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Reclaiming the Self: How Korean Housewives Make Meaning of their Reentry Experiences

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Abstract: *Well-educated Korean women are returning to higher education in unprecedented numbers with the motivation of recovering their personal identity. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand in what ways this experience is meaningful to these reentry women. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 Korean full-time housewives aged 25 to 45 who already had a Bachelor's degree yet enrolled as students at a four-year university, a graduate school, or a university-affiliated lifelong education center. The constant comparative method was employed for data analysis. The major finding of this study was that the experience of returning to university was meaningful for the participants in that they re-established themselves as independent individuals, broke their isolation, obtained a sense of accomplishment, gained recognition, and structured everyday life. These experiences are perceived meaningful because schooling addressed the sources of discontent in their lives of full-time housewives.*

Introduction

The demographic patterns of college participation in the U. S. have changed dramatically over the last fifty years. The number of adult learners has rapidly increased and they now account for a significant portion of the college population. In fact, nearly one-half of all postsecondary credit students are adults over age 25 (Kasworm, Sandman, & Sissel, 2000). The growth of women adult learners who return to school after 25 years of age is particularly noticeable. A similar trend has appeared in Korea since the 1980s. As universities began to provide formal and informal programs for adult learners, the number of women who return to higher education has increased tremendously in both regular universities and special universities for adult learners, such as the Korean National Open University and university-affiliated Lifelong Education Centers (Ministry of Education, 2000).

According to the literature, Korean reentry women are mostly highly-educated and belong to the middle class or higher, as assessed by their family income (Son, 1997). The majority of them are full-time housewives with school-age children (Kim, 1999). Research has shown that unlike American reentry women whose primary motivation is vocational, Korean women return to school for personal improvement, personal enrichment, or self achievement (Lee, 1998) and for restoration of personal identity as an independent individual (Jang & Merriam, 2004).

These motivations of Korean reentry women are created by the unique Korean social context of constraining highly-educated married women's roles to full-time mother and wife. Unlike former generations of Korean women who identified themselves with their family members, highly-educated women obtain a sense of independent identity through their education, and thus they desire self-actualization by working outside the home through their whole lives (Cho, 2000; Chung, 2001). On the other hand, in Korean society, the labor market has been slower than school in achieving gender equality (Lee, 1996) and childcare is perceived to be mother's work. Thus, married Korean women become full-time housewives as the result of quitting their jobs due to childcare responsibility, leaving their jobs due to blatant gender discrimination in their workforce, or failing to enter the workforce. Falling in this unwanted situation makes them discontent with their lives, and particularly, they suffer from the loss of their identity as a full-human being. Therefore, in order to satisfy their unfulfilled desire of self-actualization, they chose returning to school (Jang & Merriam, 2004).

Then, what do the Korean reentry women, who return to a university with this motivation, experience at their school? Most of the studies regarding reentry women in Korea have been focused on their motivations (Kim, 1999; Lee, 1998). Thus, little is known about what happens at school indeed. That is, it is an open research area to understand what they identify as significant learning during their university attendance and how they explain the meaning of these experiences. The purpose of this study is to understand in what ways highly-educated Korean reentry women consider the experiences at university as meaningful.

Method

In this work, a generic qualitative research design was used. From June 2001 through November 2001, I interviewed thirteen full-time housewives, each of whom already had a Bachelor's degree and who was enrolled as a student in a university at the time of the interview. Their ages span 14 years; one participant is in her late 20s, eleven are in their 30s, and one is in her early 40s. All of the participants had graduated from four-year universities when they were in their early 20s. Four returned to undergraduate schools, seven entered master's programs, and two attended university-affiliated lifelong education centers. One participant had a master's degree before she returned to school for her second master's degree. The term between their original graduation and their reentry ranged from four to thirteen years. Length of their reentry studies ranged from one semester to graduation, and one participant in a university-affiliated lifelong education center has been there almost five years.

Data were collected using semistructured person-to-person in-depth interviews that averaged three-hours long, with some lasting up to five hours. Follow-up interviews were done with five participants to clarify original responses. For data analysis, I used the constant

comparative method which was originally developed as the means of analysis in grounded theory research by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In order to confirm that our interpretation captured correctly what they meant, I used member checks by showing the summary of tentative findings to each of the participants. In addition, the data were peer-reviewed, that is, the tentative findings were also shared with several Korean women colleagues.

Findings

The main motivations for educated Korean women to return to a university is discontent with the roles of full-time housewives. This discontent is so pervasive that several spoke of being severely depressed and one woman had considered suicide. Reentering a formal educated setting was seen as their only escape. Their university experience proved to be meaningful and rewarding in the following ways: It allowed them to re-establish themselves as an independent individual, break their isolation, obtain a sense of accomplishment, gain recognition, and structure everyday life.

