Aging Justice for Elderly Korean American Women:  
A Feminist Bioethics Approach

Gena Meeyuen Hong

Advisor: Charlene Galarneau

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Lastly, I would like to thank my grandma for showing me the meaning of care and the need for aging justice.
INTRODUCTION

Although Census studies show that the growth of the U.S. population has been slowing, it is expected that between 2000 and 2030, the population older than age 65 will double. While this demographic shift has received considerable biomedical attention, the ethical issues and justice concerns associated with a growing aging population, have been relatively obscured.

Yet in some ways, the lack of consideration is in itself an oppression reflecting the social isolation and voicelessness that reduce the dignity of some of the most vulnerable elderly persons. Moreover, the sources of oppression can be difficult to identify because the deep injustices that some groups of elderly persons suffer are due to unquestioned structural and systemic features of society, embedded assumptions or cultural stereotypes, and unconscious norms that actually define expressions of aging injustice as what should be accepted as the ‘normal’ processes of aging. Although these mechanisms of oppression are often hidden in everyday life, the consequences are real and reflected in the gendered dimensions of aging, such as the feminization of poverty and aging. Therefore, the oppressions that act along the lines of age also interact with other social categories of difference in a way that is not merely additive, but complex and illuminating of an important feminist notion of intersectionality. A more inclusive vision of justice in aging must attend to the way age intersects with other social differences, such as gender, race, class, and culture in order to illuminate the mechanisms of cross-cutting oppressions.

My thesis is a feminist bioethical analysis of aging justice for elderly Korean American women guided by three central questions: (1) What is necessary for aging with dignity and respect? (2) Conversely, what obstacles limit the ability of elderly Korean American women to continue to develop and exercise their capacities, express their needs, thoughts, and feelings and
be heard in a way that counts? (3) What can we learn about aging justice when we take seriously the experiences and voices of elderly Korean women who are relatively powerless and marginalized? The focus on this social group reflects both a theoretical need to allow sufficient detailed consideration of the particularities of a specific community and my personal commitment to study the aging injustice I have observed, as someone raised in a Korean American community and by a Korean grandmother.

The nature of the questions guiding my thesis necessitate a feminist bioethical methodology, which on a most fundamental level asks “the so-called “woman question,” strives to raise people’s consciousness about gender inequities, and aims to move people from ethical deliberation into moral action.”¹ I relied on the integration of two approaches that follow these central aspects of feminist bioethics.

Chapter One paints a portrait of elderly Korean American women living in the United States. They are a relatively invisible group not only because they are a minority, but also because of the oppressions that prevent them from participating in dominant forms of social cooperation. In this chapter, aspects of elderly Korean American women’s lives, such as their living arrangement or health status are introduced in the context of the Korean immigrant community as a whole.

Chapter Two is a deductive approach that lifts up aspects of existing feminist theory that are useful for the thinking about aging justice. It begins with a theory of social justice by feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young that is particularly useful for constructing aging justice because it locates structural and institutional sources of oppression. The connection between locating justice in social context as well as relationships is made by the inclusion of feminist care ethicist,

Eva Feder Kittay and her conception of justice as valuing dependency relationships to enable care for the caregiver.

Chapter Three is an inductive approach that goes out of the realm of theory and begins with privileging the lived experiences of elderly Korean American women by listening to their articulations of aging injustice in their own voices. It is the result of qualitative interviews with elderly Korean American women living in Seattle, WA. The scope of my qualitative interviews was intentionally limited with the recognition that focusing on a few concrete lives can be powerful in illuminating larger structural patterns and issues that extend beyond the few.

After engaging in two different conversations around aging justice, Chapter Four is an integration of these discussions. The emerging themes and individual stories from Chapter Three, were integrated with the feminist theory from Chapter Two. This integration revealed that listening to the voices of those with the most intimate knowledge of oppression enriches theory in a way that allows for a more usable culturally and contextually appropriate vision of aging justice for Korean American communities.

The original contribution of my thesis is not only in beginning the construction of aging justice, but also deeply rooted in my feminist methodology that provides a way for true accounts of elderly Korean American women’s articulations of injustice to be valued and heard by some for the first time. Thus, at the heart of this work is a genuine assertion that theory must be for those whose lives are being theorized about and therefore has value in its liberatory ability to inspire moral action.

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2 Fieldwork overview is located in the appendix, as well as the informed consent forms in English and Korean.
Chapter One:
A Portrait of Elderly Korean American Women

EMPIRICAL PICTURE

Currently ranked as the fourth largest Asian American group in the U.S., Korean Americans are one of the fastest growing segments of immigrants. Based on the 2009 American Community Survey, there are 1.3 million Koreans living in the U.S. and they represent 0.4% of the total U.S. population.³

The majority of Korean Americans immigrated to the United States after the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which abolished the national origin quota system based on race and allowed Koreans for the first time to immigrate to the U.S. as families.⁴ Until this time, Korean immigrants came mostly as individual laborers, students, picture brides, war brides, and adoptees. However, between 1965 and 1970, students-turned-professionals, guest nurses, and physicians were able to apply for permanent residence visas, and became a major component of Korean immigration.⁵ These professionals, together with the wives of U.S. servicemen petitioned for their respective spouses, siblings, and parents to immigrate as well. Since 1970, relatives of the permanent residents or citizens, have become an overwhelming majority of the Korean immigration to the U.S.⁶

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⁵ Yu, 2.
⁶ Yu, 2.
Age and Gender

Compared to other groups, the U.S. Korean population is relatively young due to the post-1965 immigration being that of largely family migration with young children representing a majority of the immigrants. As of 2000, Koreans 65 years of age and over represented 7% of the total Korean population. However, the proportion of elderly Koreans in the U.S. has continued to increase over the years and exponential growth is expected.

Korean women, when compared to the national population, are significantly overrepresented between the ages of 20 to 54 years. This is a reflection of the sustained gender imbalance in Korean immigration since 1965. In 2000, Korean women 60 years and older made up 12% of the total Korean American females in the U.S.

Geographic Distribution

Like most other East Asian immigrants, Koreans have traditionally been geographically concentrated in the Western region of the U.S. Hawaii and California have been home to the great majority of Koreans until the 1950s. This trend in geographic distribution changed significantly since the 1960s; Koreans have been quicker than other Asian groups to disperse across a wider geographic region in the United States. They are visible in most of the metropolitan areas across the US. Based on the Census 2000 figures, 44% of Koreans are located in the West, 23% in the Northeast, 21% in the South and 12% in the Midwest.

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7 Yu, 7.
8 Yu, 7.
11 Yu, 4.
12 Yu, 6.
California, New York, New Jersey, Illinois, and Washington State are the top five states with the highest number of Koreans.\(^\text{13}\) The fact that three quarters of the total Korean population are concentrated in just 10 states suggests a high degree of geographic concentration. For example, nearly one-fourth of Koreans in the U.S. live in the Southern California metropolitan region.\(^\text{14}\) While 96 percent of Koreans live in metropolitan areas (compared to 80% of the general population), within metropolitan areas, more Koreans (57%) live in the suburbs than in the central cities (40%).\(^\text{15}\) The rate of residential suburbanization for Koreans is one of the highest among major racial/ethnic groups and is in part due to their relatively high levels of educational achievement\(^\text{16}\)

**Work**

A major source of livelihood for Koreans in the U.S. is entrepreneurship of small businesses. Surveys conducted in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City, and Atlanta indicate that about one-third of Korean immigrant households engage in a self-owned business, one-fifth in professional work, and the rest in other salaried occupations.\(^\text{17}\) The self-owned businesses are mostly small in scale, labor intensive, and family or individually, operated. Recent Korean immigrants predominantly concentrate in small businesses that are unrelated to their prior educational or work experiences due in part to language difficulties and unfamiliarity with American culture. These small businesses stay competitive by working longer hours, mobilizing informal family labor, and catering to the Korean community’s needs.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{13}\) The percentage of Koreans residing in Washington State increased by 57.9% from 1990 to 2000.\(^\text{13}\)  
\(^{15}\) Yu, 6.  
\(^{16}\) Yu, 6. 
\(^{18}\) Yu, 14.
The concentration of foreign-born Koreans in small businesses may help explain why their reported incomes defy the strong correlation between the levels of educational attainment and economic prosperity. When compared to other groups of similar educational achievement, foreign-born Korean have the greatest discrepancy between education and income.\textsuperscript{19} The mean family, household, and individual income for Koreans are notably higher than their median, which indicates that Koreans experience a high disparity in income among themselves. This disparity in income appears between age groups; one out of every four elderly Korean immigrants lives below the poverty line.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Family Arrangement}

In Korean culture, the family is prioritized as the center of all social organization and is considered a natural support system characterized by reciprocal obligation.\textsuperscript{21} A greater percentage of Korean American families are married-couple families (82\% compared to 76\% of U.S. families).\textsuperscript{22} These families are relatively young in that around half have children below 18 years of age. Of these families 14.5 percent are single parent households (compared to 28.2\% of U.S. families).\textsuperscript{23} The lower number of single parent families is in part due to the fact that Koreans have one of the lowest divorce rates among major racial and ethnic groups (6.1\% divorced or separated Koreans compared to 11.8\% of U.S. families).\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{19} Yu, 14.
\textsuperscript{22} Yu, 9.
\textsuperscript{23} Yu, 9.
\textsuperscript{24} Yu, 9.
Living Arrangements

Studies have found that foreign-born Asian American elderly are less likely to live independently (separately from an extended family) than Whites or Blacks.\(^25\) This may be related to the fact that elderly immigrants may be particularly dependent on family members due to cultural and language barriers and limited economic resources, which would place a greater need on daily assistance. Living arrangements both provide resources for and make demands on the elderly; Co-residence may provide elderly Korean women support from family members, also it places demands on the elderly such as caretaking of grandchildren or other forms of housework.\(^26\)

After an initial period of co-residence, some elderly Korean American women prefer to pursue independent living arrangements because daughters-in-law (and daughters) are likely to be employed, because they may feel themselves to be burdens to their children when child care is no longer needed, and because single-family suburban residences may contribute to feelings of isolation.\(^27\) A study of living arrangements found that 77.5% of the Korean elderly interviewed stated that they would prefer to live alone and be less dependent upon their children.\(^28\) The availability of subsidized housing proximal to a concentration of Korean businesses was associated with increased level of independent living, which indicated that the important of access to a Korean community.\(^29\)


\(^{27}\) Kim and Lauderdale, “The Role of Community Context,” 632.

\(^{28}\) Lee and Holm, “Family Relationships and Depression among Elderly Korean Immigrants,” 4.

\(^{29}\) Kim and Lauderdale, “The Role of Community Context,” 633.
Mental Health

As predominantly first-generation immigrants, the present group of elderly Koreans face challenges of acculturation that have been associated with depression. In addition to acculturation stress, predictors of depression in elderly Koreans in the U.S. include satisfaction with social support, social network size, ethnic attachment, and disability status. Although mental health is a concern for elderly Korean immigrants, studies suggest they do not seek professional help or prescription medication for depressive symptoms. Rather they tend to rely more on religious, physical, and social self-care strategies to treat themselves.

