. There was also a heat wave that summer, with temperatures reaching higher than 33 degrees Celsius, or above 91 degrees Fahrenheit, for 29 straight days.

Now, these things might sound like bad news, but Korea, by the 1990s, had been on a long recovery from the Korean War. South Korea, in particular, was a country in ascent. Its poverty rate had steadily declined from 1965 through 1990. Now, let’s go to the Southwestern part of Seoul, specifically the Guro, Yeongdeungpo, and Yangcheon districts, because it was in that area, around 1994, that a young girl named So Hyun Kim went through a metamorphosis. That’s our guest for today, So Hyun Kim. Right before middle school, So Hyun and her family moved into a slightly better neighborhood, which meant she went to an improved school.

At that school, because So Hyun is a social person, she made a lot of friends and was voted class president. Because she was class president, she felt some pressure to fit into that role, as she said, and she suddenly began taking her classes more seriously. That’s not to say she wasn’t studying before, she was, but before that, she had mainly wanted to spend time with her friends. Now, because her friends were the ones excelling in school, she began to excel in school, too. She began to seriously think about what she might want to do with her life, what she wanted to study, and where. We talked about that on this podcast.

We also talked about one of her family members who had some mental health issues, and how that drew her to study clinical psychology. From there, she was led to autism. We talked about what a life-changing experience it was to be mentored by Cathy Lord. We talked about So Hyun’s current work at Korea University. All of that coming up in the next hour or so. I interviewed So Hyun at her office on the campus of Korea University on June 21, 2024. It was a very hot day in Seoul. Sunny and a high of maybe 94 degrees Fahrenheit.

I put the mics across from each other on a table in her office, and because it was warm, she plugged in a quiet fan to help move the air around, so you can hear a soothing background hiss as we talked. I think you’re set up, so let’s start here, where I’m asking So Hyun about the Organization for Human Brain Mapping conference that was held in Seoul June 23 through the 27. Here’s your episode of “Synaptic” with So Hyun Kim, starting right now.

[transition music]

Brady Huggett

You don’t go to OHBM?

So Hyun Kim

No. This time I won't, and I haven't been to OHBM, to be honest, because I don't do imaging studies, but I do EEG studies. So this time, because it's in Korea, I thought I would go, and we put a poster in, and we got it accepted, but my student is going.

Brady Huggett

Yes, I was wondering how it felt to have that in your hometown like this.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. It's interesting. I left Korea 15 years ago, and it was after I graduated from my bachelor's, my college, and at that time, I was not connected to anyone in academia, so I didn't know if conferences were in Korea, but I bet there was nothing. Now that I came back, I've been here for two years, and I had so many friends from America come and visit because they had conferences here. It's like people in California that I couldn't see for years, even if I was in New York. So I joke that ever since I came here, I see more of my friends from America than ever before. OHBM happening here is a big deal.

Brady Huggett

Yes, I feel like that says something about Korea.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

About maybe not only Korea, but Seoul. Seoul has really risen as a global city.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Yes. [crosstalk].

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Were you born in Seoul?

So Hyun Kim

I was born in Ulsan, which is close to Busan.

Brady Huggett

Yes.

So Hyun Kim

Which is in the south part of Korea.

Brady Huggett

Did your parents grow up there?

So Hyun Kim

No, my parents are from Seoul. My dad was working in an oil company in Ulsan. At that time, I was born there. I lived in this community where all the employees of that company live together. It was a big apartment complex where we had our preschool. I went to school, walking distance, maybe like 20 minutes or so. I had to climb up a little hill that was not paved, to go to school.

Brady Huggett

Like through the forest?

So Hyun Kim

It was like woody. [laughs] I was very adventurous. I would leave home in the morning and would not come back home until like dinnertime. No supervision whatsoever. I was like 5.

Brady Huggett

This company, this was a big oil company. Was it drilling or something, or what was it?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, it's called Ssangyong. Yes. Now I don't know if they are still strong, but it was an oil company where-

Brady Huggett

What did your dad do? Was he an engineer?

So Hyun Kim

He is an engineer. He's a chemical engineer. He's now retired, but he now is in like more of a science-teaching business. He was an engineer.

Brady Huggett

Both your parents grew up in Seoul?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

He moved the family down there for this job?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

What did your mother do?

So Hyun Kim

My mom was a nurse, but she quit her job when she got married. Then she was a stay-at-home mom, and then she decided to go to veterinarian school. Yes, so she became a vet. That was when I was like around 7 or 8. She got into college again, to study. We moved to Seoul then.

Brady Huggett

Oh, OK. She had the nursing degree, stopped nursing. How many siblings-- You do?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I have a younger sister.

Brady Huggett

So two kids?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Then she said, "I'm going back to school," got the veterinary degree, and became a vet?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

The whole family moved to Seoul?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, because she got into the program. We moved to Seoul when I was like 6 or 7.

Brady Huggett

Your dad kept the same—

So Hyun Kim

He stayed in Ulsan for like a year and then came to join us. He then was working for Hyundai.

Brady Huggett

Oh, great.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Yes, these are really the Hyundai days. They are a big company.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, it's a big company.

Brady Huggett

When you were living in Ulsan, the company was big enough to have provided a little, like, community?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

With a school, probably a grocery store, those kinds of things. Yes. Do you know how your parents met?

So Hyun Kim

They met in college. Yes.

Brady Huggett

Yes. No big story there. They just met in college. Yes. Fell in love.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, and they got married.

Brady Huggett

In Seoul?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Then they moved to Ulsan because of my dad's job.

