

LEARNING LIVES OF NORTH KOREAN YOUNG DEFECTORS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: This study of eleven young North Korean Defectors (NKDs) examines how they engage in daily learning focusing on the process of identity reconstruction through their attempt to engage in career development activities. For the purposes of this paper one case was selected to illustrate how a reconstructed identity is learned. The main research questions for the study were: a) how do young NKDs reconstruct their identity in career development activities? and b) how do young NKDs learn through the identity reconstructing process? This research was based on a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and data were analyzed by adopting a theory-driven approach. For data analysis, open, focused, and axial coding was conducted. Conclusions are preliminary, as the analysis is ongoing.

Keywords: North Korean Young Adult Defectors, Identity Reconstruction, Career Development, Sociocultural Learning, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

Young Adult North Korean Defectors and Career Development

Since 1990, the number of North Koreans defecting to South Korea has risen steadily. Since 1998, North Korean defectors (NKDs) in their 20s and 30s now constitute a majority of NKDs. Young adult NKDs are a growing population among NKDs in the South and a distinctive group. They were born in the 1980s and 1990s, right before or shortly after the collapse of the state-socialist economy, an era of marketization and eroding state relevance in the North (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Park, 2013). According to the report of Ministry of Unification (2015), they occupy 57.8 percent of the 27,247 entire NKDs who entered South Korea in 2014. They were children and teenagers in the era following the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. It was an era when North Korea began to be dramatically transformed, described as marketization from below (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Lankov, 2012; Park, 2014).

These younger adult NKDs have characteristics distinct from the previous NKDs who have memories of a monolithic state-controlled society. This younger generation shows less respect for the regime and has experiences of a market economy in the form of the North Korean black market or in a third country where they passed on their way to the South. These characteristics lead them to the need of a different type of successful career development beyond merely adjusting to South Korean society. An important learning process, then, is reconstructing their identity through participating in career development activities (Kim, 2013; Park & Oh, 2011). Thus ongoing involvement in career development activities becomes a key concern.

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Since young adult NKDs grew up in a society centered on emerging marketplaces, they are often called ‘*Jangmadang* Generation’ or ‘Black Market Generation.’ They have no personal memory of the days under Kim Il-sung. Unlike the previous generation who remembered a monolithic state-controlled society under the leadership of Kim Il-sung, the social and historical backgrounds make NKDs consider the regime more as an obstructor than a provider (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Lankov, 2012; Park, 2013). They show less respect for the government compared to previous generations and do not care as much about *Juche* or socialist ideology. Rather, smuggled foreign media exert more influence on their beliefs and attitudes (Kretchun & Kim, 2012; Park, 2013). Outside media and information are smuggled in via DVDs and USBs from China and transacted at the private black market. They watch South Korean movies, K-pop videos, Hollywood movies, and even World Wrestling Entertainment (Kretchun & Kim, 2012; Park, 2013, 2014). Exposure to the foreign media and information about other societies impacts the younger generation’s attitude and beliefs about the outside world in a favorable way (Kretchun & Kim, 2012). They no longer believe that their nation is rich, realizing that South Korea is significantly advanced economically. This is substantially different from their parents’ and grandparents’ generation who had believed that the outside world was inferior in all important regards to Kim Il-sung’s realm (Lankov, 2012).

Problem and Purpose Statement

Although the increase of young adult NKDs is noted socially in South Korea (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Lankov, 2012; Park, 2013, 2014), few studies have been conducted regarding the issue of their career development. Moreover, given that the young NKDs participate in diverse state sponsored career development activities, (Park & Oh, 2011; Yoo, Bae, Jo, Kim, & Choi, 2013), it becomes important to begin to understand how career identity is shaped and how young NKDs learn to reshape their identity.

This study of eleven NKDs examines how they engage in daily learning focusing on the process of identity reconstruction through their attempt to engage in career development activities. For the purposes of this paper one case was selected to illustrate how a reconstructed identity is learned. The main research questions for the study were: a) how do young NKDs reconstruct their identity in career development activities? and b) how do young NKDs learn through the identity reconstructing process?

Method

The larger research project is a study of eleven young adult NKDs in South Korea. Purposeful sampling was used (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations in young adult NKDs’ daily activities, and archival analysis (Creswell, 2007; Fetterman, 1998). Interviews mainly asked about their past life before coming to South Korea, first experiences in South Korea, current daily life and future plans. All interviews were transcribed and all participant observational content was recorded in field notes. This research was based on a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory and data were analyzed by adopting a theory-driven approach (Boyatzis, 1998). For data analysis, open, focused, and axial coding was conducted (Charmaz, 2006). Conclusions are preliminary, as the analysis is ongoing.

