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Gendered Narratives of Transition to Adulthood among Korean Work-bound Youth

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I was sitting at the dining table at A-ra's house with A-ra and her boyfriend, Se-yoon on a Friday evening. A-ra, a twenty-year-old convenient store cashier, generously invited me to hang with her and Se-yoon, who is twenty-one-year-old an assistant cook, at her barely-decorated small three-bedroom apartment that her parents own. Both had agreed to participate in the interviews for my study. Sharing *ddeok-bbo-kki*, a common Korean street food, the three of us pleasantly bantered until A-ra asked me to remind her of my research topic. Regardless of my intention to casually introduce the research to the potential interviewees, it triggered a good natured argument between A-ra and Se-yoon on their different perspective about what it is like to be a worker with high school education in Korea.

When I explained to A-ra that I would like to know how Korean high school graduate workers understand becoming an adult in Korea through the study, nodding her head, A-ra bluntly said, "I think that a high school graduate is now a loser in Korea." Her sudden remark stopped our conversation short. Unsure of how to respond, I asked why she believed so. She explained, "I couldn't understand why parents and other adults kept telling me to go to college until I actually came to live without college education. Once I experience what it is like, I now see why people always talk about college." Quietly listening to A-ra, Se-yoon opposed to A-ra, "That's absolute nonsense. There are people who become successful without having ever entered college classrooms. I can live a happy life without college education at all." A-ra half-jokingly rebuked Se-yoon, "You're just naïve. I think that you don't think thoroughly." She chuckled as if she tried to subdue the serious atmosphere. Irritated by what A-ra said, however, Se-yoon coldly talked back to her, "I think that you are too negative."

Their stark different point of view on what it is like to live as a high school graduate worker led me to refine my research question: How do male and female work-bound youth –

young adults who join the labor force with only high school education – construct their narratives of transition to adulthood differently in Korean society where college education has become more prevalent and the status of work-bound youth has become unsettling? During my journey to find an answer from 27 Korean young adults in the workplace, I repeatedly encountered gendered narratives among work-bound youth as A-ra and Se-hoon presented. Whereas both male and female participants reported that they had experienced a precarious transition to low-paying service jobs or irregular industrial jobs in a somewhat haphazard way, they read their transition to work in surprisingly different ways and presented opposing perspectives about their future social status in Korean society.

This chapter shows this opposing narratives that male and female young workers forge. Particularly, I argue these gendered narratives are derived from diverse institutions that shape the transition to adulthood in Korean society. For young women, college is the utmost important institution for their transition into adulthood and social status among the Millennial generation in Korea. In contrast, for men, college matters far less. Instead, military service serves as a pivotal institution which mold them into “a real man” and enables them to achieve a full membership as an adult in Korean society. They optimistically believe that they can thrive and achieve a better future without college education. By discussing these differences, this chapter investigates the subjective experience of work-bound youth in Korea, in which their journey to adulthood has become increasingly bumpy for both men and women. In addition, this chapter explores how gendered institutions shape the nature of the transition among male and female work-bound youth in Korea.

The Precarious Journey to Being Adults

The transition to adulthood has recently drawn diverse social attention in many post-industrial countries (Arnett, 2000; Furstenberg Jr, 2010; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Newman, 2008) including Korea (B.-H. Kim, Lee, & Park, 2016; H. Park, 2013, 2016; H. Park & Sandefur, 2005).

Particularly, in Korea, public discourse and scholarship has recently shed light on the uphill battle that college-bound youth have been grappling with for becoming adults (especially for completion of education, entry into the labor market). In contrast, there has been relatively limited attention to the transition experience of the work-bound youth – young adults who join the labor force with only high school education – as the proportion of this population in young adults has gradually decreased and their transition trajectory has become a non-dominant way to become adults.

We should pay more attention to the transition of the work-bound youth. Though there are increasingly fewer young adults who transition into the labor market upon their graduation of high school, work-bound youth still compose the substantial number of young adults in Korea. More importantly, as sociologist Lamont (2000) argues, every society needs the working-class workers – e.g., janitors, bus drivers, street cleaners, restaurant servers – even in the post-industrial economy. In this new economic regime where knowledge-based work is dominant, the traditional working-class workers still coexist with knowledge workers. While some youth choose to be the working-class workers as a way to achieve adulthood, as the traditional working-class, the nature of work and life opportunities that they face has been drastically changing. Therefore, we need to investigate the life experiences of the work-bound young adults in the shifting economic and social landscape.

Like their peers in other industrialized countries, Korean work-bound youth has experienced an increasingly precarious transition to adults due to the shift in economic and educational structure. Their journey to adulthood has become bumpy as the labor market has drastically changed since the financial crisis in 1997, which hit the workers at the lower end of the economic hierarchy severely, including the work-bound youth. Where Korean capitalists had actively sought the flexible use of the labor force, the financial crisis in 1997 accelerated the neo-liberal transformation of the labor market (Koo, 2001; Shin, 2010). With the restructuring of the economic structure, the number of full-time industrial jobs shrunk rapidly, and the size of the irregular workforce increased sharply. This shift in the labor market meant that the work-bound youth – often less competitive than their college-bound youth in the labor market – are now more likely transition to irregular jobs without job security (Lee, 2002).ⁱ

At the same time, the power of the labor unions waned and the scope of the labor movement became restricted; “those radical, resistant, and class-conscious workers now represented a shrinking minority in most large heavy industries” (Koo, 2001: 210). Work-bound youth hired by small-sized firms and in the service sector are less likely to be protected by labor unions and corporate welfare. Moreover, irregular workers in Korea are paid on average substantially less than regular full-time workers (approximately 60%; Geum, 2007), meaning that the work-bound youth now expect lower income from their jobs as well as less job security. Overall, like their counterparts in other post-industrial countries (Weis, 2013), Korean work-bound youth are losing their economic ground in the neoliberal labor market, making their transition to adulthood a daunting task to complete.

In addition to the labor market shift, the educational structure has unfavorably changed for work-bound youth. With the emergence of the mass higher education system, work-bound

youth have arguably lost institutional guidance for their transition (Brinton, 2011; Cook, 2016; Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001; Rosenbaum, 2001). In Korea secondary schools are heavily focused on academic education without providing an alternative pathway to college. Korean vocational education – which usually occurs within vocational high schools (30% of entire high schools in Korea) – has not been sufficiently developed to train students to have specific occupational skills by emphasizing general skills (H. Park, 2013). Therefore, Korean work-bound youth now take an unguided journey to becoming adults with little educational support.

Furthermore, work-bound youth have a marginalized social status as non-college-goers. Korean culture has long emphasized educational achievement as a desirable goal. Because college degrees are associated with good life chances, the dominant cultural script for young adults in many countries is to attend college (Baker, 2014; Meyer, 1977). Korea is no exception. There is a social hierarchy among young Koreans, in which social status is often determined by their educational ranking and the type of college they attend (Abelmann, Park, & Kim, 2009). Therefore, work-bound youth are unavoidably positioned at the lower rung of the social hierarchy and hence commonly stereotyped as those less capable or as outsiders who stray from the mainstream pathway to adulthood. In other words, their transition is seen as less desirable and less normative in Korean society.