There are culturally specific ideas about depression and mental illness. “Hwa-byung” or “anger syndrome” is a widely-held Korean popular belief that suppressed anger is the cause of a variety of somatic illnesses. It is attributed to the suppression of anger, disappointment, grudges, and unfulfilled expectations such that the body becomes the site of the expression of psychological distress. Moreover, this particular expression of mental illness is gendered; a study on “hwa-byung,” reported that more than three-fourths of the patients who complained of it were women. According to this study, the women linked their conditions to anger provoked by domestic problems, such as husbands’ extramarital affairs and strained in-law relationships.

Korean Churches

The number of Korean immigrant churches has grown at a rate faster than that of the Korean American population. Over the span of twenty years (1970-1990), there was a 27-fold increase in the number of Korean churches, compared to a ten-fold increase in the U.S. Korean population.\(^{35}\) In 1990, there was one Korean ethnic church for every 350 Koreans in the United States.\(^{36}\)

Compared to Chinese and Japanese immigrants, Korean immigrants have a disproportionately high level of Christian church participation. A 1978 study on the religious participation of Asian Americans in the Chicago area revealed that while around 30% of Chinese and Japanese immigrants were affiliated with Christian churches, almost 70% of Koreans in the area attended church.\(^{37}\) This high figure was similarly found in Los Angeles and other areas with dense Korean immigrant populations.

In addition to providing religious services, the Korean church functions as an important social and cultural institution in immigrant communities. The church is a source of cultural identification in terms of language and traditional values. Recent immigrants seek emotional support from churches, as well as advice from more established Korean immigrants.\(^{38}\) It is also a place that serves an educational function by teaching American-born Koreans aspects of Korean history, language, and culture. The church functions as a “pseudo-extended family” and as “a broker between its congregation and the bureaucratic institutions of the larger society.”\(^{39}\)

\(^{35}\) The most recent study on the religion of Korean immigrants in the United States was published in 1990. Similarly, there is a great availability of research on the role of churches in Korean communities from around this period.


\(^{37}\) Hurh, 21.

\(^{38}\) Hurh, 21.

Chapter Two:
Engaging in Feminist Theory on Aging Justice

JUSTICE AS FREEDOM FROM THE FIVE FACES OF OPPRESSION

Although many contemporary social justice movements have used the language of oppression, there has been little direct articulation about the meaning and application of this concept. Feminist philosopher, Iris Marion Young, has developed a systematic understanding of oppression by examining the conditions of social groups that have used this concept as part of their emancipatory movements. While Young found that different social groups are not oppressed in the same way, “all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.”

Defining oppression as at its core, the inhibition of self-determination and self-development may seem like an attempt to avoid specificity. However, it is not possible to define a single criteria that describes the oppression of the all groups because of their different contexts. Considering the unique contexts in which different social groups have been oppressed reveals that “oppression names in fact a family of concepts and conditions, which [Young] divides into five categories: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.”

In locating oppression as a condition of social groups, Young is clear in explaining that oppression is not necessarily the consequence of one tyrannical group intentionally ruling over another. Rather than just the result of a few people’s choices or policies, oppression also refers to the systemic constraints on groups with causes “embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of

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41 Young, 40.
following those rules.” These structural causes of oppression may run so deeply that the injustice some groups suffer comes from “unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life.” Thus, oppression cannot be eliminated by merely getting rid of a tyrant or by making new laws because oppression will continue to be reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural forces.

Due to the systemic character of oppression, “an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group,” but “for every oppressed group there is a group that is privileged in relation.” Young defines a social group as “a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life.” Social groups are “not simply collections of people...they are a specific kind of collectivity, with specific consequences for how people understand one another and themselves...they are an expression of social relations.”

Young distinguishes social groups from other collectivities: “aggregates” and “associations.” An aggregate “is any classification of persons according to some attribute,” such as skin color, the car they drive, or their neighborhood. An association is “a collectivity of persons who come together voluntarily—such as a club, corporation, political party, church, college, union, lobbying organization, or interest group.” In both cases, the individual is considered “ready-made” prior to membership in the social collectivity. In contrast, a social group is “defined not

42 Young, 41.
43 Young, 41.
44 Young, 42.
45 Young, 43.
46 Young, 43.
47 Young, 43.
48 Young, 44.
49 Young, 44.
primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity… it is identification with a certain social status, the common history that social status produces.”

In explicating the notion of social groups, Young addresses the concerns others have about thinking about justice in terms of social groups. Some people think that social groups reify arbitrary attributes, which is problematic because the issues of “prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion exist because some people mistakenly believe that group identification makes a difference to the capacities, temperament, or virtues of group members.”

In this view, people should be treated as unique individuals with the freedom to live without stereotypes or group norms. The very experience of being classified in a social group is considered oppressive because it may result in exclusion or discrimination. Young takes issue with this position because “group differentiation is both an inevitable and a desirable aspect of modern social processes.” As more people interact with one another through globalization, “people retain and renew ethnic, locale, age, sex, and occupational group identifications, and form new ones in the processes of the encounter.”

Identification with a social group does not diminish the complex, intersectional lives of individuals, “as social groups are not themselves homogeneous, but mirror in their own differentiations many of the other groups in the wider society.” The heterogeneity of social groups is a reflection of “group differentiation as multiple, cross-cutting, fluid, and shifting,” such that “group differences cut across individual lives in a multiplicity of ways that can entail privilege and oppression for the same person in different respects.”

Moreover, identification with a social group is often important to people, even when

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50 Young, 44.
51 Young, 46.
52 Young, 47.
53 Young, 47.
54 Young, 48.
55 Young, 42.
they are oppressed due to this identity. To deny the reality of social groups would mean ignoring what has been a source of mobilization for many emancipatory movements. The existence of social groups is not inherently oppressive and not all social groups are oppressed. Social justice “requires not the melting away of differences, but institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression.”

Young’s use of social groups as the basic unit of analysis for social justice does not involve comparing the relative distribution of benefits and burdens among groups in terms of material goods or social positions. Young seeks to move away from dominant conceptions of social justice that constrict justice analyses to the allocation of goods such as things, resources, income, wealth, and jobs. A distributive approach to social justice is problematic in that it “tends to ignore the social structure and institutional context that often help determine distributive patterns.” Young attends to this limitation by shifting the conception of social justice to encompass not just static distributions, but also the social relationships and processes that are a part of collective decision-making. This vision of social justice shifts an emphasis from evaluating the end result of distribution to the processes and constructions of institutional conditions necessary for the realization of the good life for all of society’s members, which can be reduced to two values: (1) self-development or the developing and exercising of one’s capacities and expressing one’s experiences, and (2) self-determination or participating in determining one's action and the conditions of one’s action. Young’s notion of justice can be best understood as the absence in society of what she identifies as the five faces of oppression, which are described below.

56 Young, 47.
57 Young, 15.
58 Young, 37.
Exploitation

Marx’s theory of exploitation explains how class distinctions exist in the absence of legally and normatively sanctioned class distinctions. Oppression in the form of exploitation in precapitalist societies was overt and enacted through direct political means. For example, in societies with slavery, the right to appropriate the product of the labor of others defined class privilege. Modern capitalist societies have removed judicially enforced class distinctions and individuals are formally free to contract with employers and receive a wage—there is no formal mechanism of law that forces them to work for that employer at that wage. Yet, exploitation exists in that we observe persistent “class distinctions between the wealthy, who own the means of production, and the mass of people, who work for them.”59 These distinctions have predominantly been measured in terms of distributable resources, such as wealth and income. However, the injustice of exploitation extends beyond the unequal distribution of resources. These inequities are often a reflection of the “fact that some people exercise their capacities under the control, according to the purposes, and for the benefit of other people.”60

The capitalist system of private ownership over the means of production and markets that allocate labor and the ability to buy goods, “capitalism systematically transfers the powers of some persons to others, thereby augmenting the power of the latter.”61 Thus, the class distinction exists in disparities in terms of not only material wealth, but also relative deprivation of power and control, as well as self-respect. At its core, oppression through exploitation sets up a structural relationship between social groups in such a way that the “steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another.”62 The privileged social

59 Young, 48.
60 Young, 49.
61 Young, 49.
62 Young, 49.
group maintains the system of exploitation by using the very benefits and energies from the oppressed group to shape social rules about what counts as work, who does what for whom, and how work is compensated.  

Young applies this conceptualization of exploitation to analyze women’s oppression. Women’s inequality of status, power, and wealth exists because not only because men exclude them from privileged activities, but also because women’s work for men enables them to gain freedom, power, status, and self-realization. Young argues that gender exploitation occurs through two dominant mechanisms: the transfer of material labor to men and the transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men. Women are not oppressed necessarily by the specific tasks that they made perform as part of the work they do in the home, but by the fact they perform these tasks for someone on whom they are dependent. Moreover, performing these tasks for men gives the men the freedom to direct their energies to other activities that receive recognition and allow them to actually increase their relative power over women. In addition to housework, women’s energies are transferred to men in the form of the nurturing emotional care, empathy, and sexual satisfaction that women provide. While nurturing and emotional support are needed by both men and women, the gendered socialization of women trains them to be good at meeting these interpersonal needs, which are often unreciprocated by men.

Gender exploitation exists not only in the more private institution of the patriarchal family, but also in the workplace and the state. The enactment of gender exploitation in these spheres is often interrelated. As men have removed themselves from the responsibility of childcare, many women have become dependent on the state for support as they continue to bear

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63 Young, 50.
64 Young, 50.
nearly all of the responsibility for childrearing. This creates a system in which the advantages of women’s informal labor benefit both men in these families and the state. The types of jobs that women have been entering in increasing numbers reflect gender exploitation in the workplace. Many of the jobs available to women typically involve gender-based tasks requiring sexual labor, nurturing, caring for others’ bodies, or smoothing over workplace tensions. Women’s work results in the enhanced status of, pleasure, or comfort of others, usually men and “these gender-based labors of waitresses, clerical workers, nurses, and other caretakers often go unnoticed and undercompensated.” The lack of respect and recognition for women’s labor, as well as the limited choice in type of work reflects the way in which exploitation exists in the formation of coercive structures. Thus, the injustices of exploitation cannot be eliminated by the redistribution of goods, since these institutionalized structures and practices would remain unaltered and therefore maintain unequal power relations and material benefits.

Marginalization

Young identifies marginalization as an especially dangerous form of oppression because a whole social group is excluded from the labor system, which places them at risk for severe material deprivation and inclusion in what society considers the most important form of useful social participation. Marginals are people the system of labor cannot or will not use. Although marginalization in Western capitalist societies is often racially marked, it is by no means the fate of only racially marked groups and a large proportion of the population is marginal: elderly people, young people, many single mothers, many mentally and physically disabled people, and

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65 Young, 51.
66 Young, 51.
Welfare programs have in some ways addressed the injustice of material deprivation from marginalization, but the harmful consequences of marginalization are more than distributive issues. Young finds that there are two categories of injustice beyond distribution associated with marginality. First, the welfare system produces new injustice by creating a system in which dependents lose some of the rights and freedoms that others have. Second, even with the material inequality of marginalization mitigated by welfare programs, they cannot address the way in which exclusion from labor opportunities means diminished ability to exercise capacities in socially defined and valued ways. 

