

## **The Life History Interview: Researching the Dynamic Identities of Ethnic Minority Women in Britain**

Hyun-Joo Lim, Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University Of Bath, [Ss3hjl@Bath.ac.uk](mailto:Ss3hjl@Bath.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to highlight how the life history interview has opened up possibilities for effectively exploring interlaced and shifting identities of marginalised groups, such as ethnic minority women, by illustrating two life stories of first generation Korean mothers in Britain. Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf (2000) maintained that in order to understand an individual more fully, we need to know her life history and the processes in which she becomes what she is. While certain elements of identity might be more stable than others, it is important to recognise that individual identity changes over time in line with the vicissitudes of individual life history. Also, the identity of the individual is a result of a complex, multifarious and dynamic interaction between different social organisations and relations at different times and spaces (Valentine, 2007). In this respect, the life history method provides 'considerable background and social texture to research' (Berg, 2007, p. 277). In order to illuminate this, the paper examines two case studies of Korean mothers, selected from the author's wider research of 30 life history interviews with East Asian mothers in Britain. These two life stories of first generation Korean mothers in Britain revealed that the identity construction of the respective ethnic minority women with dependent children is dynamic, as a result of the interplay between divergent social relations, such as motherhood and migration, in different social contexts. Alongside this, the biographical approach enabled me to explore the varied experiences of ethnic minority women who might appear to share similar positions in society. Drawing on these life history interviews, this paper argues that the life history technique is an extremely valuable research tool that enables us to fathom the formation of an individual woman's identity in a fuller and richer sense, whilst also highlighting individual differences in their experiences of being ethnic minority mothers in Britain.*

## Introduction

This paper aims to highlight the ways in which the life history interview has opened up possibilities for effectively exploring the complex, interlaced and shifting identities of ethnic minority women by illustrating two life stories of Korean mothers living in Britain. By inviting the narrator to look back on her journey through various stages of her life, the biographical interview examines ‘the inner experience of individuals, how they interpret, understand, and define the world around them’ (Faraday and Plummer, 1979, p. 776). Through this recognition of the importance of personal meaning, the life history interview offers a vital medium for studying groups of people whose lives have been almost invisible in official and academic discourses (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000). In this sense, it is an immensely useful research tool for examining the experiences of ethnic minority women in Britain, such as Korean women who were the focus in this case study, and who are largely absent in official data. Hence, by employing the life history method, I set out to investigate the identity construction of ethnic minority women with dependent children in Britain, and now seek to demonstrate how instrumental the method was in doing so. While the life history method often includes the use of a variety of other personal materials and documents (Roberts, 2002), in this paper it specifically refers to the *life history interview* and several terms are interchangeably used with it, such as the *life history method* and the *biographical interview*.

The following section presents a review of the life history method in order to provide a broader context to the subsequent discussion. An outline of my research will follow this, which will particularly focus on methodological and theoretical considerations as a means of contextualising my argument. The ensuing section examines two life stories of Korean mothers in Britain. With particular reference to these two life stories, the final section draws conclusions, underscoring how the life history interview enables us to entangle complex identity configurations for ethnic minority women. It also draws attention to the differences between these two women’s accounts, and underlines how useful life history interviews are in helping us to gain contextualised understandings.

## The Life History Interview

Whilst the origin of the biographical interview can be traced back to early periods (Kohli, 1981), there has been a resurgence of its use in sociological enquiries in recent years with 'the biographical turn' (Chamberlayne *et al.*, 2000). One of the major reasons for the method's renaissance originates from the growing interest in, and emphasis on, the importance of individual agency and subjectivity in social life (Bryman, 2001). Alongside this, the emergence of postmodernism in the 1990s has had a significant impact on the way in which we investigate individuals and society. This era has witnessed the rejection of the ontology of universal 'truths', collected via scientific methods, with an emphasis instead being placed on the value of local knowledge that is 'historically and culturally grounded' (Coffey, 2001, p. 53). In conjunction with this, the biographical interview has been regarded as particularly pertinent to a feminist research practice, which has strived to bring the subjective experiences of women to the centre (Harding, 1987). Thus it has been widely employed by feminist researchers (for example, Ginsburg, 1989; Gluck and Patai, 1991; Valentine, 2007). According to Anderson and Jack (1991), the life history can reveal women's perspectives by encouraging them to talk freely and flexibly. By allowing them to unfold their stories in their own terms, it offers an important medium for women to steer the direction of the interview. In this regard, the life history method is considered as an 'emancipatory' practice, which empowers those women whose voices have been marginalised within society (Bornat and Walmsley, 2004). One of the tenets of a biographical interview setting is that the interviewee has a keen listener who believes in the salience and value of her version of the story. According to Yow (1994), this validation is especially significant for the individuals whose lives have been devalued by society, such as ethnic minority women. In addition, life history interviews can offer the opportunity for the narrator to articulate stories they may not have consciously thought of prior to the process of telling their life stories and responding to the questions the interviewee asks. This can help the interviewee get a perspective that she did not have before (Atkinson, 1998). Furthermore, the interview may direct the narrator to look at their experiences from a different angle as well as helping them to be more reflective about their experiences than they would have been in their usual situations (Oakley, 1981).

