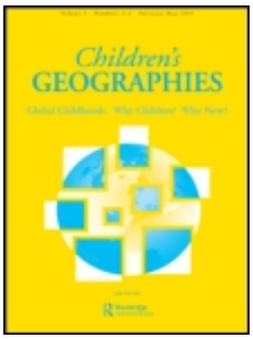

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Teaching English in South Korea: mobility norms and higher education outcomes in youth migration

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In many Western contexts, travel has a long historical association with youth, young adults and coming of age, an association that often connects temporary mobility with the lives of the educated middle classes and elite. Indeed, from the colonial adventure and the 'grand tour', to contemporary ideas of the 'gap year' or 'overseas experience', the mobility of Western youth and young adults is often considered voluntary and based on a desire to explore places and develop positive personal attributes, marking a stark contrast to depictions of migration from the developing world as directly or indirectly forced and driven primarily by economic considerations. This paper questions this depiction of developed world mobility in the context of the changing economic conditions that face young graduates in many Western countries. Drawing on survey and interview data I focus on the profiles and biographies of young adults from English-speaking countries working as foreign language instructors in South Korea. Although the personal narrative of travel and exploration amongst these individuals remains significant, findings from this research also suggest that many of these young graduates are also driven by economic circumstances: unemployment or underemployment and high levels of debt usually associated with tertiary studies. This tension between the opportunities available to young people and the constraints imposed by their own circumstances raises important questions about the multiple layers of social and economic differentiation operating through higher education and international mobility in the lives of young people.

Keywords: youth; higher education; migration; mobility; South Korea

Introduction

Research on the lives and aspirations of young people has identified a shift away from linear transitions to adulthood and a diversification of lifecourse trajectories. There are multiple, often contradictory, social and economic processes involved in this shift. On the one hand, a prolonged period of youth transition is associated with new lifestyles and an increased emphasis on individual identity construction (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This focus on the individualisation of identity suggests that traditional markers like class are becoming less prominent than lifestyle choices around education, work, family, travel and other opportunities that contribute to the construction of future adult selves. At the same time, other research emphasises the continued salience of socio-economic differences (Valentine 2003) and that more than just providing new lifestyle choices recent transformations have 'undermined young people's efforts to obtain social goods associated with "adulthood", such as a stable job, valuable skills, and secure

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housing' (Jeffrey 2010, 496). In this vein, rather than enjoying prolonged youth as a form of 'emerging' adulthood (Arnett 2004), it is argued that young people are negotiating complex terrains of opportunities and constraints (Valentine 2003), where risk and uncertainty about the future are pervasive (Blatterer 2007).

Two spheres for the articulation of these tensions between the capacity for young people to chart their own trajectories and the influence of broader structural processes are international mobility and higher education. Both engagement in international mobility and participation in higher education have become increasingly ubiquitous among young people in recent decades. Often occurring at critical periods in young people's lives (Johnson-Hanks 2002; Jeffrey 2010) mobility and education are also considered important sites for the construction of identity, the engagement in diverse experiences and the accumulation of cultural capital to support future career trajectories. They represent some of the 'choices' that young people must make as they seek to negotiate the challenges of growing up and becoming 'successful' adults. Yet, mobility and education are also characterised by considerable inequality, and despite, or perhaps because of, vast increases in accessibility, these areas of young people's lives are sites for the reproduction or reinforcement of socio-economic differentiation. Indeed, education is a 'contradictory resource: providing certain social opportunities while also drawing young people more tightly into systems of inequality' (Jeffrey 2010, 500). The same argument can be made about international mobility, both in terms of its structuring along national, ethnic, class and gender lines (Samers 2010), but also in terms of the different sorts of mobilities that are accessible to dissimilarly situated young people (Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

In this paper, I am concerned with the ways in which international mobility and higher education are involved in shaping the lives of a particular group of western youth: recent graduates from English-speaking countries who teach English in South Korea. Focusing on the stories that these young people tell about their mobility to South Korea, I examine the ways in which discourses about international mobility and the outcomes of higher education are involved in opening up and constraining the lifecourse pathways available to these individuals. Through this focus, the paper contributes to debates on the diversification of lifecourse pathways in the west by emphasising the manner in which mobility and education articulate through young people's lives, an approach that highlights the significance of both structure and action in the geographies of youth. The paper draws on findings from a survey and interviews with foreign English teachers that highlight some of the motivations involved in these mobility choices. To explore the multiple dimensions to these mobilities, I begin by foregrounding the role of international mobility and higher education in young people's lives. After introducing some background to the flow of young graduates to South Korea, the paper then discusses the stories and circumstances of young people in this study and the manner in which they come together at particular moments to drive mobility choices. The conclusion draws attention to the multiple layers of socio-economic differentiation that are articulated but also reinforced through higher education and international mobility, and highlights the need to pay more critical attention to the socio-economic circumstances of young westerners abroad.

Western youth mobility and migration

International mobility has become increasingly common among youth populations in many western countries. As Conradson and Latham (2005, 288) note, 'a period spent abroad – whether to study, develop a career, as part of travelling, or as an experimentation with the possibility of emigrating permanently – is becoming a normal and almost taken-for granted part of the life-cycle'. The forms of youth mobility also appear to be diversifying, from backpacking excursions (O'Reilly 2006) and student exchange (Brooks and Waters 2011), to travel associated with

working holidays (Clarke 2004), 'gap years' and overseas experiences (Simpson 2005), periods of international volunteering (Ansell 2008) and stable employment (Kennedy 2010). While the extent of youth mobility is difficult to measure given its diversity, research on particular types of mobility points to its growing importance: up to 250,000 young people embark on a 'Gap Year' in the UK annually (King 2011); one-third of all New Zealand graduates are living abroad within four years of degree completion (Smart 2011); study abroad participation has doubled in the USA in the last decade (Institute of International Education 2012) and international study, work and volunteer programmes are becoming more popular in Canada (Tiessen 2007).

