Understanding career-designing experiences of North Korean immigrant youths in South Korea

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Abstract

North Korean immigrant youth are underrepresented in career development research fields. We explored contextual factors that work as resources or hindrances to obtaining adequate education and exploring career paths in addition to the unfilled psychological needs they want to fill in through securing decent work. By analyzing the interview with 12 participants, we found three domains with 17 categories. The main hindering factors were the difference in language, academic curriculum, and lack of career information. Resources included increased self-understanding, social support, and past work or educational experience. Lastly, psychological needs were the sense of autonomy, economic stability, and social recognition.

Keywords North Korean immigrant youth · Career development · Psychology of work theory

Introduction

Working is essential for survival, relatedness, and self-determination (Blustein, 2008). In "Critique of Judgment," Kant (1987) mentioned that humans can gain vitality and move on to a prosperous life. Through one's work experience, humans not only fulfill the needs they lacked or needed but also develop professional competencies with opportunities. As such, career experience becomes an essential method and factor toward achieving a better life and fulfilling self-satisfaction, and refugees

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and immigrants are no exception. In contrast to the previous mainstream of career research that mainly focused on the majority group's traditional career development, with emphasis on volition and privilege of making an adaptive choice, scholars have tried to highlight the needs to explore the career development of underrepresented groups who experience oppression and discrimination (Duffy et al., 2016). In the Psychology of Work Theory (PWT), Duffy et al. (2016) explained how the social, economic, cultural, and political forces in our society have subtly and blatantly constrained the career development of marginalized people, such as refugees and immigrants. Examining the career-related experience within the current restrictive work environment and finding ways to secure decent work are essential for refugees and immigrants to make the cultural connection with the mainstream society and helps them live in their true colors (Duffy et al., 2016).

Due to the increase of diverse social inequalities, the concept of decent work emerged to understand the current labor environment and career choices (International Labor Organization, 2001; Pereira et al., 2019). Decent work refers to the basic attributes of work that all working individuals can expect (Blustein et al., 2023). While the components of decent work may vary depending on the sociocultural and economic context in which an individual lives, the general concept reflects the International Labor Organization's (ILO) four strategic goals: promotion of labor rights, employment, social protection, and social dialogue (Blustein et al., 2023; ILO, 2001). The study by Ferraro et al. (2017) explained that "decent work" operated as an essential mediating variable in promoting autonomous work motivation and other positive outcomes. Not only this research but also many other researchers have focused on the importance of the term. Especially, PWT is designed to capture both the degree of individuals' accessibility to decent work (e.g., marginalization and economic constraints) and the outcome of obtaining decent work and satisfaction of basic psychological needs that lead to overall work and life well-being. Thus, the PWT explained how getting decent work can lead to meaningful work and how different ecological factors impact accessibility and the outcome of decent work. In the present study, we focused on the career development of North Korean immigrant youth who defected with their parents as a minor or who were born after their parents' settlement in South Korea. Grounded in the PWT perspective, we intended to explore the experience of North Korean immigrant youth navigating the world of work in South Korea, which shares political tensions and ethnic ties with North Korea simultaneously.

North Korean immigrant youth in South Korea

The late twentieth century is called the migration period (Kymlicka, 1995), and North Korean immigrant youths are still an unknown and unique multicultural group in the Republic of Korea. North Korean immigrants refer to someone with an address, immediate family, workplace, or related personal information in North Korea but have the status as citizens of South Korea under the constitution after defection (Ministry of Unification, 2021). Unlike usual immigrants or refugees who apply for refugee status to settle in South Korea, North Korean immigrants receive

government support following the Protection Act on Support for Settlement of North Korean defectors (Ministry of Unification, 2021), which may differ from the Refugee Act.

As part of North Korean immigrant families, North Korean immigrant youths are a unique group with diversified birth backgrounds and growth environments, such as (a) adolescents who were born in North Korea and defected to South Korea alone, (b) those born in third-world places such as China and Southeast Asia during the defection process, and (c) children born in South Korea after North Korean parents defected (Kim et al., 2020). However, children of North Korean immigrants born in South Korea or a third-world country are not recognized as North Korean immigrants. They are excluded from the Ministry of Unification's protection of North Korean defectors while they are in a situation to serve mandatory military service in South Korea, especially for men (Ro & Oh, 2018). This situation leads to emphasizing the blind spot to establish a support system for youth who have North Korean background families.

North Korean background youths directly or indirectly experience discrimination and exclusion as migrants and minority groups (Kim & Seo, 2019). They experience contextual restrictions in work-related transitions such as school education and adaptation, educational meetings, and career choices (Im & Kim, 2019; Park, 2015). According to the Ministry of Unification (2021), 3102 North Korean immigrant youth enrolled in elementary, middle, and high schools in South Korea. Among them, half of them wanted to obtain higher education, but the dropout rate from high school was 4.7%, which is more than four times higher than that of South Korean youth. In addition, 80% of them attended public school, but half of them decided not to disclose their identity (Lee, 2019; Ministry of Unification, 2021). The rest of them attended alternative schools for only North Korean youth, which are treated as "Not In My Back Yard" (NIMBY) facilities (i.e., Lee, 2019) in South Korea. Despite the expansion of academic support for North Korean defectors every year, the difficulties North Korean immigrant youth experience in South Korean schools remain a task for South Korean society to solve (Kim & Seo, 2019).

Academic and social system in South Korea related to the career development of North Korean immigrant youth

To understand the North Korean immigrant youths' experience in the career decision-making process, understanding the education system in South Korea, where they live, is necessary. South Korea is famous for its high degree of enthusiasm for education, which originates from scholasticism and credentialism (Nahm, 2011). Educational attainment or credentials (e.g., university diploma), as a means of acquiring status such as stable jobs with higher wages, is justified and functions as a critical index constituting society in South Korea (Kim, 2011). As a reflection of the phenomenon, South Korea was among the highest-ranked OECD countries, ranking second to seventh in reading, first to fourth in math, and third to fifth in science in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 (OECD, 2021).