These structural changes in the Korean society – the emergence of the neo-liberal labor market and the mass higher education system – have changed the nature of transition into adulthood for work-bound youth in last few decades. Unlike their college-bound peers and the work-bound youth of the past, modern work-bound youth face a journey to adulthood that is tougher and riskier. Though some researchers explore labor market outcomes of high school graduates, there are surprisingly few studies on non-labor market outcomes. More importantly,

researchers rarely examine how the work-bound youth subjectively make sense of their precarious transition to adulthood, and this calls for close scholarly attention.

Gendered Narratives of the Work-Bound Youth

Whereas it becomes harder for both male and female work-bound youth to achieve adulthood, gender further shapes trajectories into adulthood in a distinctive way. Many quantitative studies on transition to adulthood among Korean young adults have documented the gendered pathways to adults: men and women achieve diverse benchmarks of adulthood through different pathways and different timings (H. Park, 2013; Park & Sanderfur, 2005). Research on gendered patterns as well as the overall trends of the transition trajectories among Korean young adults is incredibly important, but as Kim and her colleagues (2016) critique, we do not yet know how Korean young adults subjectively understand the gendered transition experience. Furthermore, very few empirical studies examine how male and female work-bound youth narrate the precarious transition, and how gender shapes their subjective meaning-making of the transition.

In particular, transition to adulthood is critically shaped by what Acker (1992) terms ‘gendered institutions.’ According to Acker (1992: 567), “the institutional structures of a society are organized along lines of gender,” which create different expectations and opportunities for men and women. The major part of being an adult is learning social expectations and roles, both which are defined by various institutions. In other words, transition to adulthood means that youth acquire full membership in society by achieving diverse institutional benchmarks, such as having full-time jobs or getting married. As Acker supposes, given that gender organizes the institution and social expectations embedded in institutions, young men and women follow different trajectories to becoming adults. Therefore, when we examine the transition experience

of young people, it is crucial to understand how the narratives of coming-of-age among work-bound youth are structured by gendered institutions in a society.

In Korea, a few specific institutions are of particular importance for the gendered pathway to adulthood of young people. For men the military is a pivotal institution penetrating their transition and shaping their manhood. Compulsory military duty is only required for men and has long been the prerequisite for paid workers and primary breadwinners (Moon, 2005). Not only did the compulsory military duty create docile male nationals (*kungmin*); but also young men could secure their positions in the labor market and hence become family providers with the completion of the military service as paid work has been closely coupled with military service. Even now, men often have to finish military service to apply for regular jobs, and the completion of military service qualifies them for higher pay and faster promotion. Therefore, military service is one of the most important benchmarks to Korean male youth, which has a critical impact on the rest of their journey to becoming adults.

Female work-bound youth, in contrast, do not have distinctive institutions channeling their transition. For example, though women were mobilized as factory workers in the industrializing economy (Moon, 2005), and more women are now participating in the labor market, their status as workers is marginalized. Women are paid substantially less than their male colleagues (Y. Kim & Shirahase, 2014; Seguino, 1997); the glass ceiling remains firm as promotions are limited (Cho, Lee, & Jung, 2014); and discrimination and penalties against female workers, particularly those with children, are substantial (Brinton, Lee, & Parish, 1995). Therefore, female work-bound youth encounter severe constraints when they transition to the labor market and attempt to achieve independence through work.

At the same time, the emergence of mass higher education can add a new constraint to female work-bound youth's transition. Given the rapidly increasing number of female college graduates in Korea and the lack of lucrative jobs for them, the competitions for the middle-class occupations in the labor market tend to become more intense for female workers. Therefore, female young workers with less education likely encounter substantial obstacles when they seek better-paying regular jobs with secure benefits.

Due to their lack of college education, they also can face a difficulty to have a spouse who can help them to achieve economic stability. Because of their disadvantageous status in the labor market, to young female workers, marriage can be of particular importance institution for their transition to adulthood (B.-H. Kim, Lee, and Park, 2016). Yet, this educational status can be an obstacle when they try to achieve the transition through marriage. The house division of labor between men and women within the families remains highly rigid: Korean women take care of the household economy (Nelson, 2000) and play a pivotal role as an 'educational manager' for children's academic development (S. J. Park, 2010). Therefore, women's education is crucial: it signals their domestic competence as productive wives and managerial mothers. In other words, women's education is an important cultural resource for the family. Since young female workers lack of this essential resource, they are likely seen to be less desirable bachelorettes.ⁱⁱ

As this study will later show, because diverse social institutions organize male and female young workers' transition differently, they tend to forge their narratives of the transition in distinctive ways. Relying on military service, a 'classless' masculine institution which channels men's transition, male work-bound youth might imagine their transition as an incomplete yet progressing pathway to becoming men. In contrast, female workers lack institutional guidance and face a weakened social status in Korean society causing them to feel

more lost in their transition and burdened by becoming working-class women. Studying the gendered narratives of young workers gives us a nuanced understanding of the transitional experiences of young workers.

Methods

For this study, I interviewed 27 work-bound youths (15 males and 12 females) between the ages of 18 to 22 years old between November 2013 and January 2015. All interviewees graduated high schools except for two male high school dropouts and one male college dropout. These interviews all occurred with residents of Harbortown. This town is located in a southern part of Korea and is well known for its industrial district that has helped the local economy remain vibrant since the 1960s.

The industrial district in Harbortown is the fourth-largest chemical industrial district in the world. There are more than 150 companies employing more than 16,000 workers. Full time workers in large companies have enjoyed stable economic well-being thanks to relatively high wages and generous benefits. For instance, these large companies provide their employees with a wide variety of medical benefits, paid leave, and educational benefits for the employees' children. There are also numerous small subcontractors supporting the district. Unlike workers at large companies, the workers hired by the subcontractors are less likely to enjoy the same level of the economic wellbeing, benefits, or job security. Also, they are rarely unionized. Besides factory work, there are diverse jobs in the service sector, including professional service jobs and less prestigious work as delivery people and sales clerks.

At the time of the interview, the majority of respondents worked part-time in the low-wage service sector and less often full- or part-time in the manufacturing sector located at the bottom

of the industrial hierarchy in Harbortown. Eight out of 15 male respondents worked at convenient stores, gas stations, restaurants and Internet cafes at the time of interviews. Another five male respondents delivered Chinese food or pizza. The other two male respondents were temporarily employed by the subcontractors in the industrial district. Work was similarly reported by women. Nine out of 12 female respondents worked at convenience stores, restaurants, and Internet cafes. Two female respondents were sales clerks at women's clothing stores. Only one female respondent worked full-time at a manufacturing factory in a city near Harbortown.

I recruited the interviewees by using a snowball sampling method. I initially contacted high school teachers and asked them to introduce their former students who did not go to college to me. After I met two female respondents, I asked them to introduce to me their friends who were also non-college-bound. Before an interview, I usually tried to build rapport with the interviewees by hanging out with them or visiting their workplaces. During the interviews I mainly asked about their educational and job experiences; how they made the decision to not go to college, and how they felt about these decisions; and their future plans and aspirations. The interviews lasted from one hour and twenty minutes to three hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher with the consent of the respondents. After every interview, I wrote a set of field notes to record the tones, gestures, and facial expressions of the respondents and general atmosphere of the interview.

To analyze interview transcripts, I used open coding techniques. After reading the interview transcripts several times, I added conceptual labels to narratives that describe relevant events, experiences, and feelings reported by the interviewees. Next I analyzed themes across interviews to identify meta-themes. I documented the differences between narratives of the

respondents. I captured the differences not only between individual respondents to find the deviant cases within the sample but also between male and female respondents to understand if there was any systematic difference in their narratives. All names presented in the chapter are pseudonyms.