Identity Reconstruction as Sociocultural Learning

Unlike the concept of personality, considered as a natural given or determined biologically, identity is human-made from participation in social practices (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). As the social context in which an individual lives changes, identity is reconstructed and recreated. In other words, when people experience a changing social context, self-identity becomes less stable; self-identity is called into question over time. This leads individuals to construct and reconstruct their identity. In this sense, identity can be one of the outcomes constructed and reconstructed activities from participating in activities within social contexts (Roth, et al., 2004). Also, identity is fundamentally not static but continuously evolving and changing under the influence of social contexts that involve individuals on a daily basis (Foucault, 1979; Hall, 1990),

Perceiving identity not as a static entity but as a process which is constantly evolving in social practices allows one to concentrate on ‘doing’ their identity within a specific social context. Namely, by focusing on the ways of interaction with sociocultural factors, the notion of identity can be illuminated. Shifting the concept of identity from ‘being’ to ‘doing’ allows one to turn attention to how people interact with their daily living situations in examining identity (Duits, 2008; Giddens, 1991; Goffman, 1969).

A sociocultural perspective shows how human cognition develops by reflecting on the interactions between diverse social and cultural factors and individuals and it considers mind to be located in the individual-in-social-action. The basic concept of this perspective is to include the external conditions of life in which human beings live to explain the highly complex forms of human consciousness. Cognitive processes are subsumed in social and cultural processes and the person is constructed in a social context, formed through practical activity, and shaped in relationships of desire and recognition. The sociocultural perspective considers that self-consciousness arises not from the individual but from social relations with others and “the individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary” (Vygotsky, 1979, p. 30). Thus, this perspective emphasizes social participation, the relationship and interaction with others, the settings of activity and historical change (Scribner, 1997).

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is situated and occurs continuously through collaboration between the person and the social context through cultural mediations, and is transformed within sociocultural history (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In particular, the sociocultural perspective of learning focuses on the interdependence of social and individual process in the co-construction of knowledge. The knowledge, however, includes not only intellectual aspects, but also knowing oneself, in a broader sense, knowing one’s identity. In this way, realizing oneself, that is, the process of constructing identity is learning as a sociocultural phenomenon.

Since identity originates through daily activities and “experience of engagement” (Wenger, 1998, p. 151) in social practices, reviewing lived experiences and activities within daily life plays a critical role in understanding the concept of identity and examining the process of identity construction. Therefore, the sociocultural perspective that focuses on social interactions at living situations and activities suggests the initial step to examine the process of constructing identity.

A Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Analysis of One Case

For this pilot analysis, I selected one case: K. K, who was born in a northern province of North Korea. She grew up in North Korea and came to South Korea by herself. She quit school at an early age. After coming to South Korea, she began to study at an alternative school for NKDs. She passed all of the school's qualification exams for a year and eventually entered university. Now she is studying Korean education in a graduate school.

Finding Daily Activities for Identity Reconstruction

To find daily activities of K for identity reconstruction, we focused on her actions. The primary researcher pursued a perspective for seeing identity as process. Thus we were more concerned about what K was **doing** rather than what K's identity is. Actions in her everyday life were clearly revealed in interviews. Her actions were related to needs or desire that derives to objects in activities. Also, her actions with specific goals were converged to activities which have objects.

Theory-driven thematic coding was used (Boyatzis, 1998). The components of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory such as object, mediating artifacts, rules, communities, and division of labors (Engeström, 1987, 1999, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978; Sawchuk, 2003) were used in the coding process and the codes were collated into themes as one element in the activity.

Identity Reconstruction in Receiving Basic Education Activity

The first activity of K's identity-reconstruction is 'participation in basic academic education activity.' It is addressed by an object, 'to participate in basic academic education.' The object is from needs which are from the subject, K's personal experience and cultural historical elements.

Upon arrival in the South, K realized that there are educational programs specifically designed for NKDs. Under the South Korean government support system, she could begin to study if she wanted. This opportunity was in stark contrast to her previous living context; her living situations in her previous life in the North allowed little opportunity to pursue education. In the North, K had to quit school and, like other North Korean teenagers, had to engage in economic activity in order to survive. When K turned 18 years old, she was forcefully assigned to a job by the North Korean government, and on the way to defect, she had no choice but to work as a housekeeper in hiding at a house of an ethnic Korean living in China.