The Korean government launched the Career Education Act to resolve the excessive enrollment rate of around 70% in tertiary education and disparities in over-education and job placement (Korean Law Information Center, 2015). The Career Education Act aims to develop positive self-concepts, plan and prepare for careers, and explore the world of work through career education in a school setting.

Due to the intense evaluation-oriented culture in the education system centering on the national college entrance exam (Kim et al., 2002), students still receive pressure to learn ahead of time, gain higher scores on the in-school test, and have good evaluations of extracurricular activities. Thus, given that culture is the collective norms and values that have been shared through generations in a specific society (Hofstede, 2001), adjusting to the unique culture related to education and work in South Korea for North Korean immigrant youth with their lack of societal and cultural capitals (e.g., parental support, financial resources) is challenging.

Theoretical framework: psychology of work psychology

To understand the North Korean youth's experience in pursuing career paths within South Korean society, the PWT (Duffy et al., 2016) is a sound theoretical framework to apply. The theory clearly illustrated how social, economic, and cultural factors play critical roles in the work experience, particularly for marginalized people, in addition to individual factors, such as career adaptability (Duffy et al., 2016).

Specifically, marginalization and economic constraints are the key predictors that hinder the possibility of securing decent work through work volition and career adaptability (Duffy et al., 2016). Moreover, social marginalization, oppression, and economic constraints may reduce equal access to resources, such as social and cultural capital, which facilitate career development and decent work (Cole, 2009; Shields, 2008). As propositions of PWT were supported by previous results that the immigrant young adults' barriers to work volition were economic strain and societal policy and systems that marginalized the minority (Autin et al., 2018), PWT is particularly relevant to North Korean immigrant youth who are socially, culturally, and economically marginalized in South Korea (Kim & Seo, 2019).

According to PWT, contrary to contextual factors hindering the ability to secure decent work, work volition and career adaptability, individual attributes mediate the relationship between contextual factors and decent work. Work volition and career adaptability are both individual attributes, attitudinal and self-regulatory competency, that are affected by constraints, but are malleable, wherein those are considered to be targets for intervention in efforts to secure decent work (Duffy et al., 2016). Furthermore, moderator variables such as proactive personality and social support and macro-level conditions, such as economic and educational systems, also affect decent work.

In addition, PWT proposed securing decent work that can fulfill not only the need for self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and a sense of social connection (Blustein, 2011) but also survival needs. Survival need is a distinct concept that emphasizes access to resources, such as financial and societal capital, by gaining stable wages and security for families (Anker et al., 2003), which are not considered in

traditional models of career development that assume various opportunities and decision-making latitude for self-actualization. Therefore, considering economic constraints, including uncertain employment or low income of immigrants (Lindheim, 2021; Yeboah, 2017), survival needs may be particularly important to marginalized people, including North Korean immigrant youth.

Present study

Based upon the structure of PWT (Duffy et al., 2016), this study aims to examine North Korean immigrant youths in-depth to understand their career design in South Korea. Although previous studies examining the experience of North Korean immigrant youth has addressed resources and barriers in general (for the review, see Shin et al., 2021), most of them were focused on their underachievement in academic performance or in school adjustment and not the career development process as a central focus. Thus, by utilizing consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, 2012), we examined how the intersections of unique North Korean immigrant status, contextual supports and barriers, and inter-Korean culture influence their pursuit of desired career path and what needs they want to satisfy through obtaining desired work. The research questions are as follows: (a) Which factors acted as a resource or hindrance to North Korean immigrant youths pursuing their desired career path? (b) What do North Korean immigrant youths want to fulfill by seeking their desired careers?

Methods

We used CQR in the construction of interview protocol and data analysis, an inductive method that researchers conclude repetitive consensus processes and have the advantage of preventing omission of meaningful data or inference of biased results (Hill, 2012).

Participants

Criteria for participation were (a) being between the age of at least 13 years (equivalent to the age of the first year in middle school) and younger than 24 years old according to the Framework Act on Youth (Ministry of Gender Equality & Family, 2020), (b) having at least one biological parent of North Korean defector, and (c) current living in South Korea regardless of nationality. Our research sample was 12 participants for whom we received a signed participation consent form from both themselves and their parents, and they represent the total sample of participants recruited for this study only.

The study sample consisted of 12 participants who had both themselves and their parents agree to participate, representing the entire sample of participants recruited for this study only. In particular, four of the participants were recruited through reputation case sampling (Kish, 1965), as it was believed that the recommended youth would be a good fit for the topic of this study. Referrals were obtained from

the community and welfare centers through an expert who has worked with North Korean defectors in Seoul and suburban areas for over 10 years. Because trust is paramount for North Korean immigrants to decide to participate in any programs or projects, the expert introduced the parents of potential study participants under 18 years and North Korean immigrant youth over 18 years to this study and our research team's contact information. After this recruitment, snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961) was used to recruit other participants. Finally, with all potential participants and their parents, we arranged the initial meeting via phone, online, or in-person by following their preference for explaining this study and getting their agreement to participate. If the potential participants were youths over 18 years, we only received a signed consent form from them; however, if the potential participants were youths under 18 years, we obtained signed consent forms from both the participants and their parents.

The year of entry into Korea is distributed from 2006 to 2019, except for one participant born in South Korea, and career hopes have appeared in various areas such as chef, costume designer, doctor, and paleontologist. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. In addition, each participant's migration background from North Korea to South Korea and sociodemographic characteristics are described below. The description is limited to the extent that the individual cannot be identified.

