ABSTRACT

JANG, SU JUNG. Toward Connection: Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making Development. (Under the direction of Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan.)

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore Korean young adults’ meaning making development. In an attempt to understand it through the most comprehensive lens, the role of spirituality in their meaning making evolution was also examined. Data were collected from six Korean college seniors and six Korean college graduates in their late 30s through in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through initial, focused, axial, and theoretical codes. The emergent theory of the current study, “A Journey Toward Connection”, showed that Korean young adults’ meaning making journey a) began with uncritical compliance with external influences; b) proceeded to search for answers to what to believe and value, who to be, and how to relate to others and coordinate their unique inner world with the outer world’s demands and expectations, and c) extended toward becoming more humble, grateful, and compassionate in the face of challenges and adversities and embracing spirituality. Research findings suggested that Korean young adults’ meaning making development was ultimately a journey toward spirituality based on the inner connection to authenticity and the outer connection to the bigger and greater meaning in life. It also revealed that Korean young adults tended to consider harmony with others as well as their significant others’ needs and wants more than their American counterparts when coordinating between their internal foundation and the external world. The limitations of the study were explored and recommendations for future research were provided. Implications for the counseling and education field were also discussed.
DEDICATION

“Individuals who develop to the fullest their uniqueness, yet at the same time identify with the larger processes at work in the cosmos, escape the loneliness of their individual destinies.”

~Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

To everybody’s journey toward authenticity and connection,

&

To my parents and husband,

who have let me freely dream and roam in my never-ending quest for meaning

and have been giving and being nothing but love
BIOGRAPHY

Su Jung, an avid learner and mind traveler, was born in a big port city in Korea. After spending almost two nondescript decades as a daughter and friend to somebody and a student at school—although she was beloved for who she was and what she accomplished, she departed home for college, which marked a significant turning point in her life journey. She soon learned she was hopelessly in love with the idea of growing (and inspiring others to grow) and living a happy and meaningful life (and spreading the spirit of happy and meaningful living). Counseling and teaching were perfect channels for pursuing all.

She earned both a Bachelor’s degree in Education and a Master’s degree in Educational Psychology from Yonsei University in Seoul. While in graduate school, she worked as a project researcher at Korean Educational Development Institute as well as a test specialist at Korea Academy of Gifted Education. After graduation, she had systematic training as an intern/resident counselor and a program coordinator at the Student Counseling Center of Sogang University. She became a licensed professional counselor at the end of her training. She owes much of her current being to the fine training of the institution and the genuine people she met through the training. She had been an instructor at several college-level institutions and the first counselor at the non-governmental organization, Korean Legal Aid Center for Family Relations until she came to the United States to study in the Counselor Education program at North Carolina State University. Her American life was an oasis in her life; she could rest her tired legs, relieve her thirst for human mind, and look up at the stars with awe, not fear… Now, it is time to hit the road again.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank all the people who have been involved in my project through their truths, wisdom, and prayers. Especially my research participants! Your stories have led me to insights that I will nurture and live by for the rest of my life. I will remember each of your voices along with the epiphany I had on a rainy day on my walk back home at dusk, and tears shed in the rain.

Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan! You knew me well, thought in my shoes, and talked to my heart. Under your caring gaze and guidance, I could go on. Dr. Edwin Gerler! Your invitation to and encouragement for a thorough inner search made me think hard about everything from scratch, begot this research, and enabled me to get where I am now. It all started with you. Dr. Siu-Man Raymond Ting! Thank you so much for your heartfelt advice and help based on your own experience as well as constant support! There were so many grateful moments although words left unspoken. Dr. Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach! I admire your professionalism and genuineness and hope to become a reliable mentor like you. I deeply appreciate your conscientious review of my work.

I would like to extend my thanks to everybody who has touched my life through the program at NCSU including the faculty and staff, fellow students and friends—especially those who held me through my meltdown. I am unutterably thankful to my family, friends, and colleagues in Korea who have shown unshakable faith in me and supported me wholeheartedly. Lastly, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Erin and Allan Kalbarczyk, for their love, whimsy, and beer. They deserve more than just gratitude.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................... viii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .................................................................1
   Rationale for the Study .........................................................................................5
   Purpose of the Study ..........................................................................................8
   Definition of Terms ...........................................................................................9

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................11
   Role of Literature Review in the Study ..........................................................11
   Research ThatDirects Attention to
   Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making .......................................................14
   Conceptualization of Meaning Making and Research Traditions ..............20
   Rationale for Theory Selection ......................................................................24
   Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self-Authorship .............................................27
   Three Dimensions ............................................................................................28
   Development of Self-Authorship .....................................................................28
   A Critique of Theory .........................................................................................33
   Fowler and Parks’s Search for Transcendent Meaning Making .................36
   Faith as the Most Comprehensive Meaning Making Framework ..........36
   Nature of Faith .................................................................................................37
   Summary and Synthesis ...............................................................................39

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD .....................................................................42
   Paradigmatic Assumptions ..............................................................................42
   Research Design ..............................................................................................43
   Research Questions ..........................................................................................45
   Participants .......................................................................................................46
   Instruments .......................................................................................................49
   Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews ............................................................49
   Researcher as a Key Instrument .....................................................................51
   Researcher’s Bias Memo ...............................................................................53
   Interview Questions .........................................................................................55
   Procedures .......................................................................................................60
   Data Collection .................................................................................................60
   Data Analysis .................................................................................................64
Trustworthiness ................................................................. 67
Immersion in Data ............................................................ 68
Theoretical Sampling .......................................................... 70
Field Notes and Case Summary ............................................ 70
Member Checks ................................................................. 71
Peer Debriefing and Auditing ................................................. 71
Reflexivity: Memo-Writing and Journaling ............................... 72
Thick Descriptions .............................................................. 73

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS .................................................. 74
Participants Profiles .............................................................. 74
College Participants ............................................................. 74
Post-College Participants ....................................................... 80
The Emergent Theory: A Journey Toward Connection ............... 86
Unplugged During High School ............................................. 89
A Prelude to Connection
: A Transition Between High School and College .................... 96
College At Last! A Land of Opportunity for Path-Makers .......... 100
A Journey Toward Inner Connection
: Searching for the Authentic Self ......................................... 103
A Journey Toward Outer Connection
: Expanding and Docking ..................................................... 118
The Role of Spirituality: A Source of Peace and Growth ........... 135

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION ............................................. 142
Discussion on Findings ........................................................ 142
Trajectory of Development .................................................... 142
Three Dimensions and Spirituality ......................................... 152
Limitations of the Study ....................................................... 156
Recommendations for the Future Research .............................. 159
Implications ........................................................................ 161
Conclusion ........................................................................ 165

REFERENCES ..................................................................... 168

APPENDICES ................................................................. 186
Appendix A: Informed Consent (for Pilot Study) ....................... 187
Appendix B: Informed Consent (for Main Study) ....................... 189
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Demographics of Participants .................................................................48
Table 2. Interview Questions and Goal of Each Segment .................................59
Table 3. Focused, Axial, and Theoretical Codes ...............................................88
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

We are *Homo poeta*, the meaning maker (Becker, 1968). That is, human organism is hardwired to organize meaning (Perry, 1970), and thus “the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning making” (Kegan, 1982, p. 11). When making meaning, we process seemingly fragmented and haphazard experiences and label them with personal interpretations. In this sense, human meaning making is “the activity of composing a sense of the connections among things: a sense of pattern, order, form, and significance” (Parks, 2000, p. 19). Given the fact that none of us receives the world as it is given to us, understanding meaning that is real and significant to somebody is the best way to understand his or her existence, change, and growth.

We, born-to-be meaning makers, are also the primary and ultimate meaning-making context. Kegan noted (1982), “There is thus no feeling, no experience, no thought, no perception, independent of a meaning-making context in which it *becomes* a feeling, an experience, a thought, a perception, because we *are* the meaning-making context” (p. 11, *italics in original*). Therefore, meaning is indigenous to an individual meaning maker whose meaning-making context is distinct.

While being the fundamental meaning-making context, we interact with various external contexts. In fact, we are construed always in relationship to some other, “whether that other be another person, other parts of the self, or the individual’s society of culture” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 36). In particular, cultural context is integrally linked to our meaning making because we are socialized by culturally agreed-upon ways of knowing and being
(Pizzolato, 2010). Parks (2000) pointed out the importance of culture in meaning making stating, “A culture is composed of the forms of life by which a people cultivate and maintain a sense of meaning, thus giving shape and significance to their experience” (p. 206).

Although meanings that people value and internalize vary across cultures, diverse cultural norms and expectations have not been fully embraced in the field of meaning-making research. In actuality, the main backdrop of most research studies on meaning making development has been Western—American, to be exact—culture. Thus, despite increasing awareness and efforts to explore culturally diverse groups (e.g., Hofer, 2010; Lee, Meszaros, Creamer, Laughlin, & Burger, 2006; Weinstock, 2010), little has been known about meaning making in other cultures, especially outside the United States.

Korea, the focus of the current study, has also remained as a blind spot in the meaning-making literature. Interpreting the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) statistics, Koreans’ meaning making does not seem very fulfilling as a whole. As of 2013, suicide rates in Korea—which reflect the meaningless state of mind—have ranked highest for almost a decade among the entire OECD member countries (visit http://www.oecd.org/health/health-systems/health-at-a-glance.htm to see “Health at a Glance: OECD indicators”). Moreover, according to the 2013 survey conducted by Yonsei University’s Institute for the Study of Societal Issues and The Korean Bang Jeong Hwan Foundation, Korean children and adolescents—7,014 participants ranging from the 4th grade to 12th grade—are the least satisfied with their lives compared with their counterparts in 23 OECD countries; one in seven elementary school students and one in four high school
students reported they had felt the urge to run away from home or commit suicide. Unfortunately, this is the fifth consecutive year Korean teens rank bottom in the subjective happiness category.

After the devastation of the Korean War (1950-1953), quick recovery and quantitative growth was a top priority of Korean society. Accordingly, most Koreans mortgaged their present in favor of a better future and worked frantically. Due to the paucity of natural resources and a great dependence on human resources, education was (and is still) deemed as the fastest ticket to a comfortable life. As a result, kids have been pushed into the ‘all work and no play’ mode by unmerciful education systems and anxious parents. Just like racehorses with blinders on, Korean kids have been raised to keep running while looking only straight ahead. Attending to their surroundings or to possibly intriguing distractions has not been considered to be a desirable component of the race.

As Korean society becomes more competitive, and younger generations have fewer children, parental involvement has become more pervasive and intrusive. Today’s Korean kids seem to regard their parents’ coercion and meddling almost as a default setting. The media fuss about extreme helicopter moms—for instance, those who would select courses, complain to professors about grades, recruit a personal tutor, and talk to a career counselor all in place of their college kids—does not appear to dumbfound Korean society as much as it used to. Regarding these freakish social phenomena, a renowned Korean scholar commented that Korean society had been mass-producing human hang gliders, who may appear graceful as they navigate their lives but who actually have no self-powered engine. His concern
touches on Korean young adults’ meaning making relying heavily upon external power sources (mostly parents), not initiated from within.

Meanwhile, in academia, scholars have viewed human meaning making development as a journey toward self-authorship, during which people get to self-define themselves and their lives (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2008, 2009a, 2010; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Boes, Baxter Magolda, & Buckley, 2010; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). Numerous previous studies have claimed that the locus of meaning making shifts from external authority to one’s internal voice over time. Specifically, as people approach the self-authoring meaning-making phases, they a) orient themselves toward the essence of who they are and what they value; b) orchestrate external perspectives and expectations in the context of their internal foundation rather than blindly following values imposed upon by other people or environments; and c) feel centered, free, and content with their lives.

Typically, self-authoring meaning making calls for post-college developmental challenges, a series of trials and errors, and learning (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Even so, Korean youngsters’ meaning making projected onto their daily lives—characterized by protracted, undue reliance on parental authority and widespread discontentment with their lives—seems remote from the development of self-authorship, the endpoint of (American) young adults’ meaning making development. The current qualitative research study on Korean young adults’ meaning making journey was initially conceived based on these simple yet worrisome observations.
Rationale for the Study

Kegan (1982) called the “region between an event and a reaction to it—the place where the event is privately composed, made sense of, the place where it actually becomes an event for that person” (p. 2) or the “zone of mediation where meaning is made” (p. 3) the self. Mead (1962) saw the self as an intrinsically social construct in that it only existed in relation to the selves of others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) echoed Mead’s (1962) stance and argued that how we perceived the world depended on how we saw the relationship between the self and others; most of all, they emphasized that the importance and role assigned to the self and others were different from culture to culture.

In Asian cultures, the self is generally regarded as being connected with others whereas the self in Western cultures is treated more as an independent and separate entity (Hoshino-Browne, Zanna, Spencer, Zanna, & Kitayama, 2005; Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Pizzolato, 2010; Triandis, 1989; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990; Varnum, Grossmann, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2010). When the former (i.e., the interdependent self) makes sense of the world, it actively takes others’ thoughts, feelings, and actions into account while the latter (i.e., the independent self) primarily refers to an individual’s own thoughts, feelings, and actions (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). In a similar vein, when making a decision, those who believe in the self-in-relation are more likely to consider contextual factors such as who is involved in the decision or how those involved in the decision would be affected by the decision (Kitayama, Conner Snibbe, Markus, & Suzuki, 2004). By contrast, those with the independent self-orientation give
priority to maintaining autonomy by making their uniqueness being heard and respected rather than fostering the common good or harmony at the expense of personal attributes (Kashima, Koval, & Kashima, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Different orientations of the self can result in a variety of dissonance or disequilibrium experiences (Pizzolato, 2005, 2010; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Wang, 2012). An event that causes any type of dissonance (e.g., cognitive, emotional, relational) provokes changes in one’s meaning-making system by inducing people to examine their existing meaning making structure and develop a better (or more complicated) one so as to accommodate previously unprocessable experiences (Piaget, 1950). Heine and Lehman (1997) held that the degree to which people perceived the self as independent or interdependent was related to the experience of dissonance. They found that unlike those with the independent self, Asians with the interdependent self were not concerned or psychologically threatened even if their decision-making was not optimal for themselves.

Pizzolato (2010) argued that discontent or discomfort derived from dissonance experiences made people engage in self-reflection, through which self-authoring meaning making was cultivated. Furthermore, she suspected that self-authorship might not be a vital element or desirable endpoint in Asians’ meaning making development in that Asians experienced less dissonance in the first place, and autonomy did not look extremely important in Asian cultures. Weinstock (2010) and Hoffer (2010) also supported the possibility that major features or the developmental trajectory of meaning making might be different in collective cultures because less epistemic authority and agency were expected
from people. Weinstock (2010) said, “The privileging of the internal over the external as the basis for decision-making in the intrapersonal and personal realms in self-authorship theory may be at odds with the values of different cultures” (p. 129).

Korean society shares the above-described characteristics of interdependence-oriented cultures considerably. In other words, “belonging and fitting in, occupying one’s proper place, engaging in appropriate action, promoting others’ goals, and reading others’ minds” are more appreciated than “being unique, expressing oneself, realizing one’s internal attributes, promoting one’s own goals, and saying what is on one’s mind” (Kashima et al., 2011, p. 13). Moreover, cultural pressures to follow parental or societal expectations are very high (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004). Consequently, it is common that children feel duty-bound not to disappoint their parents and tarnish family names (Wong, Yoo, & Stewart, 2005). Also, the bond between a parent and a child is so tight that it is often put before the husband and wife relationship (Lee, 2002).

As Korean society has become more heterogeneous, however, the loyalty to in-groups has lessened, and the tolerance toward deviation from in-group norms has increased. In addition, a sense of independence is growing amongst Korean young adults while traditional collectivistic values and cultural homogeneity collide with the individualistic and pluralistic climate of the world (Lee et al., 2006). Given these socio-cultural changes in Korean society, which could make an impact on an individual’s meaning making development, it seems timely and beneficial to provide detailed descriptions of Korean young adults’ meaning making patterns and their evolvement.
Purpose of the Study

There has been no research that delineates Korean young adults’ meaning making development at close range. Accordingly, the current research study attempted to illustrate developmental characteristics of Korean young adults’ meaning making and present a new model if any emerged. Although generating a theory that best explained Korean young adults’ meaning making development was the primary purpose of the research, knowing no one theory or model could perfectly reflect young adults’ complex meaning making development, it was hoped that the current study contributed in some way to the collaborative effort of the field to “identify all of the variables and permutations associated with development and continue to seek out the nuances of the mutual shaping process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (Taylor, 2008, p. 232).

To elicit unrestricted rich narratives from participants, the researcher pursued a simple open-ended research question: “How does Korean young adults’ meaning making evolve over time?” Additionally, the researcher investigated the role of the spiritual aspect in meaning making, which seemed lacking in the current leading theory (i.e., Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory; see the “Literature Review” for more information). The exploration of the spiritual dimension in Korean young adults’ meaning making development was not the main goal of the research per se. Nonetheless, it was included in the research questions with the intent to build a fuller understanding of complex human meaning making development (see the sections entitled “Conceptualization of Meaning Making and Research
Traditions” and “Rationale for Theory Selection” in the next chapter for more detail about the spiritual approach to meaning making).

The researcher was also mindful that the study should be conducive to meaningful insights and interventions for young adults’ meaning making development. Young adulthood is a time of questions and quests, and its transformative process is not always smooth sailing. Therefore, lived voices of Korean young adults were expected to inspire helping professionals in Korea to provide instructional and therapeutic scaffolding to Korean young adults who appeared to be in serious need of mentorship. It would be even better if the study could be used beyond its particular cultural context and field.

**Definition of Terms**

**Meaning making.** In general terms, meaning making is a way of interpreting one’s experience. In academic terms, it is “the activity of composing a sense of the connections among things: a sense of pattern, order, form, and significance” (Parks, 2000, p. 19).

**Young adults.** Conceptually, young adults are “a group of individuals who are in the process of transitioning from depending on others’ ways of making meaning to creating their own way of making meaning of knowledge, their identities, and their relationships” (Taylor, 2008, p. 216). Chronologically, young adulthood includes late teens and those in one’s 20s and 30s (Baxter Magolda, 2001).