Marginalized people depend on bureaucratic institutions for support or services and in their dependency, often have to give up basic rights to privacy, respect and individual choice. Young brings to light that the elderly, the poor, and the mentally or physically disabled are “subject to patronizing, punitive, demeaning, and arbitrary treatment by the policies and people associated with welfare bureaucracies” and “invasive authority of social service provides and other public and private administrators, who enforce rules.” Thus, marginalization results in a form of dependency for basic needs to be met.

Yet dependency is not inherently oppressive. Young argues that dependency is part of the lifecourse; “One cannot imagine a society in which some people would not need to be dependent on others at least some of the time: children, sick people, women recovering from childbirth, old people who have become frail, depressed or otherwise emotionally needy persons.” Feminist moral theory has been important in questioning the deeply held assumption of the individualistic model of rights that designates moral agency and full citizenship only to those who are

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67 Young, 53.
68 Young, 54.
69 Young, 54.
70 Young, 54.
autonomous and independent. Feminists have worked to expose that this individualistic notion is derived from male experience of social relations and denies dependency as a basic human condition. On the other hand, due to the gendered socialization of women’s experience that involves dependency work, such as caretaking, the female understanding of social relations tends to recognize dependence as a basic human condition.\(^7\)

Oppression in the form of marginalization does not cease to exist when one’s basic material needs are met. Because most of society’s productive and recognized activities take place in the context of organized labor, those who are cut out of the labor system are excluded from this form of recognized social cooperation and participation. Young argues that “Even if marginals were provided a comfortable material life within institutions that respected their freedom and dignity, injustices of marginality would remain in the form of uselessness, boredom, and lack of self-respect.”\(^7\) For example, some elderly people have sufficient material resources to meet basic needs and live comfortable, but remain oppressed in their marginal status. This is because marginalization also involves the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutional resources for self-development in the form of exercising capacities within a socially recognized context.

\textit{Powerlessness}

The notion of class distinctions by labor in Young’s analysis of marginalization is also fundamental to understanding oppression in the form of powerlessness. Young roots her examination of powerlessness in the division of professionals—who are privileged based on their position in the division of labor—and non-professionals. Rather than using the terms “middle

\(^{71}\) Young, 54.

\(^{72}\) Young, 55.
class” and “working class,” Young uses the concept of professionalism to emphasize the relative power differences between professionals and non-professionals. Many people have some power in relation to others and the opportunity to make decisions that affect others. But the powerless are those who lack authority or power even in this mediated sense. They are “those over whom power is exercised without their exercising it; the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them.”73 With little or no work autonomy, the powerless are oppressed by limited self-determination and the lack of opportunities for self-development, such as creative expression in work or gaining more technical expertise.

Young identifies three aspects of the privileged status that professionals have. The lack of these produces oppression for non-professionals. First, acquiring and practicing a profession has a progressive character. Being a professional requires education and continuing training, which means that there are opportunities for continual growth and knowledge of an expertise. In addition, there are opportunities to advance throughout the course of one’s professional life and reach positions of higher status. By comparison, the non-professional is less powerful in that there are limited opportunities for “the progressive development of capacities and avenues for recognition.”74 Second, professionals have a considerable degree of day-to-day work autonomy. While professionals may have supervisors, they also usually have some form of authority over others and make decisions for these people. Nonprofessionals on the other hand lack even this basic daily autonomy and may be under the supervision of many authority figures. Third, “the privileges of the professional extend beyond the workplace to a whole way of life.”75 Young calls this way of life “respectability,” to emphasize that professionals are listened to and heard because of their authority, expertise, or influence. Moreover, the norms of respectability in our

73 Young, 56.
74 Young, 57.
75 Young, 57.
society are deeply connected with professional culture. Even professional appearance in dress, speech, tastes, and demeanor equate with respectability and cultural capital. While non-professionals may have to earn respectability, professionals are treated differently and better because of their status.

Young’s analysis powerlessness is rooted in the division of labor and the consequent social division between those who plan and those who execute. The injustices associated with powerlessness according to Young include “inhibition in the development of one’s capacities, lack of decision-making power in one’s working life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies.” In lacking the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals are supported to have, the powerless are deprived of a socially recognized avenue of gaining self-respect.

Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism as a form of oppression is enacted through a dominant group asserting its perspective and experience as universal or neutral. Given the constructed normalcy of the dominant group’s culture, the oppressed group is stereotyped and marked as deviant or Other. Because dominant groups have access to the primary means of interpretation and communication in a society, they are able to widely disseminate and infiltrate institutions such that their experiences, values, goals, and achievements are understood as representative of humanity. In this way, those oppressed by cultural imperialism find their lives and experiences “defined from the outside, positioned, placed, by a network of dominant meanings they

76 Young, 58.
experience as arising from elsewhere, from those with whom they do not identify and who do not identify with them.”

In order to reinforce its position, the dominant group compares the oppressed group by “the measures of its dominant norms.” This furthers Otherness and may even cause oppressed groups to internalize the inferiority promulgated by stereotypes. These stereotypes are often linked in some way to the body and cannot be easily denied. Moreover, they are so deeply entrenched in society that they exist unquestioned, such as the stereotype that gay people are promiscuous, that elderly people are senile, and that women are good with children. These stereotypes are so pervasive that everybody is aware of what they are, which means that the oppressed group must always see itself through a double consciousness. In developing their own understanding of selfhood, members of oppressed groups can never quite free from their consciousness the stereotypes about their group identity, which will always exist as an anchored point of reference. On the other hand, those whose culture is deemed universal are free to explore and exist outside their group identity; individuality is an option because they are freed from revolving around the constricting binary options of either consciously defying stereotypes or promulgating them.

Members of the dominant group are free to celebrate and develop their culture, while those of the oppressed group are under constant pressure to affirm the superiority of the dominant group’s culture. In the process, the oppressed group’s culture is made invisible because “the oppressed group’s own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture.” This creates a paradoxical oppression in that those subjected to

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77 Young, 59.
78 Young, 59.
79 Young, 60.
cultural imperialism are marked by stereotypes as deviant, but are at the same time invisible by constricted cultural expression.

**Violence**

What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. It exists as a social practice that is directed at members of a group for no reason other than their group identity. Thus members of some groups live with the daily knowledge that they are vulnerable to “unprovoked acts on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person.”

Groups that are oppressed by violence live with the knowledge that there is always a threat of attack on oneself or family and friends, which “deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy.”

When systemic violence occurs, it may not cause surprise because everyone is aware of its occurrence and believes it will happen again. Due to the normalization of violence directed against specific social groups, certain circumstances make violence appear more “called for,” such as the rape of a hitchhiking woman. In this way, a characteristic of systemic violence is that it becomes increasingly legitimized and may consequently receive light or no punishment. To the extent that violence is encouraged or tolerated by institutions and social practices, these systems are unjust and therefore have the responsibility to prevent violence.

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80 Young, 61.
81 Young, 62.
82 Young, 62.
JUSTICE AS CARING: FEMINIST CARE ETHICS

Young’s understanding of oppression is powerful in placing the responsibility for justice on the very structures and systems that inhibit the self-determination and self-development of groups. Feminist care ethicists have drawn on this framework to illuminate how women’s lives and ethical decisions are situated within structures of oppression. While dominant ethical approaches have taken equally-informed and independent moral agents as the unit of analysis, feminist care ethics emphasizes that the notion of individual autonomy fails to reflect the reality of human relationships between unequal and interdependent persons.

The emphasis on the individual in dominant ethical approaches is connected to the way in which moral status in liberalism is designated for those who are rational, economically productive, independent agents. Feminist care ethicist, Eva Feder Kittay takes issue with the liberal definition of personhood. According to it, those with severe cognitive disabilities, such as her daughter Sesha, would have “no place at the table of equal deliberators, of free and equal moral agents, of free and equal citizens.” In excluding those who may never be independent or capable of intellectual deliberation, the liberal requirement for moral status denies an entire class of people from the claims to dignity and the institutional support needed for their full flourishing.

Defining an Alternate Feminist Conception of Personhood

According to the liberal definition of personhood, Kittay’s daughter Sesha would not be a person because she is not self-sufficient and lacks the capacities to engage in moral reasoning. Implicit in the liberal conception of personhood is a view of normalcy or normal-body-

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84 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 263.
functioning that frames Sesha’s cognitive disability as a problem or deviance, rather than a possible outcome of human physiology. Yet Sesha’s personhood is undeniable to Kittay based on the relational reality that she is Kittay’s daughter. While others define Sesha in the negative—as someone who cannot speak for herself, feed herself, and dress herself—Kittay experiences the richness of Sesha’s life through their relationship. For Kittay, these ‘small’ pleasures in their mother-daughter interactions provide life’s meaning and worth that would have been denied if they could not share their lives together:

Sesha, as always, is delighted to see me. Anxious to give me one of her distinctive kisses she tries to grab my hair to pull me to her mouth. Yet at the same time my kisses tickle her and make her giggle too hard to concentrate on dropping the jam-covered toast before going after my hair… In this charming dance, Sesha and I experience some of our most joyful moments—laughing, ducking, grabbing, kissing.

Rather than focusing on all the ways Sesha’s life deviates from the norm, “those who care for—and about—her see that being a person has little to do with rationality or productivity and everything to do with relationships to our world and those in it.” Thus, the requirements for moral status in liberalism are flawed in their exclusion.

In response, Kittay asserts a feminist notion of personhood that displaces the prioritization of independence by placing relationships at the very center of its definition:

...being a person means having the capacity to be in certain relationships with other persons, to sustain contact with other persons, to shape one’s own world and the world of others, and to have a life that another person can conceive of as an imaginative possibility for him or herself.

Based on this conception of personhood, we do not become a person without the engagement of others—their care, their recognition of our uniqueness, and their involvement in the world we

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86 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 266.
87 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 266.
88 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 266.
shape. Taking this redefinition seriously requires being open to experiencing the unique capacity of those who would normally be excluded from personhood status. Kittay describes this as entering another’s orbit and being willing to be changed by the experience.\(^89\) For example, a slight upturn of the lip in a disabled woman when her favorite caregiver comes along establishes a connection with the caregiver—if she is open to recognizing this form of communication. This small sign establishes personhood; it reveals the individual’s capacity to be in a relationship with the caregiver. As Kittay says, “an individual’s inability to articulate a “language” as publicly defined does not indicate a lack of anything to say.”\(^90\) By being open to a wider range of relational possibilities, we not only affirm the personhood in others, but also our own.

**Locating the Source of Dignity in the Moral Capacity to Care**

Kittay’s relational notion of personhood guides her understanding of what exists as the basis for human dignity. Rather than locating the source of dignity in the ability to reason, Kittay argues that dignity comes from a distinctly moral capacity to care for another. Care is a unique moral capacity because devoting oneself to another’s well-being requires becoming transparent to another person’s needs.\(^91\) As care is often most required by those who are least able to reciprocate it, caring goes against the model of the self-interested, rational agent. While there may be biological imperatives of species survival connected to our care for the young—our care for the sick, elderly, and disabled is not rooted in biological justifications. Rather, we care for these dependents because we see a moral obligation to protect their dignity.

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\(^{89}\) Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 266.

\(^{90}\) Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 266.