At age 3 years, Participant 1's family left North Korea and relocated to Mongolia before moving to South Korea, where his father went ahead to find work before bringing the family over. Participant 1 avoids being labeled a "North Korean defector" due to the negative connotations associated with the term. He struggles with earning a living and finding his career path, with little input from his parents. At 7 years old, Participant 2 moved to South Korea via China and Laos with her family. She stated that she experienced bullying at a Korean school and soothed her troubled mind with a mobile game, but her parents did not understand and beat her for playing the game. With limited financial support from her parents, she began working in restaurants during her secondary school years, where she found comfort from her colleagues. She worked in a factory until last year, and recently as a sanitation worker. Participant 3 was born in China and attended a Korean–Chinese school before moving to South Korea at 9 years old. Despite difficulties in her peers making fun of her identity, her mother provided emotional and financial support. Her mother has been a strong supporter enough to make her not feel her father's absence. She stated that North Korean friends he met through the North Korean Immigrants Support Foundation were easier to open up to than South Korean friends.

Participant 4 stated that she has no recollection of her family's North Korean origins but that when she was 7 years old, her parents told her that she had emigrated from North Korea at age 2 years. However, she stated that she had not disclosed this information to anyone. Growing up in a household that strongly emphasized education, she attended a middle school in China to study a foreign language before enrolling in a high school in South Korea. Participant 5's early life in North Korea was marked by financial difficulties that forced her to drop out of school at age 11 years. She took on various jobs to support herself, including carrying cement, catching leeches in rivers, and working in a

Table 1 Participant demographics

No.	Gender	Age (years)	School level (grade)	Country of birth	Desired career/job	Status of family residency in South Korea
1	M	19	High school graduate	North Korea	Chef	With parents and sibling
2	F	23	High school graduate	North Korea	Health trainer	With parents and sibling
3	F	15	9th grade	China	Medical profession	With mother
4	F	17	11th grade	North Korea	Marketer	With parents and sibling
5	F	16	7th grade	North Korea	Costume/dress designer	With mother
6	F	19	12th grade	China	Nail artist	With parents
7	F	15	9th grade	North Korea	Police	With sister
						Separately living with a stepfather, mother
8	M	20	High school graduate	North Korea	Doctor	With grandmother and mother
9	M	19	12th grade	North Korea	Police/business	Dormitory/with father
10	M	19	12th grade	North Korea	Health Trainer	Dormitory/with father
11	F	21	12th grade	North Korea	Counselor	Dormitory
12	M	17	11th grade	Republic of Korea	Paleontologist	With parents and sibling

wig factory. After moving to South Korea at age 14 years through four different countries, she had new educational opportunities, but she received little support or guidance from her parents emotionally or financially. Born to a North Korean mother and Chinese father, Participant 6 spent her early years attending elementary school in China before relocating to South Korea in fifth grade. According to her, their family income is moderate in South Korea, and her parents are paying for nail art academy tuition to support her dreams of opening her nail salon.

Participant 7 stated that she migrated from North Korea to South Korea when she was 8 years old with her mother and older sister, traveling through three countries. Her father later entered South Korea separately. Due to a lack of parental support, Participant 7's younger sister took on more of a parental role. Participant 8 moved from North Korea to South Korea, traveling through two other countries at 16 years old. He lives with a family of two, and their income is low. However, many of Participant 8's relatives in North Korea were in the medical profession, and he has been inspired to follow in their footsteps. At age 17 years, Participant 9 left North Korea for South Korea alone, where his father had already settled. His family was wealthy in North Korea and ran a successful automotive business. However, Participant 9 decided to defect after he was imprisoned for watching a South Korean drama, which is illegal in North Korea. Participant 10 moved to South Korea at 11 years old and met his family.

As a child in North Korea, Participant 10's education was cut short due to his family's financial struggles, and he turned to farming to make ends meet. Upon moving to South Korea, Participant 10 could finally attend school and pursue his passion for health and fitness. Participant 11, who was once a national youth team member in North Korea, had to leave due to an injury. She later joined her family in South Korea at 16 years old, leaving behind a life of labor and hardship in North Korea. She supports herself financially by working part-time while attending high school. Lastly, Participant 12 moved to South Korea as a baby but relocated to Canada at age 1 year due to difficulties adjusting. He spent the next 14 years in Canada before returning to South Korea at 15 years old. Because of his migration background, Participant 12 is fluent in English and has some proficiency in Korean. However, he needs help with verbal communication in Korean and aspires to attend university in Canada or the USA.

Interview protocol

The individual interview with open-ended questions by structuring the interview protocol was developed from the PWT perspective (see Appendix"). For example, the PWT was used to establish the essential theme of exploring basic psychological needs that one wants to be satisfied through a desired work/career and identifying environmental factors connected to their identity, thus influencing the career decision-making process.

Procedure

Research team

The research team comprised seven individuals, six coding team members and one auditor: one professor majoring in counseling psychology with sufficient experience with PWT and in conducting qualitative research and serving as an auditor, one professor majoring in rehabilitation counseling, one instructor with a doctoral degree of family counseling with extensive experience of qualitative research, one doctorate student, and three master's degree students in counseling program. All team members were assigned female sex at birth, and all but one Turkish master's degree student and one Korean–American are South Korean. Considering the implicit power imbalance within the research team that, mainly comprised a graduate student researcher, measures were used to obtain trustworthiness. For example, as a team, we encouraged each other to express genuine opinions and to bring up any concerns through the consensual process. In addition, before analyzing data, coding team members also openly discussed their biases and expectation on the topic of the study to avoid personal bias affecting the decision. From the discussion, all research team members are aware of cultural issues faced by North Korean immigrant youth and their biases and stereotypes.

Procedure

With the approval of the IRB review committee from the university where the first author works, participants were recruited through a careful case selection by experts (Seawright & Gerring, 2008) and snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zoom program was used for non-face-to-face interviews and participants were informed that they could freely stop the interview or not answer the questions. Each 2 h voice-recorded interview was transcribed immediately afterward.