“It just happened”: Drifting to precarious work

Min-cheol, an 18-year-old young high school dropout working at an Internet café, has been financially independent – if not fully intendent – from his father since he was in eighth grade. Although he is now living in his father’s house and rarely has had a stable job, he “has not received a single penny” from his father (a construction worker) since he began his first job at a convenience store. Not only does Min-cheol pay his own bills, he also helps his father support the family. Especially, Min-cheol helps his father pay for his older brother’s college education. Min-cheol feels obliged to support his brother’s college education until his brother “becomes financially sufficient enough to help his father back” when he graduates and gets a job:

My dad pays for his tuition and stuff. And I am paying for his monthly rent, which is 400,000 Won (approximately \$350). It’s almost half of what I am earning now. However, I don’t have any hard feeling about it. Rather, it’s fortunate that I can help him. ... He can’t give up on education. We don’t need to have two dropouts in our family. My brother should finish college education and have a better job than mine. When he gets a well-paying job, he then can help the family. Until then, I have to help him.

Min-cheol did not plan to achieve financial independence earlier when he was young. Nor

did he expect that he would be hopping from one job to another after the “completion” of his education.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Min-cheol, his transition to work occurred in a less deliberate way. When I asked him to explain how he began his first job, Min-cheol said after pondering for seconds:

It just happened. It's not like I was thinking hard about getting a job. I was only an eighth grader. I was naïve and had no idea about what I was doing or what I wanted to be in the future. ... I guess that I just happened to start working and has just kept working until now. I needed money, so I just worked. I continue to need money, so I have kept working.

To Min-cheol, who was then a middle-school student, “money” was an economic means to fulfil the materialistic desires of a teenager. He did not consider getting job early in order to help his father. Growing up in a less affluent family meant that he had to live on instant ramen for days when his father did not send money to the family; but, it meant losing chances to socialize with friends. He felt that he did not have enough money to “hang out with friends.” He remembered that as a teenager, he wanted to do many things, which usually required money. He said, “I wanted to go to an Internet Café with friends [to play the computer games], buy something good for my then girlfriend, or buy clothes, stuff like that. You know, teenagers should wear the same clothes as other kids wear.”

According to Min-cheol, being unable to participate in the consumeristic teen culture meant that he was not able to join the peer network. To a young boy, it was more bearable “to have to eat the same instant noodle for three days” than to be unable to hang with friends. Even

though he thought that he was not in an absolute poverty, he felt bitter about the sense of the relative poverty. Min-cheol vividly remembered one day when he had to decline going out when his friends asked him. Looking down and playing with fingers, he said:

Probably it was when I was a seventh, no, eighth grader. After a mid-term exam or something, my friends wanted to go to play the computer games at an Internet café. “Hey, let’s go!” They asked me to join. But I couldn’t. I did not have any money in my pocket, not even a single penny. ... I said, “No. I don’t have money. You guys go. I’m just going back home.

Even though he pretended to be “cool about it” when he told his friends to go without him, he hurt: When asked how he felt as he was walking back home alone, Min-cheol said chuckling, “It was fucking embarrassing!” This embarrassing feeling of deprivation led him to begin his first part-time job more or less impetuously. A few days after the incident with his friends, Min-cheol unexpectedly came across a job ad posted in a front window of a convenience store on his way home from school and decided to apply in the spur-of-the-moment. He said that he was thinking when he saw the ad, “Fuck, I don’t know. I should make money on my own if my dad can’t give me.” Min-cheol was afraid that he was too young to work legally. However, according to him, “the owner (of the convenience store) let me work without asking further questions when I lied that I was 17.” The next day after his application, Min-cheol started working in his green uniform and continued the first job until he stopped attending high school.

After he dropped out, he became an irregular full-time worker. Even though he worked six to eight hours a day for at least five days a week depending on his employer’s request, he has not

had any employment benefits that would go to full-time workers throughout his five-year of work experience. Min-cheol said, “I’ve never had unemployment insurance and health insurance or even signed on the proper employment contract.” His jobs have barely paid minimum wage, and the wages were always determined by the “owner’s generosity.” According to Min-cheol, he is paid slightly better when he “meets a good owner (of the store he works at)” and paid worse when he does not. When an employer treats him badly or the work is overly demanding, Min-cheol just “took some time off” from work. However, when he became short on money again, he must return to one of “those boring jobs” for which he does not feel rewarded:

As the proverb goes, “Necessity knows no law.” It is shitty to work at Internet cafes or convenience stores. There is no future with these sorts of jobs, I know. However, I have to do any work given to make ends meet before I find a real job. Also, after I left high school, I couldn’t ask my father to support me in any way. It’s embarrassing when you asked your parents to help you when you are not a student any more.

While changing jobs back and forth, Min-cheol has found himself caught up in similar types of irregular work. He did not plan on continuing his part-time job as a convenience cashier for an extended period of time when he handed the job application to the convenience store owner. Yet, Min-cheol has hopped from one service job to another in the poorly paid service sector. Particularly, since his older brother started college in Seoul two years ago, he had to be more financially responsible. It was getting harder for him to stop working and to pursue different careers in which he might feel more fulfilled. As one thing having led to another, the part-time work that he decided to take in a more or less imprudent way as a teen boy has

gradually turned into a quasi-permanent situation as he transitions to a young man.

Most respondents – both male and female respondents – reported that they had gone through similar transition experiences to Min-cheol's: Whereas starting part-time jobs to pursue teen consumeristic culture haphazardly, they have gradually slipped into the precarious jobs “with no future” and temporary job situation has turned into a permanent one. Furthermore, their risky transition to irregular work is further shaped by lack of college education. As the narrative of A-ra will demonstrate, respondents in the study find it challenging to move from their current part-time irregular jobs to full-time regular jobs. Nineteen of them reported that they have attempted to change jobs – including all female respondents – but no one has succeeded in doing so. They commonly point out that they could not get a better job than they were doing at the time of interviews since college education has become the prerequisite for entry-level jobs and college serves as an institutional broker between their graduates and employers.

Like Min-cheol, A-ra, a pleasantly cheerful twenty-year-old female convenience store cashier, started her first part-time job when she was the second year high school student to satisfy her materialistic needs as a teen consumer. A-ra, remembered that “buying cosmetic products and clothes” was her initial purpose of getting a job. To a teen girl who cares about her reputation among peers, according to A-ra, work meant “earning extra allowance to enable her to buy ‘necessities’ that any [teen] girl needs to have.” A-ra explained that she chose to work without considering the consequences, hoping to have more disposable allowance to buy herself clothes or cosmetic products that her peers were obsessed with:

You know, [as a teen girl] you can't go out without wearing make-up. You can't even go to school without wearing make-up. You can't even go to school in the

morning. ... It is an embarrassing thing to do. ... Looking back, it was very naive to begin working to make some money to buy stuff. However, I then had to do, because I wanted to get new clothes and cosmetic products. It's because that's what all other kids around me would do.

However, A-ra did not feel that it was okay to ask her parents to pay for what she wanted to buy. She felt 'the sense of constraints' that Lareau (2011) describes among youth growing up in less affluent families. A-ra felt uncomfortable honestly talking to her parents, street vendors selling sportswear, about what she wanted to possess as a teen girl. She did not want to put an additional financial burden on her parents' shoulder when she knows that "they were already working hard enough to make ends meet." A-ra said, in a subdued voice, "I couldn't tell them to pay for everything I wanted. ... I couldn't tell my parents to buy me luxuries when they were working hard to raise me and my brother."