\(^{91}\) Kittay, "Equality, Dignity and Disability," 111.
Since care involves the subordination of one’s interests in order to fulfill the needs of another, it only exists because the intrinsic worth of the recipient of care.\footnote{Kittay, "Equality, Dignity and Disability," 115.} When Kittay cares for Sesha, she restores Sesha’s claim to human dignity that would otherwise be denied based on the liberal notion of personhood. It is through relationships of care that dignity is recognized and conferred. Kittay’s relational conception of dignity can be best summarized through the aphorism, “We are all some mother’s child”\footnote{Kittay, "Equality, Dignity and Disability," 113.} In calling upon this relational identity, Kittay emphasizes that everyone has been dependent on another’s care for survival. While it may not have necessarily been from a mother, the investment of care from another person is what established our claim to dignity because he or she saw us as worthy of care.

Valuing Dependency for a Public Ethic of Care: Care for the Caregivers

Kittay’s conceptualization of care relationships as the source of dignity reclaims dependency as a critical part of our humanity—rather than a weakness. In order to translate the feminist notion of dignity into action, we must “demystify ideals of self-sufficiency and independence and promote a conception of equality that begins with our relationality and neediness.”\footnote{Eva Feder Kittay, “A Feminist Public Ethic of Care Meets the New Communitarian Family Policy,” \textit{Ethics} 111 (2001): 530.} The step toward valuing dependency begins with recognizing that every individual member of society is dependent on others in order to function in his or her work and daily existence. While most go without thinking about their critical dependence on others to grow food that is life-sustaining, other forms of dependency, such as taking care of the elderly are made hypervisible.\footnote{Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 268.} Not all expressions of dependency are treated the same. ‘Temporary’ forms of dependency, such as those associated with childhood are normalized relative to the ‘severe’
dependencies of those unable to achieve future reciprocal cooperation or participate in an equal sharing of benefits and burdens. The preferential tolerance of temporary dependency “suggests that the only reason to care for dependents is the usefulness they will provide once they are no longer dependent.” However, Kittay’s redefinition of personhood severs the link between the potential for economic productivity and claim to moral status. Thus even those with dependencies that inhibit social cooperation deserve care that supports them to not only live, but flourish to their greatest capacity.

When dependency is denigrated, both those who need care and those who provide that care are neglected. Advocating for the dignity of dependents through care therefore begins with “treating their caregivers as if their work mattered (because it does) and as if they mattered (because they do).” Kittay finds that the caregiver is vulnerable to exploitation because the dependents they care for are unable to reciprocate care. Moreover, caregiving is rarely well paid and when done by family members, almost always unpaid.

Kittay argues that the low pay and lack of respect for dependency work places caregivers in a vulnerable position and does not create conditions that would foster good care. Given that a dependent individual may have physical or mental disabilities and rely completely on the caregiver to meet all basic needs, the trust invested in the dependency worker to not abuse her power is significant. However, the more stigmatized the condition that gives rise to the dependency, the greater the opportunity and latitude for the dependency worker to violate that trust.

In order for the possibility of good care, the care of dependents must be recognized as work that is “included within a system of social cooperation wherein it is adequately

97 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 270.
98 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 260.
99 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 260.
compensated and given the same status and social standing as any legitimate employment.”  

Concretely, this means caregivers need appropriate training, the opportunity to grow in their work, and benefits of formal employment, such as paid vacation and time off for personal medical care.

Since those with severe dependencies may be unable to reciprocate care to the caregivers, society, which benefits from dependency work, has the responsibility to reciprocate support to those who do the labor of caring. Kittay calls this notion of care to the caregiver ‘doula’ after the doula or the contemporary postpartum caregiver who cares for the mother so that the mother can care for her new infant.  

Caring for the caregiver acknowledges the value of the dependency worker, as well as the dependent’s right to live and live well. A public ethic of care grounded in doula calls for reconfiguring society such that the care of dependents is one of its central functions, rather than the entire responsibility of a dependency worker or family unit. It requires undoing the privatization of dependency that has permitted the shirking of collective responsibility to support dependents.

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100 Kittay, “A Feminist Public Ethic of Care Meets the New Communitarian Family Policy,” 544.
101 Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 270.
Chapter Three:

Listening

EIGHT INTRODUCTIONS: GLIMPSES INTO THE LIVES OF ELDERLY KOREAN AMERICAN WOMEN

To be asked questions, to speak for one’s self and from one’s experience is to have meaning and to matter. Whereas Chapter Two is an immersion in a deductive approach of engaging in existing feminist theory on aging and justice, this chapter represents a significant shift. It is a departure from feminist theoretical frameworks and terminology, but an enactment of feminist methodology. In beginning with the lives of the theorized, it privileges the lived experiences of elderly Korean American women as the starting point for a vision of aging justice. By beginning with an introduction of every interviewee, this inductive approach pays attention to the particularity of each woman as an end in herself. In doing so, this chapter takes seriously the notion that each woman is as a valuable contributor to the continuing dialogue and search for an understanding of aging justice that is applicable to her own life and community.

As a listener, I had the opportunity to enter each woman’s orbit: I could observe her facial expressions that punctuated her story and hear the inflections that contributed to her meanings. Although these dimensions of fully hearing elderly Korean women are lost in the conversion to written form, the introduction into the lives of these women includes phrases and stories that are told their own words. This inclusion of elderly Korean women’s voices respects each woman as an authority on aging justice who must be heard in the world of feminist bioethics for the first time.
Grandma Maria is 86 years old and has been living in the U.S. for the past 40 years. For the first half of this time, she lived with her daughter as a babysitter for her granddaughter, Angie. Just a few minutes of speaking with Grandma Maria revealed the significance of her grandchildren in her life.

Although she appreciates having lived with her daughter and looks back on the years of helping raise her granddaughter fondly, Grandma Maria tells me that “It’s lonelier [to live with my daughter] because when the kids leave for work, they come home late at night. I’m alone all day. If I’m at my kid’s house, I can’t drive, I don’t have feet, I can’t go anywhere. You get depression if you live with your kids.” During these times when she felt confined to the home, she felt like an anakguishin, which translates to “house ghost.” Grandma Maria noted that she does not know how to speak English because “I didn’t get to work because I was a babysitter. When my kids leave for work, I cook and watch the grandchildren. I never got to learn English because I was a babysitter, I never needed to leave the house.” Her inability to speak English is not a problem because she lives near a Koreatown. “It doesn’t matter that I can’t speak English, we have Korean restaurants and Korean grocery stores nearby.”

GrandmaMaria belongs to a network of elderly Korean American women who live in the same apartment complex. “Since I live in the apartment now, I have Korean friends who come and visit me and my kids come and visit me… when you’re old, friends are more important, we can relate and have something to talk about.” She contrasted this to the relatively isolated experience living with her daughter and predicted that “I think you’re more likely to get Alzheimer’s if you just sit at home all day and watch TV.”

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102 Grandma Maria specifically used the word “babysitter” in English to describe her role. Since she never learned English in a formal setting, it is likely that someone else taught her this term, which is more often used to describe the informal childcare work of teenage girls.
In addition to visits from her friends, Grandma Maria speaks to her granddaughter, Angie everyday without fail. Grandma Maria tells me that it is not the American way to be as close as she is with her grandchildren. She thinks that her influence in raising Angie since childhood is responsible for the love and respect Angie shows toward her grandmother. Grandma Maria is proud of having instilled what she considers Korean values in Angie. “Because I raised my granddaughter, Angie, I taught her to respect her elders. I taught her that if you treat your elders well, you get bok (“luck”). It comes to back to you.” She told me that I should also follow Angie’s example and asked me how often I call my own grandmother. Grandma Maria was aware of generational differences:

You guys are different because you studied here, you were acculturated to American traditions. But people like us, we are used to Korean culture. Us grandmas and you are different even in terms of personality. You have to treat your elders with respect, that’s what we learned and it’s of course, expected. Here the attitude is you are you and I am me. Your life. My life. We have very different cultures.

Recognizing the challenges of generational differences, Grandma Maria values her close relationship with her granddaughter:

Just as the earth turns, you too are going to turn old soon and then, you’re going to think, oh that’s why grandma acted this way or that’s what grandma must have felt like. Just as the earth spins around and around. Treat your grandparents well. My granddaughter calls me once a day everyday. She is thankful that I raised her. She asks me what I’m doing. Did you eat grandma? What did you eat? How was your day today, grandma? I feel joy when I hear my Angie’s voice. She says “I love you, grandma.” Even when it’s late at night and I hear the phone ring, I know it’s Angie and I get up to answer it. We have something to talk about. But I have grandkids that call me maybe once a year on special occasions and my heart doesn’t go out to them, like it does with Angie.
**Grandma In-Cheol**

Grandma In-Cheol is 75 years old and lives with her son and daughter-in-law since her husband passed away ten years ago. Although her daughter-in-law has a part-time job, she is also Grandma Incheol’s primary caregiver and is paid by the government for this work. Grandma Incheol is dissatisfied with the care from her daughter-in-law and would actually prefer a stranger as a caregiver. “Today, she left for work early and left a bowl of clam chowder for me to have for breakfast. I didn’t eat any of it because I’m lactose intolerant.” Grandma Incheol feels that the lack of consideration from her daughter-in-law is not intentional, but due to the fact that she has other responsibilities. She also guesses that her daughter-in-law does not have an incentive to try to please Grandma In-Cheol. Since they are family, Grandma In-Cheol would never ask the agency to send a different caregiver and make her daughter-in-law lose this source of income.

Grandma In-Cheol had a knee surgery in the past year and has not fully recovered from it. She can only walk for a few minutes before her knee starts to hurt. But she has not continued with her physical therapy. “What’s the point? I’m old now and there’s nowhere I need to go anyways.” The challenges with walking have caused other injuries; she lost her balance and fell, losing several teeth and on another occasion, fell and hit her face on a sharp table corner. Due to the knee pain, she spends most of her day watching Korean television. Before the surgery, she would leave the house to attend church or assist with grocery shopping.

Grandma In-Cheol feels like a greater burden on her son and daughter-in-law after her loss of mobility. “I used to be able to at least help out with the dishes or sweep the floor, but I can’t do any of that anymore.” After she moved in with her son, she stopped cooking, which is something she used to enjoy doing for her family. “I don’t even know where any of the cooking
utensils are in this kitchen. It doesn’t matter because I don’t even remember how to make anything and I don’t have a good sense of taste… I forgot it all.” She also feels like a burden on the relationship between her son and daughter-in-law. “I hear them fighting and I know it’s about me.” For these reasons, she wishes they would think of her as a stranger renting a room in their home. Grandma In-Cheol may have felt this way after her daughter-in-law asked her to stay at another son’s house for a week while her grandson visited from college so they could spend family time. When Grandma In-Cheol heard this request, she thought “I should just disappear.”

Grandma Bun-Ja

Grandma Bun-Ja is 77 years old. She was wearing make-up and had styled hair, which was noticeable because no other interviewees seemed to place as much attention on their appearance. Grandma Bun-Ja used to live in Los Angeles and assisted her husband in owning a Korean grocery store. “I hated work, which was really tiring moving the heavy boxes and when I got home I was too tired to do anything. I had to work on Sunday too and never had free time.” She moved to Washington with her husband so they could live closer their daughter. By the time she moved, her grandchildren were already grown and Grandma Bun-Ja never had to babysit.

