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# **Making Meaning out of Learning in the Everyday Lives of Korean Married Women**

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the significance of the learning experience in the everyday life of married women in Korea and how they manage their learning. In doing so, it reveals a number of distinctive characteristics of Korean married women which differentiate them from western women in pursuing individual and collective values.*

## **Research Aims**

The Korean women who were born in the 1960's have their own unique life experiences. Alongside accelerated westernization since the 1960s, Korea has also experienced rapid economic development, and pursued political democratization. The growth of social consciousness and culture resulted in education in Korea becoming systemized. Especially in the 1980s, higher education in Korea became popularized and the Korean woman, as one of the main beneficiaries of higher education, has been expected to combine being a good mother, housewife and a successful career woman. However, there is a gap between women and men's participation rates in economic life: 74.6 % (men) and 48.9% (women) (Korean National Statistical Office, 2003). Also women did not receive the same degree of social and financial support as men in terms of opportunities in higher education (ibid, 2004).

We interviewed nine married Korean women in their 40's who participated in education during the 1980s. Formal education, especially higher education, emphasized individual value, 'one's own social achievement.' However, Korean traditional values still required social value, 'being a mother and wife instead of an individual.' Having grown up within a Korean traditional culture in spite of having experienced a modern western education, they went through a degree of cultural conflict and bore witness to radical social transformations.

This study is focused on the women learner's active learning lives through their experiences in daily lives: how they manage their learning lives and what their experiences mean? There have been few studies about women learners in Korea. Usually women have been positioned at the periphery of adult learning research and rarely recognized as active learners. However, this study assumes that women have developed their own identities and meaning in their lives through the informal learning experiences of daily life. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the meanings and the characteristics of the learning experience of married

women in Korea who were born in the 1960's.

### **Theoretical Background**

Gilligan's ethics fascinates Korean women who were raised within the tradition emphasizing intimacy and mutual care within a family and where they have practiced Confucian morals and customs. Rapid modernization in Korea has created considerable difference between generations; the Korean women born in the 1960's stand "between" different generations, an old generation following a Confucian tradition and new generation adopting western culture. As they are the first beneficiaries of the popularization of higher education based on western rationality, Korean women had to locate themselves in both a western educational system and a Confucian way of life. They faced difficulties in establishing their identities between schools encouraging individual value and intellectual and rational thinking and a traditional oriental way of life stressing collective value.

Feminist learning theories recognize that women learn better when emotional knowledge and knowledge acquired through life experiences are valued (Belenkey et al., 1986). However, women's personal and everyday learning experiences have been generally devalued (Tisdell, 1993). Attention needs to be drawn to the importance of life experiences, covering the personal, daily, and emotional, whilst recognizing women as learning subjects.

The discourses of Adult education have focused on the experience of adult learners, which is the base of learning, the most critical source, and the core of knowledge production and acquisition (Fenwick, 2000; Usher et al., 2002). However, existing 'experiential learning theory' has concentrated on human reasoning, perception and reflection, in dealing with experience in learning and its meaning. It has limitations in illuminating the fact that, apart from reasoning, human beings have other abilities and attributes, emotional, spiritual, and physical in nature (York & Kasl, 2002).

This study analyzed the life experiences of women learners, specifically, Korean married women, in the sociological context of Korea, including emotional, religious, and intellectual learning experiences.

### **Research Methodology**

This study was conducted through a case study. This involved in-depth interviews of 9 married Korean women. The interviews for each case were done three or four times for 2-3 hours from January to March 2003. The work was undertaken by a research group interested in adult learning and life experience. Participation by all members of the team contributed greatly to the accurate interpretation of the research data.

### *Social Background*

In modern, western culture, the formal education system teaches women to have their own voices and identities and to pursue achievements in their careers as an individual. After the 1960's, Korean women were educated and trained in individual values and women's needs in order to secure a career through the formal schooling system. They began to be educated to develop their own voices and achievements, not simply to remain as members of their family or group.

However, the real world where Korean women exist is still influenced by a traditional culture that respects collective values and a family-centered perspective. The distance between this world emphasizing the family and the educational culture encouraging the individual caused complications. To be under the sway of both contrary cultures created difficulties for these women in understanding their roles. This was exacerbated after leaving school. In these women's world, traditional culture was still dominant and influenced their careers, conjugal relations and family life.

