

ARTICLES

Transitions and Time Dissonance Between Social and Political Aging in South Korea

Wonjee Cho, M.S.
Department of Child and Family Development
University of Georgia

Denise C. Lewis, Ph.D.
Department of Child and Family Development
University of Georgia

Abstract

This study explored multidimensional meanings related to “becoming old” for the young-old in South Korean society. Six persons aged 62 to 68 were interviewed in-depth. They chronologically, physically, and socially experienced the transition to old age at different times determined through “Hwan-Gap” (at age 60) and through current social policies that define entry into elderhood (at age 65). However, most did not psychologically accept their own aging as beginning at age 60 with “Hwan-Gap.” They reported that they were “forced” to become old at that time, even though they did not yet qualify for old age benefits provided by the South Korean government. In addition, they did not consider others’ perceptions of them as “old” as a psychological obstacle to defining themselves as young. Knowledge about young-old persons’ dissonance between their identities and sociopolitical views of entry into elderhood is important for understanding their experiences during the five-year gap between sociocultural entry into old age at age 60 and entry into the nationally defined elderhood at age 65.

Key Words: Aging, Korea, transition to elderhood, young-old, Hwan-Gap

INTRODUCTION

Rites of passage, often associated with reaching a particular chronological age, define entry and exit from roles and responsibilities assumed in one’s life. In the South Korean concept of annual time passage, there is a 60-year cycle with each year bearing a particular name. The 60th birthday, called Hwan-Gap, marks the beginning of the second cycle of life whereby years are “repeated.” Oftentimes, children provide elaborate celebrations as a parent reaches this important rite of passage. Hwan-Gap was once a celebration of longevity but now it marks the beginning of a nebulous five-year period of transitioning to elderhood.

During the past five decades, South Korean society has experienced dramatic demographic changes including the rapid growth of those aged 65 and older, from 3.8% of the population in 1980 to 11% in 2010 (Choi 1996; Kim 1996; National Statistical Office 2010). Population aging is expected to continue in the next two decades, reaching 15.6% in 2020 and 24.3% in 2030 (National Statistical Office 2006). Social policies have adapted to current aging patterns and longer life spans with age 65 as the official entry point into elderhood. For example, people aged 65 and over are classified as ‘the elderly’ and are eligible for a variety of social benefits through the Long-Term Care Insurance Act, Old Age Pension Act, Law for the Welfare of the Aged, and Road Traffic Law, along with other acts or laws. Eligibility at age 60 applies to only four health and

social programs: Early Dementia Detection project, an eye examination project, Leisure Welfare Center for Elderly, and a free meal service for the elderly (Chung 2011, 2012). Yet, Hwan-Gap continues as the traditional marker for an aging self and little is known about the five years between the traditional and policy-mandated designation as an elder.

With increasing social interests in aging-related experiences of old people in South Korea, most attention has been paid to their declines and losses in physical and mental health and their attitudes toward the end of life (Cho 1997; Kim et al. 2003; Seo 2008). Neugarten (1996) emphasized the significance of classifying old people into three groups (i.e., young-old (age 65-74), old-old (age 75-84), and oldest-old (age 85+)) for understanding diversity in old age. She explained that the young-old were differentiated from the middle-aged by the fact of retirement and were reluctant to accept their own aging, contrary to the old-old and oldest-old who fully accepted that they had entered elderhood. In addition, the young-old were portrayed as more healthy and active than the old-old and oldest-old (Baltes and Smith 2003; Chou and Chi 2002; Neugarten 1996; Smith et al. 2002). However, research on South Korean elders assumes a more homogeneous population who share similar experiences of aging-related changes and attitudes toward death, such as declining functional capability, loss of social roles and responsibility, and (Cho 1997; Choi 2009; Kim et al 2003; Lee and Rhee 2004; Yang 2012). Although Neugarten's classification of ages was developed for a Western population, it is equally salient in this consideration of South Korean elders who are experiencing aging in a rapidly changing sociocultural climate.