**Faith/Spirituality.** Faith involves valuing, committing, and acting beyond simply knowing and aspires toward more being beyond simply being (Fowler, 1981). Thus, faith is
“composing and dwelling in some conviction of what is ultimately true, real, dependable within the largest frame imaginable” (Parks, 2000, p. 20). The terms faith and spirituality were interchangeably used throughout the study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins by discussing the role of a literature review in grounded theory research—the guiding method of the current study—and the stance of the study on it (see the “Method” chapter for more information on grounded theory). Next, a review of the literature on Korean young adults’ meaning making development is provided. Due to the lack of research directly related to the target population, statistics and studies that indicate the need for examining Korean young adults’ meaning making are explored. Also, research traditions according to different conceptualizations of meaning making are outlined. The rationale for the selection of theories is followed by explanations of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory and Fowler (1981) and Parks’s (2000) transcendent approach toward meaning making. Finally, a summary and synthesis of the chapter is presented.

Role of Literature Review in the Study

The place of the literature review in grounded theory research has long been “disputed and misunderstood” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 165). Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1978) argued in their seminal pieces of work on grounded theory that the literature review should be delayed until all the analytic work was over to keep researchers’ lens from being contaminated by already existing theoretical frameworks and concepts. According to Charmaz (2006), however, an increasing number of scholars have moved away from the positivistic standpoint that Glaser (1978) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) adopted. Unlike classic grounded theorists, she claimed a literature review gave initial ideas and a loose frame to pursue. More specifically, she explained that a literature review not only
sensitized researchers to discern potentially significant concepts that otherwise might slip away but also helped them further questions related to their research topics; therefore, she concluded, “Achieving intimate familiarity with the studied phenomenon is a prerequisite” (p. 68).

As to theoretical frameworks, Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated that already existing theories played a useful part in “complementing, extending, or verifying the findings” (p. 39). They added especially when previously developed theoretical frameworks were closely aligned to a study underway, they could help with the methodology of the research as well as initial concepts and the overall direction of the research. They could also offer insights and alternative explanations to the findings. Charmaz (2006) suggested that researchers use theoretical frameworks to showcase “how your grounded theory refines, extends, challenges or supersedes extant concepts” (p. 169, italics in original).

In reality, it is impossible for researchers to remain as a tabula rasa (i.e., blank slate), untouched by earlier theories or empirical findings (Charmaz, 2011). While belonging to academic and/or professional fields, researchers are naturally exposed to concepts and theories related to their topic of interest. Moreover, many doctoral programs require a literature review regardless of research methods as a means to judge their doctoral candidates’ ability to synthesize the existing body of knowledge on a chosen topic (Charmaz, 2006). Consequently, it is undeniable that researchers bring their disciplinary or professional knowledge into their studies. In the end, what it boils down to is how to use that background knowledge.
Instead of aspiring to the impossible state of being a blank slate, a growing number of grounded theorists have supported the stance, so-called, *theoretical agnosticism*. Henwood and Pidgeon (2003) maintained that researchers should put theoretical concepts and ideas in the back burner of their mind until they became relevant and confirmed by real data. In other words, “Each preconceived idea should *earn* its way into analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 68, *italics in original*). Researchers do not need to have empty heads as long as they have open and critical minds (Dey, 1993).

To summarize, referring to existing theories and concepts does not automatically indicate that researchers' lenses are seriously contaminated. Knowledge gained from a literature review might dampen researchers’ creativity to some degree, but previous frameworks and perspectives can also sensitize and guide researchers’ inquiries. Research can still be novel and significant as long as researchers allow new concepts to reveal themselves and continue to discard or adjust preconceived ideas that do not fit what is happening in the real world (Charmaz, 2011). For the current project, the researcher conducted a literature review prior to the actual research. Existing theories and studies helped the researcher design the research and recognize potentially significant codes and concepts. Throughout the research, the researcher—who espouses Henwood and Pidgeon’s (2003) *theoretical agnosticism*—checked if each code and concept was grounded in data or from her preliminary knowledge.
Research That Directs Attention to Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a triennial worldwide survey done by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. It measures 15-year-old students’ performance—not just knowledge and skills but also abilities to apply what they know to real-life situations—in reading, mathematics, and science. 510,000 students from 65 countries participated in the latest study in 2012, and Korean 15-year-olds were placed fifth in both math and reading and seventh in science after a handful of countries such as Shanghai-China, Singapore, Hong Kong-China, and Taiwan. However, when asked if they felt happy at school, they turned out to be the least happy among the over a half-million students from all over the world (OECD, 2013).

Suppose that the above-mentioned 15-year-olds become high school students. Their lives do not seem to improve significantly. According to the most recent large-scale nationwide study on Korean high school students’ lives conducted with 10,335 students from 107 high schools by Korean Educational Development Institute (Choi, Cha, Jo, & Hyun, 2009), Korean high school students’ lives center around school and study. Even though many schools specializing in vocational and professional training were included, the results show that 38.8% of Korean high school students study 10-15 hours a day; 8.1% of them study 15-20 hours. It depends on the types of school and policy of each school, but most of Korean high schools (81.6% on average; 95.8% just for general high schools) run the after-class self-study program that begins at 6:00-7:00 p.m. and ends at 9:00-11:00 p.m. Many Korean high school students (72.4%) study one to three hours outside school (e.g., at home or private
institutions) every day while some of them (14.9%) study more than 4 hours outside school. A considerable number of Korean high school students wake up between six and seven o’clock in the morning (61.6%) and go to bed between midnight and two o’clock in the morning (63.7%). Some of them (14.2%) call it a day after two o’clock in the morning. Almost half of Korean high school students (48.2%) do not play or watch sports even once a week. 32.4% of them do not do any type of art-related or cultural activities, and 31.9% do not read books at all during the week. 31.9% of them do not even talk with their family during the week.

The qualitative inquiry part of the same study not only illustrates Korean high school students’ real lives but also hints at their meaning making with the five themes that emerged from the in-depth interviews with 38 high school students: a) grades as the number one goal, b) vagueness, c) a moratorium on everything other than study, d) meaninglessness/lack of vitality, and e) alienation. First, there is nothing that matters more than getting good grades in Korean high school students’ lives. They neither fully understand why they have to study nor want to study, but they believe they must enter a (good) college in order to live a good—at least average—life. As long as they can get into a good school, their interests or dreams, if any, do not carry much meaning.

Second, one of the most frequent answers that people hear from conversations with Korean high school students these days is “I don’t know”. The “don’t know” epidemic stems from both inside and outside vagueness. Their goal to enter a good college may seem tangible enough. However, it lacks intrinsic motivation and passion because they are vague
about who to be, what to want, how to live, and even where to get help. Nothing is certain, and they go through vague and continuous anxiety.

Third, Korean high school students are pushed to postpone everything until they enter college and just focus on studying. They are told that their hard work will pay off in the end, so it is better for them to endure pain with patience and delay gratification. They live for the future at the expense of the joy of here and now. Especially as the link between education and employment is getting tighter, the pressure from home, school, and society to sacrifice the present for the better future is increasing.

Fourth, every day is the same. Today is not different from yesterday, and tomorrow will be the same as today. One student’s remark reflects the meaninglessness and dryness of Korean high school students’ daily lives well: “I don’t see any problem even if other high school students who are total strangers to me write a diary on my behalf. There will be no difference.” In addition, Korean high school students feel that what they learn and study at school is uninteresting and irrelevant to their lives. Therefore, every day is boring and pointless, and they feel apathetic and helpless in their lives.

Lastly, Korean high school students are isolated from their lives because their parents or schools do not allow them to explore and make decisions on their own. Instead of supporting their inner search and trusting their decisions, most of Korean parents and teachers order, control, and keep a close watch on what their kids and students do. Since their parents decide everything for them, Korean high school students become afraid of making their own decisions and responsibility for them. What is worse, many Korean high school
students find nothing interesting and try to avoid thinking seriously about what they want. As a result, they become more alienated from themselves and their lives.

Korean high school students finally enter college after great struggles only to find it is not the finish line but another starting line. Unlike their hope that a new world will open up to them once they make it to college, a long to-do list and challenging tasks are awaiting them, which makes it still hard for them to lead a self-motivated and reflective life. As Choi, Kim, and Cheon (2012) pointed out, parental interference continues to exist; higher education intensely concentrates on preparing students for a job neglecting its other important roles such as helping students’ personal growth; most of students dedicate their college years to building up an attractive resume including high English test scores, good grades, and a variety of experiences (e.g., studying/working abroad, an internship, community service, leadership, club activities, awards and honors); and Korean society keeps urging people to become and remain competitive to survive in the endless global competition.

An extensive nationwide study done by the National Youth Policy Institute in 2012 on Korean college students’ lives—a combination of a survey with 2,217 college students and in-depth interviews with 30 college students—reveals that college students in Korea recognize that they need to live an independent and responsible life departing from their parent-led lives; nevertheless, they find it extremely challenging to establish their own life goals as well as figure out what they want to do after graduation. And they continue to rely on their parents (Choi et al., 2012). Some Korean scholars even call college students in their 20s post-adolescents because their reality is not very different from that of adolescents (Oh,
2010). Especially as more and more college students delay graduation, get a job late, and get married late, they tend to exhibit characteristics of adolescence to an increasing extent and over a protracted period of time. Their lives continue to be heavily influenced by what their parents want and what their society encourages (Choi et al., 2012).

The only study that directly concerns Korean young adults’ meaning making shows that Korean female college students who interact frequently with their parents tend to perceive their parents as an advisor or a supporter and actively negotiate with their parents and develop self-authoring ways of decision-making based on their positive relationship; by contrast, those who do not interact with their parents much and are unable to negotiate with them are more dependent on external sources when making decisions (Lee et al., 2006). The research also points out—in fact as one of the most interesting findings—that Korean female college students intend to be a good daughter and make their parents happy even in the midst of trying to be more independent from them. Although they experience the internal conflict between being a good daughter and becoming independent—especially when their own interests take priority over pleasing their parents as a good daughter, it is significant for them to consider their parents’ wants. The researchers did not interpret their participants’ tendency to coordinate their wants with parents’ expectations as a sign of low or no self-authorship. Rather, they concluded that in Korean culture, even self-authoring decision-makers could rely considerably on the opinions of a selected circle of trusted others because they believed those people had their best interest in mind.
In summary, Korean high school and college students’ lives are geared toward getting into a good college and finding a good job. Since most Korean students are motivated to survive by securing better and safe positions in their society, they cannot be free from their society’s standards and expectations; consequently, there is little room left for self-exploration or existential questions. In addition, the tendency to attend to significant others’ opinions as much as satisfying one’s own needs and wants is one of the unique Korean young adults’ meaning making patterns.

The current study postulates that young adulthood generally begins around the time of college entrance (see “Definition of Terms” in the chapter one for more explanation). College is indeed a critical time in meaning making development because it stimulates students to explore their inner voices rather than personal or societal authorities (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Bryant, 2011; Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2007, 2008; Lee, 2002; Nash & Murray, 2010; Parks, 2000; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007). Moreover, college helps students “learn who they are, search for a larger purpose for their lives, and leave college as better human beings… A college or university is… a forum for the exploration of life’s mystery and meaning” (Palmer & Azjonc, 2010, p. 3).

In Korea, eight out of ten high school students, on average, enter college each year (Park & Kim, 2014). This research study, for the first time, seeks to explore how Korean college students—who used to be clueless about themselves and their lives and follow what was dictated to them by their parents, ignoring and deferring everything that got in the way of them entering college—make sense of themselves and their world and transform.
Furthermore, it extends its exploration to post-college young adults in their late 30s, a group which has received little academic attention. After college, young adults start to seriously engage in life tasks such as working, partnering, and parenting and are expected to deal with various challenges with their own philosophy of life (Kegan, 1994). Nevertheless, as previous research alluded, if an increasing number of Korean college students are sacrificing their present *again* to get a nice job this time, their post-college meaning making may face serious delays and issues.

By including both college and post-college eras, the current research aspires to depict the entire young adulthood through the lens of meaning making development in the Korean context. College students’ narratives are expected to show how Korean young adults spend their most pivotal years in meaning making evolution and transform. Lived experiences of college graduates in their late 30s will corroborate or enrich college students’ stories. Furthermore, they will reveal what ramifications college years’ meaning making will have for life after college connecting the dots and completing the whole picture of Korean young adults’ meaning making development. Ultimately, unveiling both college and post-college young adults’ meaning making development—with seemingly many obstacles in the way—is hoped to inform each period’s development and provide useful insights into how to enhance their development and wellbeing.

**Conceptualization of Meaning Making and Research Traditions**

Meaning making is a broad concept. If we simply associate meaning with how to process or respond to external stimuli, meaning making carries a limited definition; in this
case, we see it mostly as a cognitive activity. In fact, many scholars have understood meaning making through this solid lens. On the other hand, if we regard meaning as one’s “narrative framework or philosophical rationales” (Nash & Murray, 2010, p. xx) or “an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes, strivings, thoughts, and actions” (Fowler, 1981, p. 14), we use meaning as a bigger framework that covers existential concerns.

According to Fingarette (1963), meaning making can indicate two different activities: either “a scientific process of developing a logical, reliably interpretable, and systematically predictive theory” or “an existential process of generating a new vision which shall serve as the context of a new commitment” (as cited in Kegan, 1982, p. 11). The two different ways of conceptualizing meaning making have created two different approaches to scholarly inquiry into meaning making. The former has led to the cognitive-developmental approach, and the latter to the existential-phenomenological approach.

The cognitive-developmental tradition (also known as the Piagetian) is mainly concerned with what and how we think. At its core stands Piaget’s (1950) idea that we make meaning through the assimilation and accommodation mechanism. That is, we process our experience based on a set of schemas. Occasionally, we modify our schemas to accommodate a new experience; in particular, when disequilibrium (or dissonance) caused by the new experience is too substantial to be solved with the existing meaning-making structure (in other words, through assimilation). Our meaning making becomes more complex over time as a result of the repetitive assimilation and accommodation process. Following in the
footsteps of Piaget, many scholars have examined our meaning making development through the lens of cognitive disequilibrium or epistemological changes (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Gilligan, 1982; King & Kitchener, 1994; Kohlberg, 1969; Perry, 1970).

The traces of the existential-phenomenological tradition can be found in various areas such as philosophy, theology, psychology, and even literary work. In the clinical and counseling-related field, Rogers (1951) and Maslow (1954) underscored the actualizing tendency through which we expanded and transcended our being. Viktor Frankl (1959, 1969) advocated man's intrinsic will to meaning and unceasing search for it. Explaining the term existential vacuum, Viktor E. Frankl (1969) contended that we felt emptiness and meaninglessness essentially because we did not know what we wanted. According to him, it is the lack of direction in our lives coupled with a very profound lack of sense of ourselves that makes us follow what others do or what others want us to do. He emphasized the importance of “taking a stand toward” (p. 17) our being as well as searching for meaning and considered it as the spiritual side of meaning making. Despite its vast influence and inspiration, this abstract quest for meaning has not been strongly supported by empirical research and become less conspicuous in academia.

The cognitive-developmental tradition focused primarily on the individual and cognitive (or epistemological) aspect of meaning making. Consequently, ontological, emotional and social aspects were left unexplored (Parks, 1986). In response to the need for a more holistic conception of meaning making, Kegan (1982) ushered in a third tradition called
the constructive-developmental approach. Embracing the neglects (i.e., ontological, emotional, and social aspects of meaning making), he posited that meaning making included not only cognitive but also intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions.

The constructive-developmentalism was based on the suppositions that a) meaning—including patterns, forms, or structures that guided our interpretive process—was constructed (i.e., constructivism); and b) increasingly complex forms of meaning making emerged over time (i.e., developmentalism) (Kegan, 1982). Explaining the course of self-evolution, Kegan (1994) presented five distinct orders of mind and coined the term _self-authorship_, an advanced order of mind that enabled the shift in the locus of authorship from others to the self in meaning making. He firmly believed that self-authorship was essential to be an effective parent, partner, colleague, and leader.

Kegan (1982, 1994) also argued that meaning making development was enacted based on the subject-object relationship. He described subject as “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in” whereas object referred to the elements that we could “reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon” (Kegan, 1994, p. 32). According to his explanation, a child who sees his world only through his perceptions (i.e., he is subject to his perceptions) cannot see his own perceptions until his meaning making system is able to separate himself from his perceptions (i.e., his perceptions become an object). Likewise, an individual with a self-authoring mind is
no longer embedded in other’s perspectives and values; instead, it reflects on external influences and acts accordingly.

Since Kegan (1982) pioneered constructive-developmentalism to map human meaning making, the very approach has been leading the field. Baxter Magolda (2001)—who opened the post-Kegan era and both expanded and fortified the field of meaning making studies—succeeded to Kegan’s (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental and holistic approach. She also continued to adopt the subject-object relationship—“the particular balance of which elements are object and which are subject” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 12)—as the underlying mechanism of meaning making development. Recently, she and her colleague conceptualized meaning making development as “a continuous and cyclical journey characterized by cycles of differentiation and integration, periods of transition and consolidation, variability across developmental dimensions, and multiple personal and environmental influences” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 21). Research inspired by her theory has informed helping professionals in higher education settings regarding what young adults’ meaning making development is like and how to better assist them in promoting self-authorship. Recent efforts to refine her theory (e.g., Baxter Magolda, Creamer, & Meszaros, 2010; Baxter Magold & King, 2012) are expected to make the already dominant theory more powerful and influential.

**Rationale for Theory Selection**

theory/model itself but their extended ideas and approach to mean meaning—were selected to guide the current research study. Since this study sought to explore phenomena such as “construction of meaning” and “development” in a particular “culture”, the constructive-developmental paradigm was an inevitable choice. The constructivist lens was necessary to discover how Korean young adults uniquely construed their realities in their socio-cultural context. The developmentalist lens was supposed to track the ongoing evolution of their meaning making system. The holistic approach of constructive-developmentalism was suitable to unravel the mystery of multifaceted human meaning making.

Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2012) Self-Authorship theory is a constructive-developmental and holistic framework. It vividly illustrates, based on the still ongoing longitudinal project, how young adults’ meaning making changes over the course of time across epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. Moreover, it is an empirically proven theory unlike Kegan’s (1982, 1994) conceptual theory and zooms in on young adulthood, the critical time for meaning making development and the focus of the current study.

