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Learning Lives and Reconstructing Identities of Young Adult North Korean Defectors

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Abstract: This ethnographic study is to examine young adult North Korean defectors' learning and identity reconstruction process within daily lives in South Korea, based on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as a theoretical framework.

Purpose of the Study

There has been a rapid increase in the number of North Koreans entering South Korea. According to a report from the Ministry of Unification (2017), 1,2175 North Koreans came to South Korea in 2015, which brought the cumulative total of North Korean defectors (NKDs) to 28,555 as of 2015 and the total number of NKDs is expected to reach more than 30,000 soon. The remarkable trend of NKDs is demographic transition. The defectors in their 20s and 30s now constitute a majority among NKDs in South Korea; as of September 2016, the defectors between 20 and 39 years of age occupy 57.5% of all NKDs (Ministry of Unification, 2017). Although the younger generation of NKDs is an emerging group, the characteristics of younger NKDs have attracted relatively little attention in researches and policies. Also, the discussions about NKDs matters tend to have a one-sided perspective toward them; they treat NKDs as a passive object of being adjusted, seeing their previous working, learning, and living experiences as negative factors hampering their social adjustment in the South (Kim & Bae, 2010; Kim & Shin, 2014; Lee, 2012; Park, 2009). The transition in living context, however, brings new experiences to NKDs, and it enables them to create opportunities and conditions for learning in new living contexts. As Jarvis (2006) indicated, all human beings unceasingly continue learning throughout their lives, and the transition to a new social context means having to learn a new language, social systems, and cultural values. In this regard, a new angle to examine NKDs' ordinary lives with a learning perspective is required.

One of the central aspects people constantly change and learn throughout their entire lives is identity. Identity is constantly constructed and reconstructed in diverse social contexts through social interactions (Bauman, 1996; Holland & Lave, 2001; Roth et al., 2004; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Although identity is a process consistently evolving, much research deals with the concept of identity as a static, focusing on the 'being' of research participants; they tend to depend on research participants' direct statements about the sense of themselves to examine their identity. It is constrained in conceiving the subtly detailed, complex concept of identity as a process and leads to the need of a theoretical framework to examine the process of identity change.

This study aims to explore young adult North Korean defectors' (referred to here as "North Korean Millennials"; NKMs) identity reconstruction process within their daily activities in South Korea. For this purpose, based on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as a theoretical framework, this study examines the following research questions: (1) What activities are NKMs involved in for reconstructing identity within daily lives in South Korea? (2) How do

NKMs learn and reconstruct their identity through the social interactions within the activities in South Korea?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

NKMs are a growing population among NKDs in the South; they were born in the 1980s and 1990s, right before or shortly after the collapse of the state-socialist economy in the North (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Park, 2013). They were children and teenagers in the era following the death of Kim Il-sung, the first supreme leader of North Korea, in 1994. Since they have no personal memory of the days under Kim Il-sung, NKMs consider the regime more as an obstructer than a provider (Haggard & Noland, 2011; Lankov, 2012; Park, 2013). Within the terrible living situations, NKMs made personal efforts to participate in economic activities, selling products at *Jangmadang*, black markets. It allowed them to become the market friendly and individualized generation unlike the older generations who have a strong sense of community. For them, ideology is just a survival tool. Rather, smuggled foreign media exert more influence on their beliefs and attitudes (Kretchun & Kim, 2012; Park, 2013). It is the reason they are more open-minded toward accepting the outside world than the older North Korean generations.

Many identity theories explain people can have their identities within social situations through participation and social interactions. Since humans construct their identity by interacting with external circumstances (Holland & Cole, 1995; Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), identity is subject to change according to social and cultural factors (Brandt, 2001; Hall, 1997). Namely, identity is not an objective feature of a person, but a discursive one constructed continually by social interactions in daily situations in which an individual lives (van Oers et al., 2008). However, many of researches in adult education tend to see identity as a product and/or precondition to learning (Axelsson, 2009; Phinney, 1989; Phinney et al., 2001). Some researchers in adult education consider social and cultural factors by perceiving identity not as a product, but as a process (e.g., Kasworm, 2005; Kim & Merriam, 2010; Merrill, 2009; Nasir & Cooks, 2009; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Torres et al., 2012; Ullman, 1997). However, these studies still are ambiguous in showing the influences of sociocultural factors on the identity construction, thereby predominantly explaining *what* kinds of sociocultural elements affect identity construction, not *how* identity is constructed and reconstructed by the influence of sociocultural elements. Those limitations of the existing literature highlight the need for a new approach and a theoretical framework to understand identity as a process.