Brady Huggett

Yes. That's where you were born, actually. OK. I was thinking, I'm not quite sure of the timeline. It wouldn't have been you or your parents, but your grandparents probably experienced the Korean War, yes?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. My mom's side, when we moved to Seoul, we actually lived with my mom's parents for a year or two years while my dad was finding his way to Seoul. I got to live with them for a couple of years, which was a very, very interesting experience. My mom's parents are from North Korea. After the war, they blocked the border, right? They said, "We'll have a break." [chuckles]

We've had that break for like seven years. It's not like, "We are going to end the war." It was actually a break. During that time, during that period, a lot of people were moving up and down because the—

Brady Huggett

The border?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. The border control was not perfect, but it was dangerous to come across the border. My grandparents, my mom's side, crossed the border with three kids, or two kids. My mom's older brothers.

Brady Huggett

And her.

So Hyun Kim

She was not born yet.

Brady Huggett

OK.

So Hyun Kim

They had five kids. They came across the border, and my grandma will always say this when they get into a fight, and say, "Your grandpa abandoned me when we were coming across the border. We were swimming and swimming and then there were like soldiers coming, and your grandpa just like ran away thinking that they're going to get arrested or something," but it was the South Korean soldiers coming to rescue them. [laughs]

Brady Huggett

As they were finishing the swim, he saw soldiers and ran the other direction?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Then my grandma's like holding two kids, the water is coming up, and the soldiers are like, "Come, you're going to get on the ship." Then they did. Then grandpa came after. He was like, "OK, it looks safe. Let me go and join."

Brady Huggett

What does he say? When your grandmother would say that, what would he say?

So Hyun Kim

He will not say anything, but he was not that embarrassed. [laughs]

Brady Huggett

No. So, the crossings, there wasn't— like, you weren't allowed to cross, so they had to actually swim across the river?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Oh, I thought for a while they had a little bit—

So Hyun Kim

Yes, they had to do it secretly somehow, because I think it was a year or two years after.

Brady Huggett

Yes. Do you know why? Why did they decide that they wanted to go to the South?

So Hyun Kim

I don't know, actually. They got separated from their family members. They had their parents, sister, brothers, cousins, all in North Korea. When my grandpa was dying, he would say things like, "Please, let me call them. I need to talk to them." We

would be like, “You know, we cannot talk to them now.” He was kind of losing it, but then at the same time, they really missed their family, and they couldn’t see them anymore.

Brady Huggett

Yes. That’s like my limited knowledge. Right? Just tell me where I’m wrong. I read that again and again and again, how it tore families apart. You just had to— Like a wall came down.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Without knowing.

Brady Huggett

Almost like a literal wall.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

You don’t know if they’re OK, you can never communicate again.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Is that still the way? I guess you can’t email.

So Hyun Kim

No.

Brady Huggett

That’s brutal.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I have distant cousins maybe living there. My husband’s grandparents are also from North Korea. We do think about this topic quite a bit. We really hope that someday we will be reunited.

Brady Huggett

Unified. Yes.

So Hyun Kim

Not everyone thinks that way.

Brady Huggett

Your father’s parents. Where were they?

So Hyun Kim

They were from here.

Brady Huggett

They’re from Seoul?

So Hyun Kim

They’re not from North Korea, but during the war, or before the war, my grandparents were in Japan for a while studying. Then they came back. My dad grew up very poor. He went to college, and he went to a really good college. He went to Yonsei, which is a big time rival of Korea University. He really made his way for his entire life. For example, he wouldn’t have shoes to wear when he went to school, during like middle school. He was so embarrassed.

Brady Huggett

What years are we talking about?

So Hyun Kim

He was born in 1952.

Brady Huggett

OK. This is right– He grew up exactly post-war?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Everybody was poor then.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, but he was especially very poor. Yes. He did it. He made his way.

Brady Huggett

Yes. OK. You're growing up with all this history behind you. What were the things that interested you as a kid? Were you interested–

So Hyun Kim

Oh, when I was growing up?

Brady Huggett

Yes. Yes.

So Hyun Kim

Let's see. As I told you, I was big on just hanging out with friends and visiting them. I would not come back home until dinnertime. My mom will still talk about that. That's a big deal for her, because she thinks that I got here because– She thinks that I wouldn't have gotten here if I continued to be like that, because there is huge emphasis on academics. She's like, "She wouldn't study at all. I don't know how she got here now."

Brady Huggett

Here being Korea University.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, and like–

Brady Huggett

A PhD.

So Hyun Kim

- getting a Ph.D. and having this kind of career. "She was not the type who would–" [laughs] Because I was not really interested in studying.

Brady Huggett

You were social.

So Hyun Kim

I was very social. I'm still, I think, very social and chatty. I was really into comic books. I really read a lot of comic books with my sister. At that time, my mom was still studying, working. We didn't have any supervision at home. We would come home, eat ramen noodle, and just read comic books. I didn't study really hard until I think middle school, high school. Now, Korean kids have so much academic pressure. If you live like me, you wouldn't be able to make it.

Brady Huggett

What made the change for you in middle school where you thought, “OK, now I’m going to study.”

So Hyun Kim

That’s so interesting. I don’t know. I was always in school districts that were not the most popular ones. Even though my dad made his way, we never lived in a rich neighborhood. I moved to a new school one day and I think at that time, because I was social, I became the classroom president.

Brady Huggett

Because people liked you?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Yes.