Although the relative affluence of western societies in recent decades, the reduction in the cost of international travel and the feasibility of social networks stretched across territories are important dimensions of this process, it is the cultural characteristics of mobility that have been particularly pronounced in scholarship. Scholars have argued that mobility is viewed as an important part of young people's 'biographical construction' that is associated with more individualised identity development (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In part, this reflects the association of mobility with the transition from youth to adulthood; 'leaving home' allows young people to establish independence in spatial, financial and social ways (King 2013). From this perspective, travel forms part of a 'culture of self-exploration and self-development' that is focused on the 'nurture of the individual self' (Conradson and Latham 2005, 292). It is a means to accomplish adult identities that are more difficult to attain in a context of uncertainty (Blatterer 2007): through travel and the experience of 'distant', 'exotic' or 'risky' destinations young people 'envisage the sort of person they want to become and invest in performing that identity' (Ansell 2008, 221). This kind of identity work is not just a personal matter, rather research suggests that it is also part of a new packaging of the self in terms of less institutionalised soft skills in an 'economy of experience' (Heath 2007). Here 'risk', 'experience' and 'identity' are viewed as highly valued to future employers and successful youth should focus on cultivating their own 'self package' through forms of mobility (Ansell 2008).

This focus on mobility and experience of different places as an important part of youth transitions is particularly apparent in the representations that circulate around more leisure-based travel such as backpacking, gap-years and overseas experiences. In this regard, O'Reilly (2006) notes the significant representational connections between contemporary youth travel and earlier forms of exploration and colonisation by Europeans. This includes the characterisation of the mobile individual as,

> the brave, intrepid explorer; the association of physical movement across vast distances with adventure, excitement, and daring deeds; and the lone individual pitting himself (the ideal is generally a 'he') against the forces of nature, savage 'Others', and his own physical and psychological limits. (O'Reilly 2006, 1003)

Echoing historical forms of travel, the narratives of mobility used here reinforce a characterisation of western youth travel as exploration that is socially and materially linked to the transition to adulthood. These representations reflect not only the increased interest in travel among young people but also an increasing commoditisation of these types of mobility, with substantial industries emerging around backpacking (Clarke 2004), gap-years (King 2011) and international volunteering (Ansell 2008) that support the reproduction of narratives about the value of travel.

Paralleling this growth in primarily leisure-based mobility, a small body of scholarship in migration studies has also identified emerging patterns of skilled migration that involves relatively younger western populations. Although the precise definition of who is a skilled migrant is highly debated, education (particularly in terms of tertiary degrees), occupation and professional experience are usually considered important factors (Samers 2010). On this basis,

much research on western skilled migrants has focused on managers and executives working in advanced producer services, who are understood to move relatively freely between different global city labour markets as part of overseas postings (Beaverstock 2002) or more extended expatriate lives (Butcher 2010). Of more relevance to the focus of this paper is research exploring individuals described as 'middling migrants', whose education and occupation reflect a middle-class status in their home countries but also as they migrate to new destinations. Conradson and Latham (2005) in this regard discuss educated young New Zealanders in London who are seeking career development or are driven by desires for more worldly experiences. Likewise, in Kennedy's (2010) research on recent EU graduates in Manchester, migration is framed in terms of developing life projects and experiences abroad are seen as part of continued processes of the individualisation of young people's identities.

An even greater emphasis on western skilled migration as akin to travel and exploration and tied up with processes of identity development has emerged in research on migration from western to non-western countries. In this context, individuals are described as 'expatriates', 'mobile professionals' or 'privileged migrants' (Fechter and Walsh 2010) in ways that point to assumptions about their relatively privileged position in comparison with local populations and other migrants. In their review of the field, Fechter and Walsh (2010, 1199) suggest the term 'mobile professional' as most appropriate in referring to 'European or North American nationals who move abroad, mostly for work-related reasons, including to countries which were former colonies'. Reflecting the normalisation of mobility discussed above, the focus of much of this research has been on critical readings of cultural motivations for migration or encounters with local populations. There has, for example, been considerable emphasis on 'expatriates' and the way in which imagination of places like Dubai (Walsh 2012), China (Yeoh and Willis 2005), Singapore (Butcher 2010) or India (Korpela 2010) contributes to mobile professionals' position in power structures abroad but also to transnational belonging and new more cosmopolitan selves.