Researchers also have focused on issues relevant for a productive and successful later life by highlighting the need to maintain physical health and strength and the benefits of engaging in social activities (Bae and Park 2009; Chung 2007; Jeong and Shin 2009; Kim and Kim 2009; Kwon and Kim 2008). In spite of the body of literature on aging in South Korea, little is known about young-olds' experiences of becoming old and their reconstruction of a sense of self as an older person. This study illuminates how the young-old experience and interpret entry into old age and age-related psychological, physical, and social changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multidimensional Quality of Time

Time is a means to measure temporal flow and duration, usually employing clocks and calendars, and as an index

variable to designate "age" among populations. However, increasingly researchers also have begun to view time also as a socially constituted reality. Time and temporality reflect socially-shared norms and expectations relative to normal timing and sequencing of major events across the life course as well as personal concepts and sense of time that emerged through experiencing temporal events and changes within a society (Hendricks 2001; Sorokin and Merton 1937). Researchers recognized that quantitative and linear dimensions of time taken for granted in previous research are not entirely sufficient to understand how an individual perceives the passage of time and life changes and how they interpret personal experiences of time. The recognition of this shortfall underscores the need for formulating time as a temporal structure containing multiple facets and modes (Hendricks and Peters 1986; Sorokin and Merton 1937).

Hendricks and Peters (1986) employ Maltz's time schema to propose diverse aspects of time and classify time into ecological, individual, social, and ideational modes. They assert that the ecological mode refers to a temporal structure representing chronological changes from the outset of events and activities in the natural world and provide a calendar as an index of time reckoning and passing. Individual time is a temporal construct comprising one's own meaningful and private events, which affect personal awareness of external events and objects and personal life. Social time is used to identify a temporal regularity of social activities and events based on socially shared norms and expectations about life transitions or life events. Age-graded events and roles serve as reference points in systematizing and ordering individual experiences of time. Finally, an ideational dimension is a historical temporality specifying significant traditions and historical events. Such an approach to time could provide a deeper insight into human experiences of time and could tell us more about the meaning and implication of lived time in personal life.

Present Time in Old Age

Older adults begin to be aware of finite time and inevitable death and simultaneously to refashion their own sense of time through reflecting on their lives and organizing them in meaningful ways (Dittmann-Kohli 1990; McAdams 1990). Personal concepts and sense of time are crucial in adjusting to age-linked changes as well as affecting the construction of an aging self, health management behaviors, and emotional well-being (Lennings 2000; Rappaport et al. 1993; Showers and Ryff 1996).

However, research on time and aging has often dealt with older people's orientation toward time and its relationship with health and psychological well-being (Bouffard et al.

1996; Lennings 2000; Nurmi et al. 1992; Rappaport et al. 1993). Although older adults tend to focus on occurrences and goals in the present and the near future (Lennings 2000; Nurmi et al. 1992; Rappaport et al. 1993), their sense of the future is viewed as a crucial component affecting attitudes toward aging and dying, health behaviors, and life satisfaction (Bouffard et al. 1996; Lennings 2000; Rappaport et al. 1993). These studies display limited understanding of older adults' perceptions and interpretations of temporal experiences such as age-related changes and declines in the present. Further, these studies investigating temporal attitudes and experiences of the overall elderly population demonstrate a limited grasp of temporal experiences of the young-old who recently transitioned to elderhood. It is recognized that the young-old differently perceive their temporal changes and their locations in the aging process through fewer changes in health and social resources (Baltes and Smith 2003; Chou and Chi 2002; Smith et al. 2002). Older people's attitudes toward death and future time perspectives are a major issue in South Korean research on time and aging (Cho 1997; Kim et al. 2003; Lee and Rhee 2004). These studies also provide a limited insight into the young-olds' reconstruction of an aging self through temporal experiences of age-linked changes.