So Hyun Kim

There’s this stereotypical, I think, way of thinking about presidents in classrooms or school president. I became a school president at some point, but that was way later. I had to fit into that role. I think I started studying, and then I got to hang out with friends who were doing well. Even if I didn’t try really hard, I did quite well, because I didn’t live in the most competitive neighborhoods. I had a variety of friends who were very poor to people who were well off, but not really well off. It was not the best neighborhood, but I did well enough to be recognized by teachers.

Brady Huggett

OK. You’re saying the schools were OK?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

They weren’t the best schools, but they were OK. The people around you maybe, I don’t know, weren’t studying very hard, and so you weren’t studying very hard?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

You went to a new school, you became a president, president of the class, and then you felt this pressure almost, and then you were with people who were studying hard and you said, “I’m going to study hard, too.”

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Even in middle school, high school. I think in high school, because I also went to a high school that was not really a school where they send kids to the best school, like best colleges. I was one of the top students in my whole class, but we never had 10 kids going to Seoul National, or Korea University, or Yonsei. When I was studying really hard, I was the only one, almost, studying really hard. Nobody else was super interested in going to good colleges at the time.

By the time that I was in high school, I was really focused, because during high school years, I met a teacher who recommended that I go study in America. His kid was in America studying in high school or something.

Brady Huggett

Oh, in high school he was studying?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Oh, OK.

So Hyun Kim

He was like, “You have so much potential. You can learn so much in America. Think about going to colleges there.” I brought it up with my parents, and they were like, “We cannot afford it.” [laughs] “You’re going to college in Korea, and once you get there, you’ll figure it out.” That was very crushing to me, because I was like, “America, new opportunities, amazing education. I need to go there.” I became laser-focused, and I said, “I will go to college and I will figure out a way to go study abroad.” From then on, I was really driven.

Brady Huggett

I wondered if at what stage– I don’t know if you had just thought, “I’m going to go to the U.S. for this specific program,” but in general, you were like, “When I’m done with college, I’m going to go study abroad.” You didn’t even know what it was going to be.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, but I wanted to go to a college in America, but we just couldn’t afford it.

Brady Huggett

Yes. OK. Then you go to, I’m probably going to pronounce this wrong, Ewha?

So Hyun Kim

Ewha.

Brady Huggett

Ehwa.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Ewha Women’s College here in Seoul.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Were you already thinking about clinical behavior, psychology, at that time, or how did that come?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. In Korea, when kids go to college, they select their discipline based on their grades. If you have the best grades, you’ll go to medical school. That’s what’s happening now. All the medical schools get filled with the student who takes the SAT and get like 100% on it, and they fill in all the medical schools. Then from then on, the popular disciplines get filled based on the grades. If you do well, you’re going to aim for that. That’s very sad.

Brady Huggett

If you had the best grades and you wanted to be, I don’t know, an English teacher, [crosstalk]-

So Hyun Kim

That would be very rare.

Brady Huggett

With your grades, you should be a doctor?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. That’s how–

Brady Huggett

A lawyer.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. That's what's happening now. When I was in high school, I got interested in psychology because my uncle had some issues mentally, and I saw that his whole family got affected by that. I got super interested in clinical psychology, and helping people who are struggling psychologically. I read books about them, and I said I want to study psychology. By the time that I was applying to college, I had my grade for Korean SAT, which is the biggest deal. You build up from elementary school to middle school to high school to take that test, and you have to get the best score ever, and you can only take it once a year.

If you don't do well, you have to wait another year after graduating high school. I took it. I didn't do as much as I wanted, but I got a decent score, so I looked at the schools that I can apply to, and the departments. Ewha psychology would be easy for me to get in. Also, I had psychology interest. The other schools were like Yonsei English Department, or a really good school with a lower, less popular discipline.

Brady Huggett

I don't even know what that would be, but [crosstalk].

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I don't know. I applied, and then I got into Ewha, and my dad was like, "I think you could do better. Why don't you try for another year?" I was like, "There's no way. I'm going to go to grad school in America, so I'm not going to delay that. I'm going to go to Ewha." Ewha was amazing. That's how I got here, but at that time, it's not like— The top three Korean schools are Seoul National, Yonsei, and Korea. Still, it opened up so many good opportunities for me.

Brady Huggett

Yes, OK. You finished, what was your degree in?

So Hyun Kim

Psychology.

Brady Huggett

Psychology. OK. As you're going through school, you're already looking at places to apply in the United States?

So Hyun Kim

I had never been outside of Korea until I was a second year in my college. I taught English to myself during middle school and high school, because I was really interested in English. I listened to tapes, I listened to, at that time, "Friends" the show.

Brady Huggett

The TV show?

So Hyun Kim

It was so popular. I would watch it and just like say those lines. Then as soon as I got into college at Ewha, they had an exchange program. I was like, "This is the opportunity to go to college in America." I applied for the exchange program. I went to Mount Holyoke at that time. Before then, after the first year, as soon as I was done with my first year, freshman in college, I told my parents, "I need to learn English. I need to go to America and learn English." They were like, "We don't have money though. How are you going to go?"

Suddenly, my grandma, who is from North Korea, who like built her entire life up from nothing, said, "I will give you some money so that you can go." At that time, she sold her building or something that she had. It was like a little building where she had restaurants and so—

Brady Huggett

Once she'd established herself in South Korea with your grandfather, she had somehow bought a building and started businesses.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Oh my God.

So Hyun Kim

She started from nothing. They just swam with nothing, and then they came here, they had a restaurant. They had like a little restaurant, and then it became a building.

Brady Huggett

She sells that.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. She's like, "I will give you some." That was like just enough money for me to go to Delaware. I went to the University of Delaware English Language Institute. Their ESL program. I was there for a year, and I did stay with like a stay-home family, American family. I was there for a year learning English.