While the experiential dimensions of transnational mobility and cultural encounters abroad have been prominent in literature on western migrants, there has been only limited consideration of the economic circumstances or motivations of these migrants – even as some are understood to be migrating to work. The literature on 'mobile professionals', for example, says very little about conditions in migrants' home countries (Fechter and Walsh 2010). In their focus on 'middling migrants', Conradson and Latham (2005, 288) argue that 'a significant proportion of these global population flows cannot be understood within a straightforward economic rubric'. Although also primarily concerned with experiences of migrants abroad, Kennedy (2010, 467) does offer some indication of the broader issues involved, suggesting that 'although the desire to travel and/or escape from home were also significant', 'for most respondents, employment and career or educational needs were paramount in deciding to migrate'. While there is no doubt that in many forms of migration, including western migration, 'financial considerations are not necessarily primary' (Conradson and Latham 2005, 288) the representation of western youth as based on experience over other concerns seems to reproduce a rather problematic notion of western youth abroad as wealthy and driven only by individual life projects. Certainly, it seems to ignore the influence that socio-economic conditions in home countries may have, even on highly skilled individuals, in terms of job opportunities. It also suggests a need to pay attention to more ordinary western migrants who may not be working in desirable jobs or simply enjoying the experience of being abroad. More broadly, the result of the emphasis on culture over economics in these migration processes creates a problematic distance between western (youth) migrants and those from other countries, reifying the agency of the former over the supposed structural constraints that exist for the latter (Kothari 2008).

Teaching English and higher education

This research is focused on a more ordinary group of young people, English teachers, whose mobility cannot be understood through either a focus on leisure-based travel or as a form of skilled or middling migration. Although westerners have been travelling to South Korea and other parts of East Asia to teach English for decades, there is virtually no research on the processes or experiences involved in this migration pattern. Some research in applied linguistics has addressed questions about the role of foreign language teachers in classrooms (Shim and Park 2008) and the valorisation of the (white) native speaker (Shin 2007). The scant social research that does exist on English teachers in Asia suggests that they are not easily understood within orthodox migration categories. Lan (2011, 1676), for example, who interviewed a small number of teachers as part of research on skilled migrants in Taiwan, characterises them as 'the bottom stratum of Western expatriates in Taiwan'. She suggests that while many construct self-narratives that promote an identity as 'global trekkers and cultural adventurers' (Lan 2011), their lives reflect a form of 'economic migration and marginal employment'. Lan (2011, 1676) speculates that this is a result of the globalisation of labour markets, that English teachers are 'economic migrants marginalised by a shrunken labour market in the West as a result of capital outflow and global outsourcing'. While this explanation accounts for some of the context of English teacher migration, there is also a broader context around participation levels in higher education that is important to understand how individuals can engage in this kind of migration and why they feel they might have to.

Participation in higher education has also become increasingly normalised in recent decades. While little more than a generation ago higher education was the preserve of a small elite, in many western countries pursuing post-secondary qualifications has become a necessity in an increasingly competitive environment (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). In the countries where participants in this research originate (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, UK and USA), tertiary enrolment rates have increased significantly in the last three decades and in all except South Africa[1] over 50% of young people now enter some kind of post-secondary training, reaching more than 75% in Australia, New Zealand and USA (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009). While this growth in participation reflects longer term trends, it is also part of a recent emphasis on producing educated workers that is related to the incorporation of national economies in globalising processes, the flexibilisation of labour markets and the normalisation of neoliberal government policies that emphasise individual responsibility (Furlong and Cartmel 1997).

The growth of participation in higher education also reflects changing representations of study and the value of qualifications. There is an increased emphasis on the 'cultural capital' of higher education in securing class status and helping young people to craft individual identities through their study choices and career development (Brooks 2003). This is certainly the case for middle-class young people (Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011), but the growth in participation also points to the increased importance of further study for young people from families where this has not previously been commonplace. Brown (2011, 8) identifies a significant 'politics of aspiration' (Raco 2009) in government and university efforts to widen participation in the UK where initiatives 'act on young people's emotions' for a better life 'in order to try to raise aspirations'. Crucially, the increased emphasis on higher education has been accompanied by changing funding structures where students and their families are expected to be responsible for a greater proportion of funding in anticipation of the economic benefits that will be derived through more skilled employment. Many of these costs have been borne by an increasing prevalence of student loan systems, which effectively allow individuals to borrow to make investments in the development of their own human capital (Christie and Munro 2003).

As a 'positional good' (Hirsch 1976), education has a relative rather than absolute value that depends on the level of distinction a qualification provides from others. As higher education has become increasingly the norm, then, the distinction that accompanies a university degree has also decreased. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) describe this process as 'qualification inflation': while more individuals now partake in higher education through increased provision and private financing, there remains considerable inequality as distinction increasingly oscillates around the right kind of degree. These differences are also followed by varied labour market outcomes and growing educated unemployed or underemployed populations (France 2007). As Salas-Velasco (2007, 334) notes, 'new cohorts of recent graduates may have greater difficulties to find a first 'good' job … the transition period is becoming longer and transition patterns are becoming less defined and less certain than they once were'. There are significant flow-on effects from underemployment: it influences the assumed connection between education and employment; can reduce the human capital acquired through education through underuse; and an inability to service debts built-up during study can lead to greater financial burden. As this study suggests, qualification inflation can also contribute to the growth in work-based migration like English teaching, as individuals seek resolutions to their underemployment and high levels of debt in alternative labour markets abroad.

Teaching English in South Korea

There are a relatively small but growing number of young western graduates who teach English in South Korea. In 2010, 47,405 foreigners entered South Korea on foreign language teaching visas, the vast majority of whom teach English (Korea Immigration Service 2011). The number of English teachers has grown considerably in recent years (from 7695 in 1995 to 11,849 in 2000 and 25,014 in 2005) as a result of the continuing expansion of public and private English education. This expansion also reflects the increasing emphasis on English in South Korea in the last three decades. Korean businesses and the state now view the general acquisition of English as crucial to economic success (Shim and Park 2008, 148). A key characteristic of this trend is the idealisation of the (white) native speaker as the only credible teacher of English (Shin 2007). Accordingly, there has been a gradual shift from English taught by Koreans trained in linguistics towards the employment of native speakers in private academies and, more recently, in public schools.