The Personal Narratives Group (1989, p. 5) claimed that women's personal accounts are salient in investigating 'the interaction between the individual and society in the construction of gender'. They subsequently assert that although individual women create their own biographies, they do so under social conditions that they do not always get to choose. It is therefore vital to understand such conditions, through which individuals' lives have been influenced and formed (Chamberlayne, Rustin and Wengraf, 2002). In that sense, life history interviews can be highly instrumental in examining the dynamic interactions 'of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world' (Mills, 2000, p. 4). Based on her study of four groups of Australian men, which made use of the life history technique, Connell (2005) demonstrated that the life history method offers rich data not only in relation to personal accounts but also to social structural aspects.

Middleton and Hewitt (2000, p. 273) maintained that the life history method provides 'continuities of participatory identities across changes in place and time.' According to Yow (1994, p. 173), the biographical method enables the interviewer to observe the world of the interviewee in its full complexity and is 'a process by which the narrator constructs a self or an identity'. In harmony with this, Chamberlayne *et al.* (2000) claimed that it is necessary to know an individual's life history and the processes by which the individual becomes who she is in order to fathom the person more fully. Long (1987, p. 5) also argued that it is vital to use first-person accounts, such as life history interviews, in order to examine the subjectivity of the individual belonging to a particular social group that has been 'muted, excised from history, and invisible in the official records of their culture.' Individual identity is 'an ongoing interactional accomplishment' (West and Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 8), which undergoes transformations throughout the individual's life. Whilst certain aspects of identity might be more stable and continuous than others, it is crucial to be cognisant of the fluidity of an individual's identity, which is subject to change over time in line with the vicissitudes of the individual's life history. Additionally, the identity of the person is the outcome of a multifaceted, dynamic and complex interplay between different social relations and factors that have a profound impact on the everyday experiences of the individual (Valentine, 2007). Hence, life history interviews can reveal the processes through which identity is produced as a result of the intersection of gender with other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity and class (Bertaux, 1982).

Nonetheless, the life history interview is not without its criticisms and pitfalls. Some scholars have pointed out potential dangers in the uncritical use of individual narratives and biographies for analysing social problems (for example, Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Whilst biographical work typically aims to offer 'the whole life', invariably it is impossible to explore one's entire individual life. Any biographical approach therefore accompanies inevitable 'omissions and silences as well as the selectivities necessarily involved in reducing the vast amount of data' (Stanley and Morgan, 1993, p. 3). Similarly, Gardner (2001, p. 192) commented on the infeasibility of biographical approaches in providing a complete and accurate picture of events, given that memories are likely to fade over time as a result of 'neurological and psychological processes'. Such a reliance on memory and its partial and articulated characteristics raises questions regarding the validity of the life history data. Because the narratives of the storyteller are based on recollection, it is highly likely that they are the products of his/her articulation of events, rather than of 'facts'.

However, Stanley and Morgan (1993, p. 3), whilst suggesting the intertextual relationship between the representation of reality and reality itself, also claimed that repudiating 'conventional referential claims' does not mean that:

...there is any significant relationship between 'the life' as it was lived and 'the life' as it has been written. Rather, it directs us to accept the manifold complexities of the relationship as crucial analytical material.

In addition, Atkinson (1998, p. 134) proposed that:

The way an individual recounts a personal narrative at any point in his or her life represents the most internally consistent interpretation of the way that person currently understands the past, the experienced present, and the anticipated future.

Thus, the emphasis is not on the factual reliability and accuracy of the person's accounts but on the way in which the narrator arranges their narratives in a particular way in order to tell their life story, because it discloses the narrator's relationship to their own biography (Portelli, 1981). Hence, the significance of biographical narratives cannot be found in 'its adherence to facts but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in' (Portelli, 1981, p. 100).

## **My Research: Methodological and Theoretical Considerations**

The aim of my research was to investigate how first generation East Asian women with dependent children living in Britain have constructed and reconstructed their identity over time and in different geographical spaces. In pursuing this aim, a number of methodological and theoretical issues were taken into consideration when choosing a research method. Firstly, my study took a political stance, in that it had as its primary concern the interests of a socially disadvantaged group, i.e. ethnic minority females located in Britain. It was predicated on the awareness that social relations, such as gender and ethnicity, are highly political because they are the resultant products of exclusion and inclusion, which give advantages to some groups over others (Connell, 2005). Hence, my research sought to generate a knowledge that could make a positive contribution to the existing social structure by adopting a theoretical framework and research practice, which was female-centred. In this sense, I was conscious of the existence of power inequalities between the researcher and the participant, and strove to find the best way to minimise the power disparity between the two. Concerning this, the biographical method, which allows the narrators to tell their story whichever way they want to rather than by merely answering certain questions the interviewer is interested in, is a highly instrumental practice in giving power to the voice of interviewees.