Brady Huggett

You'd go to a class every day?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Oh my God.

So Hyun Kim

Just learn English. It's very diverse. People from all over the world come there to study English. I was there for a year, made a lot of friends.

Brady Huggett

This is after college?

So Hyun Kim

No, first year of college. Freshman. After freshman.

Brady Huggett

OK. You did one year—

So Hyun Kim

I took a break—

Brady Huggett

—then took a break.

So Hyun Kim

—after. Yes.

Brady Huggett

Got it.

So Hyun Kim

Then I came back. So I'm about to start my sophomore year.

Brady Huggett

Sophomore.

So Hyun Kim

Then, [chuckles] that's when I met my husband, too. After the sophomore year, I said I will go to Mount Holyoke for exchange program. I applied, I got in. I was in Mount Holyoke for another year. I did two years out of five years of college in America. I made my way there. I was able to go to the Mount Holyoke because it was an exchange program. I didn't have to pay the tuition for that rate.

Brady Huggett

It cost you what it would normally cost you to go to Ewha?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. At that time I had like a scholarship, so it literally cost nothing to be in America, in an amazing school. Mount Holyoke is just— It blew my mind off. From Delaware to Mount Holyoke was also a very different environment, too.

Brady Huggett

OK. This is amazing. You come back, you finish your undergraduate, you said it takes five years. You go to Michigan after that, right?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I did.

Brady Huggett

You had to apply, you have to know what you're going to study in for your PhD?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

How did all that come about?

So Hyun Kim

When I was at Mount Holyoke, I was dating my now-husband, my boyfriend who was at the University of Michigan.

Brady Huggett

OK. You're at Mount Holyoke, he's at Michigan?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I met him before he went to Michigan.

Brady Huggett

You met him in Seoul?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I met him in Seoul, before I went to Mount Holyoke. In Seoul, he was about to go to the University of Michigan. He got accepted and he was just waiting to go.

Brady Huggett

For his undergraduate?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, for his undergrad.

Brady Huggett

Got it.

So Hyun Kim

He's three years younger than me. I was just done with my freshman year in college. He graduated high school and was waiting to go to Michigan. At that time we were in English class together at Yonsei.

Brady Huggett

That's how you met him?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. We met in a class. Then we started dating, and then he went to Michigan. When I went to Mount Holyoke I said, "Well, I have the summer vacation before I go home, so why don't I go and visit my boyfriend in Michigan?" Then I wanted to be productive, so I emailed everyone in the psych department at the University of Michigan and said, "I am a student from Korea University. I am nobody, but please can I go and work in your lab?" Of course, Cathy Lord emails me back and says, "Sure, come."

I went there and worked with Cathy. I saw Cathy probably like once, but she had a huge center, UMACC, University of Michigan Autism and the Developing-- Communication Disorder Center. I was there for about three months scoring protocols, doing data entry, and hanging out with my boyfriend. Then I came back, and then I did another year or two years at Ewha and then I applied to Michigan for grad school. Meanwhile, I got a scholarship, full scholarship from SK. Do you know that company, SK? That's a big company in Korea.

Brady Huggett

No.

So Hyun Kim

They have SK Telecom, they have various big businesses in Korea. They have the scholarship program for people who go abroad to study. They give you tuitions, they give you stipends for five years. They cover everything.

Brady Huggett

Did you apply for that?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

OK. Very smart.

So Hyun Kim

I had to take a test, and then I had to take the interview. They select about 10 people for social studies and others, and then probably like 20 in engineering and science. I remember sitting in that room taking the exam and there were like 500 people. I was like, "I'm not from Seoul National, Korea, and Yonsei, and the committee is probably people from there. There's no way--

Brady Huggett

I'm not going to get it.

So Hyun Kim

--that I can make this." Somehow, I was the only person not from Seoul National, Korea, or Yonsei who got in, and I made it all the way there and got selected. So when I applied I said, "I have this scholarship. I'm coming with the money." So it was easier for me definitely to get in. Then there were other people at Michigan who had this fellowship already.

Brady Huggett

Oh, really?

So Hyun Kim

So they knew that these students were going to be good. So when I said I'm applying, they were like, "Sure."

Brady Huggett

Did Cathy know you're applying? Did you apply through Cathy?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. No, actually. Yes, I did tell her, when I was applying, but I applied to like 20 other schools. When I was interviewing, I talked to Cathy directly. At that time she was like, "You'll be amazing, please come." She knew that I worked in her lab like a year or two years ago.

Brady Huggett

Yes. She remembered that?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

It's funny that when you were sending emails around to the university— Well, I don't know, but of course Cathy replied, right? This kind of person [crosstalk]-

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

—do that.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Yes. While you're there, you do a bunch of things and she's a mentor to you. I keep reading that. You tell me if I'm wrong.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

I think you worked on OSEL together, the Observation of—

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

—Spontaneous Expressive Language.

So Hyun Kim

The language measure, and then I worked on the ADI, the interview algorithm for toddlers. I still work with her.

Brady Huggett

Yes.

So Hyun Kim

I have an NIH grant with her. She is my academic mom, and a huge, huge supporter.

Brady Huggett

Of your career.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. It was just a life-changing experience for me to meet her.

Brady Huggett

Yes. You go in thinking, “I like the brain a little bit,” or what happens with people, but now when you’re finished with your PhD, it’s specifically autism.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Yes. From that point on.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

OK. I think then it’s a postdoc at Yale.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I did my postdoc at Kasia Lipska’s lab at Yale for two years. I got licensed, because I wanted to be licensed. I did an internship at Michigan, and then I did two years postdocs, postdoc years at Yale, and then I was a research scientist there for a year. Then I got recruited again at Cornell, when Cathy was there as a director, at CADB [Center for Autism and Developing Brain], the autism center.