Moreover, contrary to western societies that have obvious distinctions between 'I' and 'we', Korean culture does not distinguish 'I' and 'we' so clearly. For instance, the expressions, "our husband" and "our home" are more natural and common for Korean married women than "my husband" and "my home." This social and cultural background has influenced the discourse on learning. It is difficult to draw a line between 'I' as individual subjectivity and the 'we' as group identity in Korean culture.

### *Management Strategies of Everyday Life*

Women born in the 1960's had to overcome and solve cultural and value conflicts. To confront and solve those conflicts became a question of great importance. In the situation, informal learning was the critical element for women to interpret and find their way of life and meaning. According to the research, these married Korean women made a decision to adopt a course of harmony, not discordance with their cultural environment.

According to this research, the Korean women found their own way to manage their lives in two conflicting cultures: the traditional culture which is family centered and the modern culture which focuses on individual value, rather than permitting a conflict between the two. Korean women's management of their own lives can be divided into 3 streams; 1) family-oriented life, 2) pursuit of limited social achievement, 3) religion-oriented life.

1) In the family-oriented life, women seek their satisfaction through family members' achievement. One typical manifestation of this is to latch onto their children's scholastic attainments and social success. Education fever in Korea seems to be exceptionally extreme. These women live for and dedicate their lives to their husband and children

2) Pursuit of limited social achievement means women seek their own social achievement within the limits of preserving a family-oriented life. As they strive both to secure their own social achievement and to be a good wife and a helpful mother, they prefer having either part-time jobs or irregular work, having relatively low positions.

3) Women who are eager for social activities but cannot carry out them choose a religion-oriented life. Through various religion activities, they have access to social relations, express themselves and have some opportunity to be socially recognized. Group activity experiences, such as bible study, serving the community and voluntary work, deliver a sense of social achievement.

In pursuing these lives, Korean women make use of their own learning strategies that integrate thoughts, emotions and actions through sympathies among those they interact with. Instead of formal learning, informal learning provides them with insights and expands their learning itself.

### *Making Meaning out of the Learning Experience*

Married Korean women in their 40s have failed to resolve the conflicts arising from the gaps between generations, genders, and cultures; instead, they have inwardly endured rather than confronting these contradictions externally. Although the matter has not been solved collectively and structurally, Korean women are still on the path of learning that keeps searching for the best solutions to the problem at hand.

Learning through Korean women's lives is a powerful example of the true meaning of adult learning. Korean women's learning through their lives brings about the reconstruction and growth of "self". On the surface, their attitudes may seem to be passive and to reflect the demands of society. When the purpose of learning means the change (transformation) and growth of self, however, their attitudes can be seen as the very results of learning. It is possible to interpret this shifting of the "self" in several ways.

First of all, the Korean women seek to magnify and pursue the self through their life experience or life learning. It is possible to argue that the growth of Korean women's self does not mean acquiring the course of an individualized life or identity but harmonizing themselves with the communities that they belong to. That is, for the married Korean women, individual and group community can not be separated nor be allowed to conflict with each other. The notion of both individual and community are utilized as a similar meaning, in the perspective of the contents of learning, as well as both the process and values of learning. Sometimes, the individual tends to expand her identity to contextualize itself within the whole society and thereby participate in various social activities. This does not mean that it is suggested that an individualized subject is to be used in network learning. In Korean society, an individual cannot

be referred to as a member of a group; on the contrary, an individual tries to embrace a group, especially family, into their inner minds. The expansion of the self, sometimes, outruns the category of family and reaches to the dimension of the local community.

Secondly, the married Korean women pursue the maturity of the self through self-reflection. Married women tend to intensify their learning to reflect themselves internally instead of expanding themselves externally. When faced with the difficulties of life, the Korean women reflect their self and true meaning of their life regardless of their level of education. To carry out the above, the married Korean women, sometimes tend to utilize their tacit acknowledgement through their experiences as a reference for their self-reflection; they tend to seek to communicate with mentors, colleagues or sisters for the purpose of discovering an external point of reference.

Finally, these Korean women tend to explore the enhancement of the self through spiritual learning. Religious activities are one means to measure the gaining of social recognition, which leads these women to create momentum in the transformation of their inner minds. The transformation of their inner minds seems to involve an abandonment of their 'individual self' in spite of pursuing the expansion and maturity of their self. However, it indicates a transformation whereby that 'individual self' changes into a 'beyond self.' One of the solutions that these women tend to use is to disregard the previous state in favor of 'transformed self' when they face difficulties that cannot be solved through rationality and logic.

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