Grandma Bun-Ja has lived with her husband at the same apartment complex for seven years now and has a well-established social network. She is an elder at a Korean church and is in charge of organizing various church activities for elderly people:

There are about sixty of us. We have a ‘college’ for elderly people and meet for Christian fellowship, study the bible together, learn about health, play worship music, learn flower arrangement, take computer classes, we eat lunch together, there’s line dancing, sometimes we even go on stage to dance.

Although Grandma Bun-Ja visits Korea once in a while, she explained that because she’s lived in the U.S. since her 50s, when she goes to Korea, she looks forward to coming back home.
Grandma Hye-Sook

I met Grandma Hye-Sook at a Korean Women’s Association meal site. She was curious about the new face at her weekly social event and showed as much interest in learning about me as I had in listening to her. Grandma Hye-Sook is 86 years old and other than lingering pains from shoulder surgery, she emphasized that she is in good health. She currently lives alone and moved out to her own apartment after having lived with her daughter to help take care of her grandchildren. When I asked about living independently, she spoke about the lack of other elderly Koreans at her apartment building and on the loneliness of living alone.

Grandma Hye-Sook expressed a specific preference for living in Tacoma, as opposed to Bellevue because the availability of the Korean meal site events, which she regularly attends to meet new friends:

I like it here… the people in Bellevue act ‘high-class’ and think they are better than us. I’m content, I don’t have complaints. But I know other grandmas who aren’t happy. They are the ones who don’t have a U.S. citizenship, who came recently to the U.S. and miss Korea. For people who came here recently, as an already old person, they’re not used to living here and it’s more uncomfortable for them. Because in Korea, they can take the subway.

Grandma Mina

Grandma Mina is 68 years old and lives in a suburban area with her husband. Before moving to Seattle, Grandma Mina lived in Los Angeles and helped her husband operate a small toy store. During this time, she was also busy as the primary guardian for her granddaughter. After her daughter’s divorce, Grandma Mina was responsible for raising her granddaughter from elementary to high school because the mother wanted to pursue a career abroad and the father remarried.
Grandma Mina never learned to drive a car and expressed discontent about the fact that she has to rely on her husband for all transportation needs. “He goes to see his friends and out to restaurants whenever he wants. I have to beg him to take me anywhere other than church or the grocery store.” She is similarly dependent on her husband for all financial needs. “I’ve saved some money for myself in secret by spending less on the grocery allowance he gives me.” Grandma Mina was open with me in revealing that she has tried several times to leave her husband, but was unable to because she depended on him for too much. “I wish I could stop having to prepare his meals—I’m sick of it. But I know that for grandmas who are living alone, they have to worry about the future. I’ve followed my husband up until now on what to do.”

Grandma Rose

Grandma Rose is 66 years old and lives with her husband in their own home. Grandma Rose was diagnosed with breast cancer in the past year. She is an elder at a Korean church and was supported by this community during her cancer treatment. “My cousins and nieces would only visit me once a week in the hospital because they were busy. But my church friends were better than family. They came to see my everyday and brought me soup and prayed for me.”

In addition to her health condition, Grandma Rose has faced financial struggles with her small business and recently declared bankruptcy. She explained that the dry cleaner that she operates with her husband has suffered in recent years. “I don’t have the desire to work myself to death.” Despite these challenges, Grandma Rose finds strength through her faith and continues to serve others through her leadership position in the church.
Grandma Kyung-Hee

Grandma Kyung-Hee is 76 years old and lives with her husband. Grandma Kyung-Hee exuded positivity as she repeatedly said, “I’m so thankful for everything… I’m so thankful to the U.S. government, I wouldn’t get this kind of support in Korea.” Part of this gratitude that she expressed was due to the government support she receives. “What kind of oldest son is going to be as good as the government and send me a monthly allowance every month without forgetting?” She described the government as a *hyoh-jah*, which means devoted son.

Government assistance has allowed her to live in what she considers a very nice apartment. “People who live in apartments like this one that’s really nice shouldn’t have any complaints. There are places that are cheaper and older than here. How happy you are depends on where you live.” She appreciates living in a location that’s considered a Koreatown. “I walk to H-Mart (the Korean grocery store), the Korean hospital is here, the Korean bank, Korean sauna…that’s why so many elderly Korean people live here.”

However, Grandma Kyung-Hee hasn’t always had her own place. Grandma Kyung-Hee and her husband used to live with their daughter so that she could babysit her grandchild. “When they need you, they ask you to live with them. They just got married and have a small child so they ask you to stay. They tell you to please don’t leave, help us take care of the baby. But if they don’t need you, they wish you would leave and go live on your own.” When I asked Grandma Kyung-Hee how she felt about them asking her to leave, she said she was happy to go. “Living with them, you have to always try to figure out what they want, what they’re thinking (*noon-chi*) and then they yell at you when you do something that’s not their way (*goo-bak baht goh*).” As part of her role as the babysitter, she would make mistakes and do household chores in a way that did not align with her daughter’s preferences. For example, she made mistakes in using the
laundry machine and would sometimes completely shrink clothes or put in bleach and get yelled at by her daughter. The term Grandma Kyung-Hee used to describe her daughter’s response to her mistakes is *goo-bak*, which is difficult to translate because it refers to a combination of contempt and resentment. Grandma Kyung-Hee predicts that the unhappiest elderly women living in the U.S. are probably the ones who have to live with their children. Yet she endured her unpleasant living arrangement as a babysitter because her help was desperately needed and her joy in life came from being close to her grandchild.

*Grandma Yoo-Na*

Grandma Yoo-Na is 81 years old and lives by herself. When I met Grandma Yoo-Na, her caregiver was at her apartment preparing lunch. Grandma Yoo-Na has a close relationship with her caregiver, whom has stayed by Grandma Yoo-Na’s side for ten years. Grandma Yoo-Na explained that their relationship was closer than some people’s relationships with their own daughter. Her caregiver picked up a stack of Korean soap opera video-tapes and asked if Grandma Yoo-Na had finished watching those because she was on her way to go rent the latest episodes and restock Yoo-Na’s groceries. They chatted about the latest episode of a popular soap opera and after listening to what Grandma Yoo-Na wanted to watch next, her caregiver was off to run the errands. When she left, Grandma Yoo-Na told me that some of the other elderly Korean women in the same apartment building have switched caregivers several times a month:

They’re so picky. But they’re foolish because the longer you stay with someone, the more they know what you like and your taste. I’ve fought with my caregiver, but who hasn’t. She knows me so well now that she does things without me having to ask her. My caregiver takes me everywhere I need to go. She takes me to the doctor and picks up things from the store for me.
Yet, Grandma Yoo-Na revealed feelings of solitude and loneliness. “When I sleep alone at night, I’m afraid that something could happen to me and no one would be there to help me.” This concern is due to her heart illness, which she is trying to take care of by faithfully taking her medications and trying to go on walks around the apartment halls. She told me that in her youth, she was an aerobics dancer and instructor. “There are dances at the elderly center here and I go, but I don’t dance with the grandpas. I don’t go to those often, it’s too tiring.” Although challenging, she had made an effort to explore new hobbies. “Since I’m so old, even if I have interests, I just can’t. My hands shake. I’m just happy eating three meals a day and going to sleep at night. I gave up; I wanted to learn English, but I just gave up. I turn around and I forget. I have to start all the way from the beginning again—everything I learned is lost. It’s different than when I was your age. I learn something new today and forget it tomorrow. It’s stressful.” While she stopped attending the English class at the Korean church, she still attends church service twice a week and the meeting for elderly members once a week.

FIVE EMERGENT THEMES

Listening to the experiences of each woman in her own voice revealed the complexity of their lives. None of the individual stories simply corroborate that of another. Since the interviews were conversations rather than linearly directed ask and answer sessions, each elderly Korean American woman had the freedom to elaborate on what is important in her own life; the particularities of each introduction reflect the rich results of this approach. Through the process of re-listening to each of the discussions, certain ideas about aging with dignity and respect surfaced again and again. These points of emergence called for more in-depth attention and became themes that reflect the interweaving of individual voices. Five core themes emerged
when all the conversations were gathered and heard collectively: the persistence of physical and social isolation, the value of the Korean community, the dependency on others to meet basic needs, the informal work of caregiving, and the prioritization of relationships.

The Persistence of Physical and Social Isolation

In describing herself as an anakguishin or “house ghost,” Grandma Maria powerfully named the isolation and sense of imprisonment that was a consequence of living with her children. Her prediction that other elderly Korean women in the same position are likely to be vulnerable to the depression that comes from isolation revealed an awareness that Grandma Maria was not alone in her experience. She identified specific dynamics of residing at her daughter’s home that contributed to physical and social isolation.

Living in a suburban area was a source of confinement to the home because the lack of public transportation. Grandma Maria likened this immobilization to the condition of having no feet. Without access to a public system of transportation, elderly Korean women are limited in their ability to go out in public since they do not know how to drive. Grandma Hye-Sook identified the reliance on others for transportation as a barrier that is especially noticeable for elderly Korean women who recently emigrated from Korea and were accustomed to using the extensive public subway system. For Grandma Maria, this dependence on her children meant not having the option to leave the house for the majority of the day since both her daughter and son-in-law were away at work. Considering the busy schedule of her children, asking for a ride was always a special request that had to be thoughtfully phrased and planned with their agenda kept in mind and prioritized. It is not difficult to imagine the weariness that comes from having to carefully negotiate even the most basic trip to places such as the pharmacy, let alone visits to get
together with friends. Thus, expressions of physical isolation were intimately connected to the toll of being cut off from social interaction with peers and the rest of the community.

Restricted to a personal life that revolved around the home, elderly Korean women articulated the solitude of a constricted social life. Both Grandma Maria and Grandma In-Cheol referenced the television as their only source of entertainment during the day, as their only interaction with other adults would occur when their children came home for work. Watching hours of Korean television during the day was a way for them to be stay up to date with current events, ‘meet’ characters in soap operas, and learn from cooking channels. The value of this passive and one-dimensional source of interaction with the outside world reflects the extent to which elderly Korean women are limited in their ability to actively be a part of what becomes news, develop relationships with other people, and expand their hobbies and personal capabilities in public settings. Grandma Maria believes that this diminished mental and physical engagement can manifest as serious health conditions, such as depression or Alzheimer’s.

The mechanisms that constructed isolation were not limited to those who lived with their children and were at play for even those with their own residence. Even after Grandma Hye-Sook moved out to her own apartment after living with her daughter to help babysit, she experienced isolation due to the lack of other elderly Korean women in her apartment. In some ways, she felt more alone than when she lived with her daughter because she used to at least interact with her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren on a daily basis. Yet Grandma Hye-Sook makes an effort to reach out to the Korean community by attending senior meal events offered by the Korean Women’s Association. In providing transportation and creating a space in which elderly Koreans can gather together, the Korean Women’s Association mitigates social isolation.
The Value of the Korean Community

The critical value of belonging to a Korean community came up in every conversation with elderly Korean American women. Although the women have been living in the U.S. since middle-age, it has been important for them to be able to maintain aspects of Korean culture by having access to institutions catered to Koreans, such as acupuncture clinics, hair salons, restaurants, and churches. For Grandma Maria, the presence of a Koreatown mitigates the cultural barriers she would otherwise face because her inability to speak English. Just as her work as a babysitter confined her to the home and prevented her from being able to learn English, it limited her ability to acculturate to American culture. Due to limited opportunities to become fluent in English and navigate American social institutions, elderly Korean women especially value the cultural familiarity of a Korean community because it provides social spaces that they feel comfortable navigating and occupying. For example, the Korean Women’s Association understands that they are not many places in which elderly Koreans can gather and advocates for this group by organizing a senior meal gathering once a week.