However, humans not only make meaning but also seek meaning, which involves a bigger picture that guides meaning, purpose, and priorities in our lives (Becker, 1968). Although Kegan (1982, 1994) claimed that he had picked up the neglected pieces of meaning making and created a multidimensional holistic framework, his theory was deeply ingrained in Piaget’s (1950) work, and the existential aspect of meaning making was not sufficiently incorporated. Baxter Magolda (2001)—whose theory was built upon Kegan’s (1982, 1994)
ideas—did not fully embrace the transcendent and mysterious aspect of meaning making either. It is noteworthy that spiritual topics (e.g., getting closer to one’s purpose or something beyond oneself) became increasingly prevalent among Baxter Magolda’s (2001) participants as they evolved toward more advanced phases of meaning making. Nevertheless, she did not integrate the newly emerging themes into her theory saying, “I do not profess to understand them at this point. Hopefully, these dimensions of their self-authorship will become increasingly clear as we continue our work together” (p. 180). Later, Baxter Magolda (2009a) mentioned that the holistic understanding of young adults’ meaning making development was far from complete. However, no new dimension has yet been added to theory.

In an effort to accommodate the underappreciated yet essential part of our meaning making (i.e., the existential or transcendent or spiritual dimension; these terms were used interchangeably throughout this study) and complete the holistic framework in progress, the current study adopted Fowler (1981) and Parks’s (2000) transcendent approach to meaning making. Both Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) believed that the essence of meaning making lies in seeking and discovering ultimate truth at the core of and beyond our existence. They called the seeking and discovering part of meaning making faith and encouraged people to search for what was ultimately true within the largest frame imaginable.

Fowler (1981) and Parks’s (2000) approach was constructive-developmental as well. Regarding her approach to faith development, Parks (2000)—whose basic assumptions of faith were greatly indebted to Fowler’s ideas—stated, “One of the perspectives that informs my respect for another’s becoming is the discipline of constructive-developmental
psychology, careful study of the unfolding of competence and consciousness through time and space” (p. 36). In addition, both of them considered multiple aspects (i.e., cognitive, affective, and social) of meaning making to explain faith development.

In summary, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory approaches human meaning making using a constructive-developmental and holistic framework. It is a well-established theory based on lived experiences of young adults and ample evidence. Nevertheless, it does not provide sufficient explanations of the spiritual aspect of meaning making, which is impossible to ignore. By contrast, Fowler and (1981) and Parks’s (2000) approach lacks empirical evidence, but their way of conceptualizing meaning making within a larger and transcendent frame helps us interpret human meaning making development in a more comprehensive way. Further information on the selected theories and how they were integrated into the study is provided below.

**Baxter Magolda’s Theory of Self-Authorship**

Spotlighting the self-authorship phase among Kegan’s (1982, 1994) lifelong self-evolution stages, Baxter Maloda (2001) elaborated on the developmental transformation from external authority toward self-authorship across three dimensions of meaning making. Detailed explanations about the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions and the developmental trajectory of young adults’ meaning making toward self-authorship are given below. Subsequently, a critique of the theory is presented.
Three Dimensions

Baxter Magolda (2001) identified three driving questions among college and post-college young adults: “How do I know?” “Who am I?” And “What kind of relationships do I want to construct with others?” The how-do-I-know question represents the epistemological (or cognitive) dimension of self-authorship and refers to the evolution of assumptions about knowledge (e.g., the nature, certainty, and limits of knowledge) and knowing (e.g., how knowledge is obtained). The intrapersonal dimension pertains to the who-am-I question and thus, is mostly viewed as an identity-related domain (i.e., how we see ourselves). The last question concerns the interpersonal dimension and addresses how we see ourselves in relationship to others. The three dimensions are inextricably connected and overlap. And meaning construction requires the simultaneous involvement of all these three dimensions.

Development of Self-Authorship

Baxter Magolda’s longitudinal research on self-authorship development began in 1984 and is still ongoing. As the research progresses, the developmental structures of meaning making have become more specific and nuanced. At first, Baxter Magolda (2001) reported four distinctive meaning-making structures: 1) Following External Formulas; 2) The Crossroads; 3) Becoming the Author of One’s Life; and 4) The Internal Foundation. When Baxter Magolda (2008, 2010) scrutinized the last two meaning making phases (i.e., “Becoming the Author of One’s Life” and “The Internal Foundation”), she discovered three distinct yet interrelated elements for self-authorship development: 1) trusting the internal voice; 2) building an internal foundation; and 3) securing internal commitments. Recently,
Baxter Magolda and King (2012) refined the entire developmental structures into ten positions under the three categories: 1) External Meaning Making (1, 2, 3 positions); 2) the Crossroads: Entering the Crossroads (4, 5 positions) and Leaving the Crossroads (6, 7 positions); and 3) Internal (Self-Authoring) Meaning Making (8, 9, 10 positions). Main features of each position are described below.

**External meaning making.** This is a solely external meaning-making phase. People decide what to believe, who they are, and how to relate to others following external authorities' perspectives and expectations. Even if they are explicitly confident about or comfortable with what they say they believe and who they are, they still echo external authorities' voices.

1. **Trusting external authority.** People in this position unquestioningly depend on external authority and sources. They think that others know them better than they themselves do and seek to maintain familiar values and comfortable relationships. Most of all, they do not recognize any shortcomings of this way of meaning making.

2. **Tensions with trusting external authority.** People from this position still rely on external sources when forming their beliefs, identities, and relations. However, they start to experience tensions when external sources conflict. They also begin to see the need to question what they have accepted uncritically before and interact with more diverse peers. Nevertheless, social expectations and external authority's approval remain important to them.
3. Recognizing shortcomings of trusting external authority. People continue to trust external authority and follow external formulas yet recognize shortcomings of this approach. They see uncertainty of knowledge, appreciate multiple perspectives, and begin to explore who they are. However, they hesitate to take full responsibility for self-defining what to believe, who they are, and how to relate to others and often encounter confusion and frustration.

The crossroads. As people continue to realize that there are multiple perspectives and possibilities (i.e., not one right answer or absolute formula to follow), it dawns on them that following external formulas does not bring them feelings of fulfillment or happiness. Gradually, they become aware that they need to develop internal sources of beliefs, values, identity, and relationships in order to resolve their dissonance and dissatisfaction. Even during the “Following External Formulas” phase, people can detect inner conflict and discontent. However, it remains as recognition. It is not until “The Crossroads” that people actually begin to search for their internal voices, cultivate them, and consider how to incorporate them into their meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 2009a; Pizzolato, 2005). External and internal meaning making coexists in this phase.

4. Questioning external authority. This position is characterized by people’s awareness of the need to move out of totally external meaning making and search for their internal voice. Nevertheless, they are not sure how to proceed, so they continue to depend predominantly on external sources for knowledge construction, identity formation, and social relations.
5. **Constructing the internal voice.** People work actively on exploring and constructing their own beliefs, identity, and relationships. Consequently, their internal voice grows, yet they often slip back to the external meaning making.

6. **Listening to the internal voice.** This position is a turning point at which the internal voice becomes more prominent. People listen carefully to their internal voice and use it to make decisions. Although the internal meaning making edges out external voices, external influences still linger and compete with the internal voice.

7. **Cultivating the internal voice.** People move toward more firmly developed internal meaning making and actively cultivate their inner voice. With this more fully established internal voice, people mediate external influences when making decisions. They consciously try not to fall back to the former external meaning making.

   **Internal (or self-authoring) meaning making.** Through intensive introspection of one’s beliefs system and identity coupled with renegotiation of relationships, people become able to put their internal foundation to the forefront of their meaning making. They critically analyze information and make judgments purely based on internal criteria.

8. **Trusting the internal voice.** Recognizing that one cannot control his or her reality but can control how to interpret it, people become more conscious about and responsible for forming their interpretations and reactions. The more people use their internal voice, the more they trust it and the less they get pulled back to the former (i.e., external) meaning-making tendency.
9. **Building an internal foundation.** Trust of the internal voice naturally leads people to delve deeper into what they hold dear, how they see themselves, and how they want to connect with other people. Continuous efforts to follow the internal voice then enable people to establish the internal foundation that consistently guides their interpretations and reactions to reality.

10. **Securing internal commitments.** Finally, commitment to an internal foundation solidifies one’s philosophy of life. People at this point truly live their philosophy of life from their hearts, not from their heads; in other words, it becomes their second nature and the core of their being. They feel both centered and interconnected and gain greater openness, freedom, wisdom, and peace.

Overall, most young adults linger on the external meaning-making phase during and several years after college; enter into the crossroads in their mid 20s; and display self-authorship in their late 20s or 30s. And the trajectory of meaning-making development is neither fixed nor linear. It is more like a helix, which is “undulating, cyclical, or wavelike” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 16).

**A Critique of Self-Authorship Theory**

First, the terms *cognitive* and *epistemological*—which have been interchangeably used—need to be addressed. Even Baxter Magolda herself has been using the terms inconsistently. *Cognition* involves a broad set of mental activities while *epistemology* refers to one facet of cognition (i.e., developing assumptions about knowledge and how we come to
know) (Kitchener, 1983). And the dimension described in Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory is mainly related to epistemic cognition that controls the realm of knowing and assumptions about knowledge (King, 2010); therefore, using the term cognitive instead of epistemological is like “casting a broader net that encompasses more elements” (p. 169). That is, the dimension ends up gaining greater leverage than it is supposed to have.

Pizzolato (2010) also agreed that cognitive was a broader term. However, she did not believe that the term epistemological was sufficient enough to explain the convoluted process of our knowing. She thought knowing required a series of mental activities (e.g., sensation, perception, information organization, information storage, reasoning, and knowledge retention), so the term cognitive was more appropriate. Particularly, she preferred to call it *situated cognition* in that knowing was inseparable from context and co-determined by the agent and the context (Greeno, 1998).

Second, the theory needs to explain relationships among the three dimensions more precisely. Initially, Baxter Magolda (2001) maintained that the three dimensions were inextricably interwoven in such a way that each dimension played an important role in the development of self-authorship. She did not explicitly state that each dimension had equal significance, but she alluded to equal partnership emphasizing the interconnectedness among the three dimensions with no primary focus on any dimension. Sometimes, her participants’ narratives highlighted a particular dimension, but she explained that the salience of each dimension was mediated by participants’ particular life circumstances or experiences; in other words, any dimension could be in the foreground of meaning making. King (2010) also
thought Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory represented the “equal partners” stance rather than the “stronger partner” stance.

Recently, Baxter Magolda (2010) made a more specific statement about the relationship of the dimensions. She said that there was a “default” or “home” dimension that acted in the forefront of meaning construction and served as an anchor, and any dimension could be one’s default dimension. However, she also argued, regardless of which dimension was in the foreground, people typically constructed meaning epistemologically before they did intrapersonally or interpersonally (Baxter Magolda, 2009a, 2010). This implies that the development of the epistemological dimension is necessary, if not sufficient, to properly process one’s identity or relational issues. In a similar vein, King (2010) asserted that development in all three dimensions involved development of complexity, but it was not certain whether the development of cognitive complexity was substantively different from that of intrapersonal or interpersonal complexity. If cognitive complexity influences each of the three dimensions, it supports the stronger partner stance. On the other hand, if complexity development in the other two dimensions is qualitatively distinctive from cognitive complexity, it evidences the equal partners stance.

Third, Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory has limits in applying it to other populations, settings, and times. Her sample was predominantly White, so it is questionable if the theory can be generalized to people from different cultural backgrounds (Boes et al, 2010; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Moreover, her theory was based on the interviews with those who attended a selective school (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Given the fact that
adversities intervene in one’s self-authorship development (Pizzolato, 2003, 2004), stories of the privileged would be different from those of the disadvantaged. Also, judging from the fact that only 39 participants out of 101 college students persisted through the final theory development after 14 years of annual interviews, it is uncertain if the theory represented the average young adult’s meaning-making development. In general, it is more likely that those who are interested in self-reflection—a key element for self-authorship development—continue their journey in a longitudinal study.

As far as settings are concerned, college students are constantly exposed to diverse worldviews and nudged into questioning their beliefs and values, which is essential for self-authorship development (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Lee, 2002; Parks, 2000; Pizzolato, 2005). Without unique experiences that college settings offer, people may create different developmental trajectories; for instance, they might show more rapid development in the interpersonal or intrapersonal dimension. In addition, attending college in one’s immediate neighborhoods—where things are more homogeneous and unquestioned—can result in different self-authorship development because usually living away from home and parents opens up possibilities for new challenges and subsequent changes (Astin et al., 2011; Lee, 2002). Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory does not account for these circumstantial variables.

It is also doubtful whether the theory is applicable to today’s young adults. The study was launched in 1986 and the theory was proposed in 2001. Things have changed dramatically in many aspects since. The influence of mass communication has been overwhelming, and thus, the world has become a global village. College has provided greater
diversity than ever. In addition, compared to the 80s and 90s, those born after the millennium have been raised with various parenting styles, education, and social values. As a result, today’s young adults could show more signs of self-authoring meaning making due to all the advances of modern life; or they may show more dependency on their significant others and social formulas for success intimidated by modern days’ complexity and uncertainty.

**Fowler and Parks’s Search for Transcendent Meaning**

Fowler (1981) suggested seven stages of faith development over the life span: 1) Primal Faith, 2) Intuitive-Projective Faith, 3) Mythic-Literal Faith, 4) Synthetic-Conventional Faith, 5) Individuative-Reflective Faith, 6) Conjunctive Faith, and 7) Universalizing Faith. Parks (2000) proposed a faith development model with three interacting components (i.e., forms of knowing, dependence, and community) and four developmentally distinctive phases (i.e., adolescent or conventional, young adult, tested adult, and mature adult). However, detailed descriptions of neither theory are offered in this chapter because this study only utilizes Fowler (1981) and Parks’ (2000) orientation and assumptions around the concept, faith or spirituality.

**Faith as the Most Comprehensive Meaning-Making Framework**

As a means to frame human meaning making, Fowler (1981) and Parks (2000) used the term faith, the most comprehensive, all-compassing lens that included knowing, valuing, committing, and acting. Fowler (1981) said, “Faith has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning... orients us toward centers of power and values which
promise to sustain our lives and guarantee more-being” (p. 15). He believed we humans were meant to search for—and committed ourselves to—ultimate power and values that gave our lives coherence and meaning.

Parks (2000) defined faith as “the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience” (p.7); according to her, the composing of meaning in most comprehensive dimensions involved “a sensibility of life that not only transcends (is beyond us) but also permeates and undergirds our very existence (is within, among, and beneath us)” (p. 23, italics in original). She further elaborated, “All human beings compose and dwell in some conviction of what is ultimately true, real, dependable within the largest frame imaginable... and this act of composing and being composed by meaning is faith” (p. 20).

**Nature of Faith**

Fowler (1981) treated faith as a human universal; that is, everybody is endowed with an orientation toward and capacity for faith at birth and cannot live well without it. And our innate capacities for faith are activated and evolve differently depending on “how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environment we grow in” (p. xiii). Although he argued that faith was a universal human meaning-making activity, he assumed that it was so infinitely varied that each individual had unique faith.

Faith is mysterious and sacred. According to Fowler (1981), faith is “the most fundamental human quest for relation to transcendence” (p. 14). And it involves exhaustive
self-examination and openness to embrace others’ faith to finally be able to relate to the holy, beyond the fathomable. Particularly, he regarded initiatives of spirit or grace and how they were recognized (or ignored) as a powerful factor in one’s faith formation.

Faith is also relational and contextual. We see ourselves in relation to others and continuously influenced by social environments such as “community, language, ritual and nurture” (Fowler, 1981, p. xiii). Just like our personal center of power and values is shaped by those of our family and significant others, our identity is shaped based on the values and power in which we invest our trust and loyalty.

Last but not least, Fowler (1981) emphasized faith as an imaginative process; in other words, it is shaped by images and symbols. Images connect information with feeling, so they are felt representation of our experiences. Faith, in the end, is imagining or forming images of the ultimate conditions of our existence, based upon which we shape our interpretations and actions. Some people may use religious images or representations, but faith is “not always religious in its content or context” (p. 4).

Parks (2000) portrayed faith as a) a primal force in human nature; b) a center of power, value, and affection; c) setting one’s heart upon what she or she trusts as true; and d) something transcendent yet immanent, dynamic and transformative, and more than cognitive. Since she developed her model grounded in Fowler’s (1981) assumptions, the characteristics of faith she presented were fairly similar to those of Fowler’s (1981). However, she introduced a unique concept called shipwreck experience as part of challenges to faith. Individual shipwrecks are particularly relevant to young adults’ meaning making during
which they go through the collapse of the self, others, world, and "God". In fact, young adults reorient and enrich their connections to self, other, world, and “God” through shipwrecks.

She used the word “God” (originally used with quotation marks) to refer to “whatever serves as the centering, unifying linchpin of our pattern of meaning and holds it all together” (p. 21) (i.e., the center of values and power) with no religious connotation.

**Summary and Synthesis**

A modern scientific tradition to understand human meaning making traces its roots to Jean Piaget and his originative academic descendant Robert Kegan. In his book, *The evolving self*, Kegan (1982) delineated the life-long evolution of human consciousness and introduced the notion of self-authoring meaning making. He thought self-authorship was indispensable for a happy adaptive adult life. Baxter Magolda has widely propagated the concept of self-authorship particularly to higher education settings and maintained the holistic approach that Kegan proposed to explain young adults’ meaning making development. However, despite its holistic approach, Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2012) Self-Authorship theory does not fully address a critical aspect of meaning making: that is, seeking and discovering meaning beyond simply making sense of our experience. On the other hand, Fowler (1981) and Parks’s (2000) approach casts light on the need to align our lives with ultimate meaning and transcendent power and frames the meaning making phenomenon through a more inclusive lens.

The researcher employed Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2012) theory as the backbone of the research because of rigorous empirical support behind the theory and growing interest in the education and counseling field. In addition, Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2012) theory
conveys inspiring messages for young adulthood (e.g., finding one’s authentic voice), which is worth spreading. In order to complement the missing spiritual piece in Baxter Magolda’s (2001, 2012) approach and embrace Fowler (1981) and Parks's (2000) bigger vision, the researcher added a research question that would explore the role of the spiritual dimension in Korean young adults’ meaning making development.

Previous studies on Korean high school and college students’ lives imply that Korean society could be a barren land for self-authoring meaning making or a unique ground where self-authorship is not welcomed. High school students are forced to tolerate the monotonousness and meaninglessness of their daily lives until they enter college. And college is becoming more like high school where every decision is seen as critical to getting a good job upon graduation. Moreover, significant others’ opinions play an important role in Korean young adults’ decision-making, which might impede or complicate self-authoring meaning making. All in all, postponed or neglected inner search and the interdependent (i.e., self-in-relation) orientation in decision-making among Korean young adults raise doubts whether they could lead a fulfilling life loyal to their inner voice and live beyond the mere survival level pursuing ultimate meanings.