As a solution to her dilemma, A-ra chose to work at the end of the spring semester of her second year at high school. She started working at a convenience store that is a fifteen-minute walk from home. A-ra described that it was a fun experience when she first began. "It was fun to work at the store. I liked meeting and chatting with people. It was fun to scan stuff, receive money, and put money into the cash drawer. Also, money was not bad for a teen. It was enough to buy what I wanted." Despite her initial excitement, she never expected to continue working at the convenience store. "I didn't imagine that I would be still scanning barcodes behind the counter when I became twenty years old. I thought that I would be doing something better when I graduate from high school."

She began to think about having a "real career" as an adult more seriously after she

graduated high school. A-ra half-jokingly described a real career as “those jobs for which you wear nice suit looking professional.” However, unlike her ambiguous expectation, she has worked as a cashier at the same convenience store for almost three years. She has tried to find a way to become a wedding planner while working. She enrolled herself for a few classes to get licenses, believing that she would be able to leave her current job and to have a more rewarding job that could provide better salaries and social reputation:

I’ve spent quite a fortune to get licenses relevant to the [wedding planning] job. I thought that I would get a job once I have a few licenses. ... I had three licenses, one in make-up, one in wedding planning, and one in facial massage. It took over year and a half to taking classes and taking license examinations although there are a few more license examinations to take more to be advanced in the field.

However, A-ra has recently realized that having a few licenses might not be sufficient to obtain her career goal. She gradually found out that she needed more than licenses; college education. A-ra found that she was facing a competition with college graduates:

There are numerous colleges with the wedding planning majors here and there, including some four-year universities. Every year, these schools released hundreds of hundreds of graduates with licenses plus college degrees. I believe that employers would prefer those with college degrees to high school graduates like me. If I were the employers, I would hire people with degrees, even from less prestigious two-year junior colleges, not a high school graduate.

A-ra is also worried that college graduates are in better positions because they have the institutional support that she does not have. To her perspective, college provides more than degrees. She thinks that college actually bridges job seekers and employers “to make their schools look better by helping more graduates to get jobs.” Since college students likely have more institutional support whereas she has to find a job on her own, A-ra feels that “college students have far more advantageous[advantages?] in the labor market.” And she believes that the competition with college students who have institutional support stalls her to full-time professions:

I’ve heard that college professors know employers well and that they have good relationships. ... Moreover, I’ve heard that college professors actually arrange job opportunities for their pupils because they want to make their schools look better by helping more graduates to get jobs. However, I have to do everything by myself. The license classes do not help me to find jobs.

In fact, her experiences in the labor market after her graduation has proven that her concern is not entirely unrealistic. A-ra has applied for four entry-level jobs related to the wedding planning in a year. However, she has not received any callbacks from employers and has not had an interview chance yet. She wished to apply for more jobs, but there were not many openings. “I’ve been totally ignored [by employers],” she bitterly summarized her experience in the past year.

While A-ra’s experience in seeking a new profession has been unfruitful, her part-time job

that she began as a teen has gradually turned into a full-time job. She used to work for eight hours two days a week when she first began her job. She now works more than 40 hours a week. Yet, her hourly wage has barely increased (approximately 45 cents over three years), and she is still not protected by social welfare that full-time workers with regular jobs are entitled to (e.g., unemployment insurance, health insurance). She still believes that her current work is only a temporary way to pay her bills every month. However, unlike her intention, this temporary situation is getting prolonged as her plan to transition to a better job – i.e., becoming a wedding planner – has not been successful:

Looking back, I happened to keep the job. It's like the law of inertia. Even though I didn't want to keep the job, I am doing the same job because I am used to it. I can't think of any better jobs that I can easily find now. They will ask college degrees anyway. ... I will keep applying for wedding planning jobs, but I am not sure [if I can find one]. ... I will have to keep working here [at the convenience store] until I find a job as a wedding planner.

As Min-cheol and A-ra recall, their transitions to irregular work “has just happened.” They have drifted to work without their sufficient consideration or deliberate preparation. Both men and women began to work in a hasty way hoping to pursue materialistic needs as teens. As they hoped to participate in the consumeristic peer culture without asking their parents for money, they decided to be financially independent from their parents from earlier ages. They initially chose work to deal with their materialistic needs as a short-term strategy. Unlike their initial plan to work temporarily, however, their work situation has become prolonged and they became

trapped in irregular work which helps them keep financial independence, if not fully, from their parents.

At the same time, respondents see that their disadvantaged status as high school graduates in the labor market keeps them from shifting into regular work. As A-ra worries, respondents need to compete with their peers with college education when they pursue better jobs. In addition, they experience unguided transitions to work as they do not have social support for their transition to regular jobs. The institutional support for youth's entry into the labor market is often organized by educational institutions – i.e., college and vocational high school. Therefore, once work-bound youth pursues a trajectory to being an adult outside those educational institutions, their attempts to find regular jobs that help them to fully achieve transition to adulthood become tougher and riskier than their peers whose transitions are more likely supported by educational institutions.

“A Life Without Future”: Perpetuating Transition of Female Respondents

As the cases of Min-cheol and A-ra demonstrate, both male and female respondents experience a haphazard transition to work that they find to be less rewarding in a haphazard way. Despite similar patterns of the transition, the subjective understanding of the transition diverges between male and female respondents. Female respondents are often anxious that the transitional period in their life, which they stepped into in a more or less haphazard way, might become their permanent social status. Particularly, they are worried that their attempt to transition to adults might continue indefinitely. Their anxiety largely comes from the salient role of college education in shaping the transition to becoming adults in the Korean context, which they do not have. To them, college education is a practical and cultural means to help achieve a legitimate status as adults.^{iv} Therefore, they worry that their journey to becoming an adult might be

prolonged and their status as an adult might be shaky because they lack college education.

First, young women are concerned that their transition might be prolonged? since their high school degrees are penalized in the labor market due to the mass supply of better-educated workers. For instance, Hyun-joo who is a distant and reserved twenty-one-year-old server at a local coffee shop, has recently failed to pursue an entry-level office job because of another candidate with a four-year college degree. After having working as a server at cafes and local diners and a cashier at a convenient store since her first year at high school, Hyun-joo found a good opportunity to transition to regular work last year. It was her mother who worked as an assistant cook in a cafeteria of a factory in the industrial district that recommended Hyun-joo to apply for the job. Her mother “knows someone who knows someone” in the HR department of the firm. Hyun-joo had firmly believed that this ‘string’ would secure her the job, so she had kept her hope for the job high.

Hyun-joo was very happy about the job opportunity because she thought that the job would be “more stable” than any other job she has had. She would not need to hop from one job to another when she felt that the employers maltreated her, or her “fickle employers” unexpectedly fired her without a good reason. She was also excited about having a fixed work schedule and a long-term job security. In addition, she could now expect a pay raise based on the seniority as well as diverse corporate benefits including paid leave. This opportunity could allow her to escape her precarious work which she felt is more like a teen job. To Hyun-joo, overall, the job meant that she had a means to achieve a smooth transition to adulthood:

I was excited about the job that my mom told me. It is not easy to find this type of job opportunity [in Harbortown]. ... [If I had had the job,] I would be eligible for

benefits like unemployment insurance and pensions. I was told that I would be able to continue to work even after I get married. Not many companies would allow their female workers to keep working after having a baby. I thought that the work was good for me in the long run. ... [Also, if I had had the job,] I could save some money because I now had a stable job. I even daydreamed that I could go to travel abroad for a vacation or prepare for getting married with the saving.