Life Course Perspective on the Entrance to Old Age

The young-old are relatively healthy and free from physical impairments and illness compared with the old-old and the oldest-old (Baltes and Smith 2003; Chou and Chi 2002; Smith et al. 2002), but becoming an older adult within a society is a key transition and is simultaneously a great psychological challenge in adjusting to changes in social roles and activities. Life course perspective is employed to understand the changing contexts of lives experienced by the young-old. Life course perspective provides a way to illustrate the meanings of these changes in the aging process in that it focuses on processes and changes of individual development (Elder and Johnson, 2003). In addition, it highlights that individual lives are linked to the social and historical contexts in which they are embedded and the individual life course is considered as an outcome of interactions among multiple temporal, individual, and sociocultural phenomena over time (Elder 1998; Fry 2003). Because aging is a lifelong process embedded in social contexts and historical time, life course perspective provides a theoretical framework to gain insight into variable and patterned aging-related experiences of the young-old within South Korean society and meanings of temporal experience in aging process. This study explores young-olds' experiences of time and age-related changes in South Korea in order to better understand their lives during the five-year transition between "forced" elderhood and nationally defined elderhood.

METHODS

Sample

This pilot study, conducted in 2006, used a purposeful sampling strategy for selecting young-old participants (LeCompte and Preissle 1993; Patton 1990). Inclusion criteria were those who with recent entry into elderhood and who were relatively healthy, independent, and require no particular care for health-related issues by self-report assessment of health status and activity limitation level. The first author is from South Korea and conducted all interviews in the Korean language. Through her personal contacts, twelve individuals were contacted and were asked if they were willing to take part in this study. University-approved human subject protection protocols were followed and basic demographic information and socioeconomic status were collected. Because several were similar in socioeconomic status and only three women agreed to participate, all but three men were excluded. These three men were chosen based on holding similar occupations as the women (with the exception of "housewife" as all men are or were wage earners). Therefore, a total of six were finally selected for in-depth interviews so that information from this pilot study could be used to inform a larger, ethnographic study conducted in 2009. A sample of three men and three women, aged 62 to 68, was interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide about their experiences regarding time passage and age-related changes [Table 1]. Interviews took place in the participants' homes. Each of the six participants was interviewed for one and a half to two hours. For obtaining accurate transcription of data after interviews, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim into texts. All persons described in this study were assigned pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Inductive analysis, a general approach for qualitative data analysis without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Dey 1993), was used to identify the frequent or dominant themes that emerged from the participants' narratives surrounding time-related changes associated with entry into elderhood. This analytic strategy was suitable for developing concepts and meanings that were not derived from previous theories or research outcomes (Polkinghorne 1995). For familiarity with the transcribed data, the entire data set was carefully read and reread in detail with field notes added for increased richness. Open coding was used to capture all potential codes across the merged interview/field notes data. For analyzing at the broader level of themes, the initially coded data were sorted and clustered into potential themes and

were assessed for differences and similarities among the participants.

RESULTS

Chronological Changes in Aging

After age 60, most participants began to recognize the effects of their increasing chronological ages (Hendricks and Peters 1986) and perceive being in their sixties as an important life event relative to the transition to elderhood or the aging process. In the past when average life expectancy was lower than age 60, Hwan-Gap was a special birthday to celebrate longevity of those turning 60 and to wish them a long and prosperous life. More particularly, age 60 signified a starting point of the later stage of life. Now, however, Hwan-Gap is viewed less as a celebration of longevity by those reaching age 60 and more as an unwelcome transition to "old" age. For example, 63-year-old Soyeon Choi described her experience and emotions when she was 60 years old. After Hwan-Gap, I began to feel old. Before Hwan-Gap, I couldn't feel my age. Hwan-Gap made me feel old. Hwan-Gap itself represents "being old," doesn't it? I felt my body and mind became old [at that time].

Hwan-Gap was internalized as a special year leading to entry into old age rather than celebrating a long life in that she perceived physical declines and changes and had felt old since reaching age 60. It was a critical, socially defined, indication of a shift from mid-life to old age and created an increased awareness of aging-related changes where none had been acknowledged before the Hwan-Gap celebration. Eunkyong Kwon, aged 66, also emphasized that age 60 served as a starting point for the transition to elderhood and for experiences of being old. She explained, "[I first experienced being old] just over age 60. After 60, I can't control my body and am sick. After 60, my leg hurts, and my knee hurts... my body aches all over." She portrayed physical declines and pains as conditions caused by turning age 60. In addition, 68-year-old Jinho Yoon viewed time left to live after age 60 as a new and different period from adult life and mid-life. He said, When I was 60 years old, my youth was slipping away. Now, in my 60's, in everything... in mental things... I became limited in my abilities. Emotionally, I'm willing to do anything, but physically, I can't.