English teachers are recruited either directly by schools or through recruitment agencies. To qualify for the position of 'foreign language instructor' applicants must be 'natives of the country whose mother language is the one they are teaching'. In the case of English, this definition includes Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, UK and USA. Applicants must possess a bachelor's degree but need no formal training in language instruction. A typical first-time one-year employment contract will include return airfares, basic accommodation and a salary that starts at about 2 million Korean Won per month (approx. USD$1800). Most of the recruitment of English teachers takes place on the internet and in job classifieds but some participants in this research had attended information sessions on university campuses. The following advertisement from WorknPlay Consulting, 'Korea's No.1 ESL Recruiting Company', is indicative of the approach to recruiting teachers:

> Why Teach English in Korea?
>
> In South Korea, English education is a booming business. There are many job opportunities around the country, whether in bustling big cities, peaceful small towns, or sunny tropical islands surrounding the mainland. Competitive pay with a relatively low cost of living makes teaching English in Korea ideal for traveling, saving money and exploring the rich culture of this vibrant country.
>
> http://www.worknplayconsulting.com/index.html

Most of the recruitment process is carried out at a distance for first-time teachers. Interviews are rare and most correspondence is over email. The time between applying to recruiters, being offered a job and departing can be as short as one week and is rarely longer than one month. In other words, the opportunity emerges very quickly and candidates with a degree are effectively guaranteed a position.[2]

The material in this paper is drawn from biographical interviews with 41 foreign English teachers living in the Seoul Metropolitan Region and an online survey with 505 respondents.[3] This research formed part of a broader project on 'Mobilities, Social Difference and Urban Incorporation' that investigated the lives of different temporary migrants in Seoul. The interviews were conducted in April and May 2009 in Seoul and generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants were invited to describe their experience of migrating to South Korea with prompts provided around important details: individual background, reasons for migrating, first experiences, home, work and public life and future plans. The 41 interviewees were selected from a total of 211 volunteers recruited through advertisements and the survey. The final sample reflected the demographic characteristics of English teachers in South Korea. It included 22 males and 19 females, and participants came from Canada ($n = 10$), USA ($n = 10$), UK ($n = 7$), South Africa ($n = 5$), Australia ($n = 5$) and New Zealand ($n = 4$). While there was a small number of older participants who arrived in South Korea in their 30s ($n = 3$) or 40s ($n = 1$), most participants arrived in their 20s either directly following graduation or shortly afterwards. This paper focuses only on the narratives of this latter group.

Although this paper also includes survey findings, it relies to a significant extent on analysing the trajectories of these young people through their own stories. A focus on the stories that migrants tell about their experiences, hopes and aspirations can serve as a valuable lens through which to critically examine migratory processes (Kynsilehto 2011). Amongst other things, biographical approaches emphasise the spatio-temporal features of migratory processes, connect migration trajectories to other life spheres (family, professional and education) and highlight the ongoing process of meaning-making involved in mobility (Breckner 2007). The aim of these interviews was to examine the interviewee's understanding of their current situation and how it related to past situations, rather than as a way to uncover objective truths (King 2013). In this respect, attention is paid to the manner that individuals re-narrate their situations as part of processes of identity construction that make sense of past decisions, current circumstances and future uncertainties (Blatterer 2007). As Lawson (2000, 174) notes: 'Migrant stories can reveal the empirical disjuncture between expectations of migration, produced through dominant and pervasive discourses of modernization, and the actual experiences of migrants'. While her emphasis is on the disjuncture between discourses of migrants as agents of development and individual experiences, there is considerable resonance with the discussion below where discourses of travel and exploration intersect with the social and economic realities of many of the young people in this research.

Pursuing travel and experience

Multiple narratives were weaved through the moments that participants decided to come to South Korea. For a few participants, these narratives were extraordinarily particular. Charlotte[4] (USA, 1–2 years) was a Korean adoptee and had always wanted to spend time in South Korea, learning the language and the culture; Rachel (USA, 1–2 years) was a social worker with Korean adoptees and eventually married an adoptee in the military who was stationed in South Korea. Sallie (New Zealand, 0–1 years) and Martina (UK, 4+ years) travelled to South Korea in pursuit of their girlfriend and boyfriend, respectively, and Martin (Australia, 4+ years) viewed South Korea as part of a career trajectory in English language teaching. In addition to these quite specific narratives,

there were also two more general narratives focused on dimensions of travel and experiences, and economic factors of migration that were common among participants.

Rebecca (Canada, 0–1 years) declared early on in our interview that she 'always wanted to travel'; she spoke of the opportunity to spend time abroad as part of a process of seeing the world, learning more and becoming independent. She recalled how after growing up on the outskirts of a small town in Ontario she was inspired by the different experiences she encountered while studying in Ottawa: 'I thought if I can see this much amazing difference stuck in Ottawa, like an eight hour bus ride away, like I want to see the world'. Indeed, Rebecca wanted to quit university immediately and travel the world but her parents convinced her otherwise and she completed her degree in journalism and political science: 'Right after that, and going into political science I wanted to compare the politics of other developed countries and I couldn't obviously do that working with what school had. I had no experience. Right away you want to travel'. South Korea was not initially on her radar and she had thought about joining a friend who was travelling through Egypt, and then considered possibly teaching in the Middle East but reconsidered after reading about the experience of other westerners. Rebecca's boyfriend suggested South Korea and eventually departed first, arranged accommodation and helped Rebecca get her first job.

