

Introduction: Searching for Uniqueness in Dreams and Futures of the 21st Century Young Generation in Korea*

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Young Generation in Korea as a Subject of Sociological Investigation

The sustained low-growth and de-growth that have characterized Korean society right before the 21st century and still continues up to now, have affected youth in their mid-twenties and early thirties with the most dire social conditions, these negative consequences translating into a double blow for these group of young adults who have just started their career paths, and often characterized by financial instability. Generation groups who have shared experiences of historical events or sociopolitical contexts are known to develop common cultural and political values specifically binding to those groups. The term “youth generation” that is being widely used within the Korean academia is not entirely in correct use and seemingly misaligned with previously defined sociological concepts. Although the notion of generation doesn’t boil down to a singular definition, if the concept of Karl Mannheim was utilized—where “generation” is defined as a group who have shared understanding of experiences and social conditions as well as shared likenesses in life courses—a mistake should not be made in equating this generation group to “youth,” who are grouped together in cohorts by birth years (Mannheim 1936). Why then has there been the widespread use of term “youth generation” and without a lot of resistance? The answer is pretty straightforward. The current age groups in their twenties and thirties in

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Korea are treading similar life course paths that are extremely commanding and at the same time injurious. The fact that these shared experiences will leave lasting impacts throughout their life histories is an indisputable matter.

Perhaps this is the reason today's youth generation of Korea have become a unique sample and target for research. The "uniqueness" arises from the unfortunate reality of these youth experiencing dissipation of optimistic hope for their future—this optimism being one of the collective and expected qualities found in young people—faced by negative social surroundings and future outlooks (Kim 2015; Kim et al 2017). Youth in any societies at any place or time garner special attention, recognized as having roles paving the future for consequent generations, but such focused devotion to this single group has been unprecedented in Korea. Most often, this group has been described as future-oriented; they create new values for the futures of their residing societies including Korea. There has been recent turn of events in Korea, turning this generation into a group termed the "N generation," characterized by reduced optimism and loss of passion and hope toward the future. Social conditions necessary to buttress reasonable planning for the "faraway future" have been stripped away, deepening the phenomenon where youth are overly occupied with surviving the immediate future only. Their work and life are then geared toward what's most immediate and feasible in their surroundings rather than on long-term future planning.

Hope cannot coexist in society with youth who do not dream. Stark changes in the global environment and Korean demographic structures have instilled hopelessness in youth generation. For them, hope cannot be recovered and future cannot be constructed. Thus, it has become Korea's long-term collective mission to sustain and strengthen the instinctive hopeful characteristics of the youth. In order to bring this mission to success, a close observation on youth's work and life must be made. Also, meaningful implications must be drawn from these observations. The three journals that will be discussed subsequently is in line with this mission.

"Dreaming" Among Korean Youth as a Nexus of Hope and Despair

The three articles below unravel stories on three different groups of youth—the general Korean youth, musicians and social activists—details on their life, work and dream for the future are examined in various perspectives. The

three groups originate from dissimilar fields and are part of different contexts that result in distinct constructions of life courses but all share the feeling of despair that comes from the bleak future painted by society. Interestingly, recognition of the harsh realities and lack of hope can have other effects than despair. Many are shot down by the hopelessness but those who choose to remain hopeful resist against the fears attached to the future and persist by looking for ways to mend their realities. The psychological resources that bring around these two different outcomes for youth encompass hope for the future, imagining of a better life, sustaining optimism and having the resilience to evade and escape hardships. When these resources are directed to hopelessness, current life circumstances become results of dire social conditions but when it is directed to motivation for change, they become the source of hope. In this context, Korean youth's dream at the individual level becomes the diverging point from which hope and despair cross over.

Seokho Kim et al. see psychological resources or dream capital resulting from rational judgement on the distance between personal dreams and realistic conditions necessary in realizing those dreams. For the youth, dreams are then adjusted realities; they are not simply allotted cultural or human capital. Rational judgement is made based on the concept of penetration as posed by Paul Willis (1977) where penetration is defined as the "cognitive judgment about the (un)realizability of a dream." It refers to the discrepancy that exists between judgment about the capacity, condition and qualification required to fulfill one's dream and judgment about the extent to which one thinks she is equipped with that capacity, condition and qualification (Kim et al. 2016). According to their analysis on the Korean Youth Survey data, penetration on ascribed status and societal factors are found to be important predictors of dreaming. These results imply that for youth, the judgment made on their ascribed status rather than judgements made on individual trait or qualification plays a more important role in promoting dreaming. Another interesting finding is that youth do not fault their own talents or efforts for their lack of dreams but turn the blame on financially incapable parents or lack of governmental policy in solving unequal distribution of opportunities and resources. This result not only evidences how youth's psychological resources are based on rational judgement but how the rhetoric of "gold spoon" and "dirt spoon" social classes prevalent in Korean media has been internalized by this generation.