In addition, the identity and subject position of the interviewer and interviewee are also considered to be significant in power dynamics between the interviewer and the interviewee, especially given that interview narratives are produced via the interaction of the two (Mishler, 1991). In this regard, my own background as a married first generation East Asian (with Korean heritage) migrant woman is likely to have played a positive role in narrowing the gap between myself and my interviewees, who associated themselves with a similar identity to my own. Although sharing the same gender would not automatically produce power parity between the researcher and the participant (see Tang, 2002) for more detailed discussion), my personal background as an ethnic minority female who perceives herself to have experienced marginalisation and discrimination is likely to have helped establish a stronger connection with the tellers in avoiding a potential barrier between us in this regard. Also, having a physical resemblance based on similar

ethnicity could have enabled us to relate to each other and to establish rapport more easily than otherwise would have been the case: this could be reinforced even more thanks to the Confucian heritage East Asian countries historically share. For instance, in my previous research with a similar sample group, participants often used the word 'we' when referring to East Asians, suggesting a close association among them. Furthermore, the fact that I was childless yet in the process of trying for a baby meant that whilst interviewees could have found certain connections with me, they were simultaneously likely to feel a greater sense of power when discussing the subject of motherhood, based on their first-hand knowledge and experience of having borne and raised children, which they were aware that I did not have. This could imply that the narrator's voice would have been given more authority than the interviewer's in this particular case, which perhaps made a considerable contribution to the issue of power equality.

Finally, my study considered identity as fluid, and constructed in interaction. Rather than viewing such categories as motherhood, employment and migration as separate entities, it emphasised the intersecting relations between them. In addition, understanding identity temporally and spatially was understood to be vital because it is likely that identities are subject to change depending on the individual context. For example, the identity of migrant women with children is likely to differ before and after migration or before and after having children due to the interplay between various social relations and organisations. Moreover, my research has stressed the significance of the situated understanding of an individual woman's experiences of motherhood. For instance, not all ethnic minority women share the same experiences due to their divergent class positions. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the intersecting relations between gender, ethnicity and class because one social category in itself is not sufficient to understand the complexity of the identity formation for all East Asian mothers living in Britain. Consonant with this, Brah and Phoenix (2004, p. 77) affirmed that gender, race and class identities are not separate and isolated entities but are 'processes constituted in and through power relations'. Similarly, Andersen and Collins (2004, p. 8) maintained that 'thinking relationally' is salient in fathoming the lived experiences of any social group within a contextual framework. By illustrating the narratives of a deaf female, Valentine (2007) showed the dynamic and fluid nature of identity formation, produced through the intersection of multiple forms of identity, as well as demonstrating the active participation of

individuals in constructing their own biographies. While structural constraints are seen as important in shaping the identity of East Asian mothers, my study has also regarded individual agency to be salient in the construction of identity. Drawing on this, it seems evident that the life history interview can be a strong tool, which captures the multifarious processes of the identity formation of ethnic minority mothers residing in Britain, and also offers efficacious ways of alleviating the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant.

Founded upon these notions, I conducted 30 life history interviews with first generation East Asian (including Chinese, Korean and Japanese) mothers of children under the age of eleven. From my previous research project based on a similar sample, I had learnt the difficulties of accessing these participants as well as the ineffectiveness of using mail or email in order to do so. Thus, I decided to employ a direct access strategy towards potential participants by approaching them face-to-face. The sampling process began with the act of identifying local communities, which consisted of a high population of East Asians, such as New Malden, West London and Southampton. I visited East Asian language schools, playgroups, private institutions for after-school tutoring and hairdressers where there were many East Asian mothers present in the said local areas. Alongside this, a snowball technique was also used, whereby existing participants were asked to introduce to me anyone else who fitted into the specified sample category. The direct approach was relatively expensive and tiring as it involved me travelling back and forth to these locations until I found a satisfactory number of participants. Nevertheless, it proved to be a successful way of gaining access to these groups.

Interviews were held in the participant's house, workplace, or cafes, depending on the participant's preference. As I am of Korean origin, I was able to speak Korean but not Japanese or Chinese. Thus, interviews with Chinese and Japanese mothers were carried out in English whilst those with Korean mothers were conducted in Korean. I would have preferred to interview all the groups using their first languages because it could have helped them to express and describe subtle feelings and details more easily, particularly when their English is not as proficient as their mother tongue. Yet, since I was not in a position to hire other interviewers and translators who could speak and write those languages due to my project's limited funding, it was not a feasible option for me. Having said that, this did not hinder me from successfully completing 30 biographical interviews – the data



from which were rich and invaluable in their own right.