Mary's (Canada, 4+ years) narrative represents a similar example. Originally from Newfoundland, Mary studied philosophy and English literature and left for South Korea almost immediately after graduation. Like Rebecca, she emphasised her long-standing interest in travel and experiencing the world. She had been involved in the Association for Canadians and the International Students Centre at university and these experiences had encouraged her to be curious about the world. Mary also emphasised that South Korea represented a path less trodden by the normal routes of North American graduates: 'When I graduated a lot of my friends were going to Europe, backpacking across Europe and I didn't really want to do that. I wanted to do something different'. Initially, she planned to go to Malaysia but her older sister had already departed for South Korea and was able to arrange a position for Mary directly.

Rebecca and Mary were not alone in articulating a desire to travel, to explore and learn more about themselves in the process. These narratives emerged, albeit to varying degrees in almost all of the interviews. They were also notable in the survey of foreign English teachers. Indeed, as Figure 1 illustrates, when asked what the most important reason for teaching English overseas was, 46.5% of respondents indicated this as their 'most important reason' (a cumulative total of 80.8% identified this as one of their three reasons). The next 'most important reason' was 'to earn a higher income' but only 11.3% of respondents chose this (36% cumulatively); the other economic factor, 'there are no satisfactory jobs in my home country', was selected by 8.7% as their most important reason (35.4% cumulatively). Other non-economic related answers also scored similar levels: 'visit Korea specifically' (9.3% and 33.7%) and 'want to teach English' (7.1% and 30.7%).

In this respect, there was considerable resonance between the motivations of foreign English teachers and the themes commonly addressed in research on mobile youth. Mobility is viewed as part of a life phase where individuals learn about the world and as a result learn about themselves. In these narratives, the specificity of South Korea is rarely pronounced. Rather, it is travel, mobility and exploration that are most important – central features of a process of individualisation that allow individuals to conform to expected practices of middle-class educated youth.

Socio-economic circumstances and mobility

While narratives of migration to South Korea as a process of travel and exploration emerged in most interviews, a large number of participants also foregrounded other factors around their

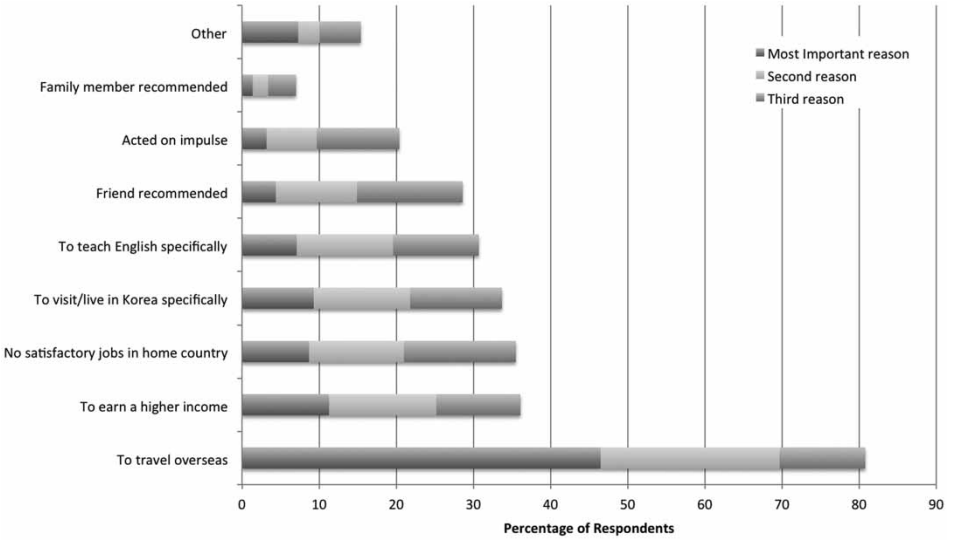

Figure 1. Most important reasons for teaching English overseas.

economic situation as significant in their decision to teach English in South Korea. In short, when these participants found themselves in difficult situations or were unable to identify a stable economic future, teaching in South Korea presented itself as a solution. This was not because of a desire to teach English or be in South Korea but rather because their education, which was not serving them particularly well in their origin countries, provided them with almost guaranteed jobs and status in South Korea. As noted earlier, foreign English teachers need only possess a recognised degree from their origin country. The degree need not have any relevance to education or language and there is no requirement to have even basic training in English language teaching – something that marks South Korea out from alternative locations like Japan.

Some of these economic elements emerged in other survey findings. Responses to the question 'Why did you decide to teach in South Korea specifically' are provided in Figure 2. These findings suggest that economic factors were an important element in the decision-making process for many respondents. The most important reason for choosing South Korea as a destination was salary at 29.7% (58.4% cumulatively), with other economic reasons 'lower cost of living' and 'easier to get a job' accounting for 10.3% (46.5% cumulatively) and 8.1% (46.3% cumulatively). Amongst the other reasons, 'Interest in living in South Korea' was chosen by 11.5% (32.7% cumulatively), and the presence of friends was the main reason for 9.9% (24% cumulatively). Similarly, when asked what their main objective while abroad was, 42.4% indicated it was to earn money with smaller responses for 'travelling' (22.4%), 'get experience teaching English' (15.8%), 'learn about Korea' (9.7%) and 'learn Korean language' (4.6%). In sum then, while respondents seem to be likely to indicate that they chose to teach English as part of an effort to travel overseas, their choice to teach in South Korea was often based on economic more than non-economic reasons.

