

## CHANGES IN MOTHERING OF KOREAN WOMEN: BASED ON NARRATIVE INTERVIEW DATA\*

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*The study purposes to depict the transition of women's mothering over the last half century in Korea. The data of this article were collected through narrative interviews on Korean women's mothering experiences and the memories of their mother's lives. They include life histories of 38 people of diverse age groups. The article examines the contents and styles of their talks and explores changes in Korean mothering. The women in the above 60 age group tend to talk about a mothering that is comprised of feeding, clothing and schooling mostly. Mothering by highly educated women in their 50s could be described as a kind of 'intensive mothering' that is characterized by strong attachment and intensive emotional labor. The trend of 'intensive mothering' becomes to be a general picture in the mothering of women in their 40s. However, mothering of women in their 30s seems to be divided two parts. Some people in their 30s show an anti-direction trend to the preexisting 'intensive mothering,' while others show a more intensive mothering than the older age groups. Based on the results of my analysis, I argue that mothering in Korea has begun to display tendencies of a 'backlash against intensive mothering.'*

**Key Words:** *Mothering in Korea, Age Group, Intensive Mothering, Backlash against Intensive Mothering, Low Fertility Rate*

### INTRODUCTION

It was roughly around the mid-1990s that research on the motherhood experiences of women in Korea began. Although some studies on mothering did exist before the mid-1990s, most did not pay attention to the mother-woman who is the maternal subject but focused instead on the notion of good child-rearing. However, beginning with criticisms of ideologies about motherhood in the mid-90s (Lee, Yeon-jeong, 1994; Kim, Ji-hae, 1995), progress began taking place as researchers either started to explore the characteristics of mothering in Korean women (Ham, In-hee, 1995; Yoon, Tack-rim, 1996; Shim, Yeong-hee, 1996; Cho, Seong-sook, 2002) or began to link the mother-woman's identity to her own experiences (Shin, Kyeong-ah, 1997; Noh, Young-joo, 1998; Lee, Jae-in, 2004). Additionally, in

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the 21<sup>st</sup> century, attempts have been made to explore changes in mothering according to period (Lee, Jae-kyeong, 2003: 151-172, Yoon, Tack-rim, 2001) and to elucidate class differences in mothering (Lee, Jae-kyeong, 2004).

As a result of the previous research, it has become clear that motherhood is not a universal and innate quality of women but instead created out of the socio-economic and discursive conditions of the current age. However, the above-mentioned studies on motherhood experiences mostly concentrate on women in the 30s and 40s age groups. Even in one case where diachronic changes are considered (Yoon, Tack-rim, 2001), the focus is not on how women experience their mothering roles but rather on changes in the familial position of mother inferred from the overall process of social transformation. Studies that explore the experiences of women in order to better understand and explain the changes of mothering are few.

This study examines 38 cases of narrative interview data in order to explore the diversity and changes in mothering in Korea. The study includes cases that represent diverse birthplaces, educational levels and socio-economic statuses as well as different age groups, since the researcher wants to transcend the limit of focusing merely on the educated, middle class. Even though the diverse variations were seen according to those factors, the content and style of women's narratives on their mothering showed strong convergence for members in the same age group.

Meanwhile, this study handles two parts in a cross-referential manner. One part is what the speakers themselves say about their own approaches to mothering and the other covers the speakers' statements about their mothers' approaches to mothering. Comparing these two aspects, the article tries to explicate the characteristics of the mothering concept by age group.

## DATA AND RESEARCH METHOD

This study consists of oral life history data that were collected from 2005 to 2006. The data were developed through a series of oral interviews conducted with 38 Korean women ranging in age from those in their 30s to those in their 70s. All the oral interviews were conducted in two rounds. Round 1 consisted of a 'narrative interview' (Lee, Hee-yeong, 2005: 133-135), in which the researcher's interventions were kept to a minimum in order not to affect the speaker's memories and style of speaking. In Round 2, the speakers' birthing and motherhood experiences were explored in further detail through a semi-structured questionnaire. Each round took about two to three hours.

Reflecting the researchers' desire to cover as many diverse life experiences

as possible, the speakers who participated in this study were, wherever possible, sampled uniformly for the factors of education level, age group, class, job status, region etc (as seen below in table <interviewee list>). The interviews were divided and administered by six people who participated in the study. When individuals of the desired profile were found through acquaintance networks, they were contacted and recruited to participate in the interviews.

The main advantage of life history studies is that they open up a possibility for exploring something that hitherto had not been known (Lee, Jae-in, 2004a: 265-266; Lee, Hee-yeong, 2005: 136-138). Each transcript is produced under the fixed principle that all information, spoken or not, should be included. Consequently, the transcript includes such fine details as the speaker's facial expressions, skips/pauses (or silences) and even sighs. After the transcriptions were recorded and analyzed, the researchers focused on discovering the commonalities and differences between cases based on such details as what the subjects recognized as mothering behaviors, how they described mother-child relationships, how they expressed the feeling of being a mother and so on.

To discern the differences between the diverse groups, this study employs the 'Ideal Type' method. Generally speaking, this method is very useful for comparing cases and synthesizing diffuse, discrete, complex and concrete individual phenomena from a fixed viewpoint (Heckman, 2004: 237). For the study in hand, ideal types that are distinguished according to age groups were discovered after the data were examined, and these were subsequently used to re-read and verify the data.

After that, the present study probes the women's memories of their own mothers' approaches to mothering. As a result, the speakers' stories about their mothers' mothering tendencies and styles have a curious resonance with their own stories of mothering, and their stories thereby reaffirm their own concepts of mothering. Therefore, this article discusses the ideal types of mothering for each age group based on women's own testimonials about their own mothering experiences as well as their recollections of their mother's approaches to mothering.