At the age of 60, he experienced a transition to elderhood and no longer viewed himself as a young adult or a middle-aged man. He underscored physical and mental limitations in abilities and motivations as a significant identity change that he experienced with increasing chronological age. For these participants, turning age 60 was a significant life event indicating the entry into

elderhood. Reaching the chronological age of 60 was a new period of facing a variety of age-related changes and was critical in self-identity as an old adult. It was important to recognize that the traditional transition year, the celebration of age 60 with Hwan-Gap, did not coincide with the nationally defined transition year, age 65 (Shin et al. 2003). This created confusion as to one's place in the aging continuum because one was often socially defined as old before one was nationally recognized as such.

Physical Changes in Aging

The participants began to perceive changes in physical functioning and strength almost immediately following Hwan-Gap and highlighted their difficulties in physical activities in everyday life. In addition, they considered these physical changes and difficulties as significant age-related phenomena in their lives. For example, 63-year-old Soyeon Choi commented on increasing physical pains after age 60 and thus physical and psychological troubles in everyday life.

After Hwan-Gap, I physically feel so bad. Because I have a pain in my legs, I can't walk well. If someone asks me about climbing together, I can't. My legs are so painful and hard to move. The ankles are so painful, so I hobble away.

She described increasing pains in her legs and ankles as an emerging change after Hwan-Gap and the impacts of physical pains on both her everyday and social activities. Painful legs and ankles led her to experience difficulties in walking and climbing and, at the same time, a decreased range of activities. Moreover, these physical pains and troubles negatively affected her psychological attitude regarding her present-time self. In addition, physical changes were found in other participants' remarks. Jinho, aged 68, described declining lung function during daily activities: "Going up the stairs, I feel old. Running out of breath, I realize I'm old. So, the older we get, the smaller lung capability becomes." He indicated that he immediately perceived the decline of lung capability and began to experience some difficulties in going up and down the stairs as age-related changes in his current life and thus began to self-identify as old. In addition, these physical declines were viewed as natural and inevitable changes as he aged and he did not seek treatment. 63-year-old Sooyoung Park also referred to physical changes and his views about how those changes reflected his present-day circumstances.

[I feel old] Not by any specific event. I feel the amount of sweat is different from before... I physically feel tough [laugh], everything is okay. I don't have any problem handling everything [requiring mental capabilities], only physical things.

Sooyoung did not experience specific physical ailments like Soyeon and Jinho; instead, he began to perceive overall declines in physical capability (i.e., loss of physical strength attributed to sweating). His perceptions of physical limitations were based on reaching age 60 and his internalized self-identity was an “old person” who was forced to accept growing old earlier than expected. It was not that he identified a particular illness; instead, the idea of aging created an internal propensity to attribute normal biological functions (such as sweating) with physical declines due to age. His contradictory statement regarding feeling physically “tough” and his problem handling physical things indicated ambivalence in his acceptance of elderhood. That is, at age 60, he entered elderhood based on beliefs associated with Hwan-Gap; however, his physical strength seemed to continue. The mixed message he and others received led to confusion over expectations and actualities associated with aging (Adams-Price et al. 1998; Bae 2009; Shin et al. 2003).