Regardless of K's needs or desire to learn, K could not be educated in her previous life. However, as K arrived in *Hanawon*, she realized that she could resume study through the education program of *Hanawon*. In actuality, for young defectors, *Hanawon* provides the program to study at an alternative school near *Hanawon*, while the adult class focuses on vocational training. At first K was assigned to the adult class because of her age—over 20 years old. However, she requested a shift to the youth class. Since South Korea is a credentialist-centered society where education is an important and basic element to live,

the education regulation of *Hanawon* also reflects the sociocultural context, encouraging one to participate in academic education. As she stated:

I quit studying when I was 12 years old. I studied until the age of 12 and I restarted to study after 10 years. I consistently had the desire to study, but family circumstances could not support it. So as I began to study [in *Hanawon*], I craved to study continuously after I go out [*Hanawon*].

K began to study at the youth class in *Hanawon* with the objective of participating in academic education for herself. K wanted to study after going out of *Hanawon*. Thus, she decided to defer receiving a house from South Korean government for a year and lived in the dormitory of an alternative school. At the school, she prepared to take the elementary, middle, and high school qualification exams.

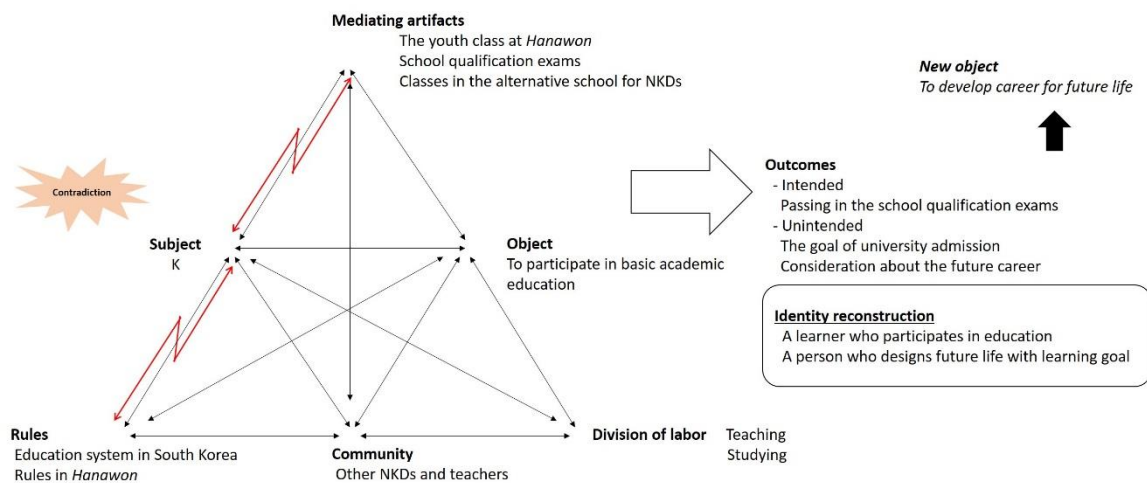


Figure 1. Participation in basic academic education activity system

When K began to study, she faced difficulties because of the different education systems between South and North Korea. The different school systems forced her to take the elementary school qualification exam, even though she graduated from the elementary school in the North. Also, except for mathematics, knowledge accumulated in the North was useless to prepare for the school qualification exams in the South. She had to learn almost everything from the beginning:

I dropped out of the middle school after first grade in North Korea, but my level of education was just fifth grade of elementary school in South Korean education system. Since the final elementary school grade is sixth here, I had to prepare to take the elementary school qualification exam ... At first, I began to study with my own desire to study, but I lacked assurance [to study continuously], because I hadn't studied for a long time and the South Korean [education] system was totally different from what I learned when I was young. Except for mathematic formula, everything was totally different. In particular, English was entirely all

new and too hard. While I prepare for the elementary school qualification exam, I thought that if I failed it, I would quit studying and earn money.

Despite the contradiction between South Korean education system and her experience, she successfully passed the school qualification exams. While K is in the process of resolving this contradiction, she could specify her goal of learning and have opportunity to reflect and learn herself for designing future career.