Re-establishing oneself as an independent individual

The participants in this study most frequently pointed out that re-establishing themselves as independent individuals was the primary impact of attending university. Before returning to a university, they thought “there is none of my own work” in the roles of full-time housewife, and “I am losing myself while rearing children.” Therefore, they expressed their schooling as having “my own time,” “time only for myself,” or “something for myself.” Hana stated that having her own activity meant to “restore who I was originally” because when she was studying, she was no longer a mother or wife. The participants also described their schooling as having “their own independent worlds” and spending time with “their own friends.” They said the outside world was very different from the limited environment they inhabited as housewives. Most of all, rather than being “somebody’s mother,” their own names were being called in the world. This recovery of their name decreased their frustration of losing their personal identity in the roles of full-time housewives.

Breaking isolation.

Attending university was also meaningful for the participants in breaking their isolation from the world. Jeawon, who suffered from “an exiled life” bringing up her children, showed clearly how attending university could lead to participation in society. As she attended her university, she came to see how other young students dressed. Realizing her clothes were too much out of fashion and strange, she tried to follow the current fashion. However, for her, it was not just a matter of fashion. Rather, she perceived this as a matter of participating in the current

society. She said,

I seem to enlarge myself [by] trying to imitate them in order to follow these days....I am just pleased with knowing what others [other full-time housewives in her neighborhood] don't know well....I am happy that I am living with the world together. Before, I didn't have that kind of life.

On the other hand, the participants met people that sympathized with them and encouraged their thoughts and way of life. Before returning to school, many of them often found themselves thinking differently from other full-time housewives, and it made them feel, "I may be too odd" or "I am a strange person." Therefore, for them, meeting people who understood them and gaining support significantly aided in restoring a positive self-image.

Hana described how she was alienated and how school solved this:

Nobody understood there is myself, Hana Lee, inside me, in addition to a mother and a wife. [They said] "That is the *ajumma's* [housewife's] life. Everybody lives like this after marriage. How much do you think you are peculiar?" But I met many of those peculiar people at school.

Obtaining the Sense of Accomplishment.

The participants mentioned that their lives before returning to a university were composed of the same, simple, and endlessly routine tasks. While repeating just routines every day for several years, they 'were tired of it' and felt themselves to be "left behind." In particular, they suffered from no sense of accomplishment in their work

Therefore, the participants indicated that obtaining a sense of accomplishment through their schooling was another way in which the experience was meaningful. For example, they obtained a sense of accomplishment through challenging opportunities at school, such as taking examinations or making presentations. Jeawon underscored that she obtained a sense of accomplishment from getting good grades on her examinations. She considered good grades as an indication of her sincere effort for certain work that was acknowledged in this society and thus, she felt that she accomplished something in taking her examinations. Good grades gave her "self-satisfaction" because unlike housework, they gave visible results of her efforts.

Gaining Recognition

All the participants emphasized that the work of full-time housewives is never recognized in society, even though the work was very hard and valuable. No recognition for their work caused their frustration, anger, and self-humiliation. Song-eun shared, "It made me suffer from a sense of self-humiliation that my position as a full-time housewife isn't socially and formally recognized."

Therefore, gaining recognition from others through schooling was considerably

meaningful for the participants. They gained recognition from their professors, classmates, family members, or neighbors. For example, Song-eun got a scholarship, and it caused her classmates to appreciate her academic ability. In particular, for the participants who attended graduate schools, their degrees or the fact itself of attending graduate schools made them be recognized by others. Hunsoo found responses about her were different before and after returning to graduate schools. She who had majored in early childhood education found that since starting graduate school, her neighbors more frequently requested counseling about their children's matters and trusted her advice more than when she was a full-time housewife. All these recognitions from others made them thrilled, caused them to feel pride in themselves, and significantly helped them restore their self-respect.

Structuring Everyday Life

The participants' lives before returning to a university were characterized by having no work to do in a specific time. Even though there were many chores to do as full-time housewives, they could delay them somewhat, and it sometimes resulted in life without regularity. Jeawon described this clearly:

Housework is like this, indeed. I can delay cleaning house a little bit. If my house is so messed up, I say "I can do it after lunch." Then, after lunch and a nap, I say, "I can do it after supper. My husband will be late anyway." Then, at night, I say "I can do it tomorrow morning. It will get messed up again anyway."

The participants pointed out that attending the university helped structure their everyday life. Inea explained, "I have made the time to prepare for Friday [the day of going to school] in a week...So I have become busy and more diligent. My life has become not loose but tighter. It makes me feel lively." By having activity that she allotted her time to in a day, she had "the concept of a time plan" as she placed her time for the housework and her study into a daily schedule.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to understand in what ways highly-educated Korean reentry women consider the experiences at university as meaningful. They returned to a university to solve their discontent of the roles of full-time housewife, especially, to restore personal identity as independent individuals. The discontent with roles of full-time housewife is multi-faceted. They felt: no ownership of their lives, isolation from the world, no personal development, no recognition of their work as housewives, and boredom. On the other hand, they identified five categories of their meaningful reentry experiences at a university. They re-established themselves as independent individuals, broke their isolation, obtained a sense of accomplishment,

gained recognition, and structured everyday life. This study revealed that their meaningful reentry experiences exactly matched with their discontent with roles of full-time housewife that they had before. Therefore, it is concluded that they perceived their experiences as meaningful because schooling addressed the source of discontent in their lives of full-time housewives.

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