Matthew (UK, 1–2 years) grew up in a commuter town one-hour north of London. He studied history at Keele University and wrote an undergraduate dissertation on the rise of the middle class in Eighteenth Century England. Matthew had a vague interest in other places and cultures but not one that had motivated him sufficiently to travel. He recalled joining a friend at a recruitment meeting for teachers in China in his last semester – his friend took this opportunity and 'had a

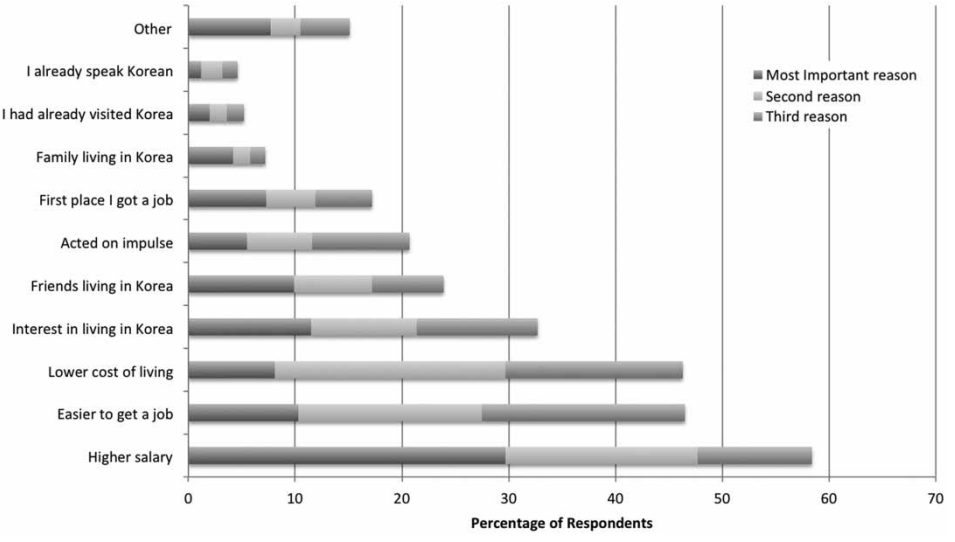

Figure 2. Most important reasons for teaching English in South Korea specifically.

great time' whereas Matthew chose not to: 'I think I was just lazy that way, lazy for a couple of years after University'. Instead of travelling, Matthew started working in temporary positions, he moved to London and again was only able to find temporary positions although he eventually secured a records management job where the contracts were regularly getting extended, 'I got on well there and they liked me'. Eventually, a full-time job was created:

> I was sort of told in confidence that you know just pretty much turn up, and the job's yours – turns out that wasn't quite the case [laughs]. And so yeah, they said 'We're really sorry, but now that we've got a full-time person to do the job we're gonna sort of bring this to a close'. … So yeah, and then I thought well, I'm out of work, being in London, I could probably yeah just get another temporary position somewhere. … [But] I just thought I'm not really doing anything interesting or particularly worthwhile, and I just thought I've always said you know since university that I wanted to go abroad, no time like the present

In Matthew's case, an underlying interest in travel was sparked by a change in economic situation and a sense that remaining in the UK was not particularly significant in terms of career development. He had no sense that travelling to South Korea was going to offer a better trajectory for career development but it did offer economic security and the opportunity to expand his personal horizons in ways that he had not been sufficiently motivated to do previously.

Narratives like Matthew's were relatively common. Many participants articulated a vague interest in travel that combined with a change in economic situation to motivate them to take up opportunities in South Korea. Lauren (New Zealand, 0–1 years), for example, had a full-time job as a museum guide in Wellington after university but once she moved towns to care for her mother she could only find part-time work in a liquor store. Nadia (UK, 1–2 years) studied technical theatre but after moving to London could only find work in bars that did not cover the cost of living; moving back to Cornwall where 'there's not a lot of jobs' was also not an option. For Karen (South Africa, 0–1 years), coming to South Korea was the only way to earn the income she expected to receive from her degree: 'Back home if you wanted a good

enough job, you had to have at least another degree. … So I knew I wouldn't really have the opportunity to work [there]'.

Debt was another prominent issue in the survey and interviews. Overall, 54.8% of all respondents had a student loan or education-related debt when they completed the survey (this question was not asked retrospectively). Unsurprisingly, respondents who had been in South Korea for less than 1 year were more likely to have debt (60%) than respondents who were more established, especially those in South Korea for more than 4 years (39.8%). Amongst the 248 respondents who provided information on debt level, the range was USD$1000–USD$125,000, with a mean of USD$24,380. Amongst respondents with student loans, 54.2% indicated that this was a factor in their decision to teach in South Korea. In addition, 31.2% of respondents had other kinds of debt such as bank loans or credit card debt. The survey also asked respondents about remittance patterns. A total of 82.7% of respondents indicated they remitted money from South Korea for the following purposes: to save (47.3%), pay education-related debt (40.1%), pay non-education debt (38.6%), support spouse, children or parents (21.0%), invest (14.6%) and other (3.4%).

A number of participants spoke about having student loans, which in some cases they were unable to service through incomes they were earning. Thomas' (Canada, 4+ years) narrative offers a useful example. Thomas (Canada, 4+ years) studied anthropology at the University of Waterloo and was faced with particularly difficult situation as he graduated:

> I came here to Korea almost immediately after university. My dad died when I was young so my mom was single and her health wasn't good so I was living on my own in high school and I paid my way through high school, and I paid my way through university mostly with loans and when I finished university I was up to my ears in debt.