However, Hyun-joo did not get the job. According to her account, another female candidate who has recently graduated from a four-year college in Seoul unexpectedly showed up and took it. Hyun-joo explained that the woman came back to Harbortown after she graduated and failed to find a job in Seoul. Hyun-joo felt frustrated that her peers with college degrees would want less prestigious office jobs that anyone with high school education could easily do. Releasing her annoyance by letting out a short, gentle sigh, Hyun-joo said, “How could I get a job when a graduate from a four-year college in Seoul came to this small city to find a job? I don’t understand why they paid expensive college tuitions only to become a secretary in this small town.” Hyun-joo mildly complained about these ‘boomerang kids’ (Newman 2012) who fail to find jobs after college and came back to their parental homes.

While complaining about individual college graduates who seek similar jobs as she does, Hyun-joo acknowledges that it is not the individual problem of college graduates. She pointed out the labor market structure is a crucial factor making her transition to regular jobs harder to achieve. Hyun-joo reasoned that the labor market mismatch – the oversupply of college-educated workers and lack of middle-class occupations for them – push college graduates to pursue menial jobs and make high school graduates further disadvantaged in the market:

I know that college graduates, even from four-year schools, are struggling these days. I've been told that there are very few jobs available for young people in general. A lot of people now have college education, and they cannot find jobs. Naturally, the job market cannot be favorable for those people like myself [who have high school education]. Who would choose a high school graduate over a college graduate when they pay the same salary?

This failure intensified Hyun-joo's feeling of "hopelessness" about her future. The fact that she could not get the office job even with the help with a weak tie of her mother discouraged her from an optimistic view of her future. She said, "How can I imagine getting a better job on my own when I couldn't with good help?" She recently became more anxious that she might have to continue doing an irregular part-time work, which she does not believe to be an "adult job." She thought that becoming a full-time corporate employee with stable employment and relatively favorable benefits was a crucial marker of a self-sufficient adult who could expect a better future. As she thought that the status would not be achievable with "a high school degree," Hyun-joo felt that her transition to adulthood might continue indefinitely:

To be honest, I feel that I am living a life without a future. I am doing the same thing every day without any hope for the future. ... The real problem is that I have done this kind of job for many years, like four or five years already, since high school. My life has been the same since then. I am still living with my mom. She pays the bills. I manage to make my allowance and pay my phone bill, but that's it.

I am no different from my high school years. Nothing has changed. I don't feel like I am an adult even though I am actually an adult in a legal sense. Probably, I won't never be able to feel that I am an adult if I keep living like this.

Furthermore, female respondents are anxious about remaining as marginalized social beings in Korean society where college-going is an impotent social norm. As Becker (2014) argues, the expansion of formal education, including college education, affects the ways in which people perceive their own identities based on educational achievement. Female interviewees make senses of their current and future social status based on their educational status as a high school graduate. Particularly, they do so by linking college education to a cultural sign of better personhood. Since they do not bear this cultural sign, they feel that they are a "lesser adult" who would not receive full social recognition as respectable adults.

For example, Joo-hee, a cheerful twenty-one-year-old restaurant server, recalled the bitter sentiment that she felt from a meeting with her old high school friends who are attending college. During the gathering with her friends who visited home from college for a winter break, she felt discomfort about being with her friends which she had not have before. Joo-hee positively described college life that her friends are having as "a new world". From the conversations with her friends, she developed an image of college life as a unique cultural experience that "they meet new people from all walks of life, navigate college culture, and try out different things." Also, she added, "I think that they are growing up to be adults through all new experiences given to them." Joo-hee pictured college as a transformative social world that helped them to become adults. Since her friends are fully experiencing college, she felt that they are turning into, if not have already, culturally more advanced people than herself.

They looked like, what should I call, new women? They clearly seemed to have a refined style while I looked like a high school girl. It was so good to see them in a year, but I felt that something was different. (Interviewer: What did you feel different about?) I feel uncomfortable with being them even though I know that they are still good friends of mine.

Her “uncomfortable” feeling came from a cultural chasm that she felt between her college-going friends and herself. When asked how she felt different about her friends, she explained, “Probably the way they wore. No, probably the way they spoke might have made me feel that way.” For example, Joo-hee felt that her friends looked more sophisticated when college-related terms such as “major,” “mandatory classes,” “term paper,” and “team project” came out of their mouths. She was the only person in the group who did not go to college and was not very familiar with those terms. She felt that she was left out from the conversation from time to time. “When they talked about their college life, I pretended to laugh without knowing what was going on. I pretended to understand what they were saying, but I actually didn’t. I didn’t want to embarrass myself. ... There was an invisible wall or something.

In contrast, Joo-hee thinks that she has remained in the unchanged circumstance, making her feel “left behind.” Similar to Hyun-joo, Joo-hee felt that she had maintained a high-school-student-like life style even after she graduated from high school. She lamented:

Compared with my friends, there have been no changes in my life. They left high school to become college students and to live independently from their parents. But

I did not experience that sort of change. I have been basically the same since high school. I think that I look more like a high school kid compared with my friends at college. ... I am in the same neighborhood and meeting same people. I've never been outside this world.

This lack of change led her to perceive herself as culturally “inferior” to her friends:

I felt as if I became a little bit, how can I say, inferior. Or, lower, lower being [may be an accurate expression]. [Meeting my old friend,] I thought to myself, “They are living in a new world while I am working in this dull uniform.” ... In one word, I can say that I am a lesser adult whereas they are more adults.

Moreover, Joo-hee is concerned that her cultural “inferiority” to her college-going peers might keep her from earning a social recognition as a respectable member of Korean society. As Joo-hee sees college education as a sign of a better person, she finds it inevitable that college graduates have more respect and higher status compared with high school graduates. She said, “It makes sense that they (college graduates) earn a better treatment [than high school graduates]. They are educated and knowledgeable.” Joo-hee sees that one’s location within the status hierarchy is determined by his or her education which is naturally revealed through his or her mannerism. Given that she does not possess the same mannerism, which implies her lack of cultural sophistication that she might acquire from college education, she is anxious that she would not be able to have social respect as a grown-up as much as her college-attending friends:

I think that people might ignore people like me. It's not fair to treat people differently based on their education, but I can see why. When they look at me and my friends comparatively, they can obviously see that my friends are more educated. My friends speak differently. I still speak like a teenager because I've lived like a teenager even after high school. Looking at myself, I worry that no one would treat a person nicely when she behaves like a teenager.

Finally, female respondents are concerned that their status as a high school graduate might negatively affect their marriageability, which is a crucial way for them to become an independent adult. They especially feel burden of their transition due to the anxiety to become a less desirable woman in the marriage market. In a society where college education has become a prevalent social norm, female respondents worry that they might not be a good wife material who can marry decent men.

Most of the female respondents reported that they would want to marry decent men (“*gwaen-chanh-eun nam-ja*”) who have economic stability through secure employment. Whereas they believe that women can still pursue their careers after marriage, they think that a husband plays a leading role in the household economy, and, thus, it is important for them to meet men with financial capability to support the families. For example, Su-ji, an outgoing twenty-two-year-old convenient store clerk, believes that it is crucial to meet a man who can provide his family for her future. When asked to describe the future that she would dream, Su-ji said:

Having a good family with a decent man? It might sound like an old-timer, but I think that it is still important. I've always told, “You will ruin your life if you meet

a wrong guy.” There must be a good reason that people keep saying that.