With physical declines, Jeongmi Lee, aged 62, described an age-related disease and its impact on her experiences of entry into elderhood. “My 6-year-old grandson said ‘Grandma, hold me’ and ran. But, I couldn’t run so long. Ah, my strength. I’m ill... [with] osteoporosis, so... I feel old.” She perceived that she became old because she had osteoporosis, a chronic illness often associated with women and aging, which affected her abilities to engage in play with her grandson. Although well ahead of the nationally defined age of elderhood, physical declines she associated with the disease, rather than chronological age, were crucial to her perception of her own aging process. That is, the limitations of osteoporosis were of higher importance than her chronological age in her entry into elderhood. Moreover, disease, not age, defined her aging process. In addition, Jinho, aged 68, demonstrated emerging health problems after age 60. He said, “Now, the only thing I’m concerned about is... health. Often, I physically feel strange.” After age 60, he began to focus on various diseases including diabetes, high blood pressure, leg numbness, and prostate disease and to recognize deteriorating health conditions. He perceived these health problems as age-related phenomena but was concerned about dramatic changes in health status and its associated sufferings. With increasing physical loss and decline, the emergence of physical health problems was his transition to elderhood; a transition he scarcely noticed happening prior to age 60.

New Social Title as Elders

Changes in others’ attitudes toward the participants and shifts in their socioeconomic positions forced them into becoming “old” within South Korean society. Recognition of others’ attitudes brought the most significant social

change to their lives. Soyeon Choi remarked on young people’s changed behavior toward her on the bus.

When young people yield their seats to me, I say I’m fine and try not to sit. But... when my legs hurt so much, I sit in the seat. If my legs feel less sore, I think ‘Oh, don’t your legs hurt? Do only ours [people age 60 and older] hurt? Yours [might hurt] too. You need to take a rest.’ I feel like this, so I don’t accept their favor. When young people yield to a senior, being old is not bad. On the other hand, young people are exhausted too, so I’m wondering if I deserve this kind of favor only because I am old.

For a long time, “Jangyuyuseo,” a hierarchical order between young and old that emphasizes the respect and acquiescence the young should give to the aged, has been considered a central virtue in interpersonal relationships between the young and the old. South Koreans have been disciplined to honor elders, yield to elders’ wills, and place elders’ needs before their own. The practice of “Jangyuyuseo” led Soyeon Choi to perceive herself as an older adult. However, she felt uncomfortable with being treated like an elder by the young because she felt that they, too, might physically need the rest. She was resistant to the label the younger adults assigned to her of respected (but also frail) elder in need of assistance.

Sooyoung remarked on changing his social title within South Korean society and described his attitude toward the changed title.

When I went to a museum, I didn’t know if I should pay admission. But, later, I knew that others had paid the fee. So, I asked a staff member. She said, “Halabeoji [an honorific meaning old man or grandfather], you are free.” That meant I’m old. I felt upset.

Realizing that the free admission was for the aged, he perceived that he was categorized as a member of the elderly population. His reaction to the free admission was negative because he saw that “benefit” as only offered to elders under the assumption that the elder had limits to financial security. The shift to an identity as an elder who was financially at risk was not a voluntary movement but a socially-mediated, forced transition that failed to recognize the heterogeneity of those entering young-old elderhood.

Change in social position was also experienced in the workplace. For example, 62-year-old Jeongmi referred to people’s image of and attitude toward older teachers in school and its impact on her transition to elderhood.

Parents and People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy said that teachers’ retirement age had to be cut down and older teachers should be retired. Social views on older teachers hurt me. I thought it was wrong. I have

done my best to teach children. But, I'm wondering why I should be treated that way. Should they do so because I'm old?

This organization's assertion reflected a social viewpoint on older teachers. That is, even though older teachers accumulated teaching-related knowledge and experience over time, they were socially considered as incompetent and unqualified, based solely on reaching age 60 even though government-sponsored old age benefits were not offered until age 65. Such a policy could have severe consequences for those forced leave their careers prior to qualifying for benefits. Sooyoung also mentioned a limited opportunity of older and retired teachers for contributing to the educational field. Even though he retired at the nationally recognized age of retirement, he stated that, from the moment of his retirement, he no longer contributed to society. It was not because he was unable to contribute; instead, it was because he was thought by others to be "too old" and "without value" when he reached age 65. He described his perceptions of being discarded:

When I retired at age 65, the saddest thing was, even though I had know-how from rich teaching experience for the past 40 years, such knowledge was thrown away. I want to tell my knowledge to someone and to help, but there is no way to do that. I think, socially... we need to find some way to use the know-how. It seems both school and other workplaces have needs to find [qualified teachers].