Briefly speaking, the research employs the "Ideal Type" method to compare varied and diverse characteristics of subjects who are classified according to age group. On the basis of differences of characteristics in mothering according to age group, it also depicts the trends of change in mothering that have taken place in Korea over the course of half a century.

TABLE 1. INTERVIEWEE LIST

Case number	Age <sup>1</sup>	Education	Birthplace	Social Class <sup>2</sup>
1	77	elementary school (incomplete)	city (Seoul)	working
2	74	elementary school (incomplete)	country (Hwanghe Do)	working
3	72	middle school	country (China)	working-to-middle
4	71	elementary school (incomplete)	Country (Gyuggi Do)	working
5	70	elementary school	country (Jeolla Nam Do)	middle
6	70	elementary school	country (Jeolla Buk Do)	working
7	69	no school career	country (Gyunsang Buk Do)	working
8	67	elementary school (incomplete)	country (Chungchung Nam Do)	working
9	65	middle school	country (Gyunsang Nam Do)	middle
10	60	university	city (Incheon)	middle
11	61	university	city (Incheon)	middle
12	60	university	city (Seoul)	middle
13	58	elementary school	country (Jeolla Nam Do)	middle
14	57	high school	city (Seoul)	working-to-middle
15	57	high school	city (Seoul)	middle
16	56	university	country (Gyuggi Do)	middle
17	53	middle school (incomplete)	country (Jeolla Nam Do)	working-to-middle
18	53	high school	city (Seoul)	middle
19	47	university	city (Seoul)	middle
20	47	university	city (Daegu)	middle
21	47	university	city (Seoul)	middle
22	47	graduate school	city (Seoul)	middle
23	46	graduate school	city (Seoul)	middle
24	45	university	city (Seoul)	middle
25	43	graduate school	city (Gwangju)	middle
26	40	middle school	country (Jeolla Nam Do)	working-to-middle
27	40	high school	city (Seoul)	working-to-middle

Case number	Age <sup>1</sup>	Education	Birthplace	Social Class <sup>2</sup>
28	39	high school	city (Seoul)	working-to-middle
29	39	university	city (Seoul)	middle
30	38	high school	city (Seoul)	middle
31	37	graduate school	country (Gyunsang Buk Do)	middle
32	37	high school	city (Seoul)	middle
33	35	university	city (Jeju)	middle
34	33	university	city (Gwangju)	middle
35	34	university	city (Seoul)	middle
36	35	graduate school	city (Seoul)	middle
37	33	high school	city (Seoul)	middle
38	30	university	country (Chungchung Nam Do)	middle

<sup>1</sup>The age referred to in the paper is the age when the interview was transcribed in 2006.

<sup>2</sup>The social statuses of interviewees are roughly evaluated on their residential circumstances, occupations, educational backgrounds and so on.

## DIFFERENCES IN MOTHERING ACCORDING TO AGE GROUP

Insofar as the motherhood experiences of individual women each have unique characteristics, it could even be said that as many diverse forms of motherhood exist as the number of cases in this study. Yet, by analyzing the life histories of 38 women with a focus on the content of motherhood experiences and the way in which such experiences are described, some cases share a great many similarities. The most typical commonality is age group as mentioned earlier.

In this chapter, it will be shown that the mothering role is changing in Korean society through examining of what is commonly talked about in each age group.

### *Motherhood above Age 60: Focus on Biological Safety and the Provision of Educational Opportunities*

Out of a total of 38 cases, women in their 60s and above comprised 12 cases. Yet, rather than speaking of mothering in terms of the emotional relationship with their children, most of these individuals essentially describe mothering

as looking after children by feeding and clothing them and making sure that they receive at least a basic education. Comparatively speaking, women in this age group scarcely mention the fact that the shaping of the children's personalities or the children's academic achievements depend largely on the mother's abilities or the efforts.

Such characteristics are quite noticeable in a few of these cases in particular (i.e. Cases 4, 8, 1 and 5). Take, for example, the following quotation from the subject in Case 4, who describes mothering first and foremost as "feeding, clothing [children] and sending them to school."

### **Case 4, Page 31 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1935, 71 years old,<sup>1</sup> low socioeconomic status (residing in Joonggok-dong), elementary school dropout

Interviewer 1: "So, what do you think is the most important thing about raising children?"

Speaker: "Oh, you know, whether it's most important or not, I just feed them and they go to school. I just take care of that, and if they go out and fight again, if my second one fights and does this or that, I act as if I were really appalled. Then, their dad puts down his spoon and sets to scolding them..."

Interviewer 1: "[So], feeding and clothing the children, that's the first priority, and when the time comes, sending them off to school is next."

Speaker: "Yes, that's what [parenting] is."

The interview excerpt below shows a mother's view on mothering which is similar to that of the aforementioned subject.

### **Case 1, Page 36 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1929, 77 years old, low socioeconomic status (residing in Joonggok-dong), elementary school dropout

Interviewer 2: "... My goodness (laughs), so how many grandchildren did you raise, then?"

Speaker: "Ah, well, my grandchildren, they were so beautiful. But when I was raising our children, maybe because my mother-in-law was there, it

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<sup>1</sup> The age here is the age given at the time the interview was performed.

wasn't [that hard]. When they were hungry I fed them, and diapers, in the old days, we all used to hand-wash our diapers, so there wasn't any specific way that I raised them."

The women in this age group speak of guaranteeing biological safety and physical growth as being the main responsibilities of motherhood, and indeed, these beliefs were shared among all the women in this age group. For example, the participant in Case 5 grew up as a landowner's daughter and maintained a middle-class lifestyle all of her life. This woman also speaks of her experiences in a similar way, maintaining that mothering is a much more exhausting responsibility nowadays than it was in her own time.