Within the Korean community, Christian churches have a vital role in elderly Korean women’s lives because they counter social isolation. For the women who live with their children, Sunday service is a regular event that the entire family can attend together; it is one of the only places in which multiple generations of Koreans interact in a meaningful way by praying for one another or simply having meals together after service is over. Once they are at church, they have the opportunity to socialize with other elderly women. As a church leader, Grandma Bun-Ja is in charge of organizing church activities for the cohort of elderly members. The church programs for the elderly are dynamic—ranging from studying the Bible to learning line dancing. The
‘college’ for elderly church members that Grandma Bun-Ja runs reflects a unique social space that is run by and for elderly Koreans.

Within the Korean community, the church is a place where elderly women feel accepted and respected as elders. The church not only supports the growth of elderly Korean women’s spiritual lives, but also expects them to share their insight. As an elder at her church, Grandma Rose has many leadership roles, such as helping new members get started with their spiritual walk, praying for the church, and shaping short term and long term goals. Grandma Rose’s description about the immense support she received by the congregation as she went through cancer treatment shows how she is valued as an integral member of the church.

The Dependency on Others to Meet Basic Needs

Although the level of dependency varies among elderly Korean American women, all rely on financial support from the government to meet fundamental requirements, such as housing, food, and transportation. Grandma Hye-Sook recognizes that only elderly Korean women with a U.S. citizenship are eligible for this critical support. Grandma Kyung-Hee spoke highly of the government assistance she receives and is thankful that she is eligible for it; she credits it as the reason why she has avoided a fate of living on the streets. This financial assistance allowed her to have a choice about housing location and is the reason why she is now living close to a Koreatown. Thus, it not only provided her with material support, but also gave her access to a Korean community. Grandma Kyung-Hee finds that the government has replaced the role of a hyo-jah or devoted son, which refers to a Korean cultural expectation that the eldest son in the family supports the aging parents.

103 All of the interviewed women receive Social Security.
While government support takes care of basic material needs, elderly Korean women also need assistance with the daily tasks of life. Each woman relies on the assistance of another person to sustain daily living—whether great or small—and her quality of life depends on the success of this caring relationship. In order to meet this need, the government provides some of the women with caregivers, but the quality of the care elderly women receive varies greatly. Grandma Yoo-Na highlighted the especially strong relationship with her caregiver developed over the course of ten years, which she thinks may be closer than the relationship some elderly women have with their own daughters. Her caregiver knows not only what Grandma Yoo-Na needs, but also what she likes. According to Grandma Yoo-Na, the quality of care she receives is directly related to how long the caregiving relationship has existed.

The importance of having a caregiver who cares about getting to know personal preferences is supported by Grandma In-Cheol’s complaints about her own caregiver. Grandma In-Cheol feels that her caregiver lacks special concern in her care and just wants to meet the bare minimum necessary to get paid. As an example of this, Grandma In-Cheol told a story about how her caregiver prepared her a breakfast that she could not eat because of lactose intolerance. While Grandma Yoo-Na’s caregiver asks her what she would like to have for every meal, Grandma In-Cheol has to eat whatever her caregiver leaves out for her. She believes that this difference in care is due to the fact that Grandma In-Cheol’s primary caregiver is actually her daughter-in-law, who has another job. Thus, Grandma In-Cheol’s caregiver cannot devote all of her energies toward Grandma In-Cheol’s care. She thinks that her daughter-in-law might not go above and beyond the basic requirements of care because there would not be any negative consequences. Moreover, her daughter-in-law may not see this responsibility as a job because she would be expected to care for her mother-in-law even if she did not receive compensation.
from the government. As Grandma Yoo-Na explained, some elderly Korean women go through many different caregivers because they are not satisfied with the individual caregiver. Thus, the caregiver may make a greater effort to match the elderly woman’s preferences in order to maintain employment. Grandma In-Cheol is unable to change her caregiver because it would mean firing her daughter-in-law and result in the loss of this source of income.

Moreover, this care relationship has to respond to the increasing dependencies associated with aging. Grandma In-Cheol used to cook meals for herself and sometimes for the rest of the family. But after her knee surgery, she became dependent on her daughter-in-law to prepare meals and help her walk to the bathroom. As a caregiver, her daughter-in-law was unprepared to respond to these new dependencies in addition to continuing her other employment. Although her daughter-in-law was the one unprepared to meet the reality of increasing dependencies with age, Grandma In-Cheol felt personally responsible for being a burden that she thought she should “just disappear.”

The Informal Work of Elderly Korean American Women as Caregivers

Elderly Korean women need care, but are also expected to be caregivers for others. While both elderly Korean women and men may live with their children, only the elderly women are expected to babysit grandchildren. Grandma Kyung-Hee and her husband immigrated to the U.S. specifically so that she could be the one to assist with childcare. As a result, Grandma Kyung-Hee—not her husband—suffered the goo-bak or contempt from her daughter when she made mistakes in completing household chores. Both Grandma Maria and Grandma Kyung-Hee appreciated that their work as babysitters gave them the opportunity to develop closer relationships with their grandchildren. The women do not consider babysitting a job in part
because in exchange for babysitting, elderly Korean women do not receive a wage or other benefits related to formal employment.

In addition to their informal work as babysitters, elderly Korean women are responsible for housework and caring for their husbands. Grandma Bun-Ja had to end the interview earlier than expected because she remembered that she had to prepare her husband’s lunch. Although Grandma Bun-Ja did not comment on how she felt about this responsibility, it was clear that her role as a cook was an established part of their relationship. On the other hand, Grandma Mina was explicit in her dissatisfaction with being expected to serve her husband every single meal of the day, every day of the week. Grandma Mina feels forced to cook and clean because she is financially dependent on her husband.

*The Prioritization of Relationships*

For elderly Korean American women, the development of new or maintenance of prior relationships with family and friends was more important than the pursuit of hobbies. Social and biological barriers limited their ability to cultivate and enjoy hobbies. During their younger years, many had little time or resources to devote to leisure activities. Grandma Mina had to split her time between helping out at her husband’s small business and raising her granddaughter. As an informal worker, Grandma Mina did not have a source of income that she could use to invest in fostering her personal interests. These limitations during her younger years prevented her from having hobbies to enjoy once she no longer had the responsibilities of working at the store or raising her granddaughter. The skills she had and was proud of, such as knowing how to cook the favorite foods of each family member, revolved around her relational identity as a wife, mother, and grandmother. Yet Grandma Mina complained about the boredom of not having anything to
do besides prepare her husband’s meals, which was due to her confinement at home. Thus, the conditions that created isolation for elderly Korean American women, such as a lack of transportation, also limited their ability to access the social spaces needed to develop personal interests.

Physical and mental manifestations of aging made pursuing hobbies challenging and a source of frustration, rather than enjoyment. Although Grandma Yoo-Na enjoyed the dancing she used to do as an aerobics instructor during her younger years, she found trying to dance again physically exhausting. Grandma Yoo-Na sought out other enrichment activities, such as the classes held for elderly Koreans at church. But she stopped taking them because her hands would shake and she had difficulty remembering what was taught in class. Grandma Yoo-Na named her efforts to explore new hobbies as a cause of stress because they reminded her of how these activities would have been more manageable during her younger years when she had greater dexterity and memory.

Elderly Korean American women privileged the role of relationships in their lives rather than the development of hobbies. The relationship each woman had with other elderly Korean American women was important in reducing the solitude of social isolation. Grandma Hye-Sook specifically sought out interactions with others from the same age group, immigrant background, and gender. Similarly, Grandma Maria explained that a network of peers was valuable because they could relate to one another. Unlike family members who only periodically came to see Grandma Maria, her friends lived in the same apartment complex and habitually visited. Meeting to share meals or play card games reduced the sense of solitude in living alone. This network of elderly Korean American women was significant in providing emotional support to one another.
In addition to friendships, elderly Korean American women valued their relationships with their grandchildren. Their relational identity is prioritized in even the way they are addressed. Rather than calling elderly women by their first name, they are referred to as ‘grandma,’ which acts as a constant reminder that they are some child’s grandmother. Grandma Kyung-Hee expressed that developing a close relationship with her grandchild was worth the negative consequences of having to live at her daughter’s home as a babysitter. Grandma Maria also spoke at length about the importance of her relationship with her granddaughter, Angie. In particular, Grandma Maria was proud that as Angie’s babysitter, she was the one to instill in Angie the Korean cultural value of respecting one’s elders. For Grandma Maria, this value of respect for elders was shown in actions by the way Angie reciprocated the care she received from her grandmother by calling Grandma Maria everyday and showing genuine interest in her well-being.

Although elderly Korean women placed great value on their relationship with grandchildren, they found that the cultural differences within generations made it less common for grandchildren to respect their grandparents. Grandma Maria noticed an attitude of “Your life. My life.” that she thought was an influence from American culture. Yet the fact that she only felt this distance with grandchildren she did not help raise indicated that those who received care from elderly Korean American women were in the best position to understand what is necessary to show respect and reciprocate care.
Chapter Four:
Integration and Implications

INTEGRATION

In engaging with feminist theory on aging and in listening to elderly Korean American women, I entered two very different conversations around aging justice—each with its own language and standpoint. Feminist ethicists have theorized about individual components necessary for a construction of aging justice, such as Young’s framework of injustice as structural oppression and Kittay’s redefinition of personhood. Yet these components have not been brought together to form a complete notion of aging justice that is able to answer: (1) What is necessary for aging with dignity and respect? (2) Conversely, what are the obstacles that limit the ability of elderly Korean American women to develop and exercise their capacities, express their needs, thoughts, and feelings and be heard in a way that counts?

In order to answer these questions, Chapter Four integrates the voices of elderly Korean American women with Young’s five faces of oppression to determine which faces of oppression are significant for further examination in developing a notion of aging justice. For example, the women did not express concerns that revealed oppression in the form of systematic violence in their lives. Taking the inclusion of elderly Korean American women’s voices seriously means allowing their expressions of injustice guide constructing the aging justice framework. Therefore violence is not included as a priority for developing a structural understanding of aging justice for this group.

Young’s theoretical framework is powerful in illuminating the often invisible and entrenched systems and structures of oppression. Yet Young’s analysis of social groups obscures
the role of relationships, which feminist care ethicists privilege as the source of ethical values.

The value of starting from the experience of one individual’s life or one relationship to come to a vision of justice is clear in the way Kittay’s relationship with her daughter, Sesha, has been the inspiration and basis for her feminist redefinition of personhood. Kittay situates her theory on dependency relationships within the larger structures and systems of oppression that Young illuminates. The integration of Young and Kittay’s theoretical insights for aging justice reveal how relationships that serve as conduits of dignity and justice are affected by oppression on a structural and systematic level.