The current research set out to capture presumably in-jeopardy Korean young adults’ meaning making development based on their lived experiences through Baxter Magolda’s constructive-developmental and holistic lens. The study was devised to allow the spiritual aspect of meaning making to manifest itself so that the emergent theory of the study could explain Korean young adults’ meaning making development in a more comprehensive
manner. In an endeavor to document both college and post-college years until full-fledged adulthood, which is a critical period of time in meaning making development, this research study gathered various stories from college seniors and college graduates in their late 30s. Details of how the current study was designed and conducted are presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

In this chapter, the researcher’s paradigmatic orientation that informed the methodological approach of the research is briefly explained. Next, the research design and research questions of the study are presented. This chapter also includes descriptions of participants, instruments, and procedures of data collection and analysis. Lastly, strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the research are discussed.

Paradigmatic Assumptions

A paradigm refers to a set of basic beliefs or worldviews that guide one’s action (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, researchers’ paradigmatic orientations determine and undergird methodologies in research (Guba & Lincoln, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three metaphysical questions were asked to show the paradigmatic stance of the researcher: *ontological* (the nature of reality/truth or what can be known), *epistemological* (the nature of the relationship between the knower/would-be knower and what can be known), and *methodological* (the way the would-be knower approaches what can be known) questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The *axiological* (the role of values) (Guba & Lincoln, 1988; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and *rhetorical* (the language of research) (Creswell, 2007) questions were not included in that the answers to the three core questions already implied the value-laden nature of this study and the descriptive, personal, informal language used in its writing; therefore, redundant.
The philosophical assumptions underlying the current study are a) multiple subjective realities exist (ontological); b) knowledge is constructed through the interplay between the knower and the would-be knower (epistemological); and c) methods used to unravel diverse realities are inductive and emergent (methodological). Specifically, since truth is context-bound, virtually infinite realities exist in the world, and each reality needs to be respected as it is. And each unique reality reveals itself through “from-the-ground-up” data (i.e., inductive), not the “handed-down from a theory or the perspectives of the inquirer” (i.e., deductive) (Creswell, 2007, p. 19). Research is nothing but a process in which researchers make sense of how their participants make sense of the world. In order to learn about an individual’s world, researchers need to tap into the meaning-making frame of reference of the person who holds a truth and understand the essence of it. In doing so, the nature of interaction and the way researchers interpret (or reconstruct) the knower’s experience play an important role.

**Research Design: A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study**

The researcher’s ontological, epistemological, and methodological stances described above correspond to those of constructivism. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994), the ontological standpoint of constructivism espouses the relative nature of reality. To the constructivist’s eye, reality is deeply embedded in one's social and cultural milieu yet also very personal and local. Epistemologically, constructivism believes that the knower and the would-be knower weave reality interactively; thus, the relationship between reality and those who experience it is basically transactional. Lastly, since the constructivist paradigm assumes
that meaning construction can be elicited and refined only through interaction and interpretation between the knower and the would-be knower, hermeneutical and evolving aspects of methodology are underscored.

In brief, constructivism champions the idea of understanding individuals’ experience from the place where they experience it and through the reconstruction process between the knower and the would-be knower (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructivist researchers, therefore, suppose that meaning resides within the human experience and is constructed by each individual's unique context and interpretation, and one’s unique meaning construction can be uncovered through the interactive and interpretive process. In this sense, at the core of constructivism lies the phenomenon of meaning making (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

The current study was launched to disclose a) how Korean young adults’ meaning making unfolded and b) what role spirituality played in that self-evolutionary journey. Since there had been little academic interest shown toward the topic and population, it was necessary to learn directly from the voices of the population of interest in order to capture the essence of the lived experience. Accordingly, an exploratory qualitative approach, particularly a constructivist grounded theory research design, was adopted to document the unheard stories of young adulthood in the uncharted terrain, Korea.

Grounded theory is about “making discoveries about the worlds you study and pursuing these discoveries to construct an analysis” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 48). The process of theory construction involves building a coherent story by explaining connections among main themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This approach strongly advocates “developing
theories from research grounded in data rather than *deducting* testable hypotheses from existing theories” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 4, italics in original).

Baxter Magolda (2010) placed emphasis on the necessity of legitimate research methods that could elicit one’s complex meaning making. For a long time, grounded theory has not only served as a popular model for qualitative analysis in general but also shown its special fitness for research topics such as self, identity, and meaning making (Charmaz, 2011). In fact, most scholars interested in the meaning-making phenomenon have adopted the constructivist paradigm and grounded theory as a major vehicle for exploring it (Jones, 2010).

**Research Questions**

The researcher initiated the current exploratory inquiry with two questions:

1. How do Korean young adults make meaning?

2. What role does spirituality play in Korean young adults’ meaning making?

The first question was mainly about what it would be like to be a meaning maker in the context of Korea. It was meant to explore how Korean young adults made sense of their experiences and how their meaning making changed over time. The second question served to identify the role of the spiritual aspect in meaning making. The first question essentially contained the second question in it, but the second question was deliberately included to establish a better understanding of the pursuit of ultimate meaning in the complicated
meaning making matrix, which had not been fully examined under the leading paradigm of meaning making.

**Participants**

The target population of the current study was young adults who were born and raised in Korea. The young adult group was divided into two subgroups: college and post-college. Eligible participants for the college group were senior students who were in their 20s and attending four-year universities in Korea. The post-college group consisted of college graduates in their late 30s aged from 37 to 39. Participants were selected through convenience sampling. Accessibility and availability were preferentially considered. Theoretical sampling—which aims toward theory construction, not for population representativeness—was also utilized to check tentative ideas that emerged during the data collection and analysis process (Charmaz, 2006, 2011; Glaser, 1978).

Participants were recruited with the help of colleagues and friends of the researcher who had access to the target population. The recruiters were informed of the research by phone or in person and received an email with details of the research (see Appendix D). Once potential participants were identified, an email regarding research participation (see Appendix E) was sent to them along with an informed consent form (see Appendix A for the pilot study and Appendix B for the main study) and interview questions (see Appendix C); in the email, potential participants were asked to check if they met the eligibility requirements, and confidentiality and anonymity were particularly emphasized. After potential participants confirmed their participation in the study, the researcher contacted them to schedule an
interview. Meanwhile, those interested in participating in the study were allowed to contact the researcher for further information about the research. The recruiters were not notified as to whether those individuals they had identified elected to contact the researcher and/or to participate in the research. Potential participants were told that their contact and/or participation in the research would remain unknown to their recruiters.

Finally, twelve participants were interviewed: four female and two male senior students for the college group and three female and three male college graduates for the post-college group. Among the twelve participants, a 25-year-old female college senior and a 39-year-old male post-college participant were initially interviewed as part of a pilot study. But, their interviews were also included in the final data analysis because no changes were made in the interview questions.

The college group participants were in the age range of 24-29. Two students were from the same prestigious public institution in Seoul, and both of them were living alone away from home. One student was going to a private college in a small city outside the Seoul metropolitan area. The rest of the participants were attending medium-high-level private universities in Seoul, one of which was a Buddhist school. Two were Christians, and the others were not religious.

All of the post-college participants in their late 30s were married and had children. Two participants were devoted Christians; two were Buddhists in mind yet not practicing; one identified himself as a Catholic with great interest in and a deep affinity with Buddhism; and one said he was searching. There were two business owners, two full-time moms, one
public-corporation worker, and one public officer. Detailed participants profiles are provided in the results section (see Table 1 below for demographic information of the participants).

Table 1.  
Demographics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital Status (*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-reum</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Senior/private university/in Seoul</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na-hyun</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>Senior/public/Seoul</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dae-jin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Senior/private/small city outside Seoul metropolitan area</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bo-young</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>Senior/private/Seoul</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young-sik</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>Senior/private/Seoul</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jae-eun</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>Senior/private/Seoul</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gi-hoon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Catholic at heart; interested in Buddhism; not practicing</td>
<td>Works at public corporation</td>
<td>Married (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-soe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Stay-home-mother</td>
<td>Married (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hae-sun</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Buddhist; not practicing</td>
<td>Public worker</td>
<td>Married (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nan-hee</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Stay-home-mother</td>
<td>Married (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sung-jin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Searching</td>
<td>Business owner</td>
<td>Married (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min-joon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Close to Buddhist; not practicing</td>
<td>Business owner</td>
<td>Married (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Number of Children
Instruments

Semi-structured In-depth Interviews

To date, in-depth interviews have (almost exclusively) served as a major medium for deciphering one’s signature meaning-making patterns (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010; Toress & Hernandez, 2007). The current study also chose intensive interviewing as an instrument to discover Korean young adults’ meaning making development in that detailed and nuanced narratives could reveal each participant’s context-bound reality and unique way of meaning making. Seidman (2006) said, “Telling stories is essentially a meaning-making process… It is this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience” (p. 7).

With regard to in-depth interviews, Baxter Magolda (2001) stated that the content and format of her interviews had become increasingly unstructured and informal as her longitudinal study progressed. She simply invited her participants to decide what experiences and reflections they wanted to share by asking, “What life has been like since we last talked?” Those loosely organized interviews worked wonderfully for Baxter Magolda’s (2001) veteran participants, who had been on the interview journey for a long time and thus knew exactly what they were supposed to do.
On the other hand, the current cross-sectional study was anticipated to afford two-hour interviews at most with each participant. Given the relatively smaller window of opportunity to interact, it seemed more likely that participants would feel less anxious and provide more focused responses under more, yet not too much, structure and directions (e.g., well-thought-out questions and probes). In particular, interviews for grounded theory require the balance between flexibility and control (or structure), which involves “open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted” interview strategies (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28). That is, grounded theory interviews need to be flexible enough to allow participants’ realities to naturally emerge yet specific enough to inform research questions and subsequently lead to a plausible theory. Semi-structured interviews, in this regard, are a perfect approach to achieve permissive yet purposeful interchanges.

Baxter Magolda and King (2012) suggested four representative examples of in-depth interview strategies: 1) Kegan’s Subject-Object Interview (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman, & Felix, 1988); 2) Berger’s (2010) GrowthEdge Interview, an adaptation of the Subject-Object Interview; 3) Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship Interview; and 4) the Wabash National Study (WNS) Interview (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Baxter Magolda, King, Taylor, & Wakefield, 2012). Since the first two were entirely based on Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theoretical framework, they were immediately excluded from consideration, and the other two were carefully compared.

The WNS was originally designed to investigate the interaction between college students’ meaning making and their educational experiences. However, in essence, the WNS
Interview and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship Interview were not totally different entities; in fact, Baxter Magolda was a leading researcher in the WNS, and she and her colleagues used Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship Interview as its interview foundation. As a result, the two interview strategies overlapped in many ways, but the way the WNS Interview was organized suited better this semi-structured and cross-sectional study. Taken together, the WNS Interview was chosen as an overarching structural guide of the study.

The WNS Interview consists of three segments, and each segment respectively seeks to a) [Opening] get acquainted, establish rapport, and gather information on participants’ characteristics and background; b) [Main] invite participants to reflect on significant experiences and understand how they interpret these experiences; and c) [Closing] synthesize participants’ experiences and meaning making. Based on this interview framework, the final interview protocol for this research was developed.

**Researcher as a Key Instrument**

Just as the effect of counseling depends more on general counselor attitudes toward clients than specific counseling orientations or techniques (Messer & Wampold, 2002), the quality of data—ultimately, that of research—hinges on researchers’ overall approach to participants (e.g., respect, openness, genuineness, responsiveness), which sets the stage for what will emerge during the interview process (e.g., participants’ openness in disclosure). In other words, the quality of data is immensely influenced by the quality of the relationship that researchers form with their participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) because researchers play
a passionate participant role serving not merely as a facilitator but always as a co-creator of meaning (Lincoln, 1991, as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Interviews are, indeed, “negotiated” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 27) between researchers and participants. Quality interviews then involve close partnership, and the nature of the researcher-participant relationship—a unique meaning-construction context—determines the depth and breadth of interviews. Naturally, establishing a strong rapport with participants becomes a prerequisite for in-depth inquiry. In order to create a safe and trustworthy interview environment, the researcher, who was also the interviewer in this study, paid extra attention to building solid working alliances with her participants.

Since researchers are part of the phenomenon they study and the data that they collect (Charmaz, 2006), it is impossible to completely block their training, knowledge, perspectives and biases from becoming woven into research (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Their taken-for-granted assumptions and preconceptions can (unwittingly) influence what they pay attention to and how they make sense of it. Particularly, the constructivist lens allows participants’ subjective meanings to be affected and interpreted by researchers’ personal contexts. In this sense, the process of data collection and analysis based on the constructivist paradigm can be viewed as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3), and eventually it is “an interpretive portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” that researchers obtain from their interaction with participants (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10, italics in original). All in all, it is imperative that what
researchers bring to their research table is thoroughly examined and then carefully integrated into research.

**Researcher’s Bias Memo**

The researcher is a licensed professional counselor in Korea. Through her intensive internship/residency training and hands-on experience with numerous college students and adult clients including couples, the researcher has developed the sensitivity, intuition, awareness and other clinical skills that enable her to a) engage in comfortable yet meaningful interactions; b) grasp the true meaning of what people say despite other misleading or inconspicuous cues; c) look at a phenomenon from multiple angles; d) thinking about the process while focusing on talks; e) discern if she says or does something for self-referent reasons or for the sake of clients; and f) pass no judgment on people because everybody has good reasons to be who they are and where they are in their lives.

The researcher has taken various courses on research methodology including qualitative approaches. However, she has not been specially trained for either a grounded theory study or interviews for meaning-making-development-related research even though she endeavored hard to find relevant classes for auditing or seminars (or webinars) to attend. Instead, she thoroughly went over books and articles germane to the very method and topic.

The researcher assumed that context was key to understanding one’s meaning making, and there would be the emergence of more complex or mature forms of meaning making over time. The researcher also postulated that existential search for meaning and
purpose in life was universal although the seed of spirituality might bud and blossom for some people and stay dormant for some others. Furthermore, she believed that the actualization of one’s authenticity in connection with a larger universe was strongly related to a happier and more fulfilling life. Therefore, deep down in her heart, she wanted to inspire Korean young adults to recognize the urgency of searching for bigger meaning and purpose in their lives and help them align themselves with their innately loving, creative, and spiritual soul.

The researcher was born and raised in collective Korean culture until coming to the States for her doctoral studies and is aware of the suspicion in academia that self-authorship might not be appreciated in Asian cultures as enthusiastically as it had been in Western cultures. Nevertheless, she believed cultivating self-authorship was critical to leading a contented—to say the least—life, and spiritual orientation and quest would play an important role in the course of self-authorship evolution. When it came to meaning making development in general, the researcher conjectured that college was a provoking and nurturing space for meaning making, and meaning making of those who were about to enter their 40s—presumably the front gate of full-fledged adulthood—would be qualitatively different from that of those in their 20s. Particularly regarding Korean young adults’ meaning making, she supposed that their meaning making and decision-making would be greatly influenced by the relationships with their significant others—mostly from one’s in-groups—on whom they put their trust.
The researcher’s personal, educational, and professional backgrounds and assumptions all together affected the way she organized, conducted, and interpreted the current research. Especially they had a substantial impact on the researcher as both a measuring and interpretive instrument. Therefore, although the researcher strived to maintain an alert mind and keep her subjectivity in check throughout the research, the collected data and results should be seen with a discerning eye.

**Interview Questions**

The interview items used for this research were eclectic; some questions directly came from earlier research, and some were adapted from existing scales. As aforementioned, the researcher borrowed the overall structure and interview questions from the WNS Interview. One decision-making related question was added to more clearly identify how certain experiences influenced participants’ lives and caused them to change. Furthermore, three additional questions—two for the spiritual quest and one for equanimity—were included to explore the spiritual aspect of meaning making, which archetypal meaning making development research had overlooked.

During the opening segment, participants were asked to freely introduce themselves. The intent behind this technique was to let the participants choose information that they thought was important so that the researcher could surmise what elements of themselves and lives they valued and cross-check them with the later part of their interviews. Aside from gathering background information, this early interview segment was regarded as crucial particularly for establishing rapport.
For the main interview segment, participants were invited to describe important experiences that had contributed to their growth and explain why they viewed those experiences as meaningful. The researcher probed further into how the significant experiences affected them and what the interpretive process around those experiences was like. In fact, these questions were known to be the most frequently used interview and probing questions in meaning making development research (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Baxter Magolda et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the participants were asked to identify the most important decision that they had made. Participants were also asked to share their criteria or ideals for decision-making. In fact, it has not been uncommon for researchers to examine meaning making development through the decision making process (Baxter Magolda, 1998; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Laughlin & Creamer, 2007; Lee et al., 2006; Pizzolato, 2007). Pizzolato (2007) saw the close relationship between self-authoring meaning making and decision-making in that both involved reasoning (i.e., engaging in multiple perspectives) and action (i.e., making decisions and acting congruent with reasoning). Other scholars also thought one’s decision-making patterns reflected their meaning making development (Creamer, Baxter Magolda, & Yue, 2010; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005). Baxter Magolda (1998) once defined self-authorship as “the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one’s own beliefs in order to form judgments” (p. 143). All in all, the question of one’s most important decision-making was deemed suitable for revealing a milestone in one’s meaning-making development.
With regard to spirituality, the researcher initially speculated that research participants would naturally bring up the transcendent aspect of meaning making because meaning making development and spirituality development were “mutually informing” (Love, 2002, p. 369); therefore, no need for specific questions. However, the researcher had to develop more concrete questions later according to the feedback from the participant representatives (see the “Data Collection” section for detail) that the pursuit of transcendent meaning might be neither salient—as much as the researcher would like it to be—nor easy to verbalize for interviewees.

Since the researcher set out to find out whether and how spirituality was related to meaning making development, she paid particular attention to the two scales on spirituality among the set of 12 measures for college students’ spiritual and religious qualities devised by Astin and his colleagues (2010, 2011): the spiritual quest and equanimity. The spiritual quest—the core of spiritual development—refers to one’s interest in seeking meaning and purpose in the mysteries of life, inner harmony, self-awareness, wisdom, and appreciation of beauty. Equanimity represents quality of a spiritual person, particularly being able to find meaning even in times of hardship and feeling good about the direction of one’s life as well as feeling centered and at peace (Astin et al., 2011). Together, the two essential elements of spirituality were expected to reveal how significant spirituality was in one’s life and meaning making.