Data analysis

Following CQR guidelines (Hill, 2012), the data were analyzed in three stages: domain coding, generalizing core ideas, and cross-analysis. First, the research team regularly met and generated a list of domains from the coded transcripts based on previous literature and current research questions. Then, throughout the domain coding process, which organized the data similar in contents from the coded transcripts into manageable sections, domains were added, combined, or taken away (Hill, 2012). For example, researchers first organized the domains as factors hindering, conductive, motivating, and needed to fulfill through the career path. However, after several discussions, researchers agreed that the motivating domain should be reanalyzed for suitable domains because the characteristics of each subcategory were diverse. Therefore, a total of three domains were created.

In the second stage, each research team member created a core idea by summarizing the major themes represented in each domain and extracting the critical point in the

participants' interviews. The research team fulfilled the consensus on the core idea in each domain by keeping the core idea as close as possible to the original coded transcript with avoiding interpretation. For example, the language barrier was used as one of the major themes for hindering exploring career path, as researchers agreed that all participants indicated difficulties in comprehending the South Korean language. In addition, sex and gender roles are key factors that can influence career development, and the sex composition of the participants in this study was almost identical between males and females; therefore, we considered the possibility of intersecting gender/sexuality perspectives and migration experiences in the analysis procedure. However, we did not find concrete gender/sex-specific characteristics in shaping their career paths, with both male and female participants expressing a desire to become police officers or fitness trainers and expressing gender-independent educational aspirations.

Lastly, a cross-analysis was performed to access common themes across the interview. Each team member generated a list of categories representing vital ideas that may constantly arise. For example, researchers noticed the core idea of being supportive of people in a similar situation emerging across multiple interviews, in which researchers generated a name of a category as willing to pursue altruistic life. When disagreements arose during the analysis, the researchers engaged in discussions as equals to understand each other's perspectives. Team members appreciated and acknowledged that they had different opinions about the meaning of the data. They were open to expanding their perspectives by asking questions of each other. They experienced the process of reaching an agreement by sharing how they arrived at their views on data interpretation. Throughout the analysis process, an auditor reviewed the coding team's work after discussion, such as recommending changing the category names or creating a new domain and checking the research team's judgment process, mainly when discrepancies occurred. Additionally, in terms of defining the frequency of ensuing of the subcategories, based on what Hill (2012) proposed with some modifications, we used general results that pertain to 11 or 12 cases, typical results that pertain to 7–10 cases, and variant results that pertain to less than 6 cases. Therefore, the data were also characterized based on frequency, as seen in Table 2.

Results

The North Korean immigrant youths' career designing experiences yielded three domains: factors hindering and conducive to designing career paths and the needs to fulfill them. Each domain contained the categories to understand their career decision-making experience in South Korea. Domains and categories are described as follows.

Domain 1: factors hindering to career path exploration

Factors hindering career exploration represent the reports from participants of factors that directly or indirectly restricted their ability to seek careers. Seven subcategories emerged in this domain: language barrier, limited financial resources, difference in academic curriculum, stereotype and prejudice, lack of

Table 2 Career-related experience of North Korean immigrant youth in South Korea

Domain/categories	Frequency
Factors hindering to explore career path	
Language barrier	8/Typical
Limited financial resources	8/Typical
Difference in academic curriculum	10/Typical
Stereotype and prejudice	8/Typical
Lack of career information	10/Typical
Difference in agency of choosing career	6/Variant
Lack of family support	9/Typical
Factors conducive to pursue desired career	
Increased self-understanding	12/General
Past work or educational experience	10/Typical
Social support	12/General
Vicarious exposure to career through acquaintance	10/Typical
Indirect career-related experience through social media	10/Typical
Psychological needs to be satisfied through the desired career	
Autonomy	11/General
Sense of belonging	4/Variant
Financial stability	9/Typical
Willing to pursuit of altruistic life	6/Variant
Social recognition	9/Typical

career information, difference in agency of choosing a career, and lack of family support.

Language barrier

Adolescents from North Korea and third-world countries typically experienced hardships in language barriers in the process of migrating and adjusting to South Korea. The difference in tone and accent interfered with understanding classes at school or making Korean friends. For example, Participant 6 indicated, "Because I have lived in China, I could not understand Korean at first. It was tough because I did not know Korean well when I was talking with my friends at school or especially during class." Furthermore, being unable to speak Korean fluently limited career search and opportunities. Participant 9 stated, "The biggest worry I have for preparing interview is my low Korean proficiency level. Even if it is the same language, the expressions or the words are different, so it was hard for me to understand Korean spoken in South Korea." Participants experienced a massive gap between the language they use, primarily due to cultural differences in accents, vocabulary, familiarity with foreign languages, and difficulties in semantic meaning and pragmatic interpretation.

Limited financial resources

Participants considered constrained financial resources as obstacles in planning their career paths. Participant 1 stated, "I think the biggest barrier to planning a career path is probably financial difficulties. My family does not have much money, so I cannot rely on them financially." In addition, occupations requiring a degree or long-term training, which needed personal disbursement, acted as a burden in the career decision process. Participant 3 said, "If I study, tuition fees will be expensive, and either living alone or staying at the dormitory will add more to my costs, so I get stressed." In some cases, one participant was ineligible for the government's settlement subsidy system, even when he/she did not receive care from the caregiver. Participant 11 indicated, "My family got settlement money, but it is not enough for all of us. Since I am an adult, I cannot ask for money from my parents, so I would have liked to have separate settlement money."

Differences in academic curriculum

Participants who had to adapt to the Korean education system experienced difficulties due to various types of subjects and contents taught in school and differences in academic importance. North Korean adolescents were bewildered by the high academic standards in the South Korean education system. For example, the importance of learning English differs in North Korea from South Korea, where the education system teaches it early, starting from primary school. Participant 3 shared her difficulty learning English: "Unlike other subjects, when I learn English, I just do not know everything. In South Korea, there are so many English words that my friends use in daily life, like tissues or bus. As I did not learn any English back then, I was flustered at first hearing those words and tried to learn them at school." Even though it was the same Korean history subject, the content was completely different, wherein it was not easy to learn Korean history. Participant 11 stated, "Even now, I do not know Korean modern period history because what I learned in North Korea is different." Moreover, teaching mathematics was utterly different. For example, Participant 6 explained, "When I learned mathematics in China, I learned different multiplication method which is not used here."