Marginalization

The difficulty I had in finding elderly Korean American women to interview was one of the first indicators of their marginalization from the labor system. All of the women I interviewed—with the exception of Grandma Rose—are unemployed. I intentionally avoid the language of ‘retirement’ because it would imply that there was an autonomous choice made about ending employment. To call this period of life ‘retirement’ would obscure the way in which decision-making was limited by the existence of structural oppression in the form of marginalization. As a face of oppression in the lives of elderly Korean American women, marginalization is especially pervasive because the intersection of their identity along the lines of age, gender, and race.

Considering the fact that arguments in favor of supporting the dependencies of the elderly revolve around their past contribution as laborers, elderly Korean American women who were not employed or were involved in informal work, such as childcare, lose this claim that for some, legitimizes their worth. This relationship between employment status and value in society places
elderly Korean American women at a high risk for marginalization since elderly Korean American women are more likely to have been formally unemployed than elderly Korean American men. Thus unemployed women are more likely to not have the experience of contributing economically in socially privileged ways, although their work in the private sphere, such as raising children, may have enabled the employment of others in the family. The marginalized are pushed out of the form of social functioning that is most valued in society—participation in the workforce—and as a consequence, are rendered dependent and vulnerable in a society that does not structurally support self-determination for the very reason it marginalizes the elderly: the lack of respect and value for those who are not economic contributors.

One consequence of marginalization from the workforce is severe material deprivation. Although it is a common belief that the elderly hold significant resources, the majority of elderly people—including all of the interviewed elderly Korean American women—rely on Social Security to live above the poverty line. Grandma Kyung-Hee spoke about the critical role of government assistance in allowing her to meet some of the most fundamental needs, such as housing and food. Without it, she told me she would have to live out on the streets, “I would be no different from a beggar.” Her expression of absolute dependency on government support points to the first of two categories of injustice beyond distribution that are associated with marginality: the provision of welfare as a way to address marginality actually “produces new injustices by depriving those dependent on it of rights and freedoms that others have.” The dependency of marginals on bureaucratic institutions for support makes them subject to “patronizing, punitive, demeaning, and arbitrary treatment by the policies and people associated

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105 Young, 54.
with welfare bureaucracies.” In exchange for assistance with meeting basic needs, the elderly on welfare give up basic rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice.

Although my interviewees expressed their dependency on welfare, they did not share critiques of the negative consequences associated with this dependence. Rather, they voiced a sense of gratitude for government assistance. Grandma Kyung-Hee even compared this support to that normally expected from the eldest son. By calling the government a hyoh-jah or devoted son, Grandma Kyung-Hee praises the support that she receives and finds it a more than adequate way of preventing material deprivation. While she does give up a sense of privacy due to the unannounced visits by staff from the welfare office, this intrusion is taken as an acceptable sacrifice for the financial support she gets in return. Yet there is no other option other than to accept the injustices that may come as a cost to the assistance she receives; the construction of dependency means being caught in a double bind or between unideal choices—either accept welfare and suffer the arbitrary and invasive authority of social service providers who enforce power over the conditions of one’s life or reject it and suffer the inability to meet one’s most basic needs.

The injustices of marginalization do not cease to exist even when material deprivation is mitigated by the welfare state because the inability to meet one’s own basic needs is a symptom of an underlying structural injustice. Thus, re-distribution of resources leaves the deeper social structure and institutional context that produced the distributive patterns in the first place untouched. It is critical to displace the distributive paradigm in thinking about oppression by marginalization because it involves the inability to attain non-material goods, such as self-respect. According to Young, the second non-distributive consequence of marginalization is the

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106 Young, 54.
limited “opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways.” Young is referring to the ways in which marginals are closed out from one of the most privileged forms of social cooperation when they are excluded from the labor system.

Employment determines the acceptable social spaces an individual can occupy and the range of opportunities for self-development. Marginalization from public participation results in social isolation and injustices in the form of uselessness, boredom, and lack of self-respect. Although expressed in different ways, an enduring theme throughout my interviews was the weight of isolation in the lives of elderly Korean American women. For Grandma In-Cheol, the knowledge that she has nowhere to go outside her home influences her apathy toward continuing physical therapy after her knee surgery. It is difficult to encourage someone to make a great effort to recover when there is little promise that she can make use of returned mobility. In some ways, Grandma In-Cheol’s knee surgery changed very little about her daily routine; just as before the surgery, she continues to spend the majority of her day in bed or on the sofa, watching Korean television for hours. While her son and daughter-in-law are away for work, Grandma In-Cheol’s day is static with neither interaction with other people nor stimulation from her environment. The way she describes herself as a renter residing at her son’s house reveals her self-perception as a drifter who occupies space, but does not possess it or have the power to make it hers. Contrary to the perception of life without work as a joyful retirement time to explore unfulfilled interests and develop new ones, the marginalized period of life for elderly Korean American women is not just a passive stagnation, but an active erosion of a sense of self and self-respect.

107 Young, 54.
108 Young, 55.
The social isolation of elderly Korean American women by marginalization is especially pervasive because of their gender and immigrant identity. Grandma Maria described herself as having no feet because she cannot drive, which was not a problem for her when she lived in Korea due to the expansive public transportation system. All of my interviewees did not know how to drive a car because their husbands drove and they did not have a reason to learn without having to work outside the home. Without the ability to mitigate physical isolation, many interviewees spoke about the deprivation of meaningful social relationships. For those who lived alone at apartments without other elderly Korean American women, such as Grandma Hye-Sook, the lack of connection with peers or a sense of elderly community magnified her loneliness and boredom. At the same time, those living nearby other elderly Korean American women noted the isolated sense of community in that age-based housing segregation limited interaction with people of other ages. If interaction did occur, it was through younger people reaching out to them without potential for the reverse because of the lack of transportation.

**Exploitation**

While marginalization describes the injustices of being excluded from the workforce, exploitation refers to the oppression of working under the control and for the systematic benefit of another social group. For elderly Korean American women, there are two social groups that exploit their labor as caregivers: elderly Korean American men and younger Korean American women. In the exploitative relationship with both groups, elderly Korean American women are not necessarily oppressed by the specific tasks that constitute caregiving work, but by the fact that they perform this informal work for someone on whom they are dependent.
As described in Chapter Two, Young extends the theory of exploitative class relations to connect women’s oppression to their exploitation within patriarchal family structures. Women’s work in the home frees men to develop their capacities in ways that receive public recognition and greater material return. Their work results in the enhanced status of, pleasure, or comfort of men, but goes unnoticed and undercompensated.\(^\text{109}\) This transfer of women’s energies to men increases men’s power over the processes that define what work is, how it is compensated, and to what extent it is valued. In this way, gender exploitation is a particularly perverse face of oppression because the extraction of benefits puts the dominant group in a preferential position to maintain the exploitative structure. Yet exploitation may be difficult to identify because the dominant group has the power to shape normalcy. For example, the perception that women are inherently better than men at nurturing shapes the idea that caregiving work is therefore their responsibility. These expectations about what constitutes women’s work become an oppressive force in women’s lives when they undermine women’s ability to choose otherwise. The physical act of cooking and preparing every meal for her husband is not what bothers Grandma Mina. It is the fact that she has no choice but to continue fulfilling this role because it is what he expects from her. Due to a complete financial dependency on her husband, Grandma Mina’s autonomy is severely limited by the lack of voice she has over the terms of her informal work. Grandma Mina’s lack of control over the conditions of her informal labor diminishes self-respect and undermines her ability to develop and use her capacities in a way that benefits herself.

As a social group, elderly Korean American women are vulnerable to exploitation by the interaction between their gender identity and elderly status. The limitations in work opportunity due to expectations about what constitutes women’s work are heighted by old age because of age-based marginalization in the labor system. Due to increasing difficulty in finding

\(^{109}\) Young, 51.
employment with aging, expected women’s work, such as childcare become more feasible options. The majority of the women I interviewed had at some point in their life lived with their children and worked as a babysitter for grandchildren. This trend of elderly Korean American women working as a babysitter is due in part to the fact that their children sponsored their immigration to the U.S. for this very purpose. It is difficult to imagine any other sector of the workforce with a similarly high demand for elderly women as employees that they would sponsor immigration. Although this work is highly desirable, it is sought after because younger women can reap great benefits for relatively little in return. In others elderly Korean American women are highly sought after for this form of work for the benefits that an exploitative relationship allows. The implicit work contract is that in exchange for helping elderly Korean American women live in the U.S., younger women are freed from either paying for childcare or doing it themselves.

While work as a babysitter provided the opportunity to immigrate, the lack of control over the working conditions created a situation in which they could be exploited by younger women. By providing childcare, elderly Korean American women free younger women from this responsibility. This transfer of energy allows younger women to pursue paid labor and gain the benefits of formal workforce participation. In addition to the benefits of being able to participate in a form of socially recognized cooperation, younger women gain the material benefit of saving childcare expenses. Yet babysitting is not recognized as work and elderly Korean American women are unpaid for their efforts. They do not receive the benefits of paid vacations, sick days, and retirement options that would come with formal employment. In some ways, this notion that childcare is not ‘real’ work is internalized by the women themselves. It is evident in the way Grandma Maria distinguishes childcare as a role separate from formal employment when she
says that she was not able to have a job because she had to take care of her granddaughter.

Behind the expectation of elderly women to provide unpaid labor is the idea that being involved in childcare is actually for their benefit, as it provides them something to do with all their free time in old age. Thus, in expecting elderly women to work without compensation, younger women are implicated in the reinforcement of women’s status as domestic laborers and servers of others.

Understanding the exploitation of elderly Korean American women is complicated by the fact that many of the women spoke positively about the actual nature of their work. For example, Grandma Maria valued that babysitting her granddaughter helped them develop a closer relationship. Yet these relational benefits should not obscure the exploitative context that limits elderly Korean American women from exercising their autonomy and developing their capacities. Grandma Maria’s close relationship with her granddaughter, Angie was gained at the cost of living like an anakguishin or ‘house ghost.’ Similarly, Grandma Kyung-Hee remained in conditions that limited her capacity for self-determination and self-development because it offered the opportunity to develop a close relationship with her grandchild. Thus exploitation in the lives of elderly Korean American women prevented them from being able to pursue what they value without the consequence of oppression in the form of exploitation.

**Powerlessness**

Implied in the discussion of exploitation is the structural division of labor between those who plan and those who execute. Young specifies this division as one between professionals and nonprofessionals, who suffer from oppression in the form of powerlessness in addition to exploitation. Although closely related to exploitation, powerlessness is a distinct face of
oppression. Whereas exploitation refers to the specific injustice of one group reaping the unreciprocated benefits from an oppressed other, powerlessness emphasizes the societal structure that privileges professionalism as a way of life in terms of both type of labor and social position. Elderly Korean American women belong to the class of nonprofessionals by the informal work they do in childcare or small businesses and the low social standing they have as dependents. The oppression by powerlessness revolves around the way in which the powerless are removed from decision-making in not only their work, but also their diminished control over the conditions of their disrespected position in society. As a consequence of this exclusion, the powerless are denied the privilege that professionals have to develop or exercise skills in their working lives and express their experience in a publically recognized way.