To provide some social contextual information, East Asian countries have historically been influenced by Confucianism, an ideology that espouses filial piety and a strong hierarchy of human relationships, in which younger women hold a lowly status. One of the objectives of the study was to examine the impact of Confucianism in the identity construction of East Asian mothers who have migrated into Britain. I started the interviews by briefly explaining to the interviewees about my research project and the main areas I was interested in, such as the experiences of employment, migration and motherhood. Then, I asked the participants to tell me their life stories up until the present time in whichever way they wanted to. I let them talk and just listened attentively without interruption until they finished their stories. This allowed interviewees to determine the structure and content of their stories, rather than being directed by the interviewer. After this, I asked a number of probing questions in order to explore themes that were not covered by the respondents. In order to obtain general background information, the participants were also asked to fill in a brief questionnaire at the end of the interview. Each interview lasted about two hours.

Out of these 30 interviews I have selected two stories concerning Korean women for the purpose of this paper, as I feel that these interviews particularly illustrate the general effectiveness of the life history method, by demonstrating the dynamic characteristics it can offer and the rich data it can help to collect. The interviews were transcribed fully and analysed by using narrative analysis. In order to promote the preservation of original meanings and nuances, the selected extracts of the Korean interview data were translated into English *after* being analysed. So as to maintain anonymity, certain details of the participants, such as names and ages, have been changed. The paper will now present the aforementioned two life stories.

## **Two Life Stories of Korean Mothers in Britain**

### *Kay's Story Before Marriage and Children*

Kay was a married, 33 year old, part-time employed mother of three children.

She was brought up in South Korea in a middle-class family 'without any special troubles or difficulties' and originally came to Britain to obtain a professional qualification from a famous hairdressing academy in London eight years prior to the life history interview. Following her passion and great interest, she started working in a South Korean hairdressing salon after graduating from high school. In order to achieve her aim of becoming a famous hairdresser, before getting married and having children, Kay decided to come to London where an internationally well-known hairdressing academy was: 'I had a very strong sense of success, and that's why I came even to Britain and went to Y'. Whilst she was studying at Y, her sense of identity as an Asian became prominent due to the prejudiced attitudes of some teachers towards East Asian students. The interplay between her identity as a confident single woman and as an Asian meant a newly acquired awareness of herself as a minority in Britain and a subsequent increase in her already existing desire to excel in the academy so she could subvert prevalent notions about Asians:

They [the teachers] just generalised, saying, 'Asians have come here while they can't even speak English'. So my aim for those 6 months was that I became better than the British. It was my mantra. Carrying that one with me all the time, I've never had any time in my life when I worked that hard, even though my character is usually not determined. Also the teachers, if we sometimes couldn't understand, didn't explain and just said 'Oh, never mind'. I was very angry about it and so determined to be the top by working hard. As a result, I became the top when I graduated and won the hair cut prize.

As can be seen from Kay's narrative, her acute realisation of racial discrimination and prejudice against Asian students at the institution reinforced her Asian identity. This experience of being perceived as an inferior Other in the eyes of the West (Said, 1978) simultaneously provided her with the momentum to resist the racialised understanding of Asians. Her subject position as an East Asian became a vital means to define who she was within the British milieu. Relating to this, it is worth noting here that racism and racial discrimination were something she encountered for the first time in her life as a result of her migration to Britain. In the Korean context where she had shared the dominant ethnic background, Kay had never had to seriously think about herself in terms of ethnicity. Thus, considering the interaction of her worker, gender, class and ethnic identities within the Korean context, issues around her ethnic identity were almost invisible, buried under the ascendancy of her

worker, gender and class identities. In contrast, in Britain her ethnic identity became a more visible and important issue, having a critical impact on her daily experiences.

Despite these setbacks and challenges though, she enjoyed her 'single' life in Britain. Thus, migration itself did not pose a rupture or disjuncture in her life trajectory, as a skilled worker who had great potential to be successful in her career, until she unexpectedly entered the next chapter of her life.

### *Kay's Story After Marriage and Motherhood*

Kay's life took an unexpected turn when she accidentally became pregnant by her then boyfriend, who was a Korean-born British citizen. As she described with a laugh, 'having a child prior to marriage was a taboo in Korea', so they hurriedly got married before their first child was born. This evidently indicated the continuing importance of Korean cultural values upon their lives in Britain. Also, Kay's personal story reveals a structural force – i.e. a dominant cultural norm in this case - that shapes individuals' lives. Soon after their marriage, she gave birth to her first child. Motherhood became the biggest turning point in her life in every respect, and she accordingly experienced a profound transformation in her own identity:

When I look back on myself, I always feel that I was always like a mere child and can't believe the fact that I'm raising my children. After having children, I feel more responsibilities. I'm very, especially because what I'm doing is hairdressing, always interested in physical appearance or fashion. I used to be very serious about things like that, doing shopping every day. However, after having children, I can't really buy things for myself...once I became a mother, the thought that I want to give my child more automatically occurred.

