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## Informal Learning during the Early Career CRISIS of Entry-Level Youth Workers as Public-Sector Temporary Employees in the Republic of KOREA

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### Abstract

*In Korea, various initiatives for youth development are the social driver for building a sustainable society by means of the public investment for next generations. The national need to make the society sustainable has been especially salient in Korea as it has accomplished both economic and democratic development in an unprecedented pace since the Korean War. Youth work has been institutionalized with the foci on protection and welfare of youth as well as various activities for youth. In the national youth work, youth workers play a key role in implementing youth policies and delivering programs and services for young people.*

*However, the labor marker for entry-level youth workers is far from favorable. Korean youth work agencies such as youth community centers, youth cultural centers, and youth shelters hold less and less capacity to accommodate newcomers, given the recent recession of national youth work. Due to the limited budget and the unstable market of youth work, the job security of entry-level youth workers in Korea has become more insecure than ever since the Korean government initiated the national youth work. In this career context, even for those who fortunately got some positions in the field of youth work, their career path is vulnerable from the beginning. This early career crisis of entry-level Korean youth workers reflects various aspects of the public-sector labor structure in Korea. At the same time, entry-level youth workers' understanding of their career and life also illuminate how individual needs and expectations collide with socio-cultural structures and norms in the Korean society. This gap between the personal agency and the societal organization can be further examined along with the conception of informal learning.*

*The purpose of this exploratory study is to illuminate entry-level youth workers' informal learning about self-identity and career through their job experiences. The study takes a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method to delve into the nature of a phenomenon, to designing the methodological framework. Through a qualitative data analysis, the research identified a number of open codes that converged into eight categories and three major themes. Subsequently, the analysis results were interpreted along with three activity systems that was constructed upon the three major themes and attendant categories and codes.*

*What and how the entry-level youth workers learn informally on the job emerged from the methodological application of CHAT to their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, this study entails the theoretical implications of CHAT for examining informal learning in the workplace, highlighting its integrative approach to the job insecurity and the early career crisis of Korean entry-level youth workers.*

**[Keywords]** *Informal Learning, Youth Work, Career Crisis, Phenomenology, Temporary Employees*

## 1. Introduction

Every government establishes the national vision of developing young people in order to sustainably facilitate social development. That is, various national initiatives for youth

development are the social driver for building a sustainable society by means of the public investment for next generations. In particular, the national need to make the society sustainable has been especially salient in Korea

as it has accomplished both economic and democratic development in an unprecedented pace since the Korean War. The Korean government has implemented “the National Youth Policy”, which is updated every five year, on the basis of “the Youth Basic Act” first enacted in 1991.

The theory of youth work is fundamental to these governmental initiatives for youth development. Youth work has been defined as the distinctive practice of working with young people for their positive development in order to advance the society[1]. The key dimensions of youth work are focusing on young people in the sense of being an age specific activity, emphasizing voluntary participation and relationship, and being concerned with informal education and the welfare of youth[2].

In Korea, youth work has been institutionalized with the foci on protection and welfare of youth as well as various activities for youth. Meanwhile, youth work has become a distinctive field of practice that is differentiated from schooling. While schooling is formal education driven by national curriculum and certified teachers, youth work manifests itself in its informal education in the terrains of out-of-school programs and community development. “The Youth Basic Act” regulates the professional certificate of youth workers in Korea. Youth workers are defined as those who work in diverse youth-related institutions for positive and productive youth development.

Likewise, in the national youth work, youth workers play a key role in delivering youth policies, programs, and services for young people. The laws and the policies in the past were oriented toward youth development, focusing on the placement of professionally trained youth workers to adequate youth work agencies. Yet it is now extensively discussed how to improve their professional competencies[3]. A number of higher education institutions run programs for the sake of growing professional youth workers.

However, the labor marker for entry-level youth workers is far from favorable. Korean

youth work agencies such as youth community centers, youth cultural centers, and youth shelters hold less and less capacity to accommodate newcomers, given the recent recession of national youth work. Furthermore, public youth work agencies are primarily run by legally consigned corporations. In other words, regional governments consign public youth work agencies to some legal corporations. Due to the limited budget and the unstable market of youth work, the job security of entry-level youth workers in Korea has become more insecure than ever since the Korean government initiated the national youth work[4].