Unlike professionals, non-professionals do not have the privilege of work that fosters the progressive development of capacities. Acquiring and practicing a profession has an expansive characteristic in that it usually requires multiple levels of education and training. Each new level of development in abilities has the potential to be recognized by material compensation and elevated social standing. Yet non-professionals have limited prospects for further development in expanding their capacities. Elderly Korean American women’s housework or babysitting neither requires a college degree nor offers the opportunity for further education. Unlike younger women who may temporarily work as a babysitter before attaining another job, elderly Korean American women lack access to this progressive work trajectory; informal work is a starting and ending point. After Grandma Kyung-Hee had to leave her daughter’s home because she was no longer needed as a babysitter, she could not find a new position that built off of her prior experience and offered the chance to cultivate more advanced abilities. The development of specialization is not a part of non-professional work because it is assumed to involve low-skill tasks that are easily

110 Young, 57.
learned without significant training. Grandma Kyung-Hee expressed feeling belittled when her daughter heavily reprimanded her for incorrectly using the laundry machine although Grandma Kyung-Hee had not received prior training on how to properly use it as part of her babysitting work. The perception that informal work only requires the simplest abilities leads to the disrespect of these workers.

The privileges that professionals have go beyond the opportunity for career advancement and extend to participation in a whole way of life that Young calls “respectability.” According to Young, the division of labor between “mental” and “manual” work also designates a division in nearly all aspects of social life. The nonprofessional is exposed to disrespectful treatment because the norms of respectability in our society are aligned with professional culture and the prioritization of professional dress, speech, tastes, and interests. Grandma Bun-Ja was dissatisfied with her work at a Korean grocery store because the monotony of daily tasks, such as reorganizing boxes, restricted opportunities to develop new capabilities. Moreover, the physical demands of manual labor were a source of exhaustion that left Grandma Bun-Ja without the energy to pursue interests outside of worklife. Thus, the limitations within her worklife were directly related to her inability to access aspects of professional culture and the privileges of respectability.

While nonprofessionals have to prove their respectability, professionals are treated with respect because of their social status. Others will readily to listen to what they have to say or do what they request because the identity of professionalism confers automatic authority, expertise, or influence. Respectability allows professionals to express their experience and needs in a socially recognized way. Without the authority professionals have, elderly Korean American

\[111\] Young, 57.
\[112\] Young, 57.
women lack access to structural paths of communication in society that would allow them to influence the conditions of their life. Oppression by powerlessness denies elderly Korean American women of being heard and included in decision-making processes. By denying access to these modes of self-advocacy, powerlessness is a face of oppression that constricts the very means by which a social group would work to eliminate injustice.

*Cultural Imperialism*

The prioritization of professional culture described in powerlessness is an example of cultural imperialism in which one group has primary access to the means of interpretation and communication. Oppression by cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experiences, values, and goals such that the oppressed group is simultaneously made invisible and marked as the deviant Other. This paradox is apparent in the particular form of cultural imperialism that elderly Korean American women face because of particular interaction of their identity as women, elderly, and immigrant. As described in the discussion of isolation by marginalization, this social group is rendered invisible by exclusion from the formal workforce. Yet the cultural devaluation of dependency makes their reliance on others to meet basic needs hyper-visible.

The elderly are subject to a cultural imperialism that exists as the emphasis on the physical representations of youth and vitality. This societal prioritization of youthfulness appears in the success of the anti-aging industry.\textsuperscript{113} Aging is constructed as a problem that needs to be fixed by erasing the markers of old age—whether through testosterone or human growth hormones, cosmetic surgery, hair-dyes, and creams.\textsuperscript{114} Efforts to avoid the visible signs of aging

\textsuperscript{113} Calasanti, 21.
\textsuperscript{114} Calasanti, 20.
are motivated by the awareness that these physical markers signal deviance from the privileged normal-body-functioning and economic productivity of mid-life. Just as stereotypes against other groups oppressed by cultural imperialism are in some way attached to their bodies or what is ‘natural,’ the equation of the elderly with physical and mental decline serves to justify the limitation of their rights and authority.\(^{115}\)

The elderly are culturally devalued because the natural reality of the changes in the body and mind that are associated with aging indicate a steady march toward increasing dependency. In a society that values the liberal conception of the person as independent, rational, and capable of self-sufficiency, the unavoidable dependencies that emerge with aging are seen as a threat to meeting the liberal conception of personhood that is required for dignity. Kittay finds that dependency is denigrated in a society that “defines and confines all meaning and worth in terms of production, profit, and pervasive greed.”\(^{116}\) Elderly Korean American women are marked as dependent because they are perceived as not only being unable to contribute to the production of capital, but also consuming resources that could have been directed toward expanding economic productivity. On the spectrum of dependencies, theirs is marked ‘severe,’ because they are unable to participate in the exchange of benefits and burdens.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The integration of feminist theoretical understandings of aging justice and the voices of elderly Korean American women illuminated four faces of oppression that limited aging justice in their lives: marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. The integration of theory and voices brings out the ways in which the intersection

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\(^{115}\) Calasanti, 20.

\(^{116}\) Kittay, “When Caring is Just and Justice is Caring,” 269.
of elderly Korean American women’s identity along the lines of age, gender, and race is significant for the forms of oppression they endure. The attention to their multiplicative identity is critical because it allows for the construction of an aging justice framework that is culturally and contextually relevant—meaning that it has the potential to provide the basis of moral action in communities.

Actively seeking out elderly Korean American women’s voices is crucial because the existence of powerlessness as a face of oppression in their lives constricts their ability to self-advocate. Due to social isolation from marginalization, they are relatively invisible and unable to reach outwards. In order to translate a theoretical understanding of aging justice to change in communities, there is a need for advocates who have a voice at the center to continue the work of listening to elderly Korean American women. Seeking out and listening to their voices means a willingness to be in a relationship of care, which confers dignity and acts as a first step toward aging justice.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Fieldwork Overview

Through Wellesley’s Wintersession and the support of the Jerome A. Schiff Fellowship, Wellesley’s Wintersession gave me the opportunity to interview elderly Korean women living in Seattle, WA. I received Wellesley College Institutional Review Board approval for my qualitative interviews under §46.110 (b) (1), “activities involving no more than minimal risk,” and under category (7) of “research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. During the month of January 2012, I interviewed a total of eight women, whom I met through personal contacts, Korean Christian churches, and meal site events by the Korean Women’s Association. Recognizing the limited time and resources available, I focused on carefully listening to the perspectives and lives of eight women and learned as much possible during interviews that lasted around one and a half hours. Without the need for statistical significance, I had the freedom to seek as much diversity in my small interview group as possible on the levels of living arrangement, marital status, and income level. The only conditions that had to be met in order to participate was a minimum age of 60, cognitive ability, and residence in the United States for at least one year.

Since all of the women spoke Korean and most had limited English speaking ability, the conversations were in Korean and allowed my interviewees to speak in a language most comfortable to them and freely use idiomatic expressions unique to Korean. Although my Korean is fluent, it is my second language and I took care to repeat or ask clarifying questions and the voice recordings enabled me to go back and identify phrases that were unfamiliar. The
data that I collected from these interviews was solely qualitative and did not incorporate any existing records or data.

I refer to my interviewees by Grandma before their first name because this is the way I addressed them in person. It is culturally appropriate to address an elderly woman by “grandma” even if they do not have grandchildren of their own. In using this title before their names, rather than using “Mrs.” or just their last name, I convey the way in which generational and relational identities are prioritized in Korean culture. Rather than a specific age, “elderly” is defined in Korean culture as a position in life when one could be someone else’s grandmother. Part of the aging process involved being marked by the constant reminder or designation of elderly status by “grandma” before one’s name.
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Gena Hong

I am asking for your voluntary participation in my thesis research project. Please read the information below about the project. If you would like to participate, please sign in the box below.

Purpose of the project:
• In order to listen and learn from those with an intimate knowledge of aging and living as an elderly Korean American woman in the U.S., I am interviewing elderly Korean American women whom have stories and thoughts to share about aging in the U.S. that are otherwise unavailable.

If you participate, you will be asked to:
• Share your personal experiences and thoughts on aging in a one-on-one interview that will be audio recorded.
• You will not be asked to share any records or documents.

Time required for participation
• Expected participation is 60-90 minutes

Potential risks of participation:
• You will not experience any more discomfort than those ordinarily experienced in daily life involved in participating as an interviewee.
• You are free to decline answering any questions and end the interview at any point.

How confidentiality will be maintained
• If anecdotes from the interview are included in the researcher’s thesis, names and identifiable information will be changed to maintain confidentiality.

By signing this form, I am attesting that I have read and understand the information above and I freely give my consent to participate.

Name: ___________________________________________ Date: ____________________________

Questions: If you have questions about this study, you can contact me, Gena Hong at (206) 226-7714 or my thesis advisor, Charlene Galarneau, at cgalarne@wellesley.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, you may contact the chair of the Wellesley College Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, Nancy Marshall, at (781) 283-2551 or nmarshall@wellesley.edu.
연구 참여 동의서

연구자: Gena Hong
연구 프로젝트: 미국에 거주하는 나이 들어가는 한국계 여성과 연관되는 사회적 이슈 내지 정의관

귀하는 다음의 연구에 참여 해달라는 부탁을 받았습니다. 아래의 내용을 읽고 참여하실 용의가 있으시면 사인을 해주시기 바랍니다.

연구의 목적:
• 미국에 거주하는 시니어 한국여성으로서의 삶과 노화하는 그 과정에 대해서 듣고 이해하기 원하고 나이드신 한국여성들과 인터뷰를 통해서 나이가 들어가는 그 과정의 이야기와 생각을 들어보기를 원함.

이 연구에 참여하게되면 귀하는 다음과 같이 질문될 것입니다:
• 노화에 대해서 개인적인 경험, 생각을 일대일의 인터뷰를 통해서 이야기 하고 그 내용이 녹음이 될 것입니다.

참여 하는데 소요되는 시간:
• 아마도 참여하는데 소요되는 시간은 60-90 분 정도될 것입니다.

참여시 일어날수 있는 문제점/위험 가능성:
• 귀하는 일상생활에서 일어날수 있는 어떤 인터뷰와 같이 응해주시고 그 이상의 불편함이 없을것을 알려드립니다.
• 어떤 사항도 불편하거나 대답하기 불편할때 인터뷰를 중단할수가 있습니다.

어떻게 귀하의 비밀이 보장될것인지:
• 만일 인터뷰의 내용이 연구자의 논문에 언급될때 이름이나 알려지기 쉬운 내용은 비밀이 지켜질것을 알려드립니다.

이것을 사인함으로서 나는 이 내용들을 읽고 이해하고 이 연구에 참여하기를 동의합니다.

이름: ___________________________ 날짜: _______________________

문의: 혹시 이 연구에 대해서 의문이 있을시에는. Gena Hong 206-226-7714 나 연구 고문 교수님, Charlene Galarneau(이메일, cgalarne@wellesley.edu)에게로 연락바랍니다. 만일 이 연구에 참여하는 참가자로서의 질문이 있으면 Wellesley College Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects에 의장이신 Nancy Marshall 남께로 연락주시기 바랍니다. 연락처는 Nancy Marshall, 781-283-2551, nmarshall@wellesley.edu