### Case 5, Page 35 of the Transcript

- Born in 1936, 70 years old, high socioeconomic status (living in Gangnam), elementary school graduate

Speaker: "[Young people these days], they have it really tough because of the kids. And so, you know, after all this time, I keep saying how glad I am to be old nowadays. My daughter and my daughter-in-law, they put so much effort [in raising their kids]. We didn't have it so tough, or at least, I didn't."

Interviewer: "You mean in terms of raising children?"

Speaker: "Yes, but not just raising kids. I mean just, you know, they're so obsessed with *hagwons*<sup>2</sup> and what not that their lives are very difficult."

As seen from the above interview excerpts, mothers from this age group, regardless of their socioeconomic status, speak of 'securing food, clothing and housing for children' and 'sending children to school' as the main duties of mothering. Related to this last point, the women in this age group do not say all that much about the influence that they had on their children's lives. Even in those cases where their children were raised well, mothers would dismiss their own contributions by saying such things as "they made a lot of efforts by themselves, that's all" (Case 5, Page 51 of the Transcript), thereby suggesting that a mother's efforts and strong will are not important.

Such light treatment of the mothering role may reflect to some extent their advanced ages. In fact, they raised their own children a very long time ago. But a more important factor, as the speaker below reveals, is the

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<sup>2</sup> *Hagwon* means a private institution (cram school) in Korean.

socio-economic conditions that confined the mothers of that period.

### Case 1, Page 15 of the Transcript

Interviewer: "What was the most difficult thing for you when you were raising your children?"

Speaker: "Educating them."

Interviewer: "Educating the children?"

Speaker: "Yes, way back, giving the kids an education, oh, that was really stressful. We had nothing to eat, and when we had to pay ... school support fees – that's what they were called at that time – we had to pay school support fees, but we would miss the deadlines. And the oldest [child] would be sent back home, bag and all, only to be chased away back to school. The oldest received a lot of physical punishment from teachers at school."

As the above excerpts illustrate well, conditions for these women were such that providing economic support to send children to school was difficult even for normal families. Therefore, the women interviewees in their 60s and the above age group were characterized by a tendency to speak of mothering as a trivial matter. Most of contents reported as mothering are limited things related to feeding, clothing and schooling. This characteristic was more noticeable in women in their 70s. Even within the group of women in their 60s, it can be seen that such oral characteristics are relatively weaker among those who have high levels of education.<sup>3</sup>

### *Motherhood of Highly Educated Women in Their 50s: The Emergence of 'Intensive Mothering'*

Some mothers in their 50s give different descriptions of mothering than the elderly mothers in their 60s and 70s introduced earlier. This difference can be seen from the fact that they believe in taking special interest in maintaining hygienic living environments for the children and in making use of the practical knowledge of experts when raising their children. In addition, these individuals include in the mother's role the task of helping

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Case 11, who is 61 years old and a university graduate, appears to share the characteristics of the group of women in their 50s who have high levels of education as I will introduce later. Of course, a few women in their 60s can be more similar with those in their 50s as introduced earlier in the paper, but those cases are exceptional. Since such a woman as the case with an educational status of university graduate are very small among the 60s age group in Korea.

the child's physical and biological growth as well as his or her personality development. Even more significant is the fact that mothers in their 50s start to mention the importance of the emotional attachment between mother and child. In other words, they remark on the importance of concentrating on their children and of developing an intensive relationship between mother and child.

Among women in their 50s, two cases (Cases 16 and 18) stand out largely for the fact that they express the characteristics mentioned above explicitly. The other cases (Cases 13, 14, 15 and 17) display more or less characteristics of the 'intensive mothering.'

First, if we listen to the story of the subject in Case 11,<sup>4</sup> a 61-year old university graduate working in a professional job, we can see that mothering based on a scientific concept of motherhood is depicted vividly.

#### **Case 11, Page 54 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1945, 61 years old, middle class (residing in an apartment in Songpa-ku, Okeum-dong), pharmacist, university graduate

Speaker: "[My mother-in-law] would always say 'kimchee' as she rinsed the kimchee in water, and then she'd suck on it before feeding it to my baby. And so, while I was raising my child, I wondered at that time how I could put this [child-rearing technique] completely into action. During the time [my children and I] were separated, I felt how I had not done much emotionally for them as a mom. Because my mother-in-law stopped me when I wanted to sit down with her or him with a motherly expression on my face. And because she didn't allow me to act that way [with my children], I couldn't go against her, right?"

In this speech, scientific ideas about sanitation and household work, as well as the idea that an intimate emotional relationship between mother and child is the basic ingredient of good mothering, can all be seen. This participant goes even further, verbally expressing the idea that good mothering entails the mother's support for the child's emotional and personality development.

Meanwhile, when we reach the 50s group, we see the emergence of self-reflection by the mothers as to the degree of influence a mother could

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<sup>4</sup> As referred to earlier, Case 11 is exceptional. Although she is in the 60s age group, the content and nature of her stories are more similar to women in the 50s age group than those of her own. I therefore cite her remarks in the section about women in their 50s.

have on her child's development. This was true not only of university graduates but of high school graduates as well, one such case being illustrated in the following example.

### **Case 18, Pages 67~68 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1953, 53 years old, middle class (living in Mokdong), housewife, high school graduate

Speaker: "Actually, I do sense that [my daughter] has this strong need for my approval in some ways. Because, uh, when she was a high school senior ... her face began to glow again. (Smiling) So, wow, she really has that inside of her, you know. It was just that she wasn't expressing it. I need to be very supportive about such things as the need arises, and also give her a lot of praise – I realized how inattentive I'd been in so many ways. Yeah, I have a lot of regrets."