In this career context, even for those who fortunately got some positions in the field of youth work, their career path is vulnerable from the very beginning. This early career crisis of entry-level Korean youth workers reflects various aspects of the public-sector labor structure in Korea. At the same time, entry-level youth workers’ understanding of their career and life illuminate how individual needs and expectations collide with socio-cultural structures and norms in the Korean society.

This gap between the personal agency and the societal organization can be further examined along with the conception of informal learning in the workplace. Learning of human beings takes place not only formally but also informally. Particularly, informal processes and outcomes of learning encompass individual and organizational, personal and socio-cultural, and subjective and objective dimensions of learning[5]. These diverse attributes of learning have inspired more and more researchers to study informal learning as opposed to formal education and training[6].

The purpose of this exploratory study is to illuminate entry-level youth workers’ informal learning about self-identity and career through their job experiences. The research limited research participants to newcomers who have undergone the labor structure of Korean youth work for less than two years. This group of public-sector employees work mostly in a temporary position influenced by “The Non-Regular Worker Act” in Korea. Thus the research participants are inevitably put in

a vulnerable position in terms of job security. Drawing upon cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), this study attempted to examine how the participants accept or resist various contradictions and how learning takes place in the process of their adaptation with or resistance to them. This CHAT approach enables the study to explicate informal learning during the early career crisis of entry-level youth workers as public-sector temporary employees.

## 2. Review of the Literature

### 2.1. Korean youth workers

In Korea, “The Youth Basic Act” regulates the certificate of youth workers (Article 21). Youth workers are defined as those employed in any fields of youth development where activities and programs of welfare and protection for young people and positive youth development are implemented. Youth workers are responsible for developing and carrying out those activities and programs in order for young people to develop their physical and emotional abilities. Certified youth workers have been raised since 1993, and the summative number of certified youth workers from 1993 to 2016 is 46,434. Since 2013, approximately 4,000 people have attained the certificate of youth workers every year[7].

Recently, the Korean government has standardized the competencies required to youth workers through the National Competency Standard project. According to the National Competency Standard[8], the general tasks of youth workers encompass 1) planning and promotion of youth work and 2) development and evaluation of youth programs. In addition, youth workers’ tasks also include management of resources, accreditation, administration, network, and information all of which are crucial to deliver youth development programs and activities in an effective and efficient manner.

More specifically, the job tasks of youth workers are categorized into four domains: running youth activities, making relationship with young people, performing administrative tasks, and managing various networks[3].

In the domain of youth activities, youth workers carry out needs assessment, program development and implementation, and evaluation of activities. In the domain of relationship, youth workers perform youth counseling and facilitation. In the domain of administration, youth workers manage youth work institutions and program budget. Lastly, in the domain of network, youth workers establish and manage various kinds of networks such as human resources, organizations, and youth clubs.

Such diverse tasks demand youth workers to be equipped with professional competencies. Therefore, the Korean government has attempted to provide updated training programs with youth workers[9]. In particular, the government has mandated the retraining of certified youth workers since 2014. Likewise, youth workers in Korea have various roles in the professional field of youth work, and the government has institutionalized youth work so as to form a professional field.

However, the work environment are not favorable to Korean youth workers. In the research investigating the job condition of youth workers[10], the level of job satisfaction among youth workers was low, and they problematized the insufficient budget for national youth work[10]. Additionally, the level of job satisfaction among less experienced youth workers was relatively lower[10].

In Korea, many youth work agencies are registered as public institutions supervised by regional governments. While a few regional governments directly run their youth work agencies, most others are consigned by some legal corporations. Given the decreasing budget from the central and local governments and the uncertainty in renewing the contract for another term, legal corporations who run youth work agencies on behalf of regional governments are hardly able to manage their human resources in a sustainable way.

In this regards, newly coming youth workers are forced to make a contract to work as non-regular employees. “The Non-Regular Workers Act” limits the maximum period of

temporary positions to two years. The original purpose of this regulation is to transfer non-regular workers to regular positions after two-year of the contract. Yet, many employers choose to terminate the contract instead of allowing the transition from non-regular to regular positions. That is, many newcomers to the public field of youth work start their career of youth workers as temporary, non-regular employees.

Due to these job characteristics and the condition of the labor market, entry-level youth workers in public youth agencies face the mid-career crisis in their early career stage. In general, the mid-career crisis are caused by the complexity of internal and external factors[11]. However, for the entry-level youth workers as public-sector employees, external factors primarily play out in their early career crisis. Even though they entered public institutions as nationally certified professionals, the consignment institution and the budget reduction influenced by the recent recession of national youth work resulted in the unfavorable job condition for youth workers.