The spiritual quest and equanimity scales consist of nine and five items respectively. The researcher integrated the multiple items of each scale into more inclusive open-ended
questions that captured the essence of each scale. For the spiritual quest (in other words, the existential engagement), the researcher used questions such as “What is important in your life?” “What is your philosophy of life?” Or “Have you searched for (or found) (greater) meaning and purpose in life?” To check the level of equanimity, participants were asked, “How do you feel about the way your life has turned out and the direction in which your life is headed?” “How would you describe your overall state of mind?” “What is your overall attitude toward life?” And “How do you view and handle hardships in your life?”

In the closing segment, the researcher encouraged the participants to synthesize what they had learned from their life experiences. Participants were also invited to share their observations and questions, if any. Interview and probing questions along with the goals of each segment are displayed in Table 2.
## Table 2.

*Semi-Structured In-Depth Interview Questions and Goals of Each Segment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment &amp; Goal</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Opening** (20-30 min.) | **Self-Introduction:**  
  - Tell me about yourself: any background information that you feel is important.  
  [Probes] Tell me about people who are significant to you.  
  Describe the nature of the relationships. Tell me more about your family (e.g., their age, education, occupation, religion, and relationship with each family member). |
| **Goal: getting acquainted and establishing rapport** | **Meaning Making:**  
  - Describe any significant experiences that have contributed to your growth (e.g., best or worst experiences; eye-opening events; challenges or dilemmas you encountered; interactions with people who differ from you; or conflicts or pressures you experienced).  
  [Probes] Why were the experiences important to you? How did they affect you? How did they contribute to your growth? How did you make sense of them?  
  - What was the most important decision that you have made?  
  [Probes] Why was it important to you? What are your criteria for decision-making? |
| **Main** (60-70 min.) | **Spirituality:**  
  [Spiritual Quest] What is important in your life?  
  [Probes] Have you tried to find (greater) meaning and purpose in life? How important is it to develop a philosophy of life?  
  - [Equanimity] How do you feel about the way your life has turned out so far and the direction in which your life is headed?  
  [Probes] How would you describe your overall state of mind? What is your overall attitude toward life? How do you view/handle hardships in life? |
| **Goal: encouraging participants to reflect on significant experiences and understanding how participants interpret their experiences** |  
  - What are you taking away from your life experiences?  
  [Probes] How have your collective experiences shaped you? What are the implications or consequences of your insights from your life experiences? |
| **Closing** (10-20 min.) |  
  - Share any other observations or questions. |
Procedures

Data Collection

In grounded theory research, data is everything because all the codes, categories, themes, and a theory are drawn from them. Data can even inform kinds of data to collect subsequently, participants to contact further, and the content and direction of the interview since data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously (Charmaz, 2011). The source of data for this research was semi-structured in-depth interviews. The preparatory procedures of developing interview questions for the Korean participants and the process of the actual semi-structured interviews are provided in detail below.

Preliminary consultation with participant representatives. Due to lack of research directly available to guide the current study, the researcher employed an instrument developed outside of the target population and culture. Thus, the suitability of interview questions needed to be checked before the actual application to the target population and culture. Accordingly, three participant representatives—an expert panel of sorts—were contacted to help the researcher envision how interviews would proceed and what possible challenges the researcher might encounter in the real research process. They were mainly asked to provide feedback on the interview questions (e.g., the structure of the interview or the content and wording of the questions) as well as the research in general.

The consultation group was comprised of one female and two male representatives. They were volunteers recruited with the help of a staff member from a public enterprise in
Korea. The researcher knew the gate person personally but was not acquainted with any of the representatives. Two in their late 30s were married and had a master’s degree, and the one in his late 20s just graduated from college. All of them reported no religious affiliation. Each consultation was held by phone because of the physical distance between the researcher (in the United States) and the representatives (in Korea) and lasted approximately 40-60 minutes.

Each of the three representatives welcomed the research ideas and said they felt comfortable with the semi-structured three-segment interview format. Overall, they agreed that the interview questions were clear and relevant to the topic. However, due to the profundity of the questions, two of the participant representatives suggested that the questions would be better answered if participants were given sufficient time in advance to retrospect and reflect.

The consultation members also commented on the difficulty of answering the spirituality-related question. They pointed out that individuals had different levels of understanding of spirituality, and spirituality was not a commonly used word or topic in Korea unless it was addressed in serious religious conversations. They also stated that spiritual quest was regarded as such a private sphere that Korean people were neither familiar with open discussion nor trained to articulate their thoughts about it. Based on their feedback, the researcher changed the initial question slated to explore the role of spirituality in meaning making (i.e., “How has spirituality affected your life?”) to more specific questions with no
religious connotations (see the “Interview Questions” section or Table 1 in this chapter for the final interview questions).

**Cross-cultural translation of the interview questions.** On the whole, back-translation has been accepted as an adequate step for cross-cultural measurement. However, according to Maneesriwongul and Dixon (2004), it guarantees only linguistic exchangeability, not necessarily cross-cultural equivalence. And cross-cultural equivalence not only involves “verbatim translation” but aims at the “comparability of the concepts and the ideas between the source and target language” (Tran, 2009, p. 35).

To ensure cross-cultural equivalence beyond word-for-word translation, the researcher translated the interview questions from English (i.e., the source language) to Korean (i.e., the target language) first. Then, a bilingual Korean American, who was linguistically and culturally competent and trained by the researcher on the key concepts of the research beforehand, back-translated the questions. After working individually, the researcher and the back-translator discussed the gap together—which was insignificant—until they reached a complete agreement. Furthermore, based on Harkness’s (2003) suggestion, the researcher invited another bilingual Korean with counseling and psychology background and research experience to evaluate the cross-cultural equivalence between the interview questions originally developed in English and those translated into Korean. The criteria used for the evaluation were the clarity and appropriateness of language, difficulty in understanding and responding, and relevance to participants’ experiences in real-life situations (Tran, 2009). The evaluator approved the interview questions translated in Korean
without changing anything. The interview questions remained tentative until they were finalized through a pilot study.

**A pilot study.** As a way of testing the interview questions translated in Korean and gaining insight into the overall direction of the research, a pilot study was conducted. In general, a pilot study is almost always a good investment when any type of clarification is needed in research (Maxwell, 2005). Particularly in grounded theory, a pilot study is more than a worth-a-try project in that “a broad sweep of the landscape” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 14) informs researchers of what lenses they will need further to have a closer and focused look to the scene that they attempt to portray.

For the pilot study of the current research, a 25-year-old female college senior and a 39-year-old male participant were interviewed. After their interview, the two participants gave positive feedback on the interview questions, the interview format, and the researcher’s interviewing skills. Both interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed following the grounded theory methods, and eventually included to the final analyses because there was no modification made to the original questions as well as the interview process.

**Interview process.** Participants completed one interview, which lasted approximately 90-120 minutes. Interviews took place in Seoul, Korea in a location and time that was most convenient for each participant. Each interview was conducted in a quiet room where participants’ privacy was protected, and the interview process was not disturbed.
Before the interview, the researcher went over the informed consent form with each participant. Participants were reminded that they could discontinue the interview and withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Then, participants were asked to sign the informed consent and select a pseudonym to conceal their identity. During the interview, participants were asked four open-ended questions related to their meaning making patterns and development along with background information. At the end of the interview, the researcher checked in with the participants to ensure the interview had not caused any stress or harm to them.

Interviews (done in Korean) were audio-recorded and transcribed (in Korean) by the researcher. The transcript and summary of each interview was sent to the participants for a member check, and additional questions were asked when clarification or further information was needed. Once verified by participants, the transcripts of the interviews were sent to the coding team and analyzed (in Korean).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the “act of giving meaning to data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 64). The whole giving-meaning process of the current study was guided by the grounded theory procedures outlined by Charmaz (2006, 2011). Transcribed interviews were broken down and reconstructed through the coding and memo-writing process. In grounded theory, coding is the “pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46), and memo writing is the “pivotal intermediate stage of analysis between coding and writing the first draft of a paper” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 166).
**Coding.** Grounded theory coding normally involves an initial line-by-line coding phase and a more focused and selective coding phase. The data of the current research were coded based on the four steps: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. Although the four-stage coding process may appear linear, it is rather concurrent and recurrent.

The coding team of the study consisted of the researcher and two other female Korean coders; one of the peer coders is a licensed counselor and a doctoral student in a Counseling Psychology program. The other coder has a doctoral degree in education and is teaching at college. Although both of the co-coders had a background understanding of qualitative research, the researcher refreshed and updated their knowledge particularly in grounded theory and its coding techniques. Furthermore, the coding team practiced together with one of the pilot interviews, and all coders’ biases were exchanged at the outset of the coding process. The co-coders not only assisted in the initial coding but also provided feedback on main categories and overall data interpretations.

All of the codes were generated in Korean first. Then, the researcher translated them into English, and the back-translator who helped with the translation of the interview questions reviewed the translation. The interview excerpts cited in the results section (translated by the researcher) were also checked and confirmed by the same person.

**Initial coding.** Initial codes were created through line-by-line coding. Line-by-line coding is the most frequently used initial coding method, through which each line of the data is given a label (Charmaz, 1995, 2006; Glaser, 1978). During the process, it is recommended
that researchers stay close to their data as much as possible and catch implicit messages and nuances, not to mention what is happening in the data. Although this arduous work often does not receive the credit that it deserves, it is line-by-line coding that truly embodies the inductive and emergent nature of the grounded theory approach. To generate initial codes for the current research, each coder assigned line-by-line codes independently first and met as a group later to compare and discuss each other’s codes. The collaborative work as a team continued until the three coders reached consensus on final codes.

**Focused coding.** Codes with overriding significance and/or the most frequent codes are called focused codes and pursued as central categories. Researchers develop analytic foci and conceptual ideas based on focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). In this study, through the constant comparison analysis method, initial codes were analyzed, synthesized, and refined into categories that explained main themes of larger segments of the data.

**Axial coding.** Axial coding refers to the process of adding “a dense texture of relationships around the ‘axis’ of a category” (Strauss, 1987, p.64). It is supposed to provide insight into salient categories and lead researchers to make theoretical interpretations and hypotheses that penetrate the emerging analysis (Creswell, 2007). Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) applied a frame for axial coding that included conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences. Charmaz (2006) argued that the frame might limit researchers’ vision, so if researchers could tolerate ambiguity and link categories with subcategories by constantly comparing data at different levels, axial coding according to formal procedures was not necessary. Accordingly, this study did not follow Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) frame.
However, links between categories and subcategories were explored through the constant comparison method, and more encompassing major categories emerged as a result.

**Theoretical coding.** Theoretical codes integrate categories, specify possible relationships between categories, and provide an overarching scheme or core category (Charmaz, 2011). Adding precision and clarity, theoretical codes provide a sophisticated understanding of collected data (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical codes for this study were drawn in such a way that they told a comprehensive and cohesive analytic tale of diverse lived experiences of participants.

**Memo-writing.** Memos are “extended notes that discuss and analyze codes” (Charmaz, 2011, p. 166). And memo-writing “keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of your ideas… catches your thoughts, captures the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallizes questions and directions for you to pursue” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 73). In this study, memos with thoughts and insights on what was really going on in the collected data (e.g., properties of tentative categories or relationships among categories) were the driving force behind the painstaking coding process that enabled more conceptual analysis and eventually the construction of a theory.

**Trustworthiness**

As methods to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) listed a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field; b) triangulation; c) using peer review or debriefing; d) negative case analysis; e) clarifying researcher bias; f)
member checks; g) rich thick description; and h) external audits. Charmaz (2006) pointed out credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness as criteria for judging the quality of grounded theory research. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggested considering a) fit (i.e., the degree the findings fit with the experience of participants); b) applicability or usefulness (i.e., the degree the findings contribute to current knowledge and practice); c) depth and variation (i.e., how rich and descriptive the findings are and how much the findings display the variation of the phenomenon of study); d) creativity (i.e., whether the findings are new and innovative); e) sensitivity (i.e., whether the findings are drawn from sensitive approach to participants and data); f) conceptualization of concepts and logic (i.e., whether the findings are presented in a way that shows concepts and the context of concepts by a logical flow of ideas); and finally g) evidence of memos (i.e., whether there is discussion of memos). The strategies that the researcher used to ensure trustworthiness of the current study were a) immersion in data; b) theoretical sampling; c) field notes and case summary; d) member checks; e) peer debriefing and auditing; f) reflexivity: memo-writing and journaling; and g) thick descriptions.

**Immersion in Data**

Trying to understand the world through the lens of participants by being immersed in data is critical in grounded theory research. Charmaz (2006) stated, “If you ignore, gloss over, or leap beyond participants’ meanings and actions, your grounded theory will likely reflect an outsiders’, rather than an insider’s view. Outsiders often import on an alien professional language to describe the phenomenon” (p. 49). Full immersion in data,
according to Charmaz (2011), undoubtedly enhances researchers’ sensitivity. And line-by-line coding helps researchers stay close to data so that they do not impose preconceived notions on a collected set of data. Charmaz (2006) suggested as follows:

   Stick with what you define in your data. Build your analysis step-by-step from the ground up without taking off on theoretical flights of fancy... The grounded theory method itself contains correctives that reduce the likelihood that researchers merely superimpose their preconceived notions on the data. Line-by-line coding provides an early corrective of this type. (p. 51)

   During the entire data analysis period, the researcher listened to the recorded interviews numerous times and thoroughly read the transcribed documents repeatedly. Also, the researcher returned to the raw data and initial codes countless times for data comparisons. The continuous contact with the data led the researcher to experience participants’ worlds from their viewpoints. Moreover, whenever the researcher went back to the data, she could gain new insights and ideas from the data. Line-by-line coding was indeed a great way to get immersed in and familiar with the data. At the early stage of initial coding, the researcher followed the Charmaz’s (2006) tips to work quickly through data. As she suggested, speed and spontaneity helped stay focused on the data instead of applying already existing codes and concepts to them.
Theoretical Sampling

Theoretical sampling means continuously gathering data to explain or confirm emerging ideas and concepts (Charmaz, 2006). It is a unique method that grounded theory research uses to increase the power of categories and ultimately the power of an emergent theory (Charmaz, 2011; Fassinger, 2005). The process of theoretical sampling entails soliciting specific participants or data collection sources that would provide further information on the particular experience being examined.

Initially, interviews of this study were conducted in the order of being arranged. However, as data were collected and analyzed, the researcher intentionally recruited participants in such a way that their stories would help explore variation in experiences and elucidate emerging themes. To check tentative ideas and hypotheses, the researcher interviewed those who were living in an area other than Seoul, attending a school whose ranking was relatively low, and very religious.

Field Notes and Case Summary

Right after interviews, the researcher wrote down observations deemed relevant and significant such as interview settings, information revealed during casual conversations before the official interview, impression of the participant, the process of the interview, reactions of the researcher, interactions between the researcher and the participant, and so forth. Field notes were a great source for theoretical sampling, triangulation, and a rich contextual understanding of each participant. In addition to those field notes, the researcher
summarized each interview before transcribing it, which was helpful in finding gaps and holes in both the interview itself and the direction of the research and planning the next sampling and interview. The full transcription always occurred right after each interview and before the next interview.

**Member Checks**

Member checking—member validation based on participants’ feedback—is the “single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they say and the perspective they have on what is going on” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 94). For the member check, participants were sent both a summary and the transcript of their interview and asked to review the documents to see if the researcher accurately understood their intentions and main ideas. All of the participants contacted the researcher either via email or phone to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions and summaries.

**Peer Debriefing and Auditing**

Collective decision and consultation with experts are expected to enhance the trustworthiness of the research process and findings. In fact, Maxwell (1996) argued, “Soliciting feedback from others is an extremely useful strategy for identifying validity threats, your own biases and assumptions, and flaws in your logic and methods” (p. 94). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that auditing could be “the single most important trustworthiness technique available to the naturalist” (p. 283).
In this study, two co-coders served as debriefers and provided feedback on the main categories and theoretical themes of the research. Furthermore, an auditor, a clinical psychologist and licensed professional counselor holding a doctorate degree in psychology, reviewed all the transcripts and coded data, memos, and the “Method” and “Results” chapters of this dissertation. She carefully examined whether the coding and theory construction process was adequate, and the findings were grounded in the data and then verified the researcher’s implementation of grounded theory procedures.

**Reflexivity: Memo-Writing and Journaling**

Since it is highly likely that researchers interpret their data based on their prior perspectives, “wrestling with preconceptions” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 67) is an extremely essential part in grounded theory. Reflexivity leads researchers to integrity, insight, and self-awareness (Chesney, 2001). Specifically, reflexivity a) explores the impact of researchers’ backgrounds and assumptions; b) offers insights on the process of research and emerging findings; c) empowers participants; and d) provides written trails of decision-making and inferences for public scrutiny (Finlay, 2002).

In the current study, writing memos and keeping a journal were used as a means of ensuring reflexivity. Memos were more like “The running logs of analytic thinking… the storehouses of ideas generated through interaction with the data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 108), so they were geared more towards making data comparisons, eliciting more abstract and encompassing codes and categories, and finding possible relationships among codes and categories. Although the researcher took notes of rationales, assumptions, or biases behind
her analytic inferences in her memos, she pursued them more thoroughly in her journal. By writing a journal, the researcher was able to see the research process and her position in the research more objectively. Journaling also enabled the researcher to detect her deeply ingrained beliefs and perspectives and prevent them from affecting the data collection and interpretation.

**Thick Descriptions**

Thick descriptions allow readers to judge the trustworthiness of research findings and their generalizability (Creswell, 1998). Hour-and-a-half to two-hour interviews of this research yielded in-depth stories about each participant’s unique meaning making development. They also provided detailed information on personal backgrounds and specific contexts in which each unique meaning making development took place. The final report of the current study included thick rich descriptions of both individual responses and collective patterns and themes so that the audience could evaluate the quality and usefulness of this study themselves.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Since the current grounded theory study aimed to develop a theory based on collective experiences shared by research participants, each participant’s unique meaning making journey is not addressed in detail in this chapter. Instead, brief profiles of the participants and the summary of each interview are provided. The emergent theory of the study is explained through initial, focused, axial, and theoretical codes. Individual responses are quoted to provide rich and vivid descriptions of lived experiences.

Participants Profiles

Six senior students at college and six college graduates in their late 30s were interviewed. Only two college participants chose their pseudonyms for the study, so the researcher selected pseudonyms for the rest. Demographic backgrounds and overall stories of the participants are as follows.

College Participants

A-reum. She is a 25 years old student at a private university in Seoul. She has an older brother who is extremely obedient to their parents. She is a Christian.