In this case, the speaker's daughter was showing symptoms of emotional maladjustment such as running away from home, and the above quotation shows the speaker explaining her daughter's problems by linking them to her own mothering. As can be seen above, the mother's role for the women in this age group does not end with enabling their children to go to school. Instead, the role includes creating an environment conducive for the children to receive high grades, and it furthermore includes the responsibility of observing children's daily lives closely to make sure that they are going through a healthy personality development. With a background such as this, it becomes possible for cases to emerge in which mothers link their children's poor academic progress or emotional problems to their own failures in mothering.

As we will see, this kind of trend becomes more popular among younger women. Summing up the above discussion, this paper suggests that emotional and intensive mothering at least began with mothers in their 50s, particularly among those with high levels of education.

### *Women in Their 40s: A Deepening of Intensive Mothering*

The women in their 40s are similar with the women in their 50s introduced earlier. They speak of mothering as being based on a strong psychological attachment between mother and children and as being wholly responsible for a child's physical, mental and emotional development.

Concretely speaking, it is found that they speak of the following points as representing the essence of mothering: taking an acute interest in their children's every action when looking after them; providing opportunities for their children's intellectual and emotional development; ultimately supporting their children so that they are able to enter good universities.

The following is the case of a housewife in her 40s who lives in Gangnam, an affluent district in Seoul. As her words reveal, the purpose of taking care of one's children these days lies in sending children to good universities, and the mother's entire life revolves around this ultimate goal.

### **Case 24, Pages 125~127 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1961, 45 years old, middle class (living in a high-rise apartment in Gangnam), housewife, university graduate

Speaker: "So throughout the three years [of my child's high school], I was careful about when to speak, and I talked in a hushed voice. I had to be so – tactful. But ah, everyone does that, you know. All the mothers do that. And believe me, [mothering a high school senior] is the last thing you'd want to do ... [For] about 3 weeks – it's totally like that, the absolute worst. And so, it becomes really hard again. It's difficult for us to adjust again. We were already on edge because of the [university entrance] exam, and on top of that, [we had to pay attention to our children waking up] because they were slow to get out of bed. That's, really, whew!/? That's tough. In other words, you're a servant, a complete servant."

The above quotation describes a situation of when children are students preparing for exams and their mothers more or less become examinees, having to do the extremely difficult jobs of matching their children's pace and being sensitive to their needs. Many other studies have already pointed out numerous times (Shim, Yeong-hee, 1996; Yoon, Tack-rim, 1996; Lee, Jae-kyeong, 2003) that this type of story concerning everyday efforts to boost children's academic achievement is quite commonplace among the oral statements of women in this age group.

Yet, while this physically and mentally exhausting effort to support the education of one's children may be considered a common phenomenon among full-time housewives, this way of thinking, as seen below, is not much different among working mothers either.

### Case 23, from the Transcript

- Born in 1960, 46 years old, office worker, graduate degree

Speaker: "... In other words, I set aside my own studies, for example. I left the US and gave up my studies. At that time, I was a part-time lecturer intermittently, but I gave all that up decisively, and at work also, I only did exactly what I was supposed to do. Because there is other work that derives from what I do – like going for training or studying, or attending seminars ... I gave it up, all of it, and during that period when I was raising my kids, taking care of the kids, I think I really tried hard to concentrate wholly on looking after the kids, I mean, on going to work and raising my kids only, because I wanted to raise my children properly."

This is the case of a working mother who worked steadfastly at one job after graduation. In terms of its depiction of childrearing as an exhausting ordeal, it appears to be not much different from the previous case. She says that her strategy is to sacrifice her own time in order to maintain both work and childcare instead of lowering her child-rearing standards. In this respect, the standard of mothering as perceived by a working mother may not be much different from that of a full-time housewife.

From a class perspective, however, the education level of the following case study, a woman in her 40s who is a junior high school graduate, may be considered below average, thereby implying a need to examine her social class group's perception of mothering. As seen from the one example below, the idea of mothering according to women in this class group may not necessarily match that of those in the middle class.

### Case 26, Page 43 of the Transcript

- Born in 1966, 40 years old, yogurt delivery woman, junior high school graduate

Interviewer: "How are [your children's] academic studies?"

Speaker: "I don't tell them to study (laughs). I say nothing about studying, but their dad, he, he looks at their test papers, and with math, when he sees mistakes, he goes over those again with them, you know? He tells them to do it this way or that way. That's all he checks, and he doesn't particularly push them to study either."

Interviewer: "Ah – so, even in terms of school studies, your mother's

generation and you, Mrs. Choi, have not changed much.”

Speaker: “Well, I do tell my daughter to study hard, you know? I tell her that she needs to study hard but she doesn’t, that’s what I think. If I say something two or three times and she doesn’t listen, then if it’s something that needs to be corrected, I don’t hesitate to use the cane. If it’s something that is totally wrong, I use the cane, but if mentioning it two or three times doesn’t – I mean, if it’s not that important – I don’t mention it again.”

The author of this quotation, unlike other highly educated middle-class women, expresses a unique child-rearing philosophy that emphasizes having a positive, happy attitude rather than focusing on academic grades. Despite that, in terms of the fact that she does consider instilling proper study habits, giving extra-curricular lessons and monitoring academic achievement as a fundamental part of mothering, it is evident that she has accepted some of the characteristics of modern motherhood.