(Interviewer: What do you think makes a decent man?) There might be many things to consider, but probably a man with economic capability? I think that a man who is able to provide for his family is a good man. At least, I want to meet a guy who has the economic ability as my future husband.

Su-ji’s perception of a decent man mainly comes from her belief in the gendered division of labor within the nuclear family. She thinks that “women should be able to choose if they want to keep working after marriage.” In addition, Su-ji believes that marriage is not a precondition for achieving an independent life for women any longer for her generation. Yet, to Su-ji, it is only a few women with middle-class jobs and lucrative incomes who have freedom to choose to marry. In contrast, Su-ji feels that marriage is a necessity for her to be independent from her parents: she will need her future husband’s economic capability to a certain extent, because her status in the labor market is not secure enough to help her achieve the economic independence by herself:

When a woman has a means to live by herself, like having a good job or making lots of money, I think that she doesn’t need a husband. She can enjoy her life freely without being chained to anyone. But how many women can live like that? Probably a few who appear on TV? ... Especially for women like me with a high school diploma, it is almost impossible having those jobs which pay enough to live alone. So, women like me can’t help but wanting to get married to men with economic capabilities. ... Otherwise, I will end up living with my parents at age of

30, and that will mean that I am such a loser.

However, Su-ji is pessimistic about her chance to meet a decent man for two reasons. First, she is worried that her current job – i.e., a convenience store cashier – makes her less attractive to marriageable men. She feels that her career is often looked down on by the male customers whom she encounters at work on a daily basis. She angrily said, “I always feel that male customers ignore female cashiers like me. They ignore women like me. They talk badly to people like me. I can clearly see that. ... Those men are usually older men, but young men wouldn’t be that much different. They just don’t say it loudly.” Therefore, she imagines herself to look less respectable to attractive bachelors as a potential spouse. In a more or less cynical manner, Su-ji asked me back in a subdued tone, “I don’t think that I will even be able to get married ever. Who would want to marry an old woman working at a convenient store? Probably a guy working at the same store?”

In addition, Su-ji is skeptical about her marriageability because of her lack of college education. She thinks that college education is of particular importance as women’s educational achievement signals their capability to be capable mothers. As researchers (Nelson 2000; S. J. Park 2010) suppose, Su-ji sees women’s education as an indispensable asset for women to be a productive wife and mother in the Korean context. She believes that women’s major role in the family is being an ‘educational manager’ who facilitate children’s academic advancement. For this, women’s education matters in that mothers should be able to understand the educational institutions and get involved in children’s education if necessary. Put differently, Su-ji thinks that women’s education, especially college education, is directly linked to a sort of ‘cultural capital’ Lareau (2011) through which they can realize their familiar role successfully. Given that she

does not possess the cultural capital, Su-ji worries that she might be disadvantaged in the marriage market compared with her college-educated peers:

Wouldn't men prefer a woman with a college degree to one with a high school diploma? Even guys who only graduated from high school would think that their wives should be college graduates so they could educate children well. ... I am not sure whether I can teach my own children at even elementary school level. The elementary school math is really hard. So I probably won't be able to teach my own kids later.

A feeling of anxiety and unsettlement penetrates the narrative of female work-bound youth in the study. Their transition to work in the era of the mass higher education in Korea concerns them that they might face a never-ending journey to becoming an adult. Contrasting their transitional process to one that their college-attending friends and projecting their future status in the 'college-for-all' society, female work-bound youth share a deep concern about their present and future life in the Korean society.

“Until the Military Starts”: Progressive Transition for Male Respondents

In contrast, male respondents present relatively optimistic interpretations about their transition. They believe that their current situation is only temporary, and they will be able to make a successful transition to adulthood by seizing secure job opportunities in the future. Their confidence in their future comes from their different perspective about the roles of college education in the transition to adulthood among Korean youth. Unlike female respondents, male respondents do not think of college as a precondition to being a self-sufficient and respectable adult in Korea. Rather, they see that college education can mean a waste of resources for those

who are not academically oriented. They believe that college is “a matter of choice,” not a rite of passage that everyone needs to pass through.

For example, Chang-woo, a twenty-two-year-old reserved man, thinks that it was “a right choice” to work for a few years before he begins his military service duty instead of going to college even though he feels that his work is hardly rewarding. Chang-woo has been working as an assistant cleaner for a subcontractor since his high school graduation. His job is mainly assisting experienced workers to clean and maintain the facilities of factories (e.g., chimneys, turbines) in the industrial district. As many respondents describe their jobs, Chang-woo cynically evaluates his job as “a career with no future.” He thinks that his job is less gratifying since “it doesn’t pay well” while “it is physically demanding.” He is also dissatisfied with his job as he cannot expect corporate benefits or a promotion to a regular full-time worker. Therefore, Chang-woo minimized the meaning of his work to a means to “get by before the military service”:

I want to help my parents to support the family a little bit before I begin my duty at the military. I also want to make some money for myself. That’s the only reason I bear with this job. I don’t pursue a sense of satisfaction or a bright future out of my current job. I am just looking at money [I earn from my work]. Otherwise, I wouldn’t do this shit.

Even though he generally feels dissatisfied with his current job, he still sees his current work situation more positively compared with female respondents. Particularly, based on his own cost and benefit analysis, he concludes that it is a rational choice for him to begin working earlier than his peers for whom going to college is a normative transition after high school. To

Chang-woo, going to college could have been just an unnecessary waste because he was not academically ready for college education. Chang-woo decisively said:

I knew that I was not a college material [when I was a high school student]. [I knew that] I would fail to graduate even from the least prestigious two-year junior college that would be willing to accept even dogs and cows as long as they could pay. ...

Why should I go to college when it is obvious that I would become a loser?

Chang-woo also criticizes that it is only an act of “saving face” to attend college when one is not sure if college is not helpful for his or her future career. He criticized, “Some people go to college simply to avoid embarrassment in Korea.” Compared to female respondents who generally think that college education is the utmost important currency in the Korean labor market, Chang-woo sees that the benefit of college education might be selective: it can be less helpful if one chooses to attend college just “to be like everyone else.” To his perspective, college education needs to be a strategic choice that one should make considering the benefits for the future career goals and the costs of the tuitions. He thinks that it is not a pathway that everyone should follow. Therefore, Chang-woo, who concludes that college education would not be useful for his future career, evaluates that he has made a rational decision about his post-secondary education transition:

Working hard at a factory while making a little money is better [for me] than spending a great deal of money to go to college. Why should I squander money to look good to others? I think that going to factory is a right choice for me. ... I don't

make lots of money. However, I didn't waste money on college education that would be useless for me at least.

Moreover, male respondents' skepticism about a practical value of college degrees is mostly derived from their observation on those college graduates who remain less successful to find lucrative jobs. For instance, Sun-ho, a pleasantly talkative twenty-one-year-old convenience store clerk, doubts the benefit of having a junior college degree in a society where "college has become high school." Similar to Chang-woo, Sun-ho believes that college is a matter of choice and one's willingness and capability to pay tuition. Sun-ho critically said, "I could've gone to a two-year college in my neighborhood, but who would value the degree from that college? Honestly, everyone has a college degree. You can get one only if you can pay even though you are really dumb." Sun-ho's skeptical perspective about college education is supported by his encounters with college graduates at his workplace or with similar types of service jobs that he believes do not necessarily require college education to perform. Sun-ho cheerfully said, showing his confidence in his transition trajectory:

I've seen people who are working at convenience stores or gas stations with college degrees. I have a coworker who graduated from that college that I was thinking about applying [when I was the senior high school student]. He is much older than me, but he is working with me at the same convenience store. Whenever I see him, I am talking to myself, "I'm glad that I didn't go to college!"