Thus, motherhood transformed the way Kay saw herself from a self-centred and highly ambitious skilled worker to a person who prioritized her child's needs and interests. This change in her identity also brought a significant change in the way she perceived her work:

I used to think only like this: 'Absolutely, by becoming the best, everybody must know me!' However, after giving birth to the baby, I really felt that things like that were really futile and rather useless, and it was only my vain dream.

After having the baby, I felt a more important thing had come into existence. And thus, all of those...of course even now there remains the importance of my work like that, but not as much as before.

As the above quotation indicates, the intersection between motherhood and employment resulted in her identity as a mother coming to the fore (Skinner, 2011) and the weakening of her worker identity. Hence, contrary to her strong career ambitions prior to having a child, her job became secondary after she became a mother. Simultaneously, the interplay of motherhood with other social relations and factors, such as class and migration, presented her with a number of challenges and difficulties:

Because we got married when my husband was a student and I also just finished at Y...we didn't have savings and it was very tough financially. This became worse because there were no savings and even if we continued to earn, it was like throwing water on thirsty soil.

As is clear from the above account, Kay struggled economically after having her child. Interplaying with her status as a migrant woman with no familial support network, this has arguably had a significant effect on her class position and her lifestyle in forcing her to try to adapt to a more lowly financial status and its subsequent social restrictions. In turn, this had a resounding impact on her daily life in combination with other social factors. Doubtlessly, both Kay and her husband needed to work in order to make money to establish financial security for their newly established family, but simultaneously the childcare issue affected Kay's full-time employment status. It was evident from her narrative that it was Kay who was largely responsible for childcare whilst working full time, and this has made her life even harder:

When I had my kids with me, I fought with my husband a lot...I was too tired, I was too tired physically, and because I was trying to do everything on my own, working outside, doing housework and caring for my kids, the feelings were just accumulated.

This suggested that gendered norms based on Confucian patriarchy continued to affect Kay's life in Britain. Thus, irrespective of her employment status, she always played the main part in the child-caring role. Her difficulties were further aggravated by the fact that she and her husband were migrants with no close family in Britain to

help with childcare:

I found it very difficult. When you have kids, unless you have a great financial security, the living cost here is too expensive, and thus in terms of a house and living, it's too tough. If I were in Korea, my mum looked after [the children] and there is lots of help around you, so life would be a lot easier. But here even if you earn a lot, after paying rent and paying for things for the kids, you can't do things like saving.

Hence, the interplay of motherhood with her and her husband's financial difficulties and their status as migrants presented them with various challenges.

To make matters worse, Kay became accidentally pregnant with her second child, followed by the third unexpected pregnancy. After having two children and expecting the third one, Kay and her husband struggled even more and started to think, 'We can't continue like this. Because we've got two kids now, we should buy a house. What shall we do?' Consequently, they decided to take their two children to Korea and leave them with her parents until they secured a council house that they had applied for. Kay and her husband moved to single-bed accommodation in order to save money so they could buy a house for the family in the future.

### *Jay's Story Before Marriage and Motherhood*

Jay was a married, 37 year old, full-time mother of one child. At the time of the interview she had lived in Britain for about five years. Jay was brought up in a middle-class family and, after completing her Master's degree, Jay started working as a language specialist for children with learning difficulties in a research centre in a Korean university. Jay felt a strong pride in her job and she believed her work was an essential part of her life and her identity, which would continue to provide the defining characteristics of her identity:

Uhhh, I think my job was very special...My undergraduate degree was general education...but I changed my degree to special education when I started my Master's. At that time, I felt that I made a very good choice and I couldn't separate it from my life...I thought I'd made an excellent decision and I would always do the job.

Alongside this, she had high levels of ambition for her career and believed that she would become very successful in her field:

When I believed I would carry on studying and would not stop working, I also thought I would do my PhD here [in Britain]...When I was there [in Korea], I dreamt that I could become a very successful case. I wanted to study further, and I wanted to be the one who did the most extensive research by combining my experience in the field and knowledge.

However, as the use of the modal auxiliary verbs ('I would carry on'/'I would do'/'I could become') indicated, her dream of becoming a highly respected expert in special education remained unachieved. This was a result of her projected career path being disrupted by her marriage, subsequent pregnancy and move to Britain.

### *Jay's Story After Marriage and Pregnancy*

When Jay got married in Korea, she changed her work from full-time to part-time because of the pressure from her father-in-law who wanted her to quit the job completely:

My father-in-law doesn't like his daughters-in-law to work outside. But, ironically, my mother-in-law had worked until we got married and my father-in-law wasn't happy with it. He wished his wife had looked after her children at home. So my father-in-law said to me and my brother-in-law's wife when we got married that he wanted us not to work and stay at home looking after the household, living on what his sons earned. To be honest, I didn't like it... Nonetheless, what can I do?