Brady Huggett

Yes. Then you moved to New York.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I did.

Brady Huggett

Yes. Where are you in your relationship at this point with you and your husband?

So Hyun Kim

Oh, yes. We got married when we were in Michigan, because I was finishing up. He graduated from college, he was a math major, and then he always wanted to go to med school. He applied, he didn’t get in the first year. So what he did was he did a master’s in biostatistics, and he stayed in Michigan with me for two years. When I got a job at Yale, he got rejected at every medical school, so he just moved with me. He was trying to figure out–

Brady Huggett

What’s next?

So Hyun Kim

–what’s next.

Brady Huggett

Yes.

So Hyun Kim

Which was very brave for him. I wouldn’t have been able to do that if I were him, but he did tag along and he came with me. He did variety of things. He was like working in a lab. He again applied, but he only applied to a couple schools in Connecticut, because we wanted to be together. He got into medical school at UConn. During his medical school and during my postdoc years, we had David, our first child. Yes.

Brady Huggett

You’re doing your postdoc, he’s in medical school, and you have your first child.

So Hyun Kim

That was wild. [laughs]

Brady Huggett

How did you get all that done? The both of you?

So Hyun Kim

It was very hard. We didn't have any family support, because my parents are in Korea, Dan's parents are in Korea, too. We just had to figure it out, and it was just a very brutal experience. So—

Brady Huggett

Brutal because there's not enough time in the day? You can't get enough sleep?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

You have to see— You obviously want to spend time with your children, you're both really busy. All that.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Somehow you just do it.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, we did manage it. We had a great child care system there at Yale, but I still remember feeling like I was not doing— I was not putting 100% into my work. Of course, that's what's going to happen, but that was hard, but the second child was much easier when I went to New York. I was not a post-doc. I had my own lab, so I was more flexible. I remember holding Grace, my second child, after a week or a day after the labor and just writing papers.

Brady Huggett

Did you feel like for a while there, you're like, "I'm not putting 100% into work. I'm not putting 100% into the family," because you can't? You're just trying to keep both afloat.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I felt like I was faking it. I still feel like it now, but I think I accepted the fact that I cannot put 100% into both. I cannot be a perfect mom, I cannot be a perfect researcher or clinician.

Brady Huggett

If you had no job, you still couldn't be a perfect— What's a perfect mom? It's nothing.

So Hyun Kim

Exactly. You learn that through the process, but it's not easy.

Brady Huggett

Dan felt the same, I'm sure.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

When you were at Weill Cornell, was he still in medical school?

So Hyun Kim

He actually finished his medical school, did residency in New York, so he moved himself to New York.

Brady Huggett

Got it.

So Hyun Kim

He did his pediatric residency. Then he became a pediatric cardiologist, so he wanted to do a fellowship in cardiology. He did that for three years at Long Island Jewish hospital. Residency and fellowship was about five, six years. While I was at Cornell, building my lab and working, and I actually had moved into a more administrative position towards the end, but he was still making his way up. Then we moved as he had one year left for his fellowship. I came to Korea two years ago, he came one year ago. I moved to Korea with two kids as a single mom.

Brady Huggett

That was in 2022?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

The fall or something?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

You returned?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Let's talk about that. Was that always the plan once you and Dan were together and had a family?

So Hyun Kim

No.

Brady Huggett

For a while, you thought, "We might just stay in the U.S.?"

So Hyun Kim

Yes. By the time that we moved here, it was 15 years. I talked about 15 years of being in the U.S. with you from the Ph.D. program until the end of my job at Cornell. For about 10 years or 13 years, we lived like graduate students and medical students. We were hopping around, and lived on IKEA furniture. Then we finally bought our house in New York in the perfect neighborhood. It was like the American dream come true from the girl who moved to America from Seoul.

We were like, "Oh my gosh, we're finally getting settled. I have a real job, Dan's about to get a real job, and it'll be amazing." Then we slowly are learning that my mom has early-onset dementia, that she's declining. We were like, "Oh my gosh, should we move? But we have this amazing life here." We were debating, debating, debating. Also at the same time, my kids were growing up. I didn't feel like this every day, but sometimes I felt like they were becoming strangers to me.

Brady Huggett

Can we ask about that, because this happens a lot, right? Your kids are born in the U.S.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

They're American citizens.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

They're growing up as Americans.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

That's what you mean by strangers.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I will be listening to music, driving with them. Then some memories are coming with these feelings with the Korean songs, and I will talk about it. My kids will be like, "Huh?" When I eat something, I'm talking about all the memories from Korea. They're like, "What?" They're not super interested in it either. Some say it's a generational gap, but—I told my husband, Dan, I was like, "They need to be in the culture where we grew up in." All these discussions are happening. Then I talked to my friend in Korea that I was thinking about moving. She happens to know people here at Korea University.

They reach out to me, and they're like, "We heard that you might be moving, and we have a great job." I was like, "OK, maybe this is a good opportunity." I did interview and then got an offer right away. It was so fast. Meanwhile, Dan is like, "It is the right thing to do for us to go and be with our families." His parents are here and my parents are here. My mom's declining. Looking back, it was probably not the smartest decision career-wise, but it was the right thing to do, so we moved.