At the same time, Sun-ho believes that his social skills that he has built from diverse “work experiences in the real world” can be a valuable asset to his future career. He expects that he will be in the competition with those from two-year junior colleges in the future labor market. Despite their possessions of degrees, he sees that he would have a competitive advantage when he searches a better job after the military service because of his work experience that his competitors do not have. Compared with himself, according to Sun-ho, his college-attending peers “know nothing about the real world” because they have been “locked up in the glasshouse”: protected by parents and educational institutions, his peers at college are not equipped with real life skills – e.g., ability to network with people from all walks of life, communicate with social superiors. To Sun-ho, those social skills are real resources when “men begin social life,” by which he means a long-term career. He confidently evaluates his advantages over his college-going friends in the labor market, saying:

Of course, they (those friends at two-year colleges) must be smarter than I am. But, they have no idea what the real world looks like. ... I know it because I have been working since young. Also, I’ve gone through the ups and downs of life while they’ve been stuck at school. ... I am not sure, but if I were an employer, I would hire some like me who have a great deal of experiences compared with those with zero experience but college degrees.

Rather than believe in the greater advantages of having college education, male interviewees commonly mentioned the military service – which is mandated for every Korean man who has a physical capability to carry out – as an important institution to help them achieve

full adulthood, especially as a man. Their strong belief in the role of the military service in their life trajectory shapes their sense of security about their transition to adulthood in the long-run despite their general dissatisfaction with their current situation.

First, the compulsory military service has a particular meaning for the male respondents: joining means the end of their current, generally unsatisfying jobs. The military service is a sort of ‘evacuation plan’ for the male respondents. While they regard their current job as a mere stopgap as Chang-woo describes earlier, they come to see the current situation as bearable as the military service will allow them to leave their job sooner or later. In other words, the military service participation helps men reduce the meaning of their unsatisfying work situation to a *temporary* situation between adolescence and a new chapter of their lives as a grown-up man that they are to open.

Hyun-sik, a stout twenty-one-year-old man who describes himself to be very social, was excitedly waiting to begin his military service at the Navy in four months from the interview. He expects that he will be able to get out of his job when he begins the service. He is working six days from eight to ten hours depending on his employer’s request as a delivery person at a local diner. When asked to describe his job, he immediately poured out complaints about it. His major dissatisfaction is that the job is overly dangerous given the money that he makes. He feels dangerous whenever he has to deliver food within a short timeframe because of “impatient customers”:

I have to ride a motorbike dangerously to deliver food on time. ... What I am scared of is that I might have an accident because I always have to drive like a zigzag to avoid the traffic. The real problem is that I am not insured. If I have an accident, I

am done. In one word, I expose myself the danger of death only to make a little money to get by.

Despite his great concern and dissatisfaction, Hyun-sik will not leave his job for another three months because he will be able to “regain the freedom” soon again as he begins his military duty at the Navy. For now, Hyun-sik thinks that he needs to keep doing the job to make a living and save some money to spend for a couple of months before the military. To him, thanks to his anticipation of the military service, his job becomes a bearable situation that otherwise would motivate him to seek an escape or to feel more pessimistic about his options. Like many other male respondents, military service means is a clear watershed in Hyun-sik’s life which puts an end to his current work that he does not feel contended with. “I plan to continue the delivery work only until September. ... I will throw the motorbike key to the boss and quit my job on September 31st sharp.” Hyun-sik emphasized the exact date when he plans to leave his job and continued, “I wouldn’t leave the job (until then). ... I will tolerate this dirty job until September. After that, *good-bye, zaijian!*” He emphasized that he would be able to leave his job soon by saying “good-bye” in English and Chinese in turn.

Moreover, male respondents expect that the military service period can serve as a ‘timeout’ period during which they can achieve maturity as a man. Whereas they see their current work as a temporary situation that they simply pass by, they read the two-year military service into a meaningful period when they can explore themselves (maybe alternative “their identity”?) and plan for the future. They generally consider the military service as an essential developmental period that they need to go through to be a real man with psychological maturity and a sense of responsibility as a future breadwinner.

For instance, like most of the young men in the study, Kyu-tae excitedly yet solemnly showed his great expectation for the military service to be an opportunity to “seriously think about general things about my life such as my aptitude, career, and what I want to do for a living for the rest of my life.” Based on the advice that he has gathered from other older men around him (i.e., older male friends, male family members), Kyu-tae especially expects that the strictly structured life style during the military service will be helpful for his personal development. He believes that the substantial restrictions on his freedom at the military will lead him to reflect on his previous life and plan on his future:

You know, I was told that I would get to think about life in many different ways. ... To be honest with you, I have lived without much discipline so far. I’ve lived as I just wanted. ... However, as you know, the military is different from the rest of the society. There are many rules that you should obey and the schedule that someone else set up for you. ... It’s a real world. You’ll never be allowed to behave as you would do in the civilian world. I think that the strict life style [at the military] will give me a chance to look back on my own life and reflect on self seriously.

Therefore, through this transformative experience, Kyu-tae believes that he will “grow up to be a mature man.” At the military, he expects that he will change from his old self, who he describes as a “childish and irresponsible kid,” to his new self who he will be able to call “a real man (*jin-jja nam-ja*”). To Kyu-tae, a real man is not simply a man with psychological maturity; he is one who is mentally able to take a full responsibility for his family (i.e., his wife and children). In Kyu-tae’s expectation, the military service will turn him into a man who is ready to

put bread on his family's table and a shelter over their heads. Removing his usual friendly smile on his face, Kyu-tae said in a serious manner:

I think that the military will make me a real man. (Interviewer: What do you mean when you say a real man?) When I leave the military, I will have a better plan on what I want to do for a living for the rest of my life. I don't have any plan for now, right? Also, I think that if I figure out a better plan for my life, I will be a man who at least knows what to do to? not starve his wife and kids.

Finally, male respondents feel less pessimistic about their current situation and optimistically expect a brighter future as they believe that the completion of the military duty will give them a better opportunity in the labor market. They understand that the military service is a prerequisite to achieve a secure position in the labor market, especially in the traditional manufacturing domain. Many respondents – 12 out of 15 – hope to find a job in the manufacturing firms in the district after the military. They commonly expect those jobs to provide a more stable life condition than the underpaying service sector jobs that they have had. They feel that the military service will be helpful to get jobs at male-dominated traditional workplaces.

They think that the completion of the military service will help them to acquire a status as a “normal Korean man” (“*jeong-sang-jeog-in han-gug nam-ja*”) with physical health and mental soundness who can work. Nam-il, a twenty-year old busboy at a Korean BBQ restaurant, sees “men with the military experience are 180 degrees different from those without.” He explains the role of the military service in Korean society as:

When you finish the military service, it means that a sort of certificate showing that you're a man who can deal with physical and mental challenges. It shows that you are a normal Korean man. [Therefore], people will treat you better and give you lots of respect. You can think that the military is something like that. When you tell other people that you finish the military, they will automatically think of you as a man without a problem, a normal man.