## **2.2. Informal learning & cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**

This research aims to investigate what entry-level youth workers learn informally during the early career crisis and how their informal learning leads to a deeper understanding of their own identity as public-sector temporary employees. Understanding informal learning requires taking into account the simultaneous relationship between productive activities at work and theories of learning[12]. Informal learning is a prevailing theme across various educational and learning-related fields.

The predominant approach to defining informal learning is distinguishing it from formal learning. In a technical definition, informal learning is defined as learning that takes place in informal rather than formal environments such as neighbors, family, work, plays, etc[13]. Another definition of informal learning is any knowledge or skill gaining activity that holds the absence of externally imposed

curricular criteria[14]. According to this definition, the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria determines learning as either formal or informal. The other definition proposes different types of workplace learning by providing six dimensions of a two-by-three matrix table[15]. This model employed two widely accepted criteria for categorizing informal and formal learning (i.e., the existence of intention and plan) along with the place and time of knowledge creation.

Likewise, the conception of informal learning views learning as not just a mental process, for instance, simply gaining knowledge and skills. Various cognitive approaches to learning likewise lack a comprehensive lens toward what, how and why people learn. In this study, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is employed to analyze the research participants' informal learning. The CHAT's alternative way of expounding human development and learning requires taking into consideration the variety of constituting components of activity. Within an activity or in the relationship among different activities, learning can be interpreted by elaborating how all the activity elements interact with and contradict one another.

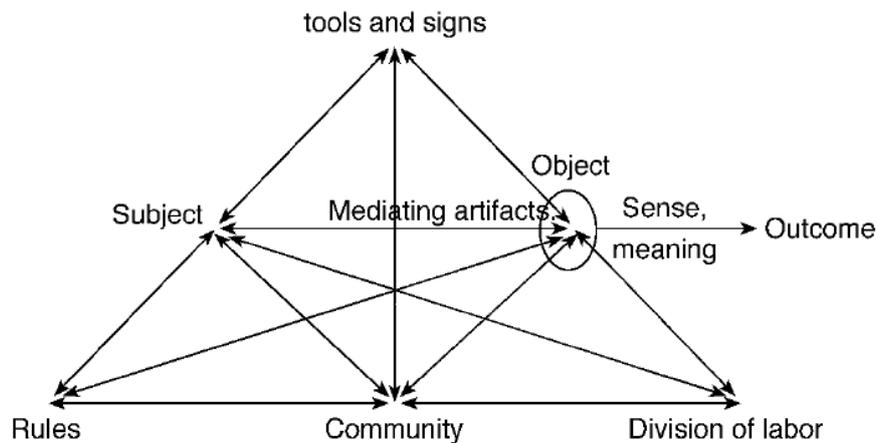
Engeström, one of the most influential contemporary CHAT scholars, has markedly contributed to the further development of activity theory in terms of methodological usefulness of the theory. Engeström's model highlights a systemic view on human activity and its constituents that entail complex social processes and outcomes by adding critical societal dynamics such as communities, the rules, and the continuously negotiated distribution of tasks, powers, and responsibilities to the Vygotskian concept of subject-object relation mediated by tools or instruments.

In an activity system, a subject is an individual or group whose perspective or point of view is driven by a subjective agency, and objects are things or concepts motivated for and eventually transformed into an outcome or result. The community is the group of participants who hold or share the same object, and division of labor refers to the horizontal actions and interactions among the members of

the community as well as “to the vertical division of power and status” [16]. A division of labor involves both rules and regulational norms that allow or constrain the dynamical

activity process in a functional activity system. The structure of a human activity system is delineated in <Figure 1> below.

**Figure 1.** The structure of a human activity system[15].



### 3. Methods

This study draws from a phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method to delve into the nature of a phenomenon, to designing the methodological framework. The phenomenological approach guides the process of data collection and analysis to explicate how the participants’ lived-experiences of work and life as youth workers form and transform[17]. While the participants engage in youth work practice, their work experiences are imbued with various elements of an activity system.

The research participants were selected among Korean youth workers who had worked for less than two years in public youth work agencies. A series of in-depth, face-to-face interviews with twenty-three entry-level youth workers were carried out in between November of 2014 and May of 2016. The semi-structured interview framework involved both scheduled and unscheduled probes about their experiences of youth work practice. In searching for the underlying beliefs and values understood by the participants, the participants were asked how the society and their organizations are structured

and how they conceive of their job characteristics, as experienced through their youth work.