As seen from the above, most women in their 40s complain that tending to their children’s education is mentally and physically burdensome. Apart from their zeal about their children’s education, women in this age group, as observed in some of the above examples, speak often about their everyday lives with their children, and they attend to their children’s needs in a very self-conscious manner. Such characteristics appeared uniformly, regardless of level of education or work status. From these facts, it may be understood that the women in this age group, more profoundly than the women in any other age group, have adapted to the concept of ‘intensive mothering’ which is founded on the notion of having a close and adhesive human relationship with one’s children.

### *Women in Their 30s: Breaking Away from Intensive Mothering*

In the previous section, mothers in their 40s were summarized as believing – based on the idea that the mother had the primary responsibility for the children’s welfare – that a mother should carefully look after the emotional or physical well-being of her children and dedicate herself completely to her children’s development. What is about women in their 30s? Out of a total of 38 cases, 10 are women in their 30s, and the mothers in their late 30s share many similar qualities with women in their 40s. However, motherhood experiences in the 30s begin to differ significantly from those of women in their 40s and 50s. The women in their 30s also take as great an interest in mothering as their predecessors did in the past. However, they express their feelings of responsibility to look after themselves and their own ways of

depicting the mother-child relationship. It represents a clear difference from the viewpoints of their predecessors.

First, let us look at the concept of a 'deepening of motherhood.'

### **Case 37, Page 61 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1973, 33 years old, office worker in a tax accounting office, having one daughter, high school graduate

Speaker: "When is [a parent] supposed to begin giving piano lessons? When do you teach writing? Everyone uses study booklets. After the [child's] first birthday, everyone else uses study booklets with their kids. I used to think, 'Is it really necessary to [put them through] that headache so early? I'll leave them be until about they're about five, five years old, and then begin teaching them gradually from age six' – that's what I thought. But then our baby began to seem really dumb, because the other kids were becoming so clever, but our child didn't know what they knew. So I worried a lot about that."

The above case illustrates plainly that the list of things that mothers in their 30s perceive can be done for their children is becoming much lengthier than that of the women in the previous age group, and this characteristic is seen repeatedly in many other cases of women in the younger age group. On the other hand, it is evident, as seen from the case below, that a notion not commonly seen among women in their 40s and above is emerging among women in their 30s about the physical and psychological separation or, perhaps, about the boundary building between mother and child. The woman from the case quoted earlier expresses this concept in the following way.

### **Case 37, Page 68 of the Transcript**

Speaker: "Really, when I'm all alone, when the baby crawls and falls off the bed, I can't even go to the bathroom, I'm so scared that he or she might fall off. Or that he or she might go somewhere and pick up something bad. So, I used to wish that there would be someone else there by my side ... when I was looking after my baby (long pause, subject thinking intently) ... how can I even talk about this? Anyway, at the time, I used to think about those things, that if only someone had been there by my side to help me, then it would have been easier for me. If so, I could have done my business

activities more easily and would have received less mental stress.”

The author of this quotation, except for having taken nine months of maternity leave, continued working at her job after childbirth, and she strongly expresses the physical and mental confinement that results from childrearing. In this way, women in this age group react sensitively to the sense of being constrained and are receptive to help from others. This is in contrast to the women in their 40s examined earlier, who showed a tendency to express guilt over receiving help from others in areas that they could not tend to in person. In a similar vein, the 30s group generally spoke of a need to maintain their own personal lives, whether through work or hobbies.

It appeared that the inner conflict between work and childrearing experienced by working women in their 40s was either absent or experienced in a much weaker form for women in this age group. The following interview excerpt, that of a mother discussing her job and her children’s lives as going hand in hand, may be better understood in the context of the description of motherhood cited above.

#### **Case 35, Page 68 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1972, 34 years old, airline stewardess, having one son, university graduate

Speaker: “Well, there are advantages and disadvantages [to staying at home to look after the kids or to looking after the kids while working full time]. No matter what you do, that’s the way I see it, there are advantages and disadvantages. I go out to work so that I’m able to offer my baby many different experiences. ‘In return, my child, please forgive me for these things: Mummy will do her best at work to be someone you can be proud of.’ That’s how it is, you know.”

As seen from this quotation, women in their 30s, when compared to those in the previous age group, exhibit a strong tendency to separate the mother’s own aspirations and space from her children’s lives and to depict her own life as having value in itself. This kind of guarded sentiment against excessive attachment to one’s children also seems to be related to the fact that the fostering of independence or autonomy in children has shown a remarkable increase among the women in this age group. So, for women in their 30s, the argument supporting a reduction of the mother’s interference

in their children's lives is seen again. Let us examine another example.

### Case 34, Pages 106~107 of the Transcript

- Born in 1973, 34 years old, full-time housewife, having one son, university graduate

Speaker: "Maybe it was because I was the oldest daughter, but an intimate relationship [with my mother], that was too much, and I think I also felt this strong obligation to be a filial child. In other words, I refused to walk out of line. And as I said another time, I didn't have courage. I was afraid of [standing out]. And now, I've lived too much like that ... So sending my kid to grade school, as I said the other time, I want to let go a little of that intimate relationship – because he can now make it on his own ...

Interviewer: "To do whatever he chooses?"

Speaker (swiftly and strongly): "Yes. So I want to look the other way."

Based on the above content, it can be seen that for mothers in their 30s, the work list for mothering has grown even longer than that of mothers in their 40s. They even have more detailed programs that target children at much younger ages. Despite the fact, a characteristic which begins to emerge clearly differentiates the experiences of this age group with those of the previous age group. That characteristic is that the women in this age group have begun to recognize the mother's desire for autonomy instead of the psychological intimacy they could have with their children, and that respects both the mothering role and working woman role at the same time. Thus, among women in their 30s, a change occurs from a certain age whereby the subject responsible for childrearing is no longer only the mother.