Stereotype and prejudice

Adaptation to school is an essential process for students with immigration in Korea. Students from North Korean and third-world countries experienced many prejudices in the school environment. Some participants experienced micro-aggressions that contained prejudice and stereotypes from their teachers and peers. For example, Participant 2 shared, "It is true that North Korea is harder to live in than South Korea. My friends talked down to me, asking, 'Do North Koreans eat trash?' or 'Do North Koreans live as beggars?' This really hurts me." Another participant, Participant 9, spoke about an episode of receiving career guidance from a teacher, "When I was talking about my dream job of being a detective, I got comments to discourage me like 'That is not possible due to your background' or 'do you think that fits into

you?'." Not only from teachers but they also directly heard insulting and discriminatory remarks about their country of origin from peers, implying that one could not reach out to the dream. These underrating stereotypes may lower confidence and limit North Korean background teenagers' career choices.

Lack of career information

Typically, participants experienced difficulties because they needed to learn what career-related information was available, whom to ask, or how to access and use it. For example, participant 9 stated that "There have been many different jobs in South Korea that I didn't know about when I was in North Korea, so I did not know what you do in those jobs and what kind of education you need to receive for getting those jobs." Participants who came to South Korea as teenagers needed somewhere to obtain information about the South Korean college admission system. Participant 8 stated, "I am very curious about what kind of preparations need to be made to apply for college. However, the guide to the prep for college is opaque and too complicated since every school has different criteria." Participant 3 wanted to know which direction is more advantageous, deciding whether it is better to work by getting a vocational education or going to college.

Difference in agency of choosing career

Half of the participants reported a significant cultural difference in choosing their career path in South Korea, unlike North Korea, where occupations were determined by their S*ongbun*. *Songbun* stands for the sociopolitical classification that determines the status of North Korean citizens based largely on their family's history of perceived loyalty to the government (Jun & Shin, 2019). According to participants, no flexibility was observed in choosing your career in North Korea, as compared with South Korea, where students have the personal freedom and various choices to choose what they want as a career. For example, Participant 11, who received only elite athletic training in North Korea, claimed, "In North Korea, we did not get any education because, if we lose the game, we are forced to become coal mine workers. So, we only trained for sports without having any backups, education." Having never received any other education except athletic training, she experienced difficulties using the freedom to choose a different career path that she had acquired in South Korea. Participant 9 voluntarily chose to do the same job in North Korea but needed help proving his job qualification due to various certifications and tests required in South Korea. Because the work done in North Korea was a government duty, no license or exams to prove individual competence were required as in South Korea. Therefore, North Korean immigrant youths were experiencing difficulties proving their abilities in a meritocratic society based on individual autonomy in choice.

Lack of family support

Participants had experienced insufficient psychological support from their families. Not only did parents or families not provide support, but they also discouraged or

exerted a negative influence on the participants or their families and did not give enough support for their career guidance. For example, Participant 2 experienced domestic abuse and school bullying for a long time. It made it difficult for her to seek help. Participant 2 stated, "I always try to find my career, but I am unsure where to start. My parents seem to be indifferent since they are busy to work." Participant 6's parents had a hard time when they immigrated, in which the participant did not want to cause any more concerns to her family. Participant 6 said, "Seeing my mother worried about me makes me even more heartbroken… So, I don't say anything about it unless it's such a big deal." Participants were discouraged by the absence of family members to share their concerns.

Domain 2: factors conducive to pursue desired career

There were several factors that supported and strengthened participants to lead their careers. Two general and three typical categories were found: increased self-understanding, past work or educational experiences, social support, vicarious exposure to career through acquaintances, and career-related indirect experience through social media.

Increased self-understanding

All participants have shown that self-understanding helps them obtain a clear picture of the type of job they want. For example, Participant 5 mentioned, "I think I have a tendency to be meticulous which suits well for a designer, which I want to be." In addition, Participant 12 indicated that "I like science like archaeology, biology, anything that relates to life . . . That is why I want to be an archeologist who can synthesize and explore these things." Finally, participant 11, who wants to be a counselor, also mentioned, "I love talking to people and hearing their stories while empathizing with them." These results show that self-understanding of their preferences and identities helped them find the jobs they dream of.

Past work or educational experiences

Past work or education experiences in North Korea, third-world countries, or South Korea gave them confidence and skills for exploring careers. For example, Participant 5, who wants to be a designer for people with disabilities, shared, "When I was in North Korea, I carried cement and caught leeches in the river. I made candy, too. I also learned how to make wigs. These various experiences helped me better understand people around me and be more aware of other lives." Due to her past experiences, she chose a meaningful career for herself by making a difference for people with disabilities. Participant 10, who had to give up becoming an athlete because of his injury but still dreams of some sports-related job, stated, "I like all sports … Exercise is what I tried, so what still I like, and what I am good at." Past work or education experiences gave them knowledge or skills and helped them find the value of life and confidence where they stuck in what they wanted.

Social support

Psychological and material support from various people, such as relatives, teachers, friends, and workplace colleagues, is vital for all participants' career exploration. For example, Participant 1 learned plenty of cooking skills and felt psychologically supported by the chef at a hotel on a part-time job. "When I said, 'I'm a North Korean defector,' he said, 'I don't care about that. I just want you to work hard.' I feel supported by a person like him, who is not biased about North Korean." Participant 2, who has not received positive support from families, commented, "Instead of my parents, there have been so many people who encouraged and helped me live according to a good direction, so I have chosen to live rather than die." In addition, Participant 2 had a teacher who gave her various cultural or educational experiences (e.g., linking free art, leisure, and psychological education programs) and friends who sympathized with her sorrow and cry. Likewise, Participant 3, dreaming of working in the medical field, has friends who said, "You can definitely do it," which increased the participant's confidence.