Brady Huggett

Let's pretend that it isn't the best move for your career. I don't know, but what it's best for is for your personal life. Your family and your sense of—

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

I want to ask this one thing, it's a really tough question. You look at your kids and you go, "They're growing up." It might be generational, but they're growing up differently than I did. They don't have any understanding of these Korean foods, this music, all the experiences that I had, and you thought, "We need to get them around that culture." But why? If they had just stayed and become Korean-Americans, would that have been OK?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. That would have been totally OK, I think.

Brady Huggett

They would have been fine with it because that's all they know, but you would have been like, "There's this other part of our history that they don't know."

So Hyun Kim

Yes, that they don't know. It was more for me, I think. When we moved, we found out that my dad had cancer. He had bladder cancer. He did chemo, it didn't go away, so he did surgery. During that time, I am taking care of my kids and taking care of my parents. I'm building up my new lab. I've never taught before, so I'm teaching. A lot of things were going on. It was very hard.

Brady Huggett

And Dan's not here.

So Hyun Kim

Dan's not here. I was with Dan's parents, though. They were amazing. They were looking after the kids, but one thing that I really appreciate is that the kids were thriving. They were doing so amazingly that I was able to attend to other things. David

came and I put him in Korean school. He's now 10. He was 8 at that time. He really couldn't keep up in Korean school because his Korean was really bad, so we moved him to international school here, and he was very happy, but he still spent a lot of time with his grandparents. We actually have four generations in our house now.

It's Dan's grandma, Dan's parents, Dan and kids, our kids, so four generations living in one house together.

Brady Huggett

I love it.

So Hyun Kim

They get exposed to so many things that they've never experienced before. Grace, who's 6 now, who was 4 at that time, I put her in Korean school. She couldn't say a word in Korean. Now she cannot speak English. She only speaks Korean. She converted into a total Korean girl. During this transition, the kids were doing so well. That was the one thing that I really just appreciated so much.

Brady Huggett

It feels like you were almost worried, like, "Is this going to be bad for the kids?" In the end it's not. They've been doing great.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. They are the ones who are, I think, benefiting the most from this move, and they're very spoiled now by grandparents.

Brady Huggett

There are worse things than that for sure. Let's talk about KU. I know you're teaching. I think you told me this morning that you're teaching a neurodiversity class here, right?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I am.

Brady Huggett

I wondered, if you think about the long arc of autism, and its recognition both biologically and just as a social condition, and how much that has changed in the US and Europe. I'm assuming that Korea is on a similar path of recognition of the condition.

So Hyun Kim

Just starting.

Brady Huggett

Yes, it's just behind the curve a little bit, right?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, but it will be similar trend.

Brady Huggett

What are you teaching in the classes?

So Hyun Kim

Neurodiversity class?

Brady Huggett

Yes.

So Hyun Kim

It's mostly really one-on-one autism, because knowing it accurately, I think, changes their attitude about people with the disorder, and the knowledge is very limited, too. There's a lot about behavior presentations, how heterogenous it is. Throughout the life, the presentation change too, and what are the treatment options? How does neurodiversity play into this

clinical practice as well as research? Every session, every class, we have some neurodiversity perspective integrated into Autism 101. Then toward the end, we talk about community-based participatory research. We talk about women with autism.

Brady Huggett

This underrepresented group.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. We talk about workplace and autism, so it's more applied. In the beginning, there's heavy emphasis on just knowing, not getting knowledge.

Brady Huggett

What it is.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

It feels like— This is still happening in the U.S., of course, but when people used to see an autistic child, they go, "I don't know, something's wrong with that child." When you actually know what it is, that's just an autistic person, that's the way they are. That's been huge, I think. It's obviously still ongoing, but that's what's happening here, too.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I actually treat my class as intervention, because I feel like I am informing these kids, and I teach 160 students every semester.

Brady Huggett

These are undergrads?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Who just—

So Hyun Kim

These are undergrads who've never— Some of them have never met a person with autism, who've never heard of autism.

Brady Huggett

They probably did. They just didn't know it was autism.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, that's true. At the same time, these are the students who were the best at studying in the entire country. They were always in very competitive classrooms where by the time that you get to middle school, high school, you don't see a lot of students with disabilities in your class anymore.

Brady Huggett

I got it.

So Hyun Kim

At the same time, there probably were some high-functioning students who were never identified.

Brady Huggett

That makes sense. OK. Then you have a lab.

So Hyun Kim

I do have a lab. Yes.

Brady Huggett

You have your Spectrum Child Clinical Psychology Lab.

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

What are you studying there? What are you looking at?

So Hyun Kim

As soon as I came here, I did get a couple of grants from the National Research Foundation in Korea. I am extending some of the studies that I had done at Cornell. Then I am finishing up some of the RO1 studies that I had to carry here. One thing that we are doing now is a longitudinal study following kids over time, looking at some school readiness. We're looking at executive function, language, social communication, and how that changes during the school transition. We use EEG methods as well as behavior methods to follow these kids. We got the grant last year, and we started data collection in August, September last year. It's been almost a year. We had 700 families calling us to participate.

Brady Huggett

Oh my God.

So Hyun Kim

We have seen about 200 kids so far. I had three or four people doing assessments, and I went to almost every assessment, I think, because I was still training them, and I met most of these families. That has been the most amazing experience since I came here, because I've never met families with autistic kids in Korea until now. I had a lot of clinical experiences in the U.S. but not here, so just working with the families. I was just calling with a family in the morning before you came here, too, giving a diagnosis, basically, delivering the news. That has been an amazing experience.

Brady Huggett

Two things. First, how was that news taken? How do the families react?