To perceive identity not as a static entity, but as a process constantly evolving in social practices, it is necessary to concentrate on the *doing* of individuals in their living context. By shifting the concept of identity from *being* to *doing*, the attention turns to how people interact with their daily living situations in examining identity. It can be the initial step in reviewing the sociocultural perspective that shows how human cognition develops by reflecting the interactions between diverse sociocultural factors and individuals. As a theoretical framework in analyzing identity, Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) can provide directions for describing how people carry out their lives and how they learn their identity in daily lives. It conceives of 'activity' within the daily lives of individual actors as the minimal unit of analysis for understanding the mutually constituting practices of thinking, feeling, knowing and doing (Engeström, 2001; Sawchuk, 2013). In CHAT, activity refers to what people collectively do under cultural and historical influence. The activity is initiated by the subject's motive to fulfill its needs. When the need meets its object, the need itself is objectified, and an activity emerges (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006; Leont'ev, 1978). From this moment, the object becomes a motive of

the activity; it directs the activity, motivating the subject to meet their needs. In this theory, the concept of contradiction plays an essential role in understanding learning. "Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems" (Engeström, 2001, p. 137). Learning embedded in an activity system is expansive in accordance with efforts to resolve contradictions (Engeström, 1999, 2001)

Research Design

There is little awareness of the ordinary lives of NKDs, overshadowed by negative images from the North Korean government's provocative behavior in international affairs. In particular, NKMs receive little attention with academic understanding. In this sense, in-depth ethnographic studies which is appropriate when literature is deficient in actually knowing how the group works (Creswell, 2007) are needed to examine NKMs' culture and characteristics beyond the descriptive reports.

This ethnographic research is a study of eleven NKMs in South Korea. To collect the information-rich data for in-depth study, I did purposeful sampling with certain criteria: (1) NKDs who were born in from 1985 to 1994 and (2) who have clear memories of previous life before coming to the South and early life in the South. The strategy of the purposeful sampling was snowball sampling. I lived with a NKM for three months as a roommate. She acted as a gatekeeper in snowball sampling by introducing her NKD friends. I met around 20-30 NKMs but interviewed 11 of them who fit into the criteria of research participants, agreed to participate in my research and trusted me. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and content 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. I observed day-to-day routines of NKMs. In particular, since I lived with a NKM for three months, I could observe NKM's daily lives very closely. To have a basic understanding about NKMs' cultural aspects, I gathered document resources dealing with information about NKMs through newspapers, media reports, government reports and academic journals. All interviews were transcribed and all participant observational contents were recorded in field notes. All data were imported into Nvivo 11 software program for analysis. Based on CHAT, the lens to examine NKMs identity reconstruction process, initial, focused, and axial coding was conducted for data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Since CHAT was used to frame the data, categories and themes were primarily connected to the elements of activity in CHAT.

Findings

Four activities for learning and reconstructing identity of NKMs were found: the adaptation, the enculturation, the self-development and the reunification preparation activity. The first two activities, the adaptation and the enculturation activities, were mainly composed with actions the participants took during the early days in the South. The latter two, on the other hand, were addressed after the NKMs experienced and learned about the South Korean society as time passed. The findings of their activities analyzed within CHAT, which is the conceptual framework to describe activities at a certain point in time necessarily (Foot, 2014), were divided into early activities and the latter, accordingly.

The Early Activities and Contradictions

The NKMs described their ignorance about the South Korean society as their first experiences in the South. By participating in South Korean social practices, they were gradually learning about new living contexts. The realization about the needs for survival in a credentialist and capitalist society led them to take certain actions, such as entering schools, taking vocational

education, and beginning to work. The needs were objectified to adjust to the South Korean social context to live like others in the South and it directed to the adaptation activity.