This clearly highlighted the dominance of her gender identity after her marriage in Korea. The interplay of her gender identity with her class position and employment status meant the diminishing position of her 'worker identity' as a result of the reinforcement of her identity as a married woman in a Korean middle-class family. This also shows a clear manifestation of the persistent impact of Confucian patriarchy in Korea where married women are generally still expected to perform their obligation as a caring wife and an obedient daughter-in-law despite some improvement in gender issues and a recent increase in married women's

participation in the labour markets (Won and Pascall, 2004).

In addition, her employment status shifted once more when she became pregnant with her child, together with the prospect of coming to Britain with her husband, who was sent to a branch in London by his company. At the beginning of her pregnancy, Jay completely quit her job in order to concentrate on motherhood. Rather than accompanying her husband, she decided to remain in Korea until her delivery. During this period she immersed herself in the performance of good mothering by attending various classes for pregnant women. According to Jay, this was common practice among middle- and upper- class women in Korea, where the intensive mothering ideology was still dominant. In addition, as Jay's narrative indicated, the practices of intensive mothering began even before babies were born. Thus, many expectant mothers participated in a wide array of classes and sessions, which were known to be beneficial for the development of babies:

To be honest, in Korea it's very exceptional even when the baby is in the womb...When women become pregnant, they learn a lot for *taegyo* [a Korean word for foetal education]. Because it's known to be good for the development of a baby to use hands, there are many classes for knitting, sewing or making toys. Or there are all sorts of free or paid classes for educating pregnant women or preparing for the birth like breastfeeding. I also attended them a lot...

This underscored the powerful imagery of good mothering in Korea, which has significant implications for the intensification of the gendered norms. In this context, her identity as a language specialist became diluted by her strong identity as a mother.

### *Jay's Story After Migration*

Three months after her son was born, Jay came to Britain in order to join her husband who had already settled down in London. Her migration consolidated her motherhood identity by blocking her chance of returning to her previous profession. On top of her caring responsibility, which restricted her employment opportunities, her lack of English skills meant she was not able to find a similar sort of job in Britain, even if she had wanted to work. As a result, she gave up the whole idea of working, which was a crucial aspect of her identity when she was single. With limited English

competency and ensuing feelings of isolation, she found it very difficult to adjust to her new environment at the very beginning of her stay in Britain:

Uhhhh, at the very beginning, for the first couple of months, I really thought I should pack up and go back to Korea...In Korea I have my family, my parents and parents-in-law and they helped me a lot in terms of childcare. But, here there was nobody to help me. Also, first of all my English wasn't perfect. Besides, the environment was new to me and everything was new to me so I had to stay at home with the baby all day, except going to a local shop near my house. My son was a real baby so for the first couple of months I felt really bored and felt like being trapped in the house. I found it really hard.

Coming to Britain, therefore, made her position as an ethnic minority a prominent issue. In contrast to her life in Korea as a confident individual who specialised in language, her limited competency in the English language became a major obstacle for her to fully engage in her new life in Britain. Moreover, this situation was made even more acute by the fact she was a stay-at-home mother of a very young child who needed full-time care from her. Hence, the intersection between her migrant status and motherhood identity produced an experience that was divergent from her life in Korea.

Nonetheless, at the time of the interview she suggested she had settled down to British life, having made a lot of friends as well as having enjoyed a new sense of freedom:

Researcher: How do you feel about your life in Britain?

Jay: Ahhhh, I feel a lot more relaxed mentally...Once I began to socialise with people around us [laughs], starting from my husband's colleagues' wives, I found it good fun. Also, there are many things I can do with my son. So I became busy, yes, meeting people, chatting, visiting different places...I felt lonely and inconvenient not having family here at the beginning but now I find it rather relaxing to be far away from the family. To be honest, because the family relationship in Korea is really unusual, inevitably all married mothers get stressed [laughs]. As I'm living here, it's nice to be free from those problems.

Rather than being the passive subject of new social settings, Jay actively participated in constructing her new life by taking advantage of the fresh set of opportunities, which British life afforded her. She found a new level of enjoyment in her life by redefining the absence of her family as a release from family demands



predicated upon notions of a Confucian patriarchy. This also enabled her to enjoy life in a small family unit without having the pressure to conform to the dominant Confucian ideology of family.

It is however important to point out that Jay's household income, which was about four times higher than Kay's, was substantial enough for her to have a comfortable life. Hence, unlike Kay, for Jay finance was never an issue in her British life and she did not have to worry about working for economic reasons. Likewise, she could afford to take new courses for the preparation of her future job without any financial concerns, once her son started to go to nursery:

Since I lived here, I realised that whilst the job I did was interesting, there are also many interesting areas I can learn in this country. First of all, I can learn English and I begin to think I can have a new life while being contented with my previous work as it was...If I were in Korea, probably I never thought like that and continued to do the same job...