The first thing she mentioned about herself was that she had been influenced a lot by her parents. Especially before entering college, she did virtually everything her parents told her to do although what her parents wanted for her was far from what she wanted. After entering college, she realized that she had been blindly following her parents’ opinions. Moreover, due to changes in the policy of the Ministry of Education (e.g., reduction in the
number of teachers who taught the subject that she was majoring in and gradual removal of
the subject from the secondary education curriculum), she had to think about her future from
the beginning of her college years unlike her cohort.

As she launched a search to find out where her passion lied, tension and conflict
between her and her parents were unavoidable. Nevertheless, she continued her search
listening closely to her inner voice and persuaded or negotiated with her parents when
necessary. Peer support was a great source for encouragement. Persistent searching for true
interest helped her get to know herself to a much deeper scale. She found out that living a
happy life doing what she loved and valued was the most important in her life. As a result,
instead of pleasing her parents by becoming a teacher, she chose the career path that reflected
her personality and aptitude well. Although she is trying hard to live according to her passion
and values, she still considers her parents opinions when making important decisions.

Na-hyun. She is 25 years old and attending a prestigious university in Seoul. She is
the oldest among three siblings and not religious. She has recently moved out from her large
family and is living by herself for the first time in her life. She is looking for a job that would
make her happy yet would not separate her from her life and labor. Finding meaning is more
valuable than gaining pleasure in her life. Any experience through which she can grow is
meaningful to her, and she wants to contribute to making a better world.

Upon graduation from high school, she intended to become either a teacher or lawyer
to reciprocate her parents’ sacrifice and help her family; in fact, she was accepted to both a
teachers college and a department of law at a good school and entered the former. However,
she soon realized that the decision made for her family without considering her own happiness was not quite right. Accordingly, she quit the school she was attending, retook the Korean SAT, and got into the school she had aimed to enter.

Attending her new school, she built her values system particularly through her enthusiastic involvement in school magazine club activities. Also, she dealt with her chronic inferiority complex, a feeling of inadequacy stemming from her physical appearance. The semester-long group experience offered by the university counseling center led her to work on her negative self-image and accept herself as she was. As her confidence grew, she felt like she was managing her life with a sense of control and becoming a true adult. Nevertheless, her low self-esteem as a woman as well as a sense of indebtedness, guilt, and responsibility toward her family continued to bother her.

**Dae-jin.** He is a 29 year-old student at a private university in a small city outside Seoul. He considers himself conservative for his age. He is a Christian.

Growing up, he had no one to talk to; his mother was always tired from work, his father was violent to him, and he was an only child. His grandparents would tell him that men were not supposed to express their emotions. Moreover, due to frequent moves, he had few friends and always found it difficult to make friends and maintain friendships. Talking to girls was particularly challenging. He held a great deal of pent-up anger and frustration and often felt lonely and depressed. Especially after being beaten by his friends in high school, he feared being in public places and getting a look or stare from others.
During his military service, he invested an enormous effort to improve his relationship/communication skills talking to fellow soldiers from all over the country and all walks of life. Furthermore, he thought intently about who he was, what kind of work he wanted to do, and how he wanted to build relationships with others. As a result, he left the army full of confidence. However, he rapidly lost the hard-earned confidence and a good spirit after wasting the two consecutive semesters that he took off for job search and preparation.

He did not feel like he was ready to go out into the world and lead an independent life. With his 30s and college graduation around the corner, he expressed a great deal of anxiety and concerns about his uncertain future. In addition, without any close relationship, he was afraid that his parents with serious health issues would pass away, and he would be left alone in the world. Currently, in the absence of clarity of purpose and direction in life, he is busy simply reacting to what happens to him.

**Bo-young.** She is 24 years old, not religiously affiliated, and attending a large private university in Seoul. She is satisfied with her current major and career path she is pursuing. She is hoping to leave home and create a loving home of her own—completely different from the one she is having now—as soon as possible.

When she was little, her mother was very ill and would not let her play outside. The time she spent with her mother at home was boring and gloomy. Her older brother, who was the sick dependent mother’s favorite, constantly harassed her. She was a very quiet undemanding child and basically raised herself. In retrospect, there were so many hard times
growing up. However, she ignored, hid, and never spoke about them. She reported that she actually lost the memories of most of her childhood. She believed that her optimistic attitude toward life helped her persevere through those tough times.

She introduced herself as an independent person with a strong character. To most of her friends, she appeared to be outgoing, tough, and extremely mischievous. But underneath, there was an extremely tender and emotional side, about which only few people knew. She did not reveal her true self even to her boyfriend. In addition, due to her too strong likes and dislikes, she usually severed relationships in which she felt uncomfortable. However, as she mingled with a variety of people in college, she gradually began to see the need to appreciate others’ strengths rather than focusing on the things that she did not like. Also, as she learned about herself including how she acted among friends or strangers, she attempted to tone down her exaggerated extroversion and recover her original self.

**Young-sik.** He is a 28 year-old student at a large prestigious university in Seoul. He does not have a religion. He strongly believes that only a happy person can make other people happy. He wishes to lead a regret-free life and is actually living a life following his heart rather than social norms or expectations. He believes doing one’s best is much more important than becoming the best, so he works hard to fill the areas that he lacks.

It was not until he was asked to decide his academic track in high school that he started to care about his life. Before that, he was a game addict. Once he tapped into the joy of learning, he became an excellent student. Although it took longer than expected, he entered a prestigious college after years of hard work. When he finally got to relax and enjoy
his life, his mother had a fatal car accident and hovered between life and death for a long time. His awful military experience added more gloom, despair, and agony to his life. Despite his seemingly never ending misery, he strived to recover from the traumatic events and eventually discovered his passion for spreading words of hope to those who were going through hard times.

**Jae-eun.** She is 24 years old and attending a private university in Seoul. She is not religious. She is very optimistic and curious. She assumes that no one is absolutely right so that we should not uncritically follow what people with power and authority say. She sees herself as a happy person who keeps trying to be happy. According to her, knowing herself well, being positive, and having good people around her are her secrets to happiness.

Her mother trusted her very much and never forced her to do what she did not want. From her early years, she was a bookworm and kept a journal. As a sixth grader, she spent numerous sleepless nights thinking of existential questions. She believed that unceasing conversation and exchange of ideas with her mother helped develop her core values. She treasured living a happy life with people she cared about doing what she wanted while most Koreans valued studying hard, getting a good job, and earning a lot of money. She thought so many people were driven by goals that were too unrealistic to achieve or meaningless in that they were set by others.

She heard very frequently that she was an atypical Korean. Unlike other Korean high school students, she pondered whether she wanted to go to college or not. When she decided to go, she then thought hard about what to study. College incubated her curiosity and let her
explore and get closer to what she wanted to be. When having hard time with her studies, she took a year off to reflect on her life and herself. Her trip to Europe reminded her that she wanted to live a happy and fulfilling life by doing things that were not only fun but also beneficial to the world. In doing so, She was well aware that she needed to balance between reality and what she valued.

**Post-College Participants**

**Gi-hoon.** He is 39 years old, a father of a son, and working at a public corporation. He is a Catholic at heart although not practicing and very interested in Buddhism. Intellectual curiosity and desire to communicate with the world are major driving forces in his life. Meeting his curiosity and pursuing his own happiness are significant, yet contributing to the collective good is equally important to him. Thus, he tends to seek a happy medium even if it involves his sacrifice or concession. He is willing to accommodate others’ needs and wants unless his needs and wants are seriously unmet.

He reported that he had discovered meaning in life through painful experiences such as the early death of his older sister born with cerebral palsy, his father-in-law’s passing, his friend’s suicide, and his own physical and psychological struggle. Especially, the death of his sister was a life-shattering experience for him. It resulted in deep introspection and spiritual quest. His positive and grateful attitudes toward life as well as devotion to a life of sharing and serving all stemmed from that event. Interactions with people from diverse backgrounds reinforced him to appreciate what was given to him.
He had been continuously exposed to foreign cultures from an early age. Consequently, he was not only sensitive to cultural differences but also receptive to different opinions. Although his values were different from traditional Koran values and standards in many aspects, he preferred to change things in a gradual and peaceful manner without disturbing the order of groups to which he belonged. He always tried to coordinate personal happiness and meaning with others’ wellbeing and bigger causes.

**In-soe.** She is 38 years old, a stay-at-home mother with two sons, and a Christian—she was born in a Christian family and chose to be a Christian after the serious questioning time during her junior year in high school. Living according to her faith is one of her top priorities. Faith helps her accept who she is and withstand life’s difficulties. Although she tends to think too much and keep her thoughts to herself, she tries to see herself and her life objectively.

She recalled that her life had not been easy. Her family financially struggled for as long as she could remember. She had to be independent from an early age and make a compromise between her dreams and helping family. Nevertheless, she had been a very confident—almost arrogant—person until she failed to enter a college, which she believed was almost impossible. After that experience, she learned to humbly accept every situation given to her. Furthermore, marriage, childbearing, and childrearing led her to consider others’ needs more and put them before hers. People commented she had become much warmer and less of a perfectionist after marriage.
Although she was known as a problem solver among people she knew, and many family members and friends relied on her, she did not feel used or drained thanks to her good boundaries. She said she tended to do her best in everything she did and find meanings in the present. She hoped to continue to work on what she lacked and become a better person as she grew older.

**Hae-sun.** She is a 37 year-old working mother whose son was born with congenital heart problems. She is working as a public worker yet dreaming of becoming a writer some day. Buddhist teachings are an important part of her life even though she is not a practicing Buddhist. She is little inclined to express her feelings or thoughts; rather, she tries to understand others and endure.

Before getting married, she felt anxious, uncomfortable, and confused all the time not knowing why. Furthermore, she could not feel any emotion clearly and wholeheartedly engage in any relationship as well as her daily life. So many thoughts whirled around her head, but she did not make any particular effort to get to know herself more or make her situation better. She lost her way not knowing who she was and what was meaningful in her life. She vaguely assumed that the void she felt from the relationship with her mother might be the cause for everything.

She resembled her father in so many ways (e.g., appearance, personality, and taste) whereas her mother was the complete opposite of her. Therefore, she never felt fully understood by her mother and could not rely on her. In addition, she felt forced by her
mother who had kept telling her to be a public worker from early on without asking her interests or guiding her to explore, which she still resents.

To see whether she wanted to marry or preferred living alone, she deliberately moved out from her parents’ house and lived by herself for a year. After the experiment, she got married, and her wandering mind completely disappeared. Moreover, after childbirth—the most significant event of her life—she became more easygoing, friendly, patient, stable, humble, and grateful. She believed that establishing values system as a mother and spouse helped her become mature.

Nan-hee. She is a 37-year-old stay-at-home mother with two kids. She is a staunch Christian. Living according to God’s will—that is, helping those in need—is her purpose of life. It is more meaningful to live a joyful and free life within God to her rather than pursue materialistic affluence.

She grew up with two brothers who beat her up almost every day. Her father, who was unfaithful to her mother throughout the marriage, sexually harassed her. Her mother was always working to bring home the bacon. Since she had never felt she was being loved and never learned how to give love, she had an extremely low sense of self-worth. Consequently, she was incapable of building healthy relationships with anybody. She was lonely and harboring quiet resentment toward her abusing father and brothers.

Fortunately, after leaving home for college, her psychological wounds started to heal. Particularly, marriage and her faith played a critical role in overcoming her traumas. Her
struggle as a mother led to the therapeutic encounter with God, and based on the relationship with God, she is now working on her other relationships. She believed that all the past ordeals were the path to meeting God. Through continuous dialogues with God and prayers, she became able to understand the cause of her misfortune and pain and thank what had given to her. Through her relationship with God, she learned that God loved her, and she deserved being loved. God made her love herself for the first time in life and gave her new life.

**Sung-jin.** He is 38 years old, married with two kids, and running his own business. He has no religion but is considering having one (either Catholicism or Buddhism) because now he feels like his mental and physical reserves are almost running on empty.

Since middle school, he wanted to leave home—away from parents with whom he had many conflicts, go to a big city, and succeed. He truly believed he could have all the opportunities and business networks because he had come to Seoul. His continued interest in English laid the foundation for many of his future choices including classes he took (those taught in English), military services (Korean Augmentation to the United States Army, KATUSA), and his current work (international trade).

Especially while serving as a KATUSA, he cultivated leadership, reduced cultural prejudices, and improved his English communication skills. Although he graduated from college with boosted confidence, he changed his jobs several times and wandered for a long time not knowing what to do. He started the current business when he felt like standing on the edge of the cliff. In his business world, maintaining the status quo meant falling behind
and dying out. Therefore, he was driven to do things that nobody had done before. He never ceased to worry or thought of the worst scenario that could happen. He was always anxious and impatient. Receiving admiration and high praise from others was what made him excited. His life was running on his constant hunger for more and strong drive to satisfy it.

**Min-joon.** He is a 37-year-old owner of a small business. He is not religious but feels close to Buddhism. He is married yet refuses to entertain the idea of having a kid for fear that the child might be just like him. He thinks raising a child is too costly and tiring.

In the absence of proper guidance and true introspection, entering a good college and amassing a fortune had been his main goals in life. In fact, after graduating from high school, he spent extra two years only preparing for the college entrance exam to enter a prestigious college. And eventually, he got into one of the top schools in Korea. After two years in college, instead of the normal two-year military service that most Korean males did, he chose to work for a small company as his alternative service, which took him over five years to finish it. During his alternative service, he realized a salaried employee’s life could not bring him the level of wealth he had dreamed about, so he decided to become a lawyer. After his army discharge, he studied for the state bar exam for three years.

He thought his life was quite unusual for his excellent educational background in that most of his peers found jobs with prestigious companies (or other respected professions) and settled down. And he believed that his decision to do the alternative service seriously interfered with his career path. Because he was much older than average college graduates and had a very low GPA and a limited proficiency in English, it was very difficult for him to
find or change jobs. Running out of options and time, he launched a business without enough preparation. Now he is struggling to survive as a novice businessman.

He described himself as a workaholic who was extremely individualistic and somewhat obsessive-compulsive. He did not feel satisfied unless he did or had things he wanted and believed that life was meaningless without tangible results. Thus, although he always had everything his way, he felt like he had not achieved anything since his life goal to make a fortune had not come true yet. When he felt nothing would get better, he even attempted to take his own life. Although making a lot of money was allegedly his ultimate goal in life, he reported he felt directionless and aimless in life.

**The Emergent Theory: A Journey Toward Connection**

The emergent theory generated based on grounded theory methods was entitled “A Journey Toward Connection”, which captured Korean young adults’ meaning making development from the inner search to understand who they really were, what they valued, and how they wanted to relate to others (i.e., “A Journey Toward Inner Connection: Searching for the Authentic Self”) toward harmoniously positioning their authentic inner world in the outer world (i.e., “A Journey Toward Outer Connection: Expanding and Docking”). There was no clear-cut boundary between the college participants’ meaning making and that of the post-college participants in their late 30s. However, the former mainly focused on connecting oneself to the authentic self whereas the latter revolved around connecting one’s authenticity to the bigger outer world.
The study initially set out to zoom in on Korean young adults’ meaning making during and after college (before they hit 40). However, since all of the college seniors (and some of the post-college participants) elaborated on their before-college lives, particularly during high school and the period between high school graduation and college entrance, those two eras were also illustrated in the results to show developmental sequences as well as contrast meaning making patterns before and during/after college.

The emergent theory was established based on initial, focused, axial, and theoretical codes. The codes used for the theory construction were displayed in Table 3 (without initial codes) and Appendix F (initial codes included). With regard to the frequency of responses, the words “the majority of”, “most”, and “many” were used for the codes endorsed by more than four participants of the each college (six participants) and post-college (six participants) group; “some” or “a few” for the codes supported by two or three participants. Since not every post-college participant talked about the events that had happened prior to or during college at length, when they did and if their narratives overlapped with those of the college participants, their comments were used as supporting evidence.
Table 3.

*Focused, Axial, and Theoretical Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical</th>
<th>Axial</th>
<th>Focused</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unplugged: During high school</td>
<td>Externally driven decision-making</td>
<td>Not knowing oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Using grades and scores as a major determinant for academic decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pursuing prestige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional shortcomings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-exploration, an unwelcome goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of guidance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A prelude to connection:</td>
<td>Change-provoking firsts</td>
<td>Making a self-motivated decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A transition between high school and college</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking (finally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College, at last!: A land of opportunity for path-makers</td>
<td>Privilege of being a college student</td>
<td>Having greater latitude and options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pruning through exploring &amp; experimenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Navigation rule: Reap what you sow</td>
<td>Carving one’s own way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A journey toward inner connection:</td>
<td>Dawn of awareness</td>
<td>Recognizing an issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for the authentic self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growing awareness and discomfort</td>
<td>Encountering a recurring issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dealing with a recurring issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alone time</td>
<td>Having alone time away from daily life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mulling over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tipping point</td>
<td>Encountering a critical moment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Taking action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An emerging sense of the authentic self</td>
<td>Getting closer to the authentic self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Working through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Into the new world</td>
<td>Tuning in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A journey toward outer connection:</td>
<td>Expanding through adversity</td>
<td>Lowering toward gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanding and docking</td>
<td></td>
<td>Connecting to others’ pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Connecting to something beyond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Docking</td>
<td>Seeking for an optimal contact point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Walking a fine line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A gemstone in the cutting &amp; polishing process*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychological refuge</td>
<td>Providing comfort and peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of spirituality: A source of peace and growth</td>
<td>Inner compass</td>
<td>Providing guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing reflection time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive mindset</td>
<td>Remaining optimistic and confident in the face of adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Growth-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Happiness-seeking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* in vivo code
Unplugged During High School

Korean young adults’ meaning making during high school was best understood as a time of being “Unplugged”. From the vantage point of their long journey toward connection, they were connected neither to the active inner search nor to the peaceful rendezvous with the outer world yet. They were not plugged in yet.

There was a general consensus among the college participants about their lives being not fully theirs during high school. They significantly lacked self-understanding because exploring their inner world was not wholeheartedly encouraged either at home or in school. Consequently, they were often cut out of major decision-making processes, and their parents made decisions for them. In particular, college participants’ stories about two academic decisions (i.e., choosing their academic track and college) demonstrated convincingly how much their meaning making was externally driven, not from within. Their self-exploration and self-initiated decision-making was encumbered by the Korean education system.