Another noticeable behavioral feature of the NKMs was their efforts to get accustomed to South Korean social culture. They watched TVs, listened to K-pop, and imitated the latest South Korean fashion trend to get familiar with South Korean pop culture, and practiced South Korean speech style to not stand out among South Koreans. As they were recognized differently by others in the South, they felt discomfort. It derived the object to be socialized in South Korean society, composing the enculturation activity.

Even though the NKMs struggled to live like others in the South and to be socialized in South Korean society within daily activities, they faced contradictions due to different sociocultural backgrounds, structural malfunction of South Korean government system to support NKDs, and the contradictory situations living as a NKD in South Korean society. Different language styles over the long division, unfamiliar educational systems, and difficulties in building relationships with South Koreans made them hardly engaged in South Korean social practices. Also, the alternative school system for NKDs initiated with the intention to support NKD students' education and early adjustment rather made barriers for them to interact with South Korean society by hindering their passage to experience the society in person. In addition, the NKMs wanted to be treated as ordinary people by others in the South, but the given inextricable tag as a North Korean made them inevitably assume the responsibility and burden as North Korean representatives. Moreover, the division of Korean Peninsula addressed contradictory situations toward NKDs. South Korean society accepts NKDs as their citizens, requiring them to be integrated into the society, but they still tend to see them as strangers, placing them in the problem category with fixed negative images. The NKMs felt they were refused acceptance as the same citizen in the South and it made them hide their origins, addressing difficulties to build sincere relationship with others.

However, through dynamic and continuous interactions in the activities, the NKMs resolved the contradictions. As a result, they learned and reconstructed identities. There are three outcomes of their learning and identities while they interact within the social context by reacting and negotiating with contradictions: (1) Learning South Korean social culture, (2) Establishing strategies to be well adjusted, and (3) Changing the ways of social interaction. Through the acquisition of knowledge and skill to live in the South, the NKM participants gradually became more involved in South Korean social culture. It allowed them to become an old-timer and in-group member from a newcomer and an out-group member. The NKMs not only learned about South Korean society and culture, but also learned to establish strategies to become well-adjusted (e.g., joining social club, using casual conversation as resources to learn about South Korean society). By doing so, they have changed as an active subject improving independent life skills and developing various strategies. To resolve the contradiction from the preconditions of the given North Korean tag, the NKMs focused on building trusted relationships with South Korean people. Simultaneously, they introduced real stories about North Korea to their acquaintances to release emotional and social difficulties caused by ignorance about the North and the associated ambivalent attitude toward them. The NKMs became the representative of NKD for deviating from the given tag as North Koreans and the fixed recognition unavoidably acquired from the one-sided evaluation in the South, not by others but by their own decision.

The Latter Activities and Contradictions

The insights about South Korean society from the early activities guided the NKMs to realize the need to live more abundantly in the South beyond adjustment. Even though they were

accustomed to a new life, as time passed by, they felt something lacking within their lives and within themselves. They began to reflect on themselves, explore career directions, enter universities, and go abroad to develop their lives and careers more competently beyond adjustment or socialization. It directed to the self-development activity.

However, the NKMs faced structural conflict in their self-development activity. Considering the circumstances under which the NKMs receive information for self-development in the South and their sociocultural and historical background, they inevitably faced challenges and difficulties in the activity. First of all, since the NKMs grew up in the different social context of North Korea, where job and work were assigned rather than chosen, they were not familiar with actively searching for information or finding someone who could help them to develop their own careers. In addition, the NKMs who moved to new living situations did not have enough scaffolding to guide their career thoroughly; only few people had considerable understandings about them with interest in their development. Also, the criteria of competition already established within South Korean society made them to face another obstacle in the self-development activity. They could not easily catch up with other South Koreans in the South Korean competition systems. It made them lose competitiveness and blocked their efforts to achieve the object, to advance life and career, in the self-development activity.