Jay's middle-class position, and status of having enough financial and temporal resources, enabled her to benefit from new opportunities with no constraints. Although her ethnic position with limited language skills put restrictions on her ability to engage in British life more fully, her comfortable economic position helped her to overcome this obstacle better than Kay. The following account of Jay also contrasted with Kay's hardship:

Researcher: In what ways do you think your life in Britain has affected yourself?

Jay: It seems that it has enriched me as a human being. Also, because relationships are not as complicated as Korea and I have more time for myself, what shall I say, I feel serene...And mentally I receive less stress and so it's good for mental health...I can really drive a car and visit a deep forest in Scotland, which I saw only in a book.

As is evident from the above, Jay's account was full of optimism and euphoria, different from Kay's. Although Jay also expressed her occasional regret about giving up her career, her narrative suggested that living in Britain had improved the quality of her life. In contrast, Kay described living in Britain as a major setback for her life, preventing her from pursuing what she wanted to do, even if she had found a new meaning through motherhood. In summary, the interlocking relations of their gender identity with other social factors, such as migrant status and class position,

highlighted different experiences for Kay and Jay who nonetheless shared the same gender and ethnicity.

## **Conclusion**

As can be seen from the two highlighted case studies of Korean women in Britain, the life history interview has provided a most effective medium to examine the multifaceted and dynamic identity construction of the East Asian women in my British-based sample. The life history method also made a contribution to the empowerment of the women in the interview by allowing the interviewees to 'take control of their own stories' (Bornat and Walmsley, 2004, p. 221). Although it did not completely eliminate the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant owing to differences in knowledge, etc., it undeniably gave more power to the voice of the narrator by letting them talk through their life stories in their own terms (Anderson and Jack, 1991). Also, having the first-hand knowledge over the interviewer based on their experiences as mothers meant that the teller's voice seemed to hold more authority for them than the interviewer's in terms of childbearing and childcare issues. During the interview, the tellers often played the role of an expert, talking about their experiences of pregnancy and childcare as a kind of explanation to the interviewer. In addition, my subject position as a female East Asian migrant and ethnic minority played a critical part in bringing about more equal power relations between myself and the interviewees: whilst having a similar ethnic and gender background helped the establishment of a rapport relatively easily, my personal experience of hardship as an ethnic minority in the UK also enabled me as a researcher to empathise with the interviewees, which narrowed the distance even more between us. Meanwhile, conducting life history interviews with ethnic minority women in their non-native language could present a certain degree of challenge for those whose English is not as proficient as their first language. Nevertheless, this felt like a minimal drawback during the interview process as the examination of the biographical paths of the individuals offered me an extensive opportunity to engage in the construction of their lives with depth and breadth and consequently allowed me the possibility to gather quite a holistic version of their life

stories. In addition, biographical interviews provided me with a means to explore the intricacy of identity development as well as to collect rich data, and so proved to be ultimately beneficial, despite the language barrier issue.

Moreover, as Atkinson (1998) and Oakley (1981) pointed out, the life history interview offers participants the chance to look back on their lives from a different angle, by inviting them to revisit and reflect on their past and present lives. The role of the interviewer was vital in these settings for my own project: the kind of questions I, as the interviewer asked, helped the participants to reflect on their biography from different perspectives. For instance, my question regarding the impact of migration on their life and identity made them look back on their biographical paths from a different standpoint, which they reported not to have done before. Also, being an attentive listener who valued the participants' stories was reassuring for the interviewees, who asserted that their experiences had been treated as insignificant previously. For example, after the interview, some of the interviewees expressed their appreciation, saying that they had found the whole process therapeutic and that it had given them a rare opportunity to reflect upon their precious past.

Additionally, as Chamberlayne *et al.* (2000) pointed out, the life history method enables us to investigate personal experiences as well as social structural issues. Whilst Kay's and Jay's stories were highly personal, they also revealed the social conditions from which their experiences were produced. For instance, Kay's personal experience of racial discrimination at college unfolds the prejudice-ridden social condition, in terms of injustice and disrespect, which many ethnic minorities face (Parekh 2000; Salway 2008). Similarly, Jay's experience after marriage discloses the persistent impact of Confucian patriarchy, which still seemingly shapes many Korean women's lives even when living outside of Korea.

Furthermore, the two life stories clearly highlighted that the biographical method offered me the opportunity to examine the interlocking characteristics of individual identity. For example, the identities of both Kay and Jay changed through the intersection of their migration and motherhood with other social factors, which had a considerable impact on their identity – for instance by shifting them from being self-focused, strongly career-minded women to being mothers who placed their children's needs and wants before their own. On the other hand, even if Kay and Jay shared the same gender and ethnicity, their life path diverged due to various intersecting relations, such as social class. Whilst both women related that they had

been brought up in middle-class families, their lives bifurcated through the interplay of their motherhood identity with their migrant status and economic factors. This demonstrates that the life history method enabled me to study the divergent experiences of my participants in different contexts.