He described his social position as a retired and older teacher. He interpreted his retirement to mean that society no longer saw value in the wisdom of elders in a workplace setting. It was a form of forced disengagement that made little sense in light of unmet needs for experienced workers and the rich body of knowledge he possessed.

Entering into Old Age or Not

The participants commonly experienced a variety of age-related changes, but most of them psychologically resisted their transition to elderhood and still described themselves as young. For example, despite his experience of changing physical appearance, Sooyoung remarked on his psychological refusal to enter elderhood.

[I'm] About 50. [It's] 10 years younger [than my actual chronological age]. I feel like 50. [laugh]. It's true. Compared with same-aged persons, I physically look older than them. And, my gray hair makes me look older. But, I don't feel older than them because I still think like a young man.

He admitted that age-related changes in physical appearance contributed to perceptions of age-related developmental changes. He was confident, however, compared with peers of the same age, that his mind remained sharp and "like a young man." In this sense, he resisted a label of elderly man and retained an image of himself as young, based on his mental acuity, not his graying hair. This demonstrates a reluctance to accept movement into old age based solely on appearances and, simultaneously, defines the conditions necessary for him to accept his own aging. In other words, when he no longer thought in a youthful way, he would then see himself as an older adult.

Similarly, Eunkeyeong assessed physical and psychological "self" as being 16 years younger than her chronological age of 66 years. She reported, "I can walk as much as others... I can participate in activities... I just feel like 50." She based her age on her experiences as a healthy person who continued to experience few difficulties in everyday life and social activities. Carrying out daily activities as much as others significantly younger than she was an important determinant for psychologically resisting a definition of self as an elderly person. Instead, she viewed "age" as it was related to health and well-being. Similar to Sooyoung, who gauged his age based on his abilities and delayed his acceptance of a label of elder; she experienced a psychological delay in the transition to elderhood through viewing herself as a 50-year-old woman. The emergence of physical difficulties in everyday life was her expected transition to elderhood.

Taehyun was the only respondent who perceived himself as an older adult in the current moment. He revealed that, "Psychologically, I don't feel younger than same-aged persons because there are many healthier persons than me. I've seen many healthy persons around me." Of all the respondents, he was in poorer health condition than same-age peers. Just as good health created resistance to accepting a social definition of "aged", poorer health led him to accept an identity as an elderly person. Although his chronological age was only 63 years at the time of this interview, his ill health accelerated his self-defined psychological shift to old age. The degree of difficulties or ease in cognitive and physical functioning were pivotal factors individuals used for determining psychological acceleration or delay in the shift to old age.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Oftentimes, in research on aging, the young-old are portrayed as more healthy and vigorous than the old-old and the oldest-old and as different from the middle-

aged in the event of retirement (Baltes and Smith 2003; Choi 2009; Chou and Chi 2002; Neugarten 1996; Smith et al. 2002). Indeed, all six participants reported they were in good health when they were contacted for interviews. Although most of the participants were in relatively good physical and mental health, most also had begun to focus on physical ailments. While they may be successfully aging as discussed by Chung (2007) and Kim and Kim (2009), we found that there was considerable ambivalence and dissonance between their inner (self-defined) and outer (socially defined) experiences of being old.

Several participants were undergoing changes related to entry into old age and being old. Chronologically, physically, and socially, they were placed into a category of “old” simply because they have reached age 60. The psychological response to the socially enforced aging-related experiences is distinct in two ways: Denial or acceptance of aging. Most of the participants, who expressed a sense of continued youthfulness in physical and mental capabilities, did not psychologically define themselves as being old. However, only one, who reported poorer health status than age peers, psychologically identified himself as old after age 60 but before age 65. Although the participants in this study experienced chronological, physical, and social changes in relation to growing older, they reported that they look and perceive themselves as much younger than what they might have expected as elders. Similar to the discussion by Kwon and Kim (2008) and Yang (2012), these participants described their own confidence in physical and mental abilities related to activities and social involvement and their desires to remain active participants in South Korean society. That is, experienced changes in relation to being old were not recognized as a significant limitation of their abilities and activities. In addition, confidence in their physical and mental abilities allowed them to retain their psychological status as a young or active person, not as an old one.