On the one hand, Participant 11 recalled, "I told my aunt that my mom kept swearing and beating me so that I couldn't live with mom. Then, my aunt came to pick me up right away." These results demonstrated that if there is social support from anyone, North Korean immigrant youths can gain driving forces in life beyond career exploration.

Vicarious exposure to career through acquaintances

Participants were able to dream and explore their careers by indirectly experiencing the career paths of their acquaintances. For example, Participant 8 dreamed of becoming a doctor because his relatives exposed him to the career, stating, "My grandfather, uncle, and aunt were all doctors in North Korea." Participant 9 also stated, "My older brother is running a small shop, and it looks good, so I wanted to do that kind of work, too." Participant 6 said she became interested in makeup while watching a friend practicing makeup information. "In middle school, I became interested in makeup while seeing my friend practicing makeup. Thanks to her, I also was able to know there is a makeup academy." Participants 2 and 10, who want careers in sports, could also consider the pros and cons of their respective careers while listening to their acquaintances' experiences of attending physical education school or working part-time.

Indirect career-related experience through social media

Participants were able to acquire and explore career-related information through social media such as YouTube, TV, mobile apps, and the Internet. Participant 3 had difficulty finding information about the career that one is interested in from school, claiming that "If I want to know about the job such as a doctor, I could search it on YouTube. From YouTube, I could meet an actual doctor talking about what is good and what I could experience. This was really helpful." Participant 4 started studying stocks after watching a TV program. Moreover, Participant 7 also uses "YouTube"

and "mobile applications" to acquire career information. Participants explored their careers proactively by taking advantage of social media, which is free and easily accessible.

Domain 3: psychological needs to be satisfied through the desired career

Participants expressed what they are eager to fulfill from their current preferred work. In the third domain, there are five categories: autonomy, sense of belonging, economic stability, willing to pursue of altruistic life, and social recognition.

Autonomy

Eleven participants showed a desire to have their independence in career decision-making. In other words, North Korean immigrant youths in South Korea generally wanted to decide their career path according to their wishes and interests rather than following the career path set by others. Participant 7, born in North Korea, stated, "I prefer to decide my career path only when I feel attractive and want to do it on my own." Participant 5 also emphasizes choice and responsibility in South Korea compared with life with less freedom of choice in North Korea. "In North Korea, whatever I choose, I must do what the government wants. The government prevents people from making various choices. (...) But in South Korea, there is no unconditional path. (...) If I want to choose what I want to do, I have to be responsible." As such, participants found that recognizing one's desire to choose and decide the direction of the career path and to take responsibility for it.

Sense of belonging

Few participants reported their desire to be part of South Korean society through the work they wanted. A sense of belonging seems to originate from a relationship. For example, Participant 2, a part-time cleaner at school, reported that she values relationships in any situation (e.g., workplace) as "What I do is important, but whom you work with and have a good relationship with is more important to me." Participant 6 also indicated the importance of being part of the community and how it affected his exploration of career paths. Participant 6 stated, "I wanted to make friends at college or a part-time job because it is hard to make social ties with others after graduating high school." Participants prioritized being connected with others in the local community, which is more important than what kind of task they would work on if they got a job. Overall, the participants' responses were seen as the basic human desire for a feeling of belongingness to the group or community.

Economic stability

Nine out of twelve participants typically explained that financial stability is of the utmost importance to adapt well to South Korea's capitalist structure. Money became the most essential factor in the choice of work. Participant 2, who had

diverse work experience and wanted to become a professional health trainer, mentioned that "I want to have a job where I can earn money stably, rather than a job that I don't know when I'll get fired so if I have a professional job, I think I can work until I get old." Becoming economically stable was one of the most critical factors in having confidence. Participant 10 said, "I want to find a paid job as soon as possible to become economically independent. That way, I will be proud of myself." Moreover, Participant 4 said that "Even if the marketing field was the priority in the choice of work, it was possible to change careers in similar fields depending on the annual salary." Participants tried to reach the economic stability associated with confidence by obtaining paid jobs.

Willing to pursue of altruistic life

A handful of the participants reported that they realized their own value in life was to help others through their work. For example, Participant 3, who wants to help older people as a physical therapist, said, "While growing up, my mom told me to help others with my job a lot, and I agree. I will be happy and proud of myself if one day I can help others." Moreover, Participant 5 claimed that "If I become a costume designer someday, I would like to design beautiful clothes that help people with disabilities." Participants tried to find an opportunity to recognize their own value and existence through an altruistic career.

Social recognition

North Korean immigrant teenagers and young adults typically wanted approval from someone in their family or community by reaching out for their desired career. Participant 4 mentioned, "I preferred socially recognized and exemplary work such as doctors, judges, large corporations' workers, and teachers, rather than simply work such as making coffee or separating receipts. I want to have a job that no one ignores. Even if it is wrong to ignore someone, there are jobs that people ignore. So, I want to introduce my job or company to others proudly." Therefore, a socially well-treated job was seen as a good job. In addition, Participant 7, who is interested in joining the police force, said, "I will choose a job that can be a proud daughter to my parents or a job that no one ignores." These reports show that social recognition or approval, such as praise and encouragement by family and co-workers, works as essential rewards when exploring future careers.

Discussion

This study aims to contribute to the in-depth understanding of North Korean immigrant youths' experiences by investigating sociocultural factors that help or hinder their process in seeking desired career and the psychological needs to be satisfied through the desired career based on PWT. Three domains and 17 categories emerged from interviews with 12 North Korean immigrant youths. By following the recommendation of Hill (2012), we will focus our discussion on typical and general

categories in detail. Participant citations have been included to support the researcher's interpretation and to help readers consider categories generated by the coding team in the context of PWT and previous findings.