So Hyun Kim

Most of the time parents, I think, have mixed feelings. I think it's similar to the U.S., but they worry quite a bit because then what's next is a big question. In Korea, a lot of kids are not identified until they are probably 6, 7, 8 years old, because first of all, even though you have already diagnosis, the government would give you vouchers, but it wouldn't give you enough services. You actually just pay for services anyway. You don't need a diagnosis to do that. Families will recognize some delays in kids, and they will bring them to private centers. They get services, and then they hope that kids will get better with the intervention. Then once they realize that the trajectories are going to be lifelong, they may get a diagnosis. Also, the wait time for diagnostic assessment is two to three years now in Korea. When we said you can get the ADOS [Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule], which is the diagnostic measure, through research for free in a month, 700 families call.

Brady Huggett

I was going to say that showed you that there's a real need, right?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Not only have you done all these great things for your family, but this is a needful population that you can help service. That's amazing. You're happy with KU. You're happy with this switch.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Another thing that's rewarding is teaching and also having students who are Korean. I feel like I can give back and really be part of building up this next generation of researchers and clinicians in this area.

Brady Huggett

A couple things. One is, let's talk about just living abroad for a second, like we were talking about before. Like I said, so I'm going to be here 10 days and I spent 2 days figuring out my T-money card and how the subways work. OK, now can I figure out the buses and all these things? When you go to a foreign country, that's a long day of a language wall and figuring it out. Now, you had English when you moved to the U.S., but still, right? That goes on day after day. How do I get it? You have to get a driver's license. You have to get a car in Michigan if you're going to be— How did you do all of those things? I'm sure Dan had the same feelings. It's exhausting to live like that.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, it is. It's not like you have parents who have done it so that you can call them and say, "What happens if I get into a car accident?" Every milestone, like having a child, you have to go register him, and all these different kinds of administrative things that you have to do too. There's no one to ask, so you Google. Sometimes these little stressors can be, I think, hard to manage. I don't think that I could have done it without the little social network that I had. Dan was there. Then I was part of a church community in Ann Arbor. Then when I moved to Connecticut, too, I was there with a church community—

Brady Huggett

What church?

So Hyun Kim

—always first-generation Koreans.

Brady Huggett

Oh, really? That's the church?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Those are the churches that we went to.

Brady Huggett

What's the faith?

So Hyun Kim

Oh, it's Christianity.

Brady Huggett

First generation.

So Hyun Kim

Presbyterian

Brady Huggett

Presbyterian, Christian, first-generation Koreans.

So Hyun Kim

I also cannot fit into a second-generation church either. It was always first or 1.5-generation churches.

Brady Huggett

In those places, you found everyone just like you?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Everyone just like me. In Ann Arbor, all of my friends were Ph.D. students who were Koreans, who grew up in Korea, who went to college in Korea, and came to Ann Arbor for Ph.D. programs. In church, there were other people who actually immigrated to Ann Arbor or they stay there after their Ph.D., basically. I had a lot of support from them. When I was in Connecticut, I had a lot of social network. I remember going to INSAR one year, it was in the Netherlands. I had Grace, and she was like 3 months or 4 months old. I was like, "How am I going to travel with a 3-month old?" My friend from church came

with me, and she took care of Grace while I was giving a talk. Instead of bringing parents, my friend from church came. That's how we survived.

Brady Huggett

Are you still in touch with those people?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. I am still in touch with them.

Brady Huggett

When you go back to New York, maybe, do you see them at all?

So Hyun Kim

Actually, many of them came to Korea.

Brady Huggett

Oh, nice.

So Hyun Kim

They came back to Seoul. I talk to them quite often. I meet with them.

Brady Huggett

Oh, they moved back?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Oh, wow.

So Hyun Kim

Many of them got jobs here.

Brady Huggett

Again, I don't know that this is the case, but it seems to me from some of the limited reading that I've done that there's a lot of people who are returning to Seoul in the past 20 years. The city is booming. The economy's booming. Everything's changed.

So Hyun Kim

I think I am quite surprised at the government putting funds for R&D. There was a budget cut, as you know, but still I think the government is still quite invested in science. It's harder for people who are not in basic science, but still I think we have good system set up.

Brady Huggett

Do you consider that your children might want to go abroad?

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Especially David and Grace, probably, because she's moving to international school, too. The reason why I am moving Grace to international school, even though she's doing really well in Korean school, is because I as a parent cannot deal with this academic pressure. I want her to follow this path of studying, studying—

Brady Huggett

Education.

So Hyun Kim

—studying until you get to the best college ever in Korea. I had to be that mom who's always searching for the best tutors, best

training. Everyone goes to *hagwon*, which is the institutes after school, and they stay there until 10:00 PM, because legally, they have to close at 10:00 PM. If there's no law like that, it's going to go until 2:00 AM.

Brady Huggett

Oh my God.

So Hyun Kim

I promise. 10:00 PM, they go and study. Then they go to a study hall or something and start studying again. I remember coming home at 2:00 AM every day during my high school years. That was 20 years ago, I don't know. Now kids are studying more.

Brady Huggett

You were doing that too 20 years ago?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

Oh, my.

So Hyun Kim

I cannot be the mom who is always designing my kids' life like that. I just cannot keep up, so I said they will go to international school. I wouldn't worry about all this crazy pressure. Of course, in international school, there are lots of Korean moms who do this, but still they have options of just being kids. Even though it's super expensive, we will try to keep both kids in international school. Meaning, they cannot go to colleges in Korea.

Brady Huggett

Oh, you're not allowed to?

So Hyun Kim

Unless you take that Korean SAT, but that's going to be impossible. They don't speak Korean as well. Think about all these students who are building up to take that test for 10, 12 years, going to these tutoring institutes.