At the beginning of participating in education, K had only the desire to learn itself. K, however, established the detailed goal of study; university admission. Also, she began to explore to plan her future career with what she will learn in university. She stated:

As I passed middle school qualification exam, I began to think “Keep up mind and go to university!” From then, I considered about my career a lot. “What will I do?” I thought that the reason I study shouldn’t just for going to university, but for doing something after university. This thought made me to consider the connection between what I want to do after university and what I do in university. “What will I do?” “What major do I have to study?” “What should I do study?” I agonized it too much. I spent around a year to decide it.

Within the participation in basic academic education activity, K reflected on her to plan career for future life. By participating in academic education activity in the South, her identity had been reconstructed to a learner from a manual worker who worked for survival. Initially her identity as a learner seemed like that of a passive education participant. Even though she participated in basic education willingly, she did not have any goals, plans or expectations to study.

As the contradiction between her previous experiences in the North and South Korean educational system in the participation in basic academic education activity, K faced difficulties. However, it eventually led to new opportunities for K to think about the purpose of her study. After K passed the middle school qualification exam, she began to reflect on herself and to consider her future life plan. Through the process of resolving the contradiction, K not only passed in all school qualification exams but also learned the need for setting a specific goal. Even though her initial objective to participate in education was just to achieve her longing to go to school in the activity, it was developed to design future life with specific learning goal. Within the activity, K’s identities had been changed from a manual worker to a learner, and to a person who considers to design future life career.

Identity Reconstruction in Career Development Activity

As the outcomes of participation in basic academic education activity, K saw her objective as entering a university. This motivated K to take actions such as exploring herself, applying to universities, searching diverse career paths, entering a university, and transferring to a different university with an object, ‘to develop career for future life.’

At first, K reflected on her previous life and her interest. However, it was not easy for someone who had never pictured a future life before. Moreover, she had lack of information about jobs in South Korea and people around her could not support and guide

her career development well.

I didn't know what I like and didn't know more what I can do. Actually I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had never thought about that kind of thing when I was young. My dream was just to survive without hunger. I just thought about it. So, I spent too much time to figure it out. And there was no one who could advise me. My mom was not there. As you know, I didn't have parents [at that time]. People around me at that time did also agonize about the similar matters and we did not know each other well, because we just began to know each other. So I did it by myself. My dad passed away under a very false accusation. So one point I wanted to be a lawyer. And my grandmother took seriously ill and passed away and it remained in my heart a lot, so I wanted to be a nurse. First of all, I just knew about a few jobs. I deleted one by one among what I want to do.

Through the agonizing process of establishing a career direction, K decided to be a Korean language and literature teacher. It was from reflecting about herself that K remembered that she liked to read books in her childhood. K applied to universities through special admission system for NKDs and finally received admission from a university. However, she realized that there is no teacher education program at this university after she entered. K transferred to another university in her junior year, but she could not take teacher education program there either. Juniors were not admitted to teacher education programs.

The lack of information about career and South Korean higher education system, led to a contradiction in her career development activity. This was a structural problem, due to the lack of understanding of the South Korean system of education. While NKDs receive information for career development in the South, the sociocultural and historical background did not prepare them to understand the structures and systems of the South. This is not a personal conflict but a structural contradiction. Like K, many of young adult NKDs who moved to new living situation do not have enough scaffoldings to thoroughly guide their career. Also, they are not familiar with actively searching information or finding someone who can help them to develop their own career, because they grew up in the different social context of North Korea, where their job and work are assigned. In actuality, after graduating the alternative school for NKDs and entering the university, K faced challenges of doing everything herself without others' guideline.

K began to consider entering graduate school, but it was not just for the career path to be a teacher. K designed her career to be a teacher first but while K took literature courses, a new issue had emerged. Taking courses, K perceived the differences in contemporary literature between the North and the South. She became concerned about the future of literature education in reunified Korea:

While I studied Korean literature, I realized that contemporary literatures are totally different between the North and the South. It could not even be categorized within same genre as literatures. In the North, all of the literatures are praising thing. Introduction, development, turn and finally praising Kim family or loyalty to the government. Although the processes are a little bit different, the final conclusions are same. Then, if we are reunified, how can we teach literature? It is

impossible to teach North Korean literatures in South Korea but South Korean literatures can't be taught to North Korea directly when we are reunified. They not only can't understand them but also we should not teach them with one way. I was concerned those kind of things.

