Youth Optimism: 
What Shapes Young People’s Lives in Second Modernity?

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I am a middle-class racial/ethnic/cultural minority in the society I live in, where I immigrated from South Korea seven years ago. Finishing up my last year of university, I will be graduating in two weeks with a Bachelor of Arts degree with a Sociology major. Looking back on my youth and my transition to adulthood, I realize that I have made countless choices that have shaped my life today. There also have been unique circumstances that influenced my actions. Filled with individual choices and environmental circumstances that I am grateful for, my youth entails many accomplishments and proud moments. However, I undeniably regret certain aspects of my adolescence as I am heading toward the end of my youth, still unsure of my future life trajectories in the ever-changing neoliberal society. Sometimes, the depressing questions and miserable self-pity sessions go on and on: "why did I make that foolish choice at that age, why did it have to happen to me at that time, and why did the social structure have to be that way?" But in the end, I remember that my younger self made the best choice possible at the time in the given circumstances that constrained my freedom/agency in the range of choices I could have made.

A young person’s life is produced through the interaction between external and internal forces. As social beings, our choices almost always reflect the internalization of our environments, the social construction of the culture, dominant system, or structure. In this way, the built environment does shape our behaviours and choices, but we are not just second-hand consequences of institutions and the larger world. We navigate our lives with an agency and mutually reproduce and construct our society as central agents and social actors. In short, young people's lives are shaped through an ongoing interaction between their agencies in choices and constructed environments. A famous saying claims, "you cannot control everything that happens to you, but you can control how you react to them" (Nehring, 2020). This quote illustrates one's ability to stay optimistic even when faced with external hardships, which would bring both inner peace and a clearer mind to get through a tough time successfully. That is, we can choose to interpret and react to circumstances that continually affect our behaviours and choices in a brighter way to shape our lives more positively.

Since the normalization of high school education after World War II and the construction of the distinction between childhood and adulthood through industrialization, schooling has become a significant secondary socializing agent (Postman, 1994; Owram, 1996; Rooke, 1996, as cited in Bereska, 1999). School is not just a place for education or skill and knowledge develop-
ment; it also provides a rich network of people, friendships, and broad experiences of social relationships (Merton, 1957). Through such interactions, the distinct institution can also reproduce and reaffirm the structure of social inequality surrounding race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and more (Jackson, 1968; Granger et al., 2017; Gebhard, 2018; Kruse, 2019). These latent functions and hidden curriculums of school education can contribute tremendously to one's character development, especially during adolescence, where basic worldviews and personalities are constructed (Legette, 2018). Indeed, both my junior high school in Korea and high school in Canada greatly impacted my childhood.

However, formal education itself is influenced by more significant social circumstances such as the economy, political policies, and changing perceptions of young people and employers (Bereska, 1999; Postman, 1994; Axelrod, 1997). In other words, society influences institutions, and the institutions influence individuals' lives. Moreover, other circumstances such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, and immigration status also greatly impact one's life paths and choices (Weber, 1978). For example, an ethnic minority who is an international student pays twice the amount of university tuition as Canadian students and may struggle with postsecondary education more than others due to language barriers, ongoing internal negotiation of different cultural identities, or the lack of support systems (Fang & Huang, 2020). Likewise, an Indigenous youth who experiences marginalization, systemic racism, isolation, and colonialism could internalize the negative stereotypes of their ethnic identity and face more challenges completing their education (Redvers, 2017). In the current society where high school completion and post-secondary studies are normative and beneficial for future employability, such barriers and hardships from the reality of the structure and environment can profoundly hinder young people's lives.

The young generation today lives in a distinctive era during second modernity. Technological advancement and globalization have never been more rapid; the dynamic free-market consumerism and altering job market have never been so uncertain; individuals' choices have never been more available or impactful (Ikonen & Nikunen, 2019; White, Wyn, & Albanese, 2011; Steger, 2020). We have seen regular teenagers branding themselves on popular social media platforms and become self-made celebrities. Some entrepreneur-minded young people have created generational wealth by investing their time and effort in areas their parents and others had not even imagined were possible or worthwhile. For instance, Mark Zuckerberg, the co-founder of Facebook, whose real-time net worth ($83.3B) ranks the 13th in the world today, chose to drop out of Harvard University in 2004 at the age of 19 to create the social media platform that has made him a world-famous billionaire (Forbes, 2022). Zuckerberg's choice to drop out of such a prestigious school was one that could be seen as very risky, uncertain, even foolish, or absurd because it has statistically been proven that higher levels of education lead to better job prospects and higher income (Statistics Canada, 2019). Still, his choice completely changed his life and the telecommunications industry forever.