The contradictions the NKM participants faced in the self-development activity were not easily resolved with their own efforts, because the fundamental causes of the contradictions were from the unchangeable fact that they lived in South Korea as a person from a different society. However, the consistent difficulties that emerged from the differences gave the NKMs new insights about the necessity of finding a breakthrough to reduce the gaps they repeatedly meet while living in the South. The NKM participants suggested an alternative to resolve the difficulties from the sociocultural and historical differences. They established a new role to encourage other newly arriving NKDs as a scaffolding and to alleviate the hardships NKDs consistently meet by sharing their experiences. They reconstructed their own identity as a scaffolding for other NKDs. According to Stryker (1968, 1980, 1991), by designing their own positions and roles, people not only designate their own role at the structural position but also perceive the broader situations. In this regard, having new roles as a scaffolding could allow the NKMs to have broadened perspectives in considering their positions and roles. In fact, they began to designate their roles, considering the life and career of the entire group of NKDs beyond an individual level of self-development.

Another activity in the NKMs' latter activities is the reunification preparation. As time passed, the NKMs seemed to be more deeply involved in South Korean society and culture, but the consistent emotional and physical bond with North Korea increased. This led to an earnest hope to achieve reunification. By participating in NKD centered activities, they initiated to take practical actions for preparing reunification. They became interviewees, as NKDs, to tell the true stories about the North, organized diverse social activities to reduce biases about North Koreans rampant in South Korean society, and led an NKD network for improving the sociocultural and perceptional gaps between NKDs and South Koreans. These actions were from their desire to reconcile between the South and the North and it collated on the object, to build bridges between the South and the North, and directed the reunification preparation activity.

In the reunification preparation activity, the NKM participants take more active actions to reduce prejudices and rectify wrong ideas about North Korea in the South Korean society, especially through various NKD-centered activities. However, there are contradictions hampering the participation in their social activities because of the divided nation situation. Due

to the risk that their face or name will be exposed to outside, the NKMs who have family members in the North faced an unavoidable limitation in participating in the NKD-centered activities; they always have to be cautious in participating in the activities that the possibility of being reported through the media. Once their escape to the South is revealed to the North Korean authority, their family in the North can face severe punishment.

The NKMs began to consider what they have to do as NKD in the reunification preparation activity. They planned their future career path aligned with national issues. In particular, they focused on informing South Korean people about North Korea, in order to resolve misunderstandings and indifferences rampant in the society. By doing so, they reconstructed their identity as the mediator who connects the South and the North, providing initiatives for broader understandings about each other. The contradictions arising from the divided nation and the conflict of interests among the NKD group still require ongoing efforts to be resolved. It will not be easily and perfectly solved by NKMs' endeavors. However, the contradictions definitely worked as a driving force to reconstruct NKMs' identity as a person who plays roles of the contributor for the national development and to more proactively learn the ways to establish career plans and directions.

Conclusions and Implications

The findings indicate that the operational concept of identity from doings of individuals can examine the identity reconstruction process. In particular, CHAT, as the theoretical framework, provides the specific explanations to examine learning and identity reconstruction within everyday lives. In addition, contradictions significantly influence the outcomes, learning, and identity reconstruction. The NKMs unavoidably faced structural conflicts in the activities, especially from the sociocultural differences between their previous and current lives or from the divided nation situation. However, they became an active subject of learning and reconstructed identities, reacting to the contradictions.

Traditionally in the field of adult education, people who are excluded from the center of social settings are the major subject of discussions. In this regard, the discussion about NKD issue provides meaningful implications not only to South Korean society, but also in the realm of academics in adult education.

The findings of this study examined that the NKMs reconstructed their identity, not only as the active lifelong learner, but also as scaffolding for next NKD generation and mediator and contributor for preparing reunification. According to McCall and Simmons (1960), legitimating the role identity from others and themselves plays a critical role in leading individuals' behaviors. In this regard, to address NKMs' more proactive behaviors for developing their careers and promoting their social contributions, the new identities will need to be legitimated by themselves and by others in the South. To promote social changes, it is important to trust them and empower through participative decision making (Horton, 1990). In this sense, South Korean society needs to practically accept and encourage NKMs' new role identities and activities, going beyond institutionally providing aid systems for NKDs.

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