Thomas had originally worked in museums while he was studying at university and really wanted to continue doing this as it connected with his interest in anthropology. The funding situation in Canada made this difficult; his position was supported by government grants that the museum reapplied for annually: 'you have to go begging to the government every year to get a grant to work for them and its very unstable and the pay was lousy'. It was in this context that South Korea emerged as a possibility:

> There is this 'go to Japan, go to Korea teach English' [on the internet] and I was running up against the limit of my student loans, had to pay them back so I came here and part of my logic was, I was thinking whether I wanted to stay in the museum field or become a teacher anyhow

Like the other participants, however, travel also formed part of Thomas's decision-making process:

> While in anthropology, so I wanted to see a foreign culture, that's actually why I chose Korea because at that time back then, Korea was off the beaten path. Japan was the place everyone was going to teach English so I came here instead.

Moments of uncertainty

These narratives and survey results suggest that there is considerable complexity in the migration decisions of foreign English teachers. Certainly, many participants connected their decision to travel to South Korea with a sense of exploration and a desire to experience other places that resonates with the broader normalisation of mobility and its association with particular periods of youth. Yet, many of the same participants also identified their own economic circumstances as

a key factor in their decision to migrate. Certainly, there were a small number of interviewees who fell neatly into one group or the other: Margaret (UK, 4+ years), the London School of Economics graduate who was a recruiting executive but just wanted different experiences; or Allan (Canada, 4+ years) the theatre major packing Gatorade bottles who saw no economic future in the small town he felt trapped in. In most cases, however, as the narratives above attest the desire to travel and have different experiences worked through current economic circumstances.

A common feature of the migration stories offered by participants in this research was the insight they provided into the multidimensional character of their decision-making processes, and the ways in which opportunities in South Korea were weaved into existing desires and circumstances. Almost all participants spoke about wanting to travel, but only Charlotte (USA, 1–2 years), a Korean adoptee, suggested that she had a particular interest in South Korea. Even among the small number (3 out of 41) of participants who were training to be language teachers or had experience teaching English, none had considered Korea as a potential destination until just before they departed (all three had considered Japan). Rather, teaching English in South Korea typically presented itself at a moment in participants' lives when they were wondering what to do next or were facing challenges that could not be overcome within their current situation.

Jason's (USA, 4+ years in Korea) story illustrates how different factors come together in the decision to teach English in Korea. Jason studied communication and worked for a short time in television production before shifting into computers just before the dotcom boom busted: 'to try to make my money, my name in computers'. After this, things were difficult economically:

> I was going job to job, and contracts were getting shorter and shorter. And, I was doing a part-time job, producing a syndicate radio show but that wasn't paying enough money. … Personal, just basic survival issue you know, worrying about rents and car insurance and you know, just trying to pay all the bills every month

Teaching in South Korea had been something that Jason had heard about when he was studying and he knew some friends who had gone there to teach English. His friends in Korea had been 'pulling' him for some time, emphasising the chance to save and pay back expenses and debts. Eventually, Jason set himself an ultimatum: 'if things get really bad, and I said after this certain day, if I'm not making this much money, lets go to Korea for a year. And, I got here in 2004, February 2004'. Jason emphasised that he 'didn't come here just because [he] was desperate for money'; rather, he already had an interest in Asia through some history courses he took during his degree and he had always had aspirations to travel, not least through the influence of his family: 'My father, … always trying to find some way to get a job overseas and my brother's always like that too. He wants to work, he wants to be overseas too'.

Jason's narrative of migration to South Korea is indicative of many participants in this research. This is not because of its particular confluence of experiences and factors, which were necessarily as diverse as the individuals involved, but rather because of the manner that South Korea emerged as a solution to aspirations or challenges that participants identified. There was both consistency and diversity in the processes, events or experiences involved in these decisions: many participants identified graduation from university and the lack of jobs as crucial; the loss of a job was also a common turning point; however, there were also more individual experiences, like a grandmother's funeral, breaking up with a boyfriend/girlfriend, girlfriend/boyfriend going to Korea first or even being dropped from the Japanese English Teaching programme at the last minute. In almost all cases, however, the decision to go to South Korea was taken at a moment of uncertainty, where the expectations of the past were broken down in the context of relatively uncertain futures.

Discussion

The narratives in this paper suggest that there is considerable complexity involved in the mobility of young western graduates to teach English in South Korea. Participants were clearly influenced in their decision to go to South Korea by the normalisation of youth mobility, and many reproduced narratives of travel and exploration, or framed mobility in terms of other friends and contacts travelling abroad. Despite these claims, however, the mobility of many of the participants in this research seems to be constrained by their social and economic circumstances following graduation. Certainly, only one out of 41 participants had a specific interest in being in South Korea, with many indicating that desires to travel intersected with the need to have a job and for others South Korea was presented as the only option to resolve challenges at home. Survey findings about decision-making processes, debt levels and remittance patterns seem to suggest that these factors are widespread in the English-teaching population in South Korea.