CHAT is applied to unmask the informality of/in their learning in this specific vocational context. CHAT highlights that meaning emerges in the interplay between subjects acting in social contexts and the mediators (e.g., tools, signs, and symbolic systems) that are used in those contexts[18]. Thus, what and how the participants learn informally can become vivid while clarifying each element within an activity system and interpreting meanings in relations between these elements.

To identify core elements of each activity system, the research focused on the key evidence that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of the interview data. Various indicators were identified through both direct interpretation of the individual instance and aggregation of instances[19]. In NVivo 9, many a priori codes and the themes were identified. Subsequently, the coded data was reviewed over and over again until meaningful patterns, similarities, and differences appeared. The research identified 54 open codes that converged into eight categories and three major themes as in <Table 1> below.

**Table 1.** Themes and categories.

Overarching themes	Categories
Productive youth work practice	Vision of youth work in Korea
	Career unconformity
	Contradictions on the job
Timely youth work services	Unfair organizational structure
	Generation gap
	Outdated policy & law
Changed standpoint on youth	Bureaucracy
	Outdated institution

Finally, the analysis results were interpreted along with three activity systems that were constructed upon the three major themes and attendant categories and codes.

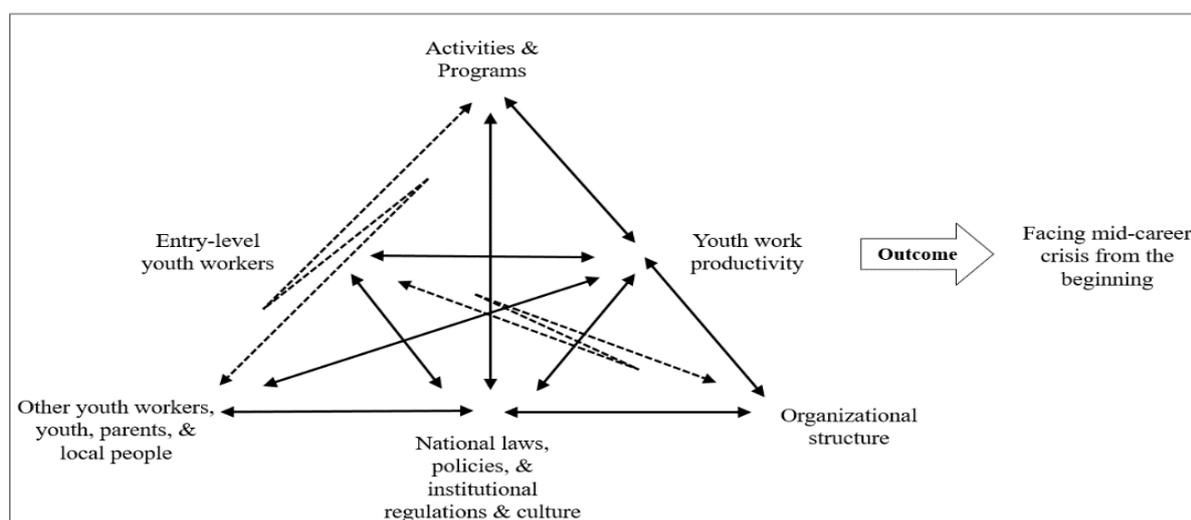
Three activity systems represent 1) productive youth work, 2) timely youth work, and 3) professional development. In each activity system, a number of contradictions are identified.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Early career crisis

The activity system of productive youth work is delineated in <Figure 2>.

**Figure 2.** The activity system of productive youth work.



The entry-level youth workers pursued positive development of young people through youth activities and programs which they designed, implemented, and participated in. One of the important missions of youth work is to realize the practice as efficiently and effectively as possible [2]. This nature is represented in the activity system of 'productive youth work.' In this activity system, the core mediation is youth activities

and programs, and the community is comprised of youth work practitioners, youth, parents, and citizens. The youth-related laws and policies, organizational regulations, and invisible culture in the workplace constitute the norms. Additionally, the participants worked in a certain organizational structure where the labor is divided by various job tasks with hierarchy.

Although all the participants agreed on such a fundamental principle of youth work

to be sought, they thought that the vision of the professional field of youth work is not bright. Given the recession and the negative social recognition of youth work, the participants were concerned about the unpromising reality with the career of youth worker from their job experiences. This frustration appears vivid by identifying the contradiction between the subject and the division of labor.