Externally driven decision-making. [Background Information] By the end of one’s freshman year in high school, Korean students are supposed to choose between two different sets of curriculums, under which they will study for the rest of their high school years: a humanities-focused track called moon-gwa in Korean and a mathematics-and-science-focused track called i-gwa. If students choose moon-gwa, they only learn introductory-level mathematics and natural sciences with no access to advanced-level classes. Likewise, those who end up with the i-gwa curriculum have no chance to deepen their knowledge beyond basic levels in the disciplines such as philosophy, literature, economics, political science,
history, and so forth even if they have a keen interest. Each track has different textbooks, different teachers, and even different classrooms; that is, it is a completely different world academically and physically. This dichotomous system allows no crossing-over. Moreover, once determined, it affects—in fact, limits—the range of majors or career options from which students can choose.

According to most of the college participants, they were not inspired or guided to consider what they liked, what they were good at, or what kind of life they wanted to live while in high school. With no or few clues about their aptitudes, interests, or dreams, they played a passive or no role in choosing their academic track relying heavily on their parents or other external factors. The patterns of choosing college—another important decision-making for Korean high school students—were not much different. The criteria for college selection seldom included their interests or dreams. They considered parents’ advice, grades and scores, and the prestige of school.

_Not knowing oneself._ All of the college participants indicated that choosing between two academic tracks was officially the first important decision they had to make in their lives. However, since they had not seriously thought about themselves before, they had little understanding based on which they would decide. Only Jae-eun—who made it clear from the beginning of the interview that she had been an anomaly in many ways for her entire life—said she had pondered over why she needed to go to college in the first place and what she wanted to study if she opted to go.
Young-sik disclosed his experience related to the decision-making on his academic track as follows:

I was a game junkie. Actually, I was a good player… When I was first told to pick between moon-gwa and i-gwa from school, I was dumbfounded. It hit me hard like a hammer to my head because I had never seriously thought about who I was, what I was interested in other than gaming, what I wanted to do in the future, those kinds of things before. Honestly, I didn’t care. I had only a vague thought of becoming a famous pro gamer some day… In the entire school, I was the only one who couldn’t really commit until the last minute. I just had no clue what to do. One day, I would say moon-gwa to my class teacher, and on the very next day, I would ask him to switch it to i-gwa. In fact, I changed my mind over ten times. You might not believe that, but if you see my documents, you’ll see. My teacher hated me for good reason. [Laugh]

**Listening to parents.** The majority of the college participants (and most of the post-college participants as well) stated that their parents’ opinions played a major role in their decision-making. As they had few clues about themselves and their future, they had no specific preference or alternative. It was, therefore, reasonable for them to listen to their parents who, they believed, had their best interest at heart. They also regarded it as natural for parents to advise them simply because they were their parents who had raised them. By and large, parents’ preferences reflected social formulas for living a comfortable life. And
despite the uncritical compliance with their parents’ suggestions or requests, participants did not show any indicators of serious internal or external conflict.

A-reum chose her academic track against her interest in mathematics because of her parents’ strong assertion. She said regretfully, “There was no me back then”, but she also said that she believed her parents would always make decisions for the sake of her wellbeing. Na-hyun applied to the college that her father really wanted her to enter although that was not one of her initial choices thinking, ‘I grew up eating and wearing what my parents had provided for me. They have a say in this decision-making.’ In a similar vein, Bo-young, Dae-jin, and Young-sik mentioned they had thought about reciprocating for what their parents had done for them somehow when choosing college.

The college participants showed the tendency to pay more attention to their parents’ needs and wants especially when their family was financially struggling. At first, Bo-young, Na-hyun, and Young-sik all hoped to have stable and respected careers as a prosecutor, lawyer, and doctor with the intention of easing their parents’ financial burdens and helping with their family situation. Among the post-college participants, In-seo compromised her dream to study at a prestigious institution and become a chemist for her financially stricken family by entering a cheap college.

**Using grades and scores as a major determinant for academic decision-making.**

Most of the college participants (and all of the post-college participants) mentioned that they chose their academic track based mainly on their grades even if what they wanted to do at college required choosing the other track. For example, Young-sik, who initially wanted to
be a doctor of oriental medicine and thus, was supposed to choose the mathematics-and-science-focused track, wound up with the humanities-focused track just because he was terrible at mathematics and science.

All of the college and post-college participants also confessed that their high school grades and college entrance exam scores served as prime—if not sole—determinants for their college application and selection. Jea-eun, who examined and followed her interest, was the lone exception. And she herself knew that she was a rare case in Korean society.

**Pursuing prestige.** It turned out that most of the college participants (and most of the post-college participants) had chosen their college based on its ranking and recognition. They readily gave up their interest (i.e., major) for the prestige of college; in the worst-case scenario, they thought they would transfer. For instance, Bo-young chose her current school even though she had been admitted to several programs in other schools—better tailored to her interest in becoming a fund manager—because the name value of those schools was lower. Furthermore, the majority of the participants (seven out of 12 participants) reported that they had spent one to two extra years after graduating from high school or quitting the college they had been attending in order to upgrade their schools. (see “A Transitional Period” in this chapter for more explanations of the Korean college entrance exam).

Prestige mattered in college selection because it was viewed as a starting point of getting a good job and eventually living a good life. Min-joon (post-college participant) stated, “I thought there were only three universities in Korea. I truly believed once I entered one of the top three schools, my life would be smooth sailing from then on.” Sung-jin (post-
college participant) also said he had studied very hard to get into a prestigious college in Seoul, land on a great job (preferably one of conglomerates such Samsung, Hyundai, and LG), and get recognized as a successful man.

**Institutional shortcomings.** The results showed that the Korean education system facilitated neither its students’ search for the true self nor well-informed decision-making. Most of the college participants (and some of the post-college participants) blamed the achievement-oriented, oppressive, and competitive school system. They also complained about their teachers who had not offered proper guidance for both self-understanding and the college application process.

**Self-exploration, an unwelcome goal.** Many college participants mentioned one thing that was expected and encouraged by their schools was to study hard and enter a good college. Young-sik recollected him having no presence at all in the classroom due to his poor academic performance. According to his observations—which were also supported by quite many other college and post-college participants, teachers paid more attention to those academically talented, and schools were obsessed with the numbers of the students they sent to prestigious colleges each year. In that atmosphere, it was unlikely that either schools or teachers would nurture their students’ self-exploration. Also, it was realistically impossible for some students to examine their inner worlds under their tight daily schedules. Looking back on her earlier school days, A-reum said:

I knew nothing back then. Most of all, I had no time to think about myself… I would go to school in the early morning and have both my lunch and dinner at school. As
soon as I finish my after-class self-study at school, I would go to private academies for more studies and come back home around 2:00 a.m. Then I would do my homework and go to bed. I rarely saw my father because he went to bed early and left for work early. My life had been that way since middle school, or maybe even a little bit earlier than that. There was no time for me to think about anything else other than grades and getting into a good college. I even had no time for boredom.

Although her life was considered to be somewhat on the extreme side, all of the participants had to stay at school for extra self-study after class till late at night. And when they went home, they watched online lectures or continued to study until they fell asleep. With most of their time and energy tied to school and study, they found it extremely difficult to think about themselves or their lives.

**Lack of guidance.** Although decision-making on colleges and majors as well as the academic track had considerable ripple effects on each individual’s life, almost all of the participants (both college and post-college) said that they had received neither sufficient information nor appropriate help from school. Young-sik expressed the frustration he experienced in the process of choosing his academic track saying, “If I had met nice teachers, even just one good helpful teacher, I might have thought of becoming a teacher.” Students might get lucky like Bo-young who was guided by her class teacher to pay more attention to her dream than grades, for which she feels extremely thankful until now. But, that was not the case of the rest of the participants of this study.
Especially students in non-Seoul areas tended to get less and inaccurate information. Min-joon (post-college participant) from a city remote from Seoul recounted his first discovery of special foreign language high schools on the very day of his college entrance exam; to his dismay, he found out all his college application strategies were wrong without taking the college application trend among those students from foreign language high schools into account. Not a single teacher had informed him of the existence of those schools.

In the absence of accurate and sufficient information and guidance, not a few of the college participants talked about having aspired to certain occupations influenced by characters from popular TV shows. It turned out nobody had actually pursued their fantasies for many different reasons, but they said they had seriously considered those options when choosing their academic track or colleges.

A Prelude to Connection: A Transition Between High School and College

[Background Information] In Korea, a unique transitional period exists between high school and college for those who decide to take the college entrance exam—the Korean version of SAT (K-SAT)—after graduating from high school. Korean students can take the test only once in their senior year of high school. And the test scores play a critical role in entering college. Therefore, quite many and a growing number of high school graduates go on to study one or more years to retake the exam and get into a better school (see the “Implications” section in chapter five for specific statistics). Some enroll in private institutions specially designed to prepare students for the test, and some study by themselves.
Seven out of 12 participants of the study underwent this transitional period; for four of them (Na-hyun, A-reum, Nan-hee, and Gi-hoon), one more test was enough, but three of them (Young-sik, Min-joon, and In-seo) needed two more. Although individual differences existed, the time after high school and before college provided a unique meaning making setting for each participant. For those few who did nothing but study, it was more like an extension of high school. However, for those who had the opportunity to examine themselves and their lives with fresh eyes away from their hectic high school life, it was a prelude to significant change and growth.

**Change-provoking firsts.** Those who went through this transitional period recalled it was not an easy time for them. They were not part of the formal education system any more. They had not jumped into the workforce yet. They were not adolescents any longer, for whom things were easily understood and forgiven. But, they were not viewed as adults with full ownership of one’s life either. In this twilight zone, the participants had various unprecedented experiences and grew from them.

**Making a self-motivated decision.** Some participants made the decision to take the K-SAT again almost immediately when they found out they earned disappointing scores. Some others needed a longer time until they made up their minds while attending a college, with which they were not quite happy. However, not a single participant said that they had made their decision because of their parents’ suggestion or coercion. Unlike previous academic decision-making, their decision was totally voluntary and self-motivated.
When the participants announced their decision to take another K-SAT to their parents, most of the parents respected and supported the decision; only Na-hyun and A-reum faced parental objection. However, the two once-obedient-good daughters actively persuaded their concerned and skeptical parents and were able to carry through their decision. A-reum even went on a hunger strike for several days because she desperately wanted a second chance.

**Thinking (finally).** During the transition, the participants had more flexible schedules and free time, so they could finally afford some time to think. They began to face the issues that they had not dealt with before such as their personalities, important values, or relationships. In the process, some encountered meaningful insights and gained a clearer understanding of themselves and their lives.

Young-sik studied alone for his second and third K-SAT at a public library. He fondly recollected his quiet after-lunch walks along a river, during which he had time to think. He learned so much about himself and how he wanted to live his life from those walks. When Na-hyun quit her college to prepare for her second K-SAT, she realized she had wanted to be a teacher or lawyer purely to rescue her family from economic hardship. And it suddenly dawned on her, ‘Nobody in the family has forced me to sacrifice. Then, why am I mortgaging my life for them?’ That realization made her think further of her excessive sense of responsibility for family and the relationship with her father. After much contemplation, she was able to reject undue responsibility as the oldest and smartest child in the family and made herself a promise that she would live her life, not someone else’s, from then on.
Gi-hoon (post-college participant) stated that he had met friends from disadvantaged households in smaller cities for the first time at his K-SAT prep academy. Since all of his high school friends including himself were from affluent households in Seoul, it was surprising to see there were so many people with fewer resources in the world. That experience made him not only become more appreciative of his family’s economic status but also consider how to live his life more meaningfully.

**Learning from hard time.** During this transitional period, the pressure to earn good scores was extremely high. But, anxiety and stress from the pressure were higher. Watching their friends savoring every bit of their time at college was painful while they were all cooped up inside a dark library or a crowded classroom of a K-SAT prep institution. It was their first official failure and first experience with adversity.

Nevertheless, many of the participants reported that they had had a chance to get to know themselves better during those tough times. As a high-performing student until high school, failing to enter a good college that she had been targeting was a terrible ordeal for In-seo (post-collarge participant). However, she soon realized she had been a self-conceited, arrogant, and lazy person, who did not work hard just counting on her high IQ. She finally began to see herself as who she was and even became able to lower herself in front of God, which she had longed for as a Christian. Some of the participants added that hard times had strengthened their muscles to persevere and raised self-confidence that they could do anything however difficult a situation might be. Young-sik said that he had been able to overcome his hardships—such as his mother’s fatal accident and nightmarish military
service—thanks to the relatively long transitional period and the lessons earned hard from those times.

**College, at Last! A Land of Opportunity for Path-Makers**

All of the college participants stated that there were distinctive differences between before and after entering college. Although the depth and breadth of the changes that they encountered at college varied, college was definitely a place in which they could explore, experiment, and grow. In fact, college was meant to be the land of endless possibilities and potential for everybody, but the college participants believed it was those who took initiative and actively made their paths who thrived at college.

**Privilege of being a college student.** As benefits of being a college student, most of the college participants mentioned a) greater latitude and options and b) opportunities to narrow their interests through exploration and experiment. Jae-eun’s description about her overall college experience provided a general idea of what it would be like to be a college student in Korea:

Once you enter college, and even more so if you are admitted to a prestigious school, you are finally allowed to release all the repressed desires and emotions from high school. Theoretically, you can do whatever you want until you find a job. You can take any course that draws your attention. In my case, I really enjoyed my horticulture class, which had nothing do with my major. And if you want, you can double major or minor in almost any discipline. Actually, I’ve never thought that I will be double
majoring in chemistry. [Laugh] There are also diverse cultural exchange programs you can participate in. I went to Mongolia as part of my cultural exchange activity. You can apply for overseas volunteering programs as well. There are indeed so many interesting opportunities for college students… I don’t think I would’ve had the luxury to travel Europe for two full months if I had not been a full-time college student. And if I hadn’t gone to Europe, I would’ve never thought about pursuing my graduate studies in Europe or even living there. As a college student, sometimes you find yourself doing what you’ve never dreamed of you doing before.

**Having greater latitude and options.** For most of the participants (both college and post-college), entering college meant clearing one of the most challenging and important life missions. When they actually became a college student, they were given explicit or tacit permission to do as they pleased by their parents and society. According to Na-hyun, for example, her father officially pronounced that she could do whatever she wanted to do after she had gotten into one of the top universities in Korea. Min-joon’s (post-college participant) parents let him decide literally everything since college.

Upon entering college, Korean young adults were given various options and the freedom to decide as well. For someone like A-reum, to whom achieving financial independence from her parents was critical, working part time became a critical aspect of her college life. Even though she had to sacrifice her social life for that, it was clearly her choice, and she was happy with the way her college life had turned out. In contrast, Young-sik spent his first two years fully focusing on making friends and social connections; during those
times, he mostly drank and hung out with friends neglecting his studies of his own volition.
Na-hyun devoted most of her college life to her club activities, and she believed joining the club that published a quarterly school magazine was one of the best decisions that she had ever made.

**Pruning through exploring and experimenting.** Many college participants saw exploration and experiment as the right and duty of being a college student. Since almost any trial and error was tolerated while they were in college, they took advantage of the status of being a college student and attempted to have as many experiences as possible. Also, they believed that it was their task to figure out what they really wanted to do before going into the real world. And pruning the unwanted or unneeded away through ongoing search and action was considered as the best way to accomplish their task. Except for Bo-young, who was satisfied with her major from the beginning and stuck to it without further searching or meandering and Dae-jin, who was not in eager pursuit of his true interests, the rest of the college participants did not cease their exploration and experimentation until they found what they really liked.

**Navigation rule: Reap what you sow.** The majority of the college participants strived to carve their own ways while making most of the resources that their colleges had to offer. As a guideline worth remembering for a fulfilling college life, they presented the idea of so-called “reap what you sow”; in other words, they believed that nothing would happen at college unless they made it happen.
Carving one’s own way. Since college students had greater latitude than before, and few forced them to do things against their will, their choices and decisions had a direct impact on outcomes. Consequently, the overall quality of college life was greatly influenced by each individual’s genuine and strenuous effort to create his or her own unique path. Most of the college participants stated that they had acted on their own initiative and led a fairly fruitful college life.

Na-hyun, in her first semester, was looking for an intellectual community in which she could share her concerns and ideas. When she learned opportunities for seminars and academic affiliation that her department provided fell seriously short of her expectations, she actively searched for alternatives and joined her current club. She truly believed that she had become a better person with better thoughts thanks to her club experience. She said, “It is no exaggeration to say that about 70%, maybe more, of the current me are shaped by the wide variety of club activities that I’ve gotten involved in.” Jae-eun, who was full of curiosity and energy, stated she had enjoyed her college life to the fullest trying out everything that had appealed to her. As a result, she felt like her personal universe had expanded enormously and become filled with diverse colors. On the contrary, Dae-jin who had not lived fiercely exploring and experimenting his possibilities and potentials expressed great anxiety and regrets.

A Journey Toward Inner Connection: Searching for the Authentic Self

Continuous endeavors to connect to the authentic self summed up Korean young adults’ meaning making development during college. Their inner searches to find out who
they really were, what they valued, and how they wanted to relate to people around them, started with the awareness that “something” was not quite right. That “something” was different from individual to individual but kept occurring until it was addressed properly on mature reflection. And the entire process of recognizing, grappling with, and dealing with one’s recurrent issues turned out to nurture each individual’s inner search for authenticity.

**Dawn of awareness.** Each participant had a particular issue that kept bothering him or her, and the recognition of the issue emerged at some point in college. As aforementioned, both college and post-college participants were not given much time and encouragement for self-exploration before college so that little inner conflict was experienced. At college, on the other hand, diverse stimuli and freedom provoked them to look into their inner states and attend to personal issues. And the awareness of their issues accompanied by nagging discomfort was the starting point of their grueling journey toward the authentic self.

**Recognizing an issue.** The majority of the college participants shared their experience in which they felt something was not quite right with them. They said they had sensed their problems almost immediately after entering college. The issues that bothered each participant included self-esteem, personality, identity, and relationships.

Bo-young heard so many times from her friends that she had become very feminine after starting dating her first boyfriend. In fact, she was an extremely mischievous tomboy and typically perceived as a strong, independent, and blunt individual. Therefore, “feminine” was the least likely word that her friends would choose to describe her. However, she herself was aware of the extremely tender and emotional side of her, which she had rarely revealed
to other people, even to herself. Bombarded with people’s comments on her growing femininity, Bo-young realized that there was the serious gap between the images that she chose to present to others and the hidden parts inside of her.