Anandhi Narayanan claims in her TED talk video that the innovative entrepreneur mindset is the key to solving youth unemployment in Canada in an unforeseeable and uncertain neoliberal society (Narayanan, 2016). In the contemporary world, new technologies replace certain jobs, create new fields of work, and change our ways of living. Getting good grades at school to get into higher education and achieve degrees does not prepare today's youth for a job anymore, and no job
provides eternal employment or economic security (Narayanan, 2016). But at the same time, even entry-level work demands more than a high school diploma nowadays (Cannizzo & James, 2020). In short, young people are required to follow the structured social trend of getting higher education in hopes of a long-term secure career that would provide financial stability while spending tons of money and time on schooling for the uncertain future in return. Some may argue that learning and gaining knowledge for its own sake should be a joy and the basis for postsecondary education (Cannizzo & James, 2020); however, such a claim is hence a pricey middle-class ideal that reproduces class stratification for working-class students who cannot easily afford access to the institution (Cannizzo & James, 2020).

Indeed, my four years of university education were not sorely for gaining knowledge but mainly for growing my job prospects. One thing I had misconceived during my education, though, was that I would be ready for a nice job than others at my age once I had a diploma and a Bachelor’s degree. I thought that I would be a good fit for any entry-level job once I graduate from university, especially if it is related to my field of study. Now that I am looking for a job opportunity near graduation, I realize I should not have depended entirely on my education. As a fresh graduate who has dedicated time and energy to getting good grades, I did not have much work experience that most employers require me to even apply for the jobs. On top of this, having learned in my various sociology classes that immigrants, women, and ethnic minorities generally face more challenges when looking for employment, I felt utterly defeated by the society’s structure and my circumstances for a while. Here were my three biggest regrets: I should have known that networking and making professional connections was crucial; maybe I should have studied something other than my major that was more practical in terms of employability; I should have looked for work or volunteer opportunities in my free time. Then, maybe, I would not be struggling as much to get a job interview call as I am graduating from university. I blamed the reality of unfair social structure, growing youth unemployment, and some of my choices.

Even so, I decided to accept and embrace the external and internal forces that have created the ongoing context and reality I live in (Narayanan, 2016). I continued to make progress by seeking help drafting my resume, earning certificates, connecting with people who could be my reference, and starting volunteer work. Individual choices/experiences and larger forces/environments are bi-directional, meaning I can also change my circumstances and the social context through my choices. Therefore, I am aware of my agency and ability to construct the best life path for myself by actively choosing to internalize more positive aspects of my environment and contribute to the change in social structure. Rather than feeling lost and defeated by the unfair society -- the matrix of domination -- and reflecting or reaffirming those damaging products of earlier social actors, I could choose to be an individual entrepreneur who actively navigates through life and brings a change into the dominant system and institutions. After all, building better environments will lead to a more extensive range of choices available, which would, in return, shape my life in more pleasing ways.

Such processes can be seen in many areas of society. The macro-level gender norms, societal labels, and academic discourses on gender, such as bio-essentialism and cisnormativity, constrain and affect the micro-level agencies and choices on gender as performance and personal pronouns (Frouhard-Dourlent et al., 2020). Nonetheless, those who choose to undo the norm or redo gender, not conceptualizing the toxic societal labels, are the central social actors who make
healthier, more genuine, and more accepting environments for themselves and others who do not fit into the normative categories. In a documentary about transgender youth, Dallas comments that she has become able to be so much more authentic with herself, feel emotions again, and genuinely connect with her family members since coming out as a transgender person (Ransom, 2019). Likewise, many bicultural Chinese Canadian youth from Lin Fang's research continually negotiated their micro-level ethnic identities within macro-level forces and different social contexts (Fang & Huang, 2020). The negotiations mean that the youth have agency in establishing and representing themselves regardless of the larger social processes. Once bicultural or multi-ethnic youth could actively choose their identities between their heritage and national cultures, their psychological and sociocultural adjustment had a positive outcome (Berry et al., 2006). Furthermore, like the 17-year-old Max Fulham on CBC news, who "stepped up his involvement in climate activism during the pandemic" (O'Connell, 2022), people can build something positive from a negative situation that they often do not have direct control over. What really matters is one's resilience and ability to stay optimistic and flexibly find solutions even when faced with adversities.

In conclusion, the dominant social system will always affect individual choices, but one must remember that they mutually reproduce and construct our society with their personal experiences as central social actors. Today's society is unique in that maybe it is the best time to challenge the social structure with all the changes and new opportunities arising (Narayanan, 2016). It is the perfect time for youth to step out of their comfort zone of what their parents taught them and always seek creative ways to navigate through their lives with an entrepreneurial mindset. Think outside of the box, experience as many things as possible, build skills, and seek opportunities regardless of the larger social context. In the end, the courage and ideas to change one's lived reality of society's system stem from optimism and ambition. Therefore, young people can successfully guide their lives by understanding their capability to make the best choices for themselves even under the worst circumstances.
References


Statistics Canada. (2019). *Average earnings or employment income, by age group and highest certificate, diploma or degree (x1000).* (Table 37-10-0152-01). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710015201