In the previous age group, mothers, even those with jobs, assigned a lower priority to their work in order not to neglect their mothering responsibilities. However, in the 30s age group, mothers are seen developing a psychological boundary or physical sense along the line that the mother comes before the child. Of course, this characteristic may in some respects be due to the fact that the stage of family life being experienced by these women's families is largely that of raising pre-school children. When other characteristics of this age group are considered together, however, including the attitude that work is essential for women, the psychological mechanisms required to be able to continue working<sup>5</sup> or their low anxiety about or aversion to letting

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<sup>5</sup> Case 35 is a good example. The case includes a story about a mother overcoming the tired

others look after their children, it may be reasonable to interpret this not necessarily as an age group characteristic, but rather as the effect of the self in this age group being transformed into a more independent self.

### *Concluding Remarks*

As seen before, mothering in Korea changes drastically. Over a half century, the trend of mothering moves to a 'very time, energy and knowledge consuming work and job.' For the purpose of accentuating the characteristics of deepening in mothering, I use the term 'intensive mothering.' The term was utilized by Sharon Hays. Hays (1996: 6-9) conceptualized intensive mothering as a term that denotes an ideology that is composed of three suppositions: 1) the mother must be the central care-giver; 2) mothering has to be an energy- and time-consuming job; 3) mothering labor should be practiced according to different and contradictory logics comparing with the rest area of life. I employ the characteristics of mothering as a definition of intensive mothering, even though the purpose of using the term does not coincide with hers.<sup>6</sup>

The characteristics of mothering in a specific age group are discerned clearly as follows. Mothering of women in 60s and 70s is plain, and mothering in 40s and 30s is intensive. The mothering of women in 50s shows the transitory phase. Some cases among women in their 50s show the characteristics of intensive mothering, while others are far from it, depending on the subjects' level of education or class background. Instead, women in their 40s generally speak of same type of mothering even though they differ in the conditions such as class or level of education. Therefore, I argue that women in the 40s age group represent deepening of intensive mothering. Even though a reversal trend also happens recently, the tendency of the 'intensive mothering' expands until now.

In a meanwhile, a methodological issue is noticeable. In the paper, I probe the mothering in each age group through their memories of their practice not the practice itself. As well known, the testimony on their past is not the past itself, because everyone recalls the past in the lens of their current issue and point of view. Generally speaking, people of the age group with babies and

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feeling she had while working full time. When she felt too fatigued to continue, she began doing a university degree online and eventually passed. A story such as this is rarely heard of among women in their 40s and older.

<sup>6</sup> Hays employs the term to illuminate the difference of logics between mothering labor and another area labor. However, I use the term to describe the difference between a simpler form of mothering and a more compact and complex mothering. Thereafter I adopt upper two characteristics among three mostly, while she underlines the third supposition.

kids tend to complain on their burden of rearing, compared with the elder age group people. In this aspect, the differences between age groups indicated in the paper may be shown exaggeratedly. However the differences between age groups are not restricted to the amount of burden. It is more impressive in the vocabulary and the way of talking. Therefore the article focused on the style as well as the contents as suggested before.

#### CHANGES IN THE MOTHERING TREND:

#### FOCUS ON THE MEMORIES OF THE MOTHER'S MOTHERING

The research gathered for this study included questions dealing with the women's memories of their own mother's mothering. The purpose of such questioning was twofold: to obtain information about the old generation that we could no longer hear and to find the effect that a mother's mothering has on her own daughter's mothering. An interesting fact was discovered in the research results, namely that the memories of their mothers' mothering showed differences across age groups. What was more interesting was the fact that women's methods of interpreting and evaluating their mothers' approaches to mothering reflected their own current concepts of mothering, which is to say, reflected the standard concept of mothering in the age group to which they belong. This may be most natural if we consider it from the perspective that memories never exist in raw form, but are always formed selectively within the frame of interpretation which is expressed and reserved in the narrative form (Lee, Jae-in, 2006: 89-90).

In the following pages, I show that testimonies about their mothers' mothering testimonies reflect the women's own mothering standards in each age group.

#### *Women in Their 50s and Above: Few Criticisms about Their Mothers' Mothering*

In this study, there were 18 narratives by women in their 50s and above, and most of these women, when asked to talk about their mothers' mothering, spoke instead about the character of their mothers or provided a general review of their mothers. Thus, there were almost no cases of women who spoke of their mother's approach to mothering in a critical or negative manner.

#### **Case 16, Page 104 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1950, 56 years old, former teacher, two-year teachers' college graduate

Speaker: "My mother also had six siblings, four daughters and two sons. She passed away at an early age, but she was really coldhearted. Cold and precise. So maybe we could describe her as a woman-warrior."

In response to the question about her mother's child-rearing methods, this speaker consistently described various episodes illustrating her mother's cold personality, an example of which could be found in the above quotation. This woman's attitude seems to be that raising children is the same for all mothers, the only difference being that mothers have different personalities. Even when she speaks more specifically about mothering, it is not about items or lists of mothering responsibilities, but is rather a comprehensive description of a mindset or mentality as a mother. The woman in the following excerpt gives us another example of this way of thinking.

#### **Case 9, Page 117 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1941, 65 years old, former financial planner, junior high school graduate

Interviewer: "Looking back now to when you lived with your family of origin, when you were growing up, [please describe for me] something, among your mother's role as a mother, that you thought was quite admirable – or not."

Speaker: "Yes, yes. I've given that some thought. It was there, and maybe that was why I [also] had that kind of belief that a mother should be responsible for her child. At that time, our father, he was into – how do I say this? – social campaigns or political campaigns ... and he knew nothing about money."