For many, decisions to go to South Korea took place as part of or shortly after the movement between education and work, a period often recognised as a key moment or 'vital conjuncture' (Johnson-Hanks 2002) in the lives of young people. It is a period where individuals are presented with challenges and opportunities around career, residence and identity. As the narratives here suggest, future orientation is pronounced – uncertainty characterises different choices and individuals experience the limitations of their situation alongside the potential for a radical transformation of life trajectory. On the one hand, the mobility of these young people to South Korea reflects the uneven outcomes of increased participation in higher education, where 'qualification inflation' has reduced the relative value of their degrees and led to under or unemployment and increased debt levels. At the same time, however, these mobilities have also been enabled by participation in higher education as only degree holders can teach English in South Korea. Paradoxically then, this particular form of mobility is both the result of the opportunities created by increased higher education while also reflecting the manner in which higher education continues to reproduce inequalities in life chances.

There is, then, a substantial socio-economic differentiation operating through and being reinforced in these youth mobilities. As Jeffrey (2010, 498) argues, during important moments in young people's lives, 'social life can only be understood with reference to how structures contingently combine to shape action in particular spans of time, where structures are imagined as mutually sustaining schemas and resources that enable and limit action'. This is clearly the case in this research, where inequalities produced through higher education contingently combine with dominant discourses about travel and individual circumstances to shape what is possible in the lives of young people. Future orientation is the key here – unlike young people travelling to experience the world or seeking to accumulate social and cultural capital as part of a repackaging of the self, many of the participants in this research are focused on more immediate concerns and challenges. Travelling to South Korea provides these individuals with an alternative solution to limited opportunities at home – even if this opportunity is generally limited in its time span and is not clearly connected to career development or a prosperous return to their home countries.

Conclusion

The diversification of lifecourse trajectories is a key characteristic of contemporary youth experience. Yet, scholars remain divided as to the extent to which young people can shape their own futures and the degree to which broader structural processes and socio-economic differences continue to influence the lifecourse trajectories that young people experience. The mobility of young western graduates to teach English in South Korea seems to encapsulate this tension. On the one

hand, these young people appear to be engaging in the growing normalisation of international mobility akin to gap years, backpacking, overseas experiences and international volunteering. Yet, the socio-economic circumstances revealed in interviews and the survey suggest otherwise. These findings suggest that while the mobility of English teachers may be narrated through dominant discourses about youth mobility, the choice to work in South Korea is also clearly structured by the local context of higher education outcomes and financing, and the limitations of local labour markets. Their actions, while reflecting individual life trajectories, are shaped by these dominant discourses around travel and its possibilities for self-development and the constraints posed by their own socio-economic position. Many of the participants in this research were caught at the crossroads of these discourses about international mobility, the desires they encourage and the economic circumstances they face. These findings offer important insight into this small but growing channel of youth mobility from the west but they also have two broader implications.

First, this research points to the multiple layers of differentiation that is both articulated through and reinforced by higher education and international mobility as key features of contemporary youth experiences in the west. It is well established that higher education both provides opportunities while also drawing individuals into systems that more firmly place them in socio-economic hierarchies (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Jeffrey 2010). In a similar sense, some research on the international mobility of young people from the west has illustrated how international volunteering (Ansell 2008) and overseas study (Waters, Brooks, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011) are more accessible to the middle class and elite but also play a role in reproducing privilege. This research points to another connection between the structural influences of higher education and mobility, where the differential outcomes from education contribute to reduced opportunities and different motivations for international mobility. These differences have clear implications for immediate experiences of young people in this research but they also point to differences in the ways in which such mobility will benefit individuals in the future.

This research also suggests that there is a need to pay more critical attention to the socio-economic circumstances of western youth engaging in international mobility. While terms like 'middling migrant', 'expatriate' or 'mobile professional' may accurately describe some of the mobilities that young people engage in, these are also terms that presume a middle-class or elite status. Few of the participants in this research would fall into these categories. While all have gained educational qualifications, participation in higher education was also often funded by debts that must be repaid and in many cases has not led to employment that is stable, well remunerated or fulfilling. International mobility was a response to these circumstances. This raises questions about the extent to which young people from the west engaging in other kinds of mobilities are becoming part of international labour markets. This might include specific areas of employment like English teaching but also broader occupations such as hospitality and service industries that constitute work dedicated or leisure-work mobility. In addition to drawing attention to a wider diversity of reasons why young people engage in mobility, focusing on the role of work offers opportunities to identify synergies and disconnections with migration and mobility in other places. There are further questions to ask about the experiences of western youth crossing borders and in employment and housing situations that may offer fruitful comparisons with young migrants from other parts of the world. There remains a broader question, too, about whether initially temporary moves lead to onward migration, the formation of transnational families or even settlement. To respond to these challenges, however, there is a need to take a fresh look at western youth mobility that incorporates existing insights about the desire for travel and exploration and the accumulation of social and cultural capital with the socio-economic circumstances and experiences of these young people.

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Notes

1. South Africa is characterised by quite different social and economic conditions, not least emerging from decades of apartheid rule and the intense inequality it created. Even here, however, tertiary enrolment rates are rising rapidly and there is emerging evidence of increased graduate unemployment and under-employment (Kraak 2010).
2. More recent requirements for police records have slowed down the speed of the process somewhat – but these did not affect most of the participants in this research.
3. The survey was conducted between April and July 2009. The survey included all seven nationalities who can teach English in South Korea with relatively proportional representation of each nationality. The sample was also relatively proportional in terms of gender with 45.9% female and 54.1% male, and included diversity in terms of length of time in South Korea: 0–1 year (37%), 1–2 years (19.6%), 2–3 years (14.3%), 3–4 years (6.7%) and 4 or more years (22.4%).
4. All names used are pseudonyms.

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