Hyunji Kwon et al. keep an optimistic stance on how psychological resources serve to sustain youth's dreams. This does not mean that they have turned a blind eye to problems replete in Korean society including the

precarious and unstable labor market and dire economic and social conditions (Arditi 2014; Huws 2014). Rather, they advocate for the necessity of hope and optimism in thinking about the future, which will eventually lead to sustaining youth's ambitious identity and its development (Lingo and Tepper 2013). Kwon et al. have analyzed the 2017 data collected on young artists collected by the Institute for Social Development and Policy Research. Results show that both the family's economic background and human capital, represented by a set of skills acquired through significant investment of time and money, did not make a significant difference regarding the musicians' experience of interruption in their careers or intention to stay in the profession. Rather, the results reveal that musicians' ability to construct future affects musicians' career prospects. Psychological resources such as optimism, hope, and resilience rather than immediate financial circumstances seem to be the most important determinant of the musicians' desire to continue in their professional career in music. As pointed out by the authors, these findings are eye-openers that remind many who were overindulged in the despair factor, which has indeed been the main focus of previous research on youth, that meaningful implications for future policy changes remain that can aid youth in sustaining their hopes. Rather than gearing toward a one-dimensional solution involving policy change tied to financial funding, it is now time to consider policies that can foster an environment that helps youth feel a sense of shared hope and trust.

Making Collective Dreaming Possible

Where different outcomes are actualized at the diverging point where despair and hope cross over in youth's process of dreaming at individual levels, the same occurrence can be observed at the collective level. Contrasting from the other two articles by Kim et al. and Kwon et al. that concentrate on the youth themselves as rational actors, Yoonjeong Joo's article regard youth's psychological resources as collective representations, observing their resulting actions and social movements. Apart from their personal motives, youth move beyond defining themselves as victims of social conditions but rise to a position of an actor that can perform collective action. Joo observes that based on the research on frames and repertoires of movements, young people develop their ways of political engagement and contentious politics, which are reflective of their social contexts and conditions. During the process, youth are not fragmented victims but individuals who share

solidarity in values and understanding on realities. Youth from different backgrounds come together to participate in social movements to alter social conditions that serve as obstacles in achieving their dreams. According to Joo, youth's actions observed in the youth movement study is both a result of individual effort to sustain their dreams and a way of strengthening and realizing their dreams based on an imagined future of changed outlooks. In other words, sometimes youth movement becomes in and of itself a dream for a revolution. Social problems raised in youth movement including issues regarding gender, labor and environment do not exist as separate concerns but relate directly to the social mechanisms that replicate youth's desperate realities. Joo's remarks on the repertoire and contentious framework serve to provide helpful implications for these youth problems.

The three articles use different terminologies for youth generation's psychological resources but all of them examine for individual and collective effects of these resources and how it interacts with dreams, often creating disparate outcomes. The use of the term "dream" as a sociological concept is problematic for it is tied to too many ideas and meanings. The conceptual equivalence of aspiration, hope, wish and desire with dream means that there is a tendency to use these terms interchangeably (Kim Hong-jung 2015, pp. 40-44). Encompassing everything from unrealizable fantasy to the concrete blueprints of the future, the spectrum of term is too wide-ranging. To minimize such problems, and attempt a sociologically empirical investigation of the phenomenon of the dream, the following two issues must be resolved. It is necessary to define the concept of dream operationally, and then figure out a way to clearly prescribe the specific area of research amongst all possible phenomena. The three articles have kept to the ethical ground rules when selecting for research subjects as advised by Hongjoon Kim (2015) and resulting findings have successfully expanded the grounds for discussion for youth generation's life courses, their thoughts and yearnings of the hearts that haven't been addressed in previous literature.

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