The speaker in this quotation says that under the influence of a mother who developed a strong sense of responsibility toward her children because of an irresponsible husband, she later devoted herself to taking care of her own children. Yet, rather than remembering a specific scene of mothering, this woman is describing a family environment characteristic.

Speakers in their 50s and above tended not to provide proper answers corresponding to the questions they were asked, and this may be due to the age group characteristic in which these individuals are to a large extent free from regular child-rearing activities, meaning that their memories about their mothers' styles of mothering are relatively faint. The interesting fact, however, is that in terms of revealing details of their own mothering (and

despite the fact that the same essential factors are discovered for women in the 40s-to-60s age group), women in their 40s tend to speak in a very different manner from those in the 50s and above age group. The fact that women in this age group have very faint memories about their own mothering may be evidence that a woman's perception of that mothering standard is weak, even in cases where women might be engaged in mothering that would fit the characteristics of modern motherhood.

*Women in Their 40s: Criticism of Their Own Mothering from the Perspective of Empathic and Intensive Mothering*

Women in their 40s, interestingly enough, understood the purpose behind the questions about their mothers' approaches to mothering and evaluated details of mothering more specifically. Usually, they complained about the lack of closeness between themselves and their mothers, pointed out that their mothers lacked an understanding of their lives as a whole, or said that their mothers should have intervened more skillfully in their lives.

First, there are many instances of oral statements from this age group where the mother claims that she did a lot for her daughter and yet, in her daughter's eyes, something was missing. An example can be seen in the following case, where the mother arranged private tutoring for her daughter, but her daughter complained that her mother did not pay enough attention to her.

**Case 24, Page 150 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1961, 45 years old, housewife (two sons), university graduate

Interviewer: "Reflecting back on when your mother was raising you, do you have any memories such as, 'I was really unhappy about these things concerning my mother'?"

Speaker: "I think I said previously that I received too much private tutoring."

Interviewer: "Ah, right."

Speaker: "That – even my dad had studied a lot, but they still, I mean, my dad worked, so in the end – they didn't see me, they paid no attention to me, to how I was faring – and my mum by nature didn't take an interest in my studies. You know, see how I was doing in this area and that. She just arranged studies for me and that was it ... Of course, there was no guidance for me at all, academically, in those days."

Interviewer: "You mean guidance for choosing a major?"

Speaker: "That, too. [I had] no idea about my major, and when I was entering university, she was like, 'Just choose anything'."

The woman in the next case continues speaking along the same line as the one above, with the message that mothers should not simply tell children to study but should help them figure out the right career so as to enable them to make a good living. Thus, the speaker in this case states that a mother must support her children's career exploration and even be responsible for instilling a sense of professionalism in them.

### **Case 22, Pages 100~101 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1959, 47 years old, Ph D, university lecturer and composer, having two daughters

Speaker: "In my mother's days, you were taught not to look out only for yourself in a selfish manner. And I'm resentful of that kind of teaching. Because the world is much more competitive, so [hearing them say] 'Don't live your life' ... like that ... We weren't taught about greater things in life. But that was only natural, because our mothers did not work, and so that was only to be expected."

Interviewer: "I see —"

Speaker: "Raising my own kids now, I teach them first of all that hey, life is not a joke. And so I let them prepare, although that doesn't really prepare them, you know (laughs) [But I do my part in teaching them]."

Of course, even in the transcripts of women in their 40s, when it came to talking about their mothers' styles of mothering, there were several cases of women who spoke of their mothers' lives instead or who described episodes about the relationships between their mothers and their children. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction about their mothers' roles, such as that illustrated in the cases introduced earlier, and criticism from the perspective of intensified mothering — the belief that the mother must take a professional interest in and plan out her children's lives — seem to be characteristics specific to this group.

#### *Women in Their 30s: Critical View of Intensive Mothering*

Descriptions of their mothers' mothering by women in their early to

mid-30s are different from those of women in the 40s' group described earlier. Of course, in this group as well, memories of mothering frequently take the form of descriptions about their mothers' personality characteristics, but what is new here is the emergence of opposition against excessive styles of mothering. In other words, where women in their 40s complain about a lack of mothering, mothers in the younger age group begin to take a critical view of excessive mothering.

### Case 34, Page 61 of the Transcript

- Born in 1973, 33 years old, housewife, having one son, university graduate

Speaker: "As for me, I used to go to *taekwondo*, and my childhood... Over-education, well that began with [going to] the mental arithmetic *hagwon* (private institution). I don't know if it was because I was the oldest, but I went to kindergarten, mental arithmetic *hagwon*, piano, *taekwondo*, abacus calculation, calligraphy, all of that. I went to all of them, and I was brought up really special by my mum, but from that time, (voice grows smaller) I gradually began wishing to escape from the bondage to which my mum had subject me."

The speaker in this excerpt, who shows that her mother's overzealousness for education had made her feel as if she had been in "bondage," also shows that she was rebelling against her mother's mothering. Although the women in their 40s also had many complaints about their mothers' approaches to mothering, they differ entirely from the 30s group in terms of the content of their complaints. That is to say, the complaint of women in their 40s was that they lacked something, while women in the 30s group complain that they were given too much. Thus, the perception begins to emerge that a mother's excessive support may be rather harmful to a child's development.

Additionally, in the early to mid-30s group, parenting virtues such as teaching respect for autonomy and fostering independence, which did not feature much in the narratives of the women from previous generations, frequently began to be presented as central requirements of human development. The following case is an example of this.