Brady Huggett

If they continue in this life, they're almost forced to go to college abroad?

So Hyun Kim

Yes.

Brady Huggett

They're going to go to college abroad.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, they're going to have to, which David doesn't know yet. David's like, "Mom, I want to go to college here in Korea and hang out with you guys." I was like, "Sure." He will have to go to college outside of Korea.

Brady Huggett

Do you think that's the U.S., or it could be anywhere?

So Hyun Kim

Anywhere. Why not? They're American citizens, but they can go anywhere. I think for them to go to college in America or other places after growing up in Korea is a very different life than growing up in the U.S. and going to college there. By the time that I went to the U.S., I had my identity as Korean. It was core to me. I think that was really important for me. They will have that kind of identity here, just growing up. It'll be different because they were born in the US, but still—

Brady Huggett

But still.

So Hyun Kim

–Korea will be always part of their heart.

Brady Huggett

I have, I think, one more question and it actually deals with identity, like you just mentioned. I was introduced to you, or I knew you as Sophy, but of course, that's not your name. Your name is So Hyun Kim, which--

So Hyun Kim

Yes. Good.

Brady Huggett

There's a long history, of course, of people immigrating and changing names, shortening their names, taking on names to sound more like the local population. Why did you do that?

So Hyun Kim

I regretted it.

Brady Huggett

Go ahead.

So Hyun Kim

My phone is connected to the other office, so they will pick it up if I don't pick up. What was the question?

Brady Huggett

Sophy, taking the name Sophy. You said you regretted it.

So Hyun Kim

Oh, yes. I do regret it. Kim So-Hyun is how you say my name. Kim is the family name. So-Hyun is my first name, even though in Korea, first name goes last. My dad named me. In high school, I was going to English classes. I needed an English name, so my dad was like, "What about Sophy?" Because So-Hyun, Sophy, similar. I was like, "Sure." It was my nickname in English classes.

Then I went to America, and people just had such a hard time pronouncing my name and remembering it. I remember running. I did a 10K, which was a big deal for me. Took me like three hours or something. I don't remember. After that, I never ran, but I remember running, running, and then toward the end at the finish line, everyone's cheering, and there's a guy who's emceeding the event and saying, "Brady made it. Yay, Dan made it. Yay." Then I come in and he doesn't say anything because he's afraid of pronouncing--

Brady Huggett

Making a mistake.

So Hyun Kim

Yes. It was like that. People were just afraid of saying my name. I was like, "Sure, I will use my nickname." I went by Sophy, but the problem was that I will publish in my real name, So Hyun Kim, and people will never make connections between me and that name. I think that's one of the troubles that I have about-- When people meet me and get to know me, they're like, "Oh, you are--"

Brady Huggett

You are Sophy.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, "You are Sophy. You are So Hyun Kim in this paper." Getting my name out there was important at some point throughout my academic career, but that was one of the barriers that I had. I always wondered when I got corrected for my

English in my manuscript, even though I had 17 other native speakers on as co-authors, I always wondered in the back of my mind head, like, “Oh, is it because of my name?”

Brady Huggett

Because of the So Hyun Kim.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, it’s very foreign, right?

Brady Huggett

They’re going to think that you’ve made a mistake for that reason. Actually, this is my last question then. When I put this out, can I just say So Hyun Kim? Can it be that, or do you want to be Sophy?

So Hyun Kim

What I usually do is I put my name So Hyun and then in quotation, I put Sophy. It’ll be So Hyun “Sophy” Kim.

Brady Huggett

That’s what you want to do?

So Hyun Kim

Yes, that’s how I usually do, but it’s up to you.

Brady Huggett

That feels like– I don’t know, it just feels wrong.

So Hyun Kim

Yes, I know. I doubt that even my close colleagues in the U.S., I doubt that they remember my legal name.

Brady Huggett

Really?

So Hyun Kim

People like Cathy, definitely–

Brady Huggett

She knows.

So Hyun Kim

–she knows. There are so many siblings under Cathy. My sisters, like Summer Bishop, Vanessa Bell, they all know my real names, but others, I don’t know. Even if I worked with them, yes, I’m not really 100% sure if they know my real name or not.

Brady Huggett

We’re going to think about this. OK, that’s it. Thank you so much.

So Hyun Kim

Oh, yay. We did it.

Brady Huggett

Unless you have something else to add?

So Hyun Kim

No.

Brady Huggett

All right, we’re good. Thank you.

[transition music]

Brady Huggett

Boy, did I learn a lot in that interview. I really did. When we were done, So Hyun took me around the campus. It's gorgeous, and then drove me to an art museum where we saw some work by well-known Korean artists of the past and some modern works, too. That was a great day. Thank you, So Hyun, for the open conversation and your hospitality in your home country.

This episode will be archived on thetransmitter.org, where we also have a transcript. We have put links into the transcript for any papers that we discussed, if you're interested in more information. Some of the details for the intro on Seoul and Korea were taken from *The Korea Herald*. Of course, there is a "Synaptic" episode with Cathy Lord in our archives. That's Episode 1. Our very first "Synaptic" was with Cathy. If you'd like to comment on this show or whatever we do at *The Transmitter*, you can find us on the social media platforms X, Blue Sky, Mastodon, and LinkedIn. Our theme song was written and performed by Chris Collingwood. Thank you for listening to "Synaptic." Until next time.

[ending theme music]

So Hyun Kim

I was also losing my voice yesterday, so I got nervous. "It's a podcast" – I was talking to Dan, my husband.

Subscribe to "[Synaptic](#)" and listen to new episodes on the first of every month.