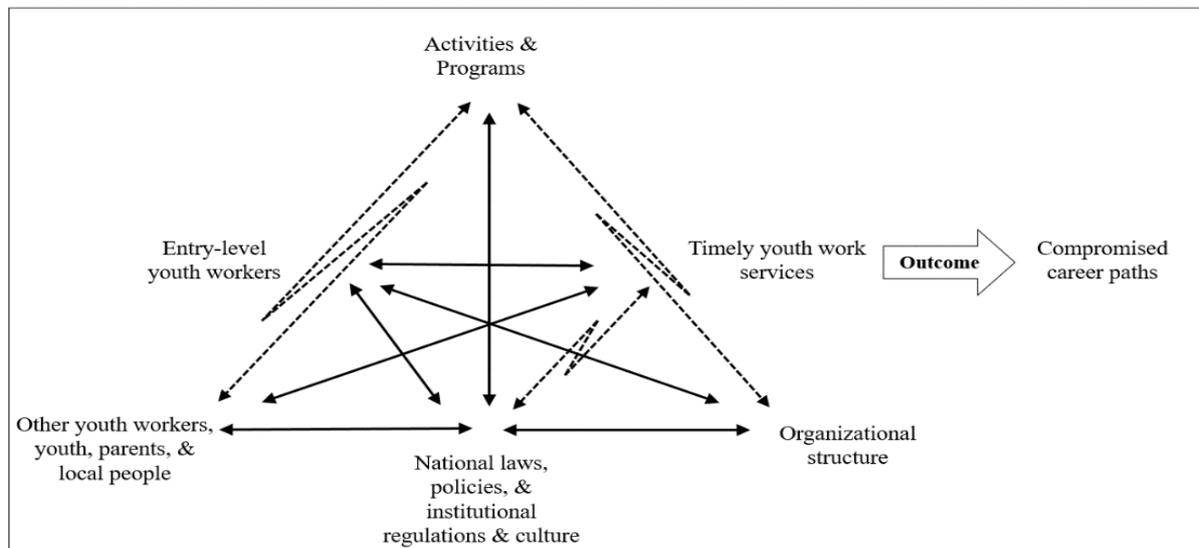
In addition, the participants kept a skeptical perspective on the situation where the mission of youth work had not been well delivered to young people. In Korea, youth-related fields and practices tend to be conceived of as a subordinated field to formal

schooling among school teachers, parents, and citizens. In this regard, the participants constantly reflected on what to do for youth development despite this stereotype. While some youth workers attempted to overcome the stereotype, others inevitably faced the early career crisis from the very beginning of their working lives

#### 4.2. Social oppression embodied in the generation gap

The activity system of timely youth work services is delineated in <Figure 3>.

**Figure 3.** The activity system of timely youth work services.



The object of this activity system is to deliver timely youth work services. That is, the participants viewed that it is imperative to deliver youth work services to where they are needed immediately. Besides, “timely” refers to the appropriate contents in terms of the zeitgeist. In the same ways as in the first activity system, the major mediation of this activity system is various youth activities and programs. The number of open codes in relation to this activity system were grouped into three categories: ‘unfair organizational structure,’ ‘generation gap,’ and ‘outdated policy and law.’ Given these categories and attendant open codes, the contradictions that the participants bumped into were discovered as follows.

First, when the participants were unable to deliver timely youth work services because of the other members of the community, the participants pointed out the bureaucracy widely embedded in the society. For parents and citizens, youth work tends to be considered merely outdoor youth activities. The participants argued that this stereotype keep youth work from fulfilling its original mission. Second, the participants thought that it is hardly possible for them to get promoted to regular workers, which prevents them from polishing their vision of the career development as youth workers. Third, as the youth-related laws and policies have become outdated, their youth work practice scarcely met the current social needs of youth development.