Turning age 60 and of being in their 60s was a key change in relation to the process of becoming old. Participants viewed their 60th birthday, Hwan-Gap, as a socially mediated and socially enforced transition to old age. Just as described by Hendricks and Peters (1986), the chronological and ecological measure of time greatly influenced their individual and others’ perceptions of aging, similar to the arguments of Bae and Park (2009), Hendricks (2001), and Sorokin and Merton (1937) also link societal changes to perceptions of aging.

Several participants in this study accepted a socially imposed identity of “elder” and simultaneously began to feel old. Just as Dittman-Kohli (1990) and Seo (2008) describe, elders began to focus on physical and

mental changes as they aged. This is important because chronological age has been used to measure ecological influences or temporal progress, so that individuals fit an ecological template or age category (Hendricks and Peters 1986; Neugarten 1996). This “forced fit” plays a significant role in affecting personal experiences of aging and definitions of self-concepts. Perceptions of health and experiences of ageism (Jeong and Shin 2009) upon turning age 60 shifted identities toward elderhood. This critical life event or transition marked the boundary between middle age and old age (Choi 2009).

Declines in physical and mental vigor were also key features associated with reaching age 60. Those who were experiencing declines felt that they almost immediately grew older. It is interesting that they experienced the beginning of old age at age 60, not at age 65, in that gerontologists and policymakers in South Korean society regard age 65 as the entry age into old age (Choi 1996; Chung 2011, 2012; Kim 1996).

This illustrates that traditional patterns still hold salience in South Korean society, even as national policies only recognize “elderhood” as occurring 5 years later. A chronological age of 60, rather than age 65, was used as the starting point in a definition of “being old” within the changing context (Chin 1991; Elder 1998; Fry 2003; Shin et al. 2003) of South Korean society. Several participants expressed that they had not thought of themselves as old until Hwan-Gap and, only then, developed their own self-image of getting older. Thus, the ideational dimension of Hwan-Gap is shown to strongly influence meanings of age and aging (Chin 1991; Shin et al. 2003). Regardless of the social age norm related to being old, they encountered the experience of entering old age and of growing older in their early 60s, a time that in many circumstances was defined as late middle age, not as elderly. This also shows that the social agreement of age 65 as the beginning of old age overlooks experiences of people who are nearly forced to become “old” in their early 60s.

This ideational dimension is unlike the findings of several researchers (e.g., Bouffard et al. 1996; Cho 1997; Kim et al. 2003, 2010; Lee 2010; Lee and Rhee 2004; Lennings 2000; Rappaport et al. 1993; Seo 2008) who focus on perceptions of death, health behaviors, and life review but do not consider older adults’ contemporary perceptions of aging. Such a forced movement into a liminal position—old as defined by tradition, but not yet old as defined by policy—gives limited insight into the individual transition to elderhood and the process of growing old within South Korean society. Toward a deeper understanding of experiences of aging, gerontologists and South Korean policymakers might be well served to pay more attention to the significance and social implications of chronological

age as a turning point in the young-olds' experience of aging. Moreover, a view of self may not necessarily be relevant as an index for measuring temporal passage or of categorizing age. Instead, it is important to consider the lived experiences of young-old persons.

Narratives about physical changes revealed that these changes were a salient feature in the process of growing older. Indeed, physical changes were perceived as the most crucial event for marking the transition to old age. Life course theory (Elder 1998) provided an infrastructure for linking these transitions to the trajectory of an aging person as the person was compelled to take on the role of elder. This is also important in that their perception of physical changes reflected their own meaning and image (Hendricks and Peters 1986) of launching into old age and of being old (Lee 2006). Old age, to these participants, was internalized as a continuous process of deteriorating health and physical abilities based on the social-ecological context of Hwan-Gap. In addition, they perceived these physical declines and health problems as a negative experience in that they often were unable to manage their own physical situations. Because the realities of physical infirmity underlie negative aspects of aging, they also negatively affected the reconstruction of a sense of self and the expectations for the future transition to old age.