Not surprisingly, Nam-il believes that his chance to have a lucrative job in the industrial domain will substantially improve after the military service. Where he thinks that the military service is generally required to have a regular job, he sees that it has a particular importance when one seeks a working-class job which often requires a physical and mental strength to deal with intense workloads. Therefore, Nam-il expects to have a competitive advantage in the future labor market as he plans to join the Navy, which is oftentimes seen to be the most challenging military group in Korea.^v He intentionally applied for the Navy, hoping to be “a stronger man.” He thinks that he will be able to prove his capability as a male manual worker effectively when he finishes his duty at the Navy “without any problems.” Nam-il confidently explains that he expects that his future experience at the Navy will be helpful for his job prospective:

To my perspective, employers would prefer those men who were at the Navy because it means that they are stronger. The work that I want to do in the future is physically tough and mentally stressful. Obviously, those from the Navy will fit for the job better than other men who were at the Army or the Air Force because they

are stronger. One's experience at the Navy tells that he is a stronger man, and I think that employers would prefer those men from the Navy.

Overall, compared with their female peers in the study who interpret their transition in a pessimistic way, male respondents present a more positive and optimistic perspective about their current situation and the future status as a man. Whereas the female respondents construct their narratives of the transition based on their understanding of the role of college education in shaping the transition among Korean young people, male respondents see the military as the most important institution for their transition, which helps them to achieve a social status as a respectable man in Korea.

Conclusion

This chapter showed that work-bound youth experience a precarious transition to work as they jumped into the labor market underprepared and unguided. To both male and female youth, the transition to the working-class occupations “just happened” as a way to deal with their needs as teen consumers. Even though they planned to work temporarily, they tended to get trapped in work that they often saw as dead-end work. As they pursued the economic independence from their parents or sought to help support their family, their initially temporary situation has turned into a semi-permanent one. In the meantime, some respondents concern that the competitions with the college graduates in the labor market, which has increasingly become intense due to the lack of the entry-level jobs for youth, make their plans to leave their current irregular jobs less realistic. Compared with their peers with college education, they feel that they do not have institutional support for their transition. They think that this makes their journey to being a self-sufficient adult more precarious and lonely.

Despite these similar experiences, their perceptions of transitions to adulthood and predictions of future trajectories starkly diverge comparing male and female respondents. Female respondents are anxious that their transition to becoming an independent adult might not end successfully. Due to the lack of college education, they are concerned that their transition might be perpetuating indefinitely, leaving them at the lower rung of the social hierarchy. They worry that they might not be able to find a better job because they have to compete with college graduates who are considered to be better able and have institutional resources that better connect them to career opportunities. Also, they are anxious that they would not earn much social respect as they lack cultural sophistication that the college-educated women would have. Finally, they also fear their status in the marriage market as they feel that they are not equipped with cultural resources to become a capable mother and productive wife. Overall, they are concerned that their project to be an adult who enjoy a self-sufficient life style and social respect might be unattainable as they do not have college education.

In contrast, male respondents are much less concerned about their current work or their future transition. Unlike female respondents, they do not put great emphasis on the role of college education in becoming an adult. Rather, they use the compulsory military service as the main reference for understanding their journey to being a respectable man. The military service, according to their interpretation, provides an opportunity for them to achieve psychological maturity and to grow up to be a responsible breadwinner. At the same time, they consider the military service to be a passage-of-rite to become a capable worker in the male-dominated industrial domain. In summary, given that they have an access to this male-dominated and classless institution, they feel that they have a chance to achieve a successful transition to adulthood.

This clear difference between male and female work-bound youth shows that diverse social institutions shape the nature of the transition to adulthood in a different way for men and women in Korean society. Even though the increasing tendency to avoid the military obligations among the younger generations and the declining benefits of the military service for the employment, the working-class young men accept “symbolic recognition” of the military service (Moon, 2005; 130). To them who often lack of resources to attain economic stability, the military can be symbolized as the equal opportunity to become a respectable social being, especially a respectable man in a traditional notion. However, with the interview data collected for this study, it is not clear whether their imagination of the military service as an ‘equalizing institution’ reflects the social reality accurately. This study cannot tell whether the military can actually enable young working-class men to achieve a successful transition to adults, which calls for following empirical studies.

Moreover, female respondents’ narratives show that female work-bound youth are facing multifaceted institutional obstacles as they transition to adulthood. As female respondents understand, female workers with less education are likely to face the dual disadvantages in the labor market – e.g., penalty for being a female worker (Y. Kim & Shirahase, 2014) and for being a high school graduate (Lee, 2002). Therefore, their efforts to be an independent adult by finding a secure employment opportunity can be a hard task to achieve. Instead, for female youth, getting married to a man equipped with economic stability can be a realistic option to achieve the transition to adulthood (B.-H. Kim, Lee, & Park, 2016). Yet, marriage might not be a viable option as well. As researchers point out, Korean women are the primary manager of children’s education, a core part of the social reproduction and mobility among Korean families (S. J. Park, 2010; Nelson, 2000). As female work-bound youth do not have cultural resources to need for the

effective navigation of the educational institutions (i.e., cultural capital; Lareau, 2011), they could be disadvantageous in the Korean marriage market especially where the educational homogamy is gradually increasing (Smit & Park, 2009).

This chapter reveals that gendered institutions shape the subjective transition experiences of young working-class men and women in Korea. Despite their similar experiences in the process of the transition, they presented opposing narratives as they use different institutional references to understand their experiences. This finding shows that it is worth further investigating how diverse social institutions facilitate or prevent the pathway to adult by creating and maintain differences across social groups (e.g., socioeconomic class, gender, race). This nuanced understanding of the transition experience among Korean youth will enable us to better make sense of the changing nature of the transition to adulthood in Korea where social institutions for young people have rapidly changed. In addition, it will help us to grasp the growing social inequalities within younger generations and how the transition trajectories that youth from different groups experience in a different way help to create the social inequalities between them.

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ⁱ In fact, in 2015, among Korean young adults aged 15 to 29, regardless of their educational level, about 64% were hired for the irregular jobs (KLI 2016). Particularly, the proportion of high school graduate workers engaging with irregular work was much higher than that of workers with college education (45.7% vs. 19.3% for men; 55.1% vs. 24.2% for women). This shows that high school graduate workers or the work-bound youth are much more vulnerable than their college-educated peers in the labor market.

ⁱⁱ In fact, work-bound young women are less likely to be married compared to their counterparts with more education (H. Park, Lee, & Jo, 2013; Raymo, Park, Xie, & Yeung, 2015). Moreover, because of homogamy (i.e., status matching within marriage), they are also unlikely to marry men with a higher socioeconomic status, which would help them to achieve economic stability (Smits & Park, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ Min-cheol said that he did not plan to go back to school. He considered that he had completed his educational career as a high school dropout.

^{iv} “College” came out from almost every interview and informal conversation that I had with them during the research. During the interviews, female respondents often made a reference to college education and college-educated peers when they described how they felt about their transitions or how they thought about becoming adults without being asked to do so.

^v Unlike the army that accepts any man who has passed the physical examinations, the Navy selects new recruits among the applicants. If one fails to get in the Navy, he will be automatically conscripted into the Army. Since the training programs in the Navy are known to be much tougher compared with those in the Army or the Air Force in Korean society, those Korean men who have finished their military obligation in the Navy have prides as the Navy veteran and enjoy the social network among the veterans after the Navy.