While K develops her future career goal within the career development activity, she realized the needs of preparing for a future reunited era in literature education field. Within the process of developing career plans by experiencing and resolving the contradictions, K learned the differences of educational contents between the North and the South and established her career goal to study North and South Korean literature education. At first, K was a person who planned the career path with the consideration of her own future. However, K learned to expand her perspective to design the career, connecting to the national issue. In this regard, K's identity had been reconstructed as an individual who made career plans with concern about future of the country in the activity. Also, K has confidence and pride in her work and herself as a unique person because of her career plan with the consideration of future reunited Korea:

The reason why I came to graduate school is apparent ... I think I am the only person who can do it. It is not from pride, but... I think it is very necessary... Some people said to me that, "You struggle a lot but if Korea won't be reunified?" I don't care about the reunification within my lifetime even though my research always assumes the date after reunification, because it must be accomplished and after then, it is necessarily important part someday. Even though it won't be realized after the reunification, some of my friends who came to South Korea could be [educated] based on my research. If the North suddenly opens everything, the step [to prepare education for both South and North Koreans] definitely will be required, so I don't care about [achieving the reunification itself within my lifetime]... Sometimes I feel like I am too much idealistic but I just want to do it continuously. In the master's degree course, I realized that I don't know too much and I need to study more deeply ... I really want to do the research that is needed.

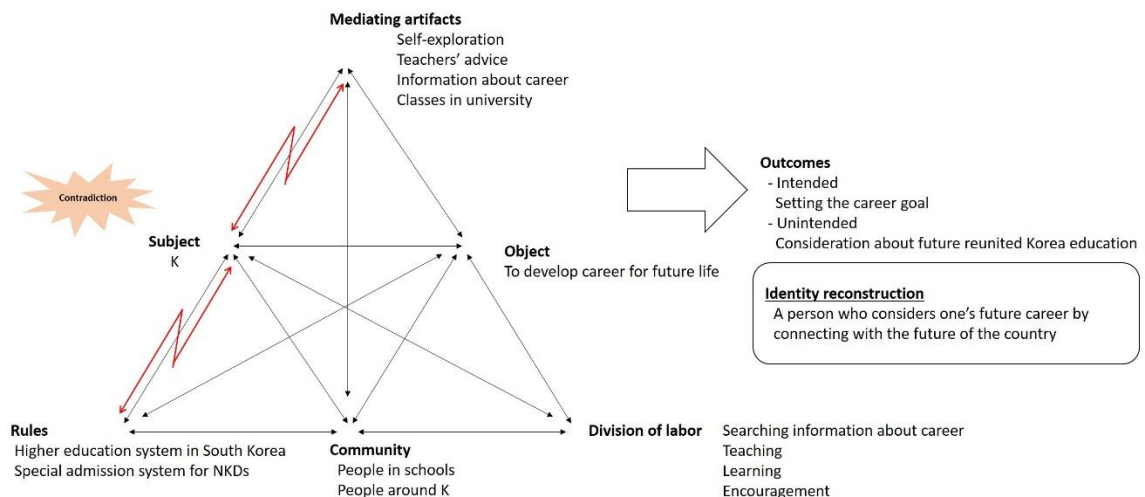


Figure 2. Career development activity system

Conclusions

By examining one young adult NKD's career development activities and processes, this study shows how she learned to reconstruct her identity in South Korea. The study's findings reveal the influences of her previous experiences before coming to the South and South Korean sociocultural and historical contexts to her career development activity. Regardless of her intention, her identity as a North Korean was given to her due to the distinctiveness as NKD's in South Korean society. However, she used the identity as a resource for recognizing herself and planning her future career. With the sense of duty and responsibility, she actively participate in career development activities to prepare for a future reunited Korea and she began to have pride of her own uniqueness as the only person who can do the work and certainty about the importance of her works.

While current discussions of NKD issues tend to see NKDs as a passive object of being adjusted to the South by emphasizing NKDs' challenges (Kim & Bae, 2010; Kim & Shin, 2014; Lee, 2012; Park, 2009), the study's findings showed how one young adult NKD reacted to the challenges and reconstructed their identity in career development activities as active subjects of social interactions in the South. In this sense, the study's findings provide meaningful suggestions to create a road map of career development for young adult NKDs as a driving force to achieve a reunified Korean peninsula. This study not only contributes in providing a broadened understanding about a new generation of NKDs but also offers ways to overcome prevailing negative perspectives about NKDs in the South.

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