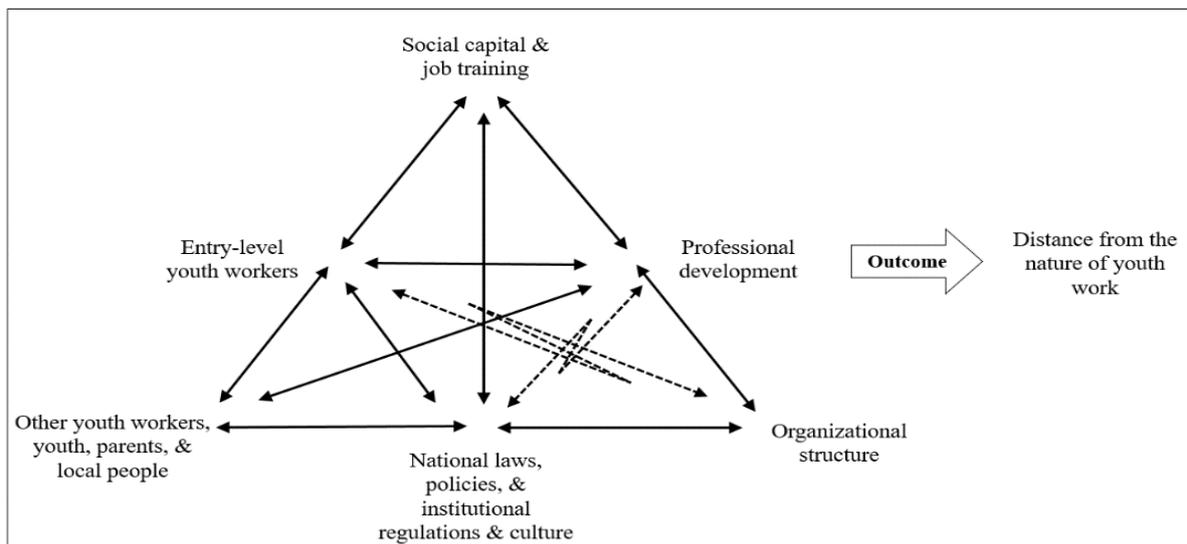
The contradictions above made the participants realize the limited opportunity of career development. Some participants expected to lay over the job in near future rather than constantly trying to overcome those structural contradictions. This challenge is by no means unique to the entry-level youth workers in Korea. Korea is experiencing the high youth unemployment rate[7], and

the unsustainable labor market has become more and more common to young professionals.

### 4.3. Change of the standpoint on youth

The activity system of professional development is described in <Figure 4>.

**Figure 4.** The activity system of professional development.



The participants believed that professional development is important for their future career in the field of youth work. In fact, many of the participants have attended some types of training programs designed for in-service youth workers. In addition, the participants attempted to develop and use their social capital which formed during their short period of career. Thus, in this activity system, professional career is the object, and the social capital and various kinds of professional training constitutes the mediation.

When the participants started their new career as youth workers, they had little information about what to do for their career development. As they experienced the field, many of them put some kinds of effort in professional development. However, the issue is that the participants' effort in professional development sometimes ended up with a negative perspective on their own professional identity. This problematic context is represented by two identified contradictions

in the activity system of 'professional development.'

First, the participants had to attend various training programs in order to develop their professional career. However, as junior youth workers who often take responsibility of technical tasks in the organizations, the participants encountered the organizational culture unfavorable for them to take external training opportunities. The participants got frustrated when they had to give up the opportunities due to the bureaucratic organization culture.

Second, the participants possessed a positive perspective of youth when they had studied to become youth workers. However, when their professional career of youth workers started, the entry-level youth workers could no long develop their positive views on youth as they repetitively took care of technical matters in the organizations. One participant pointed out that many youth workers

tend to consider youth a target group of people for the organizational prosperity. In other words, the entry-level youth workers were deprived of the opportunity to work with young people-the original task of youth work. This contradiction made the participants skeptical about their professional career of youth workers.

## 5. Implications

What and how the entry-level youth workers learn informally on the job emerged from the methodological application of CHAT to their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, this study entails the theoretical implications of CHAT for examining informal learning in the workplace, highlighting its integrative approach to the job insecurity and the early career crisis of Korean entry-level youth workers. When viewing learning as product, learning is never restricted to human minds and bodies. Thus, workplace learning ranges between and beyond individuals. The participants' informal learning about their professional identity and career took place in various contradictions which exist in a complexity of social relations and organizational structures.

The findings of this study confirm the fundamental philosophical assumptions of CHAT that learning is inextricably determined by cultural material practice and genuine participation in activity system[20]. The three activity systems were shaped by cultural and historical mediation and rules that should be viewed from the specific social and organizational standpoint through which the participants engage in practice. Furthermore, this research implies that newcomers' successful adaptation to the specific field of youth work, which is seemingly a public sector, can be enhanced through understanding what and how they learn in relation to social-cultural aspects of their work.

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