To sum up, the life history interview is arguably one of the most valuable research methods for the purpose of examining the dynamic, multifaceted and interlaced characteristics of identity formation for ethnic minority women. By helping us to unravel the complexities of a biographical tapestry interwoven with variegated colours and textiles, the life history method can provide 'considerable background and social texture to research' (Berg, 2007, p. 277).

***Acknowledgement:*** *I would like to thank Robert Casey and Dr Tina Skinner, as well as the reviewers and editorial team for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.*

## References

- Andersen, M. L. and Collins, P. H. (Eds.), (2004). *Race, Class and Gender: an Anthology*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Thomson Learning.
- Anderson, K. and Jack, D. C. (1991). Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses. In S. B. Gluck and D. Patai (Eds.), *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*, (pp 11-26). London: Routledge.
- Atkinson, P. and Silverman, D. (1997). Kundera's immortality: the interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3 (3), 304-325.
- Atkinson, R. (1998). *The Life Story Interview*. London: Sage.
- Berg, B. L. (2007). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Bertaux, D. (1982). The life course approach as a challenge to the social sciences. In T. K. Haven and K. J. Adams (Eds.), *Ageing and Life Course Transitions: an Interdisciplinary Perspective* (pp 127-150). London: Tavistock.
- Bornat, J. and Walmsley, J. (2004). Biography as empowering practice: lessons from research. In P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and U. Apitzsch (Eds.), *Biographical Methods and Professional Practice: an International Perspective* (pp 221-236). Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Brah, A. and Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5 (3), 75-86.
- Bryman, A. (2001). *Social Research Method*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chamberlayne, P., Bornat, J., and Wengraf, T. (2000). The biographical turn. In P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and Wengraf, T. (Eds.), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* (pp 1-30). London: Routledge.
- Chamberlayne, P. Rustin, M. and Wengraf, T. (Eds.) (2002). *Biography and social exclusion in Europe: experiences and life journeys*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Coffey, A. (2001). *Education and Social Change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Faraday, A. and Plummer, K. (1979). Doing life histories. *Sociological Review*, 27 (4), 773-798.
- Gardner, G. (2001). Unreliable memories and other contingencies: problems with

biographical knowledge. *Qualitative Research*, 1 (2), 185-204.

Ginsburg, F. (1989). Dissonance and harmony: the symbolic function of abortion in activists' life stories. In The Personal Narratives Group (Eds.), *Interpreting Women's Lives* (pp 59-84). USA: Indiana University Press.

Gluck, S. B. and Patai, D. (Eds.) (1991). *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*. London: Routledge.

Harding, S. (1987). Introduction: is there a feminist method? In S. Harding, (Ed.), *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues* (pp 1-14). Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Kohli, M. (1981). Biography: account, text, method. In D. Bertaux (Ed.), *Biography and Society*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Long, J. (1987). *Telling Women's Lives: the New Sociobiography*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, USA.

Middleton, D. and Hewitt, H. (2000). Biography and identity: life story work in transitions of care for people with profound learning difficulties. In P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, and T. Wengraf (Eds.), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science: Comparative Issues and Examples* (pp 261-275). London: Routledge.

Mills, C. W. (2000). *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mishler, E. G. (1991). *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Harvard University Press: London.

Oakley, A. (1981). Interviewing women: a contraction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (pp 30-61). London: Routledge.

Parekh, B. (2000). *The Parekh Report: The Future of Multi-ethnic Britain*. London: Profile Books.

Portelli, A. (1981). The peculiarities of oral history. *History Workshop*, 12 (Autumn), 96-107.

Roberts, B. (2002). *Biographical Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

Salway, S. (2008). Labour market experiences of young UK Bangladeshi men: identity, inclusion and exclusion in inner-city London. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31 (6), 1126-1152.

Skinner, T. (2011). Dyslexia, mothering and work: intersecting identities, reframing, 'drowning' and resistance. *Disability and Society*, 26 (2), 125-137.

Stanley, L. and Morgan, D. (1993). Editorial introduction. *Sociology*, 27 (1), 1-4.

Tang, N. (2002). Interviewer and interviewee relationships between women. *Sociology*, 36 (3), 703-721.

The Personal Narratives Group (Eds.) (1989). *Interviewing Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. USA: Indiana University Press.

Valentine, G. (2007). Theorizing and researching intersectionality: a challenge for feminist geography. *The Professional Geographer*, 59 (1), 10-21.

West, C. and Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, 9 (1), 8-37.

Won, S-Y. and Pascall, G. (2004). A Confucian war over childcare? Practice and policy in childcare and their implications for understanding the Korean gender regime. *Social Policy and Administration*, 38 (3), 270-289.

Yow, V. R. (1994). *Recording Oral History: a Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. London: Sage Publications.