This shift in a sense of self (Lennings 2000; Rappaport et al. 1993; Showers and Ryff 1996) is off time chronologically based on national policies but on time based on social context. While the participants in this study felt they were relatively healthy prior to Hwan-Gap, once they "became old" they became more aware of finite time (McAdams 1990) and of declining health. Thus, it is increasingly important to consider young-old people's stereotypical image of being old, their view of self, and a new transitional life stage. In addition, it is imperative that researchers move beyond interests in physical changes as the key feature of being old to design research and programs that help the young-old obtain knowledge about the aging process. Knowledge of aging processes may reduce their fears of powerlessness and inability in old age.

This research also emphasizes the effect of a new social title as an elderly person. Others' perceptions influence their own understandings of what it means to become old. The forced label of an aging self, mediated through social views on and attitudes toward them, caused them to focus on their own aging within the context of others' actions in South Korean society. They became socialized to old age, even when they did not "feel" that they were old. Socialization into old age was not a cheerful experience for several in that they learned that being old meant that they were assumed to be frail, dependent, and incompetent (Lee 2006; Yang 2012). Contrary to the social image of elders, and because they still thought of themselves as

healthy and youthful, they did not readily accept social benefits (Lee 2008; Shin et al 2003; Yang 2012) normally provided to elders (such as accepting a younger person's seat on the bus). In addition, they resented that their work-related knowledge and experience were considered useless and unworthy of recognition. They internalized that, even as a holder of valuable work knowledge, they were no longer needed by work or by society. In this process, they perceived that they were set aside, no longer socially useful and no longer productive and active in a society. The change in status, often associated with Hwan-Gap, was the catalyst for entry into old age and for their acceptance of their own aging as a nearly immediate event. This study shows that participants expected to have opportunities for their activities or productivities and to retain value in society. Instead, the social title of young-old, as defined by their age, led to an undervaluation of their current ability and productivity (Lee 2006; Shin et al 2003). Socially restricted opportunities led them to experience isolation and frustration. Moreover, these restrictions negatively affected their reformation of identity as elders in the psychological transition to old age (Shin et al 2003; Yang 2012). Although this is a small study, it shows that gerontologists and South Korean policymakers need a profound rethinking of young-old people's aging-related experiences so that this phase in life is understood to be qualitatively different from the experiences of old-old and oldest-old people. The young-old are aging (a process), not already aged (a culmination of the process). Thus, a reconsideration of young-old people's aging processes and aging experiences is required. It is also important to provide social opportunities for maintaining their sense of youthfulness through participation in socially meaningful activities.

Because this study was to explore the meaning of living in the present for the young-old, a process that little is known about in South Korean research on aging, the sample size is limited. This allowed the researchers to capture in-depth narratives regarding a select group of experiences and perspectives on aging. The findings from this study point to the need for expansion to include more young-old persons with a greater diversity of socioeconomic statuses. In addition, future studies should include elders across all three categories of old age (i.e., the young-old, the old-old, and the oldest-old). Such studies could provide a deeper understanding of the meanings of aging for elders transitioning to elderhood because of Hwan-Gap, as well as those who are transitioning into old age as defined by South Korean national policies. Taking the findings from this small study could serve as a springboard for larger studies so that policies and practices associated with aging in South Korea reflect the actual lived experiences of aging.

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APPENDIXES

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Name	Gender	Birth year	Marital status	Educational level	Previous occupation	Current occupation
Jeongmi Lee	Female	1944	Married	College	Professional	Retired /part-time
Jinho Yoon	Male	1938	Married	High school	Blue-collar	Miscellaneous work
Sooyoung Park	Male	1943	Married	Master's degree	Professional	Retired
Soyeon Choi	Female	1943	Married	8th grade	Blue-collar	Housewife
Eunbyeong Kwon	Female	1940	Married	8th grade	Housewife	Housewife
Taehyun Sung	Male	1943	Married	None	Blue-collar	Blue-collar