### Case 35, Pages 52~53 of the Transcript

- Born in 1972, 34 years old, airline stewardess, having one son,

university graduate

Speaker: “[My mother-in-law] has a zealous parenting style. And so, when it comes to planning for something ... at his age and despite having a son, [my husband is], in short, becoming a mama’s boy. He can’t make a decision by himself. It comes down to ‘Ask Mum’ ... So I realized that sometimes, excessive love can result in an adult with his own family who cannot make his own plans. But actually, I haven’t been married many years. So, at least for my son, he lives his own life. And in the future, the trend will be toward smaller family units, right? Because of the spread of individualism. For him to be able to take charge of his own life ... For me, I’d only be there to help him, just to assist him. I have no intention of dominating his life.”

Listening to this speaker’s story, it seems that the awareness of the importance of fostering a child’s self-reliance and ability to separate goes hand in hand with the observation of overzealous mothering styles characterized by excessive interference. Additionally, the women in this age group detect the high risk that comes with mothering from the fact that they themselves have assumed negative attitudes toward their own mothers. The following interview excerpt is a good example of why some mothers may be averse to parenting.

#### **Case 34, Page 137 of the Transcript**

- Born in 1973, 33 years old, housewife, having one son, university graduate

Speaker: “... So, what I said I was afraid of was, childrearing ... ”

Interviewer: “Ah ... you mean, in case it doesn’t turn out as you would like?”

Speaker: “It’s just whether I can, in whichever direction, [rear] the child in [the right] manner. In any case, I should raise them according to our family environment, right? That way, in case the child were to ask me later, ‘Why did you do it that way?’, if the child asked me that, I’d be a little scared ... because I would have done my best .... These things would happen from time to time. My mother, she always says that, you know? ‘When you have your own children, then you’ll understand me.’ And it’s true.”

As referred to in the above quotation, women in this age group often say that parenting is a job whose outcome is unpredictable, but one that requires infinite responsibility. Among the mothers from this study in their 30s, there are some who share the characteristics of the highly educated women in their 50s described in the previous chapter. Consequently, the mothers of these women in their 30s are of the first generation that began to focus on their relationships with their children, that became closely involved in their children's daily lives and that began to manage their children's lives intensively.

Therefore, the idea that the group of women in their early to mid-30s are in the age group that began to look skeptically upon their mothers' excessive interference and involvement in their children's lives seems to make sense. Thus, the intensive and intimate style of mothering in Korean society that began with the highly educated group of women in their 50s and 60s and reached down to their own children's generation has become the backdrop against which either a looser form of mother-child relationship is favored or a general orientation toward individualism is set to prevail.

## CONCLUSION

In the previous pages, I showed how mothering in Korea has changed from a style of mothering, which focuses on biological safety and the provision of educational opportunities, to 'intensive mothering,' which demands a high degree of emotional concentration and a strong level of attachment between the mother and her children. This article argues that the mothering trend in Korea has become more compact and stronger in recent years. Previous studies have also suggested that mothering in Korea has become an increasingly pressure-packed and intensive job. In that respect, the result of this study supports previous research. However, this study explicates the characteristics of mothering according to age group.

In addition, this study suggests that a new mothering trend is emerging in Korea. Whereas previous studies have only noted a deepening of intensive mothering, this article argues that the trend in Korean mothering is currently reversing in that some mothers in their 30s are now speaking out against intensive mothering and the negative effect of strong motherhood. However, unlike their older predecessors, some women in their 30s are now starting to speak about the importance of their own corporeal freedom as well. Consequently, I also argue that the mothering trend in Korea has started to reveal a kind of 'backlash against intensive mothering.'

The results of this study may also have considerable implications for

future social changes. Low birthrate seems inevitable. This is an inference from the fact that many women in their 30s, who were generally raised under a system of intensive parenting, now consider motherhood a 'high-risk industry' and have shied away from investing their lives in it. An anti-maternal way of thinking may indeed be seen as a negative side effect of the advancement of motherhood.

From another aspect, rebelling against and breaking away from this intensive form of mother-children relationship, or shifting toward a looser form of mother-children relationship, will open the way for modern women's inner desires to move toward a physically and psychologically more independent self. Furthermore, moving in this direction will support women's tendencies for de-familiarization. Relating to the development of the self in women, this trend has great optimistic implications, since establishing one's own sense of autonomy and independency is an intrinsic component in the balanced development of the self.

The methodological significance of this study lay in the fact is that it does not discuss changes in mothering in the manner of a diachronic study on motherhood experiences by making deductive inferences from the background for each period. Rather, by comparing the real motherhood experiences of women in diverse age groups, this study takes a panoramic view of historical changes in motherhood experiences.

Another significant point about this study is that historical changes can also be clarified by cross-referring experiences of women as both mother and daughter. This study examines how mothering that was intensifying and advancing among women above the age of 40 has been showing a reverse trend among women in their early to mid-30s. At the same time, the way in which women of all age groups evaluate their mothers' styles of mothering is explored in this study by age group. As a result, a few characteristics of mothering among women in their early to mid-30s – such as having a psychological aversion to mothering and a respect for individualistic autonomy – are revealed here. I maintain that the emergence of these characteristics may be related to a rebellion against the kind of mothering that is characterized by a strong degree of intimacy between mother and children, by the mother's intensive investment in her children and by the enhancement of that investment.

Lastly, this study has implications for explaining how the nature of the self in women has changed through the lens of motherhood experiences. The most prominent characteristic evident in mother-child relationships of women above the age of 40 is the intensive nature of this mother-child relationship, whereas women in their 30s, by contrast, have begun to favor

looser mother-child relationships. These changes may reflect and reinforce the tendency for the psychological boundaries of the self in women to become both more hardened and more distinct.

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