Factors hindering career exploration

According to the perspective of the PWT model with previous research on North Korean immigrant youths (Kim & Seo, 2019; Kim et al., 2020), economic constraints and marginalization factors significantly affect obtaining decent work. Much the same can be said of the result in this study that most participants cited financial difficulties as a career barrier. They showed more interest in stable jobs than interesting ones, thinking that it would be fitting to give up on a career requiring plenty of preparation without earning money. It is related to their marginal status that their families lost all human and economic capital they possessed in the process of defecting (Korea Hana Foundation, 2016). Due to the lack of understanding of capitalism, most North Korean immigrant parents' socioeconomic status is low, and poverty is likely to limit their children's career choices (Jang, 2020; Kim & Yi, 2017). Thus, career counseling for them should be provided and inclusive of practical advocacy activities such as providing information on free education learning opportunities, including financial education and liaising with related organizations.

Second, two-thirds of the participants identified the stereotype, prejudice, and language barrier as the hindering factors that cause social and cultural exclusion. A twofold view of North Korean immigrants as "outlanders" or "unification that came first" (Kim et al., 2020) is causing difficulties for them to live as ordinary individuals with their own colors. Experiences of marginalization due to one's identity may hinder career development and obtaining decent jobs (Blustein et al., 2016; Duffy et al., 2016). The current findings are consistent with previous Korean studies (Jung & Kim, 2019; Kim, 2018; Moon & Son, 2019) that North Korean immigrant youth often experience a sense of alienation in school that lack respect for differences, which negatively affects the career development process, such as academic adjustment and the school–work transition.

Along with facing prejudices, not knowing where to obtain career information while following academic curricula are additional barriers (Moon & Son, 2019; Shin et al., 2021; Song, 2018). Thus, PWT indicates the need to change the structural inequity that affects the work experience of underprivileged groups (i.e., sexual and gender minorities: Allan et al., 2019; Tebbe et al., 2019; undocumented immigrants: Autin et al., 2018) through moderators such as social support, counselors need to work closely with other teachers to provide tailored intervention for North Korean immigrant youths. For example, for North Korean immigrant youths, it can be beneficial to link career guidance and academic curricula, along with providing a class to teach the South Korean language and, for their peers, antiprejudice education, e.g., applying Intergroup Dialogue (IGD, Zúñiga et al., 2012) should be provided. To help multicultural students, including North Korean immigrants, familiarize themselves with the Korean academic system and language, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family have run the Korean as

a Second Language (KSL) program since the late 2000s (Hong, 2018). Compared with English as a Second Language (ESL) in the USA, KSL education remains to be improved, such as organically connected to the core subjects and integration at the national level (Kim, 2015; Yang, 2019).

Finally, half of the participants cited cultural differences in the agency of making career choices, and three-quarters cited the lack of familial support as the factor that made it difficult for North Korean background youths to design their own career paths. In North Korean society, individuals had to do things designated by the government control, regardless of their desires (Song, 2018), and most jobs were passed on to children based on their parents' status, that is, their *songbun* (Jung, 2018). For these reasons, North Korean refugee parents also have difficulties in helping their children choose their career path (Shin et al., 2021). Furthermore, North Korean background parents are accustomed to culturally patriarchal and strict parent–child relationships (Ryu & Yang, 2021). Thus, the lack of family support revealed by North Korean immigrant youth is closely related to the parenting culture experienced by their parents in North Korea. Therefore, career guidance for North Korean immigrant youths should be inclusive by providing consultation or education for parents or caregivers in addition to direct service for North Korean immigrant youths. It may be worth considering launching a real-time online service provided by a career professional with a North Korean background to increase the convenience of access to service and reduce the psychological distance of North Korean immigrant parents.

Factors conducive to design career path

Despite the career barriers, participants designed their careers using personal and social resources. The general factor chosen by all participants was the perceived self-understanding. The more they understand their personality and preferences, the better they become aware of their strength and desired career options. The result is consistent with the previous traditional career theories (i.e., Super, 1990) that career-related self-understanding is considered a core factor that identifies the career path. The participants seemed to have reconstructed their vocational identity by emphasizing their positive distinctiveness similar to other immigrants (Petriglieri, 2011; Wehrle et al., 2018), breaking away from North Korea's "Saenghwalchunghwa (Life Review Session)" culture, focusing on one's shortcomings through public self-criticism (Lee & Hwang, 2008). In addition, while being aware of career barriers, participants appear to acquire work volition, a recognition of their right to choose a career despite constraints (Duffy et al., 2016) through self-understanding.

Moreover, social support is well-known as a valuable resource for boosting self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2015; Sheu et al., 2010), and helped all participants alleviate negative perceptions about the career barrier of discrimination and provided confidence in developing self-efficacy. The result is consistent with the results of previous studies with students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., gender, ethnicity/race) that career-related supports closely linked with increased self-efficacy (Wright et al., 2014) and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2015), as

well as decreased perceptions of career barriers (Raque-Bogdan et al., 2013). In the case of North Korean background youths, help from people around them has become more critical when family support is not always available.

Furthermore, various learning experiences, such as through past work or education, acquaintances, and social media, were helpful to participants in their career exploration. First, past work or educational experiences have provided new opportunities to the participants and allowed them to be more proactive, which propels an individual forward to change his or her environment, and this may be particularly critical when one's environment is less conducive to vocational success (Duffy et al., 2016). Likewise, vicarious exposure to careers through acquaintances allowed participants to observe others' work experiences and motivated them to figure out what they liked and did not like. Lastly, social media stood out as an essential resource for learning various works via others' narrative stories. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram have become a part of our everyday communication and a tool to express ourselves, penetrating the educational area and becoming fundamental information sources for numerous people, including adolescents (Chen & Bryer, 2012). In summary, various learning experiences through past work or education, acquaintances, and social media provided vocational motivation to the participants and career adaptability, which is an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and anticipated tasks of vocational development (Savickas, 2002).

Need to fulfill through exploring career paths

Participants have the desire to fulfill through achieving career paths that were consistent with the desire for survival, self-determination, and social connection, which PWT supported. Through having decent work, three-quarters of participants wanted financial stability, which is essential for maintaining a basic life in South Korea, such as food, clothing, and shelter (Jeon, 1997). The participants showed more interest in acquiring knowledge and skills about payable work, which they perceived as decent, because money is the means necessary to survive in a capitalist society.

Participants also commonly wanted autonomy, a desire to have a sense of control, in the process of engagement in career-related activities (Duffy et al., 2012). Like other Korean peers, the North Korean immigrant youth valued pursuing a career with choice while focusing on finding a personal fit into the job (Seong et al., 2009). Although they also considered engaging in career-related activities that are not necessarily intrinsically rewarding due to the intersectionality issues (i.e., bias toward North Korean, limited economic resources), from the PWT perspective, it is still the way of meeting self-determined needs with a clear purpose.

Furthermore, social recognition is an influential factor, which is understood to intertwine with the need for belonging (Blustein, 2011; Duffy et al., 2016) that reflects the North Korean students need to feel respected as an ingroup member of the community. The need for belonging that emerged in this study is consistent with Hoersting and Jenkins' (2011) finding that those experiencing this childhood "mobility" often reported a lack of cultural belonging, feeling they belonged

nowhere. In addition, one of the main characteristics of South Korean society is Confucianism, which emphasizes harmony and values community and relationships, especially placing importance on blood, regional, and school ties (Kim, 2016). In this culture, it is essential to create social networks where North Korean immigrant adolescents can be emotionally connected and socially recognized. Specifically, given the polarized view of North Korean immigrants as mentioned above (i.e., the outlander or unification that comes first), North Korean immigrant youths are likely to avoid being otherized by integrating an inter-Korean identity to feel a sense of belonging or by becoming an exemplar of North Korean immigrants to be recognized socially (Shin et al., 2021).

In addition, the will to pursue an altruistic life presented in this study illustrated participants' willingness to confirm their personal value and presence by helping others despite facing discrimination. The result is consistent with the idea that altruism is a distinct need that motivates individuals to find purpose and have a personally meaningful career (Carter et al., 2021; Thoman et al., 2014). Previous qualitative studies about work experience among North Korean immigrant adults (Jun & Shin, 2019; Kim & Dong, 2020) also reported similar findings. Specifically, actively helping others, gaining social recognition, and feeling a sense of belonging were all reported as key factors for maintaining jobs while feeling proud and satisfied as a North Korean.

Considering the psychological needs of marginalized individuals that can vary within contexts, the current results indicate that it may be beneficial to examine needs separately, such as the sense of belonging, social recognition, and altruism, which are partially included in social connection needs in the PWT (Duffy et al., 2016). Thus, it will be necessary for future researchers to explore what unique sociocultural and political contexts have put North Korean immigrant youth to have unique social connection needs and how it is reflected in their life (i.e., the way of relating with others and behaving prosocially).

Limitations and future directions

Despite some significant findings, our study has several limitations that must be addressed to interpret results adequately. First, the sampling bias cannot be ruled out. We recruited North Korean immigrant youths who can speak Korean (either South or North), the languages the research team members are fluent in. All of them have at least one of the biological parents who defected from North Korea and currently live in South Korea. Considering that there are also North Korean immigrant youths who were born in third-world countries and are not fluent in Korean or English and those who moved to South Korea alone without family, our sample has some characteristics that cannot be generalized to all North Korean immigrant youth. Recruitment may be more challenging than stated. As such, future scholars need to explore the career-related experience of those doubly marginalized, such as North Korean immigrant youth who have difficulties speaking Korean or are without family.

Second, all research members were not North Korean immigrants, consistent with the participant's identity. Due to their life in North Korea and their experience of defecting, North Korean immigrant families are likely not to trust others easily and to protect themselves without revealing information about their life. Thus, it is possible that participants were nonetheless reluctant to disclose all details of their experience, although all of them were fully engaged in the lengthy individual interview. Thereafter, when researching North Korean immigrant youth, researchers need to be cautious in establishing sufficient rapport with them before conducting interviews without losing the objectivity of the research.

Third, although the participants in this study were all adolescents, the wide range of educational levels and ages, from middle school students to adults in their early 20s with a high school diploma, should be taken into account in understanding the results. The differences in the level and nature of psychological needs are particularly worthy of further investigation, especially when considering Erikson's psychosocial development stage (Chávez, 2016). For example, the prioritization of psychological needs to be met may differ by age. Specifically, belongingness was indeed reported by 4 of the 12 participants, whereas autonomy was reported by all but one, suggesting that the priority and intensity of the core need to be met by the desired work may vary according to age at the time of the defection, relationship with family before and after defection, the extent of social network including peers and romantic partner depending on development stage, academic ability, and level of education.

Conclusions

The current study presented rare qualitative findings and implications by applying the PWT perspective to the unique challenges of North Korean immigrant youths. This study showed that North Korean immigrant youths are trying to create valuable career paths despite being tied to a sensitive sociopolitical situation in the only divided country in the world. It also sheds new light on specific psychological needs the participants wanted to fulfill by securing decent work that can be helpful to empirical evidence for PWT. All factors that acted as resources and hindrances indicated that career professionals need to consider and assist with the North Korean immigrant youths' lack of social and cultural capital as advocates in the future.

Appendix

Interview protocol

1. Do you have a career path you want to pursue?
2. Do you have any experience been in exploring, choosing, and/or pursuing a career path?

    2.1 What was helpful and unhelpful experiences related to career decision-making process?

2.2 Did you get any support in this process?

2.3 What barriers emerged during this process?

3. Do you believe you will be able to achieve your career goals?
4. What makes you believe you will or will not be able to achieve them?
5. What is the most important factor to consider when deciding the career path?
6. What do you think it would be like to get the job you want?
7. Is there any prejudice or stereotype that you experienced because of the background of coming from North Korea?

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Data availability The datasets used and/or analyzed in this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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