Na-hyun also had her moment of “something was wrong”. When she entered a teachers college according to her father’s practical suggestion (e.g., cheap tuition and good job prospects), she immediately noticed she was in the wrong place with the wrong crowd. In particular, since she did not perceive herself as an attractive woman, she got extremely offended by the sights of male senior students philandering with pretty freshmen. Furthermore, she felt inadequate and inferior whenever she saw senior students passing judgment on female students with no dating experience or no boyfriend. Although she declared that she wanted to quit the school in order to enter a bigger and better school and have a more broad learning experience, she knew deep down that her low self-esteem as a woman got stirred up, and it strongly motivated her to get into a new school and start over.

Growing awareness and discomfort. As time passed, the college participants repeatedly found themselves undergoing similar experiences that provoked the thoughts and feelings of “something was wrong”. Their awareness and discomfort around their issues increased accordingly. Nevertheless, the ways they addressed their issues had not dramatically changed yet.

Encountering a recurring issue. Because each individual’s issue had not been properly tackled yet, the college participants encountered the fundamentally identical issue over and over despite their awareness: only a set of variations on the same theme. Going
through a series of events linked to the unsolved issue identified earlier, the college participants often felt frustrated. At the same time, they were getting a better picture of their vulnerable areas as they gave more thought to them knowingly or unknowingly.

As soon as A-reum became a college student, she found out she was both interested in and talented at disciplines under the roof of mathematics and natural sciences. Reflecting on the decision-making on her academic track—she had chosen the humanities track due to her parents’ strong suggestion despite her love toward mathematics, she had an epiphany that she might have been too dependent on her parents. In addition, whenever she had to hurry home in the middle of having a great chat with her friends or doing a group project, she asked herself whether her life had been too tightly controlled by her parents’ rules; she still had a curfew and was not allowed to sleep out. When she brought up the idea of becoming a physical education teacher—A-reum was very athletic as well—to her mother, her mother opposed the idea in that it was not a desirable job for women. A-reum retracted her idea immediately. Her mother, however, supported the idea of her becoming a teacher. As her search for the right job and career for herself went on, she realized she had never seriously asked herself why she wanted to be a teacher in the first place; it was her mother’s unrealized dream but not her passion. More similar incidents ensued. The issue of parental dependency stalked her for most of her college years.

*Dealing with a recurring issue.* Most of the college participants were haunted by recurrent issues and ensuing agitation, but how they dealt with their issues was not identical. A-reum took a series of baby steps to ameliorate her dependency issue whereas the rest of the
college participants remained basically the same avoiding the direct confrontation with their problems and clinging to their old patterns. It took the college participants some time until they actually took actions.

A-reum made continuous efforts for her psychological weaning. For instance, she plotted an overseas trip with her friend who also had very conservative and strict parents, and when the plan was detected by her furious parents, she did not back off; instead, she mustered her courage and advanced to execute her initial plan. In addition, she asked her parents to lift her curfew. Furthermore, she suggested a compromise solution of her becoming a math teacher combining her interest in the subject with her mother’s want. Not all of her attempts were well received by her parents. She did not always defy her parents either; from time to time, she would return to the old good doing-whatever-you-tell-me-to daughter. Overall and in the long run, however, she was laying foundations for her future independence.

Dae-jin’s interpersonal struggle had a long history. Due to frequent moves, he had hard times building long-lasting friendships throughout his school days; adding insult to injury, he got badly beaten by his friends in his circle while in high school. Despite his keen awareness and agony over relationships, the problem had persisted until he joined the army when he finally confronted the issue and actually did something about it.

Na-hyun also postponed dealing with her self-esteem issue as a woman because it was too painful to confront. She had never openly talked about the issue with anyone. In fact, she deliberately avoided gatherings with her friends from the same department out of the fear
that somebody might bring up the topic (i.e., dating, one of the most common bar-talk topics among Korean college students) and ask her about her dating history, which was nonexistent. She further confessed that one of the reasons she stayed so close to her club members was because they never asked invasive questions such as dating; as journalists-to-be, all of the club members were progressive and unconventional thinkers, so they were well aware that talking about boyfriends or girlfriends might offend somebody who did not have one or had a different sexual orientation.

**Alone time.** The majority of the college participants said they had had some type of alone time (at least once)—whether it was voluntarily sought after or given—devoted to serious thinking. During the time alone away from their routines, they had a chance to think about themselves and their lives in general as well as particular issues. Most of them reported that their serious alone time had happened during college or right before college; only Jae-eun said that as a sixth grader, she had grappled with all the existential questions such as “Who am I?” “Where did I come from?” “Why am I living?” “How was this world born?” And “What comes after death?”

**Having alone time away from daily life.** Each participant had a considerable amount of quiet alone time. A key element of their alone time was distancing themselves from their daily lives: that is, thinking away from their every day routines either physically or psychologically or both. Regarding the importance of taking time to reflect away from what one was familiar with, Young-sik stated:
I believe I know myself pretty well. And I credit the period during which I was preparing my second and third college entrance exam for that. Since I was studying alone instead of attending a private institution and rarely hung out with friends, I had a plenty of time alone. I think having the time to think quietly away from hectic life or others’ perceptions is critical for personal growth. For men, military service is that kind of time because we are completely shut off from our significant others and acquaintances and left alone all by ourselves. We lose most of our contacts and soon figure out how shallow and futile our relationships have been. Two years is a long enough time for thinking. My army experience was excruciating, but I learned things I could’ve not learned if I had been in the civilian world.

[Background Information] All Korean males aged between 18 and 35 must join the army. The length of service varies from 21 to 36 months depending on military branches. Most male college students go into the army after their first or second year in college.

In fact, all the male participants (including the post-college male participants) unanimously pointed out their two-to-three-years military service time as their personal time-out from thought-numbing daily lives. The other participants’ alone time involved taking a semester or a year off (Dea-jin, Na-hyun, Jae-eun, and Bo-young), travelling abroad (A-reum and Jae-eun), hospitalization (A-reum), participation in group therapy and follow-up reflection (Na-hyun), and living alone for the first time (Young-sik, Na-hyun)/having one’s own room for the first time (Na-hyun).
Mulling over. Something meaningful happened in silence and contemplation. A chunk of quiet alone time allowed the college participants to pay close attention to their concerns and issues. And by mulling over personally significant issues, the college participants became able to view things from different perspectives and gained a deeper understanding of themselves, their challenges, and their lives.

Right before and after Young-sik enlisted in the army, he had two traumatic experiences that caused him to lose purpose in life and question human nature: his mother’s life-threatening injuries after being hit by a car and appalling human rights abuses in a boot camp. After prolonged suffering, he began to brood over why it had been so difficult for him to get over and go back to normal. Young-sik recalled:

Writing was my only and ultimate comfort, but it didn’t work at that time. Nothing helped me shake off the transience and futility of life that I felt going through the traumas… I was wondering why some people could pass through events as equally traumatic as the ones that I had experienced unscathed, and why I couldn’t. After due reflection, I arrived at the idea that I might be too introverted and timid. It seemed that digging and ruminating too much were the main causes of my deep black bottomless depression. I thought my life could have been much easier and lighter if I had been more expressive, flexible, and laid back. I also thought if I had been bolder, I wouldn’t have collapsed the way I had in the face of hard times. Finally, I concluded I needed to balance between introversion and extroversion to lift the seemingly never-ending burden from my life.
**Tipping point.** After growing awareness, frustration, and serious reflection, many college participants were finally faced with a tipping point, a moment of “no more”. Even though they were aware of their vulnerable spots and had made several attempts to resolve their issues, without noticeable changes, they still appeared to be maintaining status quo on the surface. When they reached a tipping point, however, they actively sought solutions and took actions aimed for change.

**Encountering a critical moment.** When the college participants reached a critical threshold and were about to cross it, they thought, “I’ve had enough of this!” “It’s not going to work this way any longer!” Or “I need to do something about it.” Although they had already identified the source of their discontent, there was a sense of urgency in this watershed moment. Only Bo-young had not shown the sign of a tipping point despite the growing awareness of her issue.

After having put her self-esteem issue aside for a long time, Na-hyun was finally confronting a critical moment for change. She said:

Because of my childhood experiences, I wasn’t confident about my looks. That was my complex. I had never let it show, but I believed there was a causal relationship between my appearance and zero dating experience that surpassed a mere correlation. I got hurt numerous times when people asked me if I had a boyfriend assuming I must have been in a relationship at least once…
One day, I went to our clubroom. This is when I was taking a semester off. It was either a mid-term or final exam period, so nobody was there. I sat on the couch in the clubroom, picked up a photo album, which happened to be near the couch, and started to flip it through. There, I found a photo of a woman, who was presumed to be the girlfriend of the male senior club member that I had a secret crush on. She was so pretty, and they looked like a perfect match for each other. Suddenly, I was overcome with complicated feelings. At the very moment, I thought, ‘If I don’t solve this problem, I’ll suffer forever. I’ve got to fix this to stop my pain…’

**Taking action.** Once the college participants realized they needed to do something urgently about their issues, they were not on-lookers any more. Without hesitation, they set up a tangible action plan and set out to make real changes. In addition, many college participants reported that their initial action for change had led to a chain reaction of positive changes so that they had been able to learn and grow further in the wake of the first action.

As Na-hyun felt the urge to act promptly, she decided to participate in group therapy designed to help college students with relationship issues. Although she was not sure if she could actually share her story in front of strangers, she decided to try; and she managed to confide her complex to group members in the last session. She could not resolve her issue with one courageous talk, but she learned that things could be healed as long as they could be talked about. She also realized from her group members’ feedback that people did not apply strict standards to others as much as one did to oneself.
After the group experience, Na-hyun became able to talk with some close friends about her concerns on physical attractiveness and dating. As she opened up to more people and more often, one of her friends advised that nothing would happen unless she made active efforts (e.g., asking a guy out for lunch or coffee first if really interested). Although she did not follow her friend’s suggestion, she thought she would not at least blow a chance given to her. That was why she decided to go on her first blind date. During the date, she was so nervous that she could not talk and even eat. After the nerve-wracking first date, she realized dating involved numerous times of practice and experience, which led her to accept the next invitation for a blind date. She met her current boyfriend from that date.

Dae-jin’s move was quite surprising given the lingering fear and passivity in interacting with strangers stemmed from his experience of being bullied in high school. He talked about his tipping point and subsequent actions as follows:

I didn’t talk with anybody for the first three to four months in the army. Because I was afraid… What if I say something, and somebody nitpicks? What if they don’t like the way I say things or the way I look at them? You never know what would offend or provoke people. So, I chose to be low key… One day, I was summoned to a commissioned officer’s office. There, I was told that they had been closely watching me as a soldier at risk because I was always alone, sighed a lot, often stared into empty space, and talked to nobody. I was shell-shocked to learn how people could perceive things differently whatever your true intention might be. I had never thought in a million years that somebody would see me as a suicidal or dangerous person.
I still had more than one and a half years to go. I felt I needed to change both my mind and attitude immediately. If I didn’t change or couldn’t change myself in that kind of urgent situation, I thought I wouldn’t be able to do anything necessary or meaningful for myself for the rest of my life. So, I chose to change. The first thing that I tried was to ask people who were smoking outside if I could join them. People seemed dumbfounded at first as if they had never thought I could talk. [Laugh] Then, I initiated conversations with senior soldiers who looked less intimidating. As I tried one thing after another, I realized it wasn’t that scary. I thought I would die at first, but it wasn’t that bad. Just like the old saying, “Well begun is half done”, once I started, the next step was easy. Sometimes, I bought snacks from the PX and shared them with soldiers in the same barracks. People loved it! I watched TV with my fellow soldiers and even shared personal stories. After all, I, once branded as a soldier at risk, was able to finish my service with no more worried looks or warnings.

Both Na-hyun and Dae-jin said that they were very proud of themselves for leading such positive transformation. They also talked about increased confidence about living a better life in general, not to mention addressing their personal issues. Especially, Na-hyun stated in detail that through the conscious choices she had made after her group experience, she had realized how much energy she had been wasting hiding or repressing her inferiority. Now that she could utilize the unfettered energy for other important parts of her life in a more productive way, she felt liberated, motivated, and happy.
An emerging sense of authenticity. Working on their signature issues, most of the college participants not only gained a better understanding and control over their issues but also got closer to the essence of who they were and what they wanted in life. In addition, as they got closer to their authentic selves, they gained a better sense of direction in their lives. Their search and struggle toward the authentic self continued throughout their college years.

Getting closer to the authentic self. Each participant’s problem-solving process—including noticing, paying attention, mulling over, and taking action—provided clues for important questions such as what kind of person they wanted to become, what kind of work they wanted to do, what kind of relationships they wanted to build and nourish, and what kind of role they wanted to play in bigger communities. As a result, the college participants developed a broader and deeper understanding of their true identity, core values, and cherished relationships.

As soon as Young-sik made the resolution to balance his personality disproportionately tilted inward (mostly gloomy side) with more active and positive attitudes, he enrolled himself in a speech institute. He had grown up in a small town where learning public speech was unheard-of. Moreover, he had avoided all the classes that required presentations. Therefore, it was extremely challenging at first for him to talk in front of people.

Apart from speech practice, Young-sik made questions, went out into the street, and nerved himself to interview strangers. He also learned how to read the Tarot cards in an endeavor to mix with people more easily. Due to the relentless self-training, he was able to
switch off his negative and gloomy thoughts and became jollier, brighter, and more audacious. Furthermore, searching for useful training methods and materials on the Internet, he discovered that many people were having similar issues to his or suffering from various social phobias.

To his surprise, it turned out that Young-sik actually loved talking in front of and with people; what was more, he was good at it. He competed in many speech contests and received great feedback from experts. One of his speeches was posted on YouTube as a highlight of a TV discussion show. And he became a president of an intercollegiate speech club. Most of all, he found it fascinating and rewarding to elicit empathy from people and inspire them with his speech. Since he was extremely interested in helping people—especially adolescents living hardship-ridden lives, he started to think of becoming a broadcast journalist who could help those neglected in the society while presenting news in front of people and the camera. Before the speech training he had not had any particular plan for his future and vaguely thought about taking a bar exam, which his parents had wanted for him. Describing his newly found passion, he said, “It was a totally novel experience for me just like stepping into the unknown world. But, this is the work that makes me happy. And I believe I can make other people happy only when I do what makes me happy.”

Working through. The majority of the college participants had found breakthroughs in tackling their issues and had gotten closer to their authentic selves. Nevertheless, they often had to deal with their previous ways of being, believing, and relating because old issues tenaciously reappeared, and more complicated issues transpired. Fortunately, they were well
aware that they were still works in progress and thus, needed to continue to work on their issues and move toward their authenticity.

A-reum had made tremendous strides in making her own decisions independently from her parents. She even chose her career against her parents’ wishes: she decided to get a job in a company instead of becoming a teacher. In the process, she learned the importance of questioning what she had taken for granted and listening to what her heart had to say. She became an expert in negotiating with her parents and learned to voice her opinions. All in all, she had turned from a blind follower of her parents into a designer of her own life. Accordingly, her priority had changed from family to finding out what made her truly happy and pursuing that.

However, things started to regress when she started dating recently. She found herself swayed by her parents’ wants and expectations again. Her over-worried parents revived the curfew (and she abided by it) and interrupted her dates with numerous calls (she got irritated but had not taken any action yet). She had been in the relationship for only a few months, but her mother already began to talk about her wish list for the perfect son-in-law material; mostly external conditions. A-reum was fed up with being reminded of the list over and over. At the same time, she felt pressure because everybody in her family could be affected by her decision on this particular matter. The idea that she had felt quite confident about leading an independent life before this incident frustrated her. Finally, she realized that she needed to explore what her own expectations were for a good partner and what she valued in relationships. She also felt the need to rethink how to respond to her parents’ expectations.
Young-sik likened his meaning-making journey during his college years to a frog living in a deep well coming out toward the bigger world; according to him, the frog could make it to the world outside of his well after numerous jumps and falls, not one big leap. Although Na-hyun had gained confidence about her identity as a woman, she still found herself dubious about people’s genuineness whenever she received compliments about her appearance; she thought either those compliments were the praises for her youth not her physical beauty or people were just being nice to her. Similarly, Dea-jin, who had been full of confidence in terms of getting along with people, relapsed into his old timid and passive interpersonal patterns, especially with girls, not too long after he had been discharged from his military service.

While her fellow participants were busy talking about their continuous struggle with personal issues, Jae-eun, who had had her basic searching for the authentic self done early on, talked more about how to live happily balancing what she wanted and valued in life with the demands of reality and what others—particularly her significant others—valued. In fact, that was the main focus of the post-college participants’ meaning making development, which is addressed below in great detail.

A Journey Toward Outer Connection: Expanding and Docking

The centerpiece of Korean young adults’ meaning making during college was finding out who they were, what they valued, and how they wanted to relate to others: that is, connecting with their authentic selves. Compared to the previous inward searching and connection, their after-college journey was facing outward. The post-college participants not
only concerned themselves with connecting their authentic inner world to the outer world in a harmonious way but also expressed an added interest in others’ pain and wellbeing beyond their own wellbeing as well as something beyond their being.

**Into the new world.** After-college life was a totally different world. While in college, the college participants were allowed to explore and experiment as much as they wished. They had various privileges and options and felt well protected as if they were wearing a bulletproof vest (the expression Dae-jin used in his interview). On the other hand, the post-college participants were thrown into the new world unprepared and with no safety net. When they went into the world—full of new tasks and roles including work, parenthood, and partnership, they could not remain as free roamers any longer. As agents of important domains of life, they learned to tune in and adapt to the new world.

**Tuning in.** All of the post-college participants stated they had gone through new developmental tasks and life changes such as work, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, or childcare after graduating from college. Each task imposed different challenges on each participant. And each participant adjusted to their new reality in their own ways and at their own paces.

Until settling down as a businessman, Min-joon spent his late 20s and almost entire 30s in search of the right career for him, and Sung-jin changed his jobs several times for a better fit. While Hae-sun had a painful pregnancy because of her baby’s birth defects, Nan-hee struggled as a parent of two. Gi-hoon, as a newly wed, had a rough start due to cultural differences between his family (collectivistic) and his wife’s family (individualistic). Some
participants’ struggles seemed longer, more bitter, and still ongoing, but all of the participants strived to find their own ways to handle their new tasks and roles.

Many post-college participants said marriage was a game changer. Min-joon—who had refused to embrace another human being in his life (even if that was his girlfriend of 13 years) until his life stabilized financially—mentioned he became a more responsible and considerate person after marriage. Gi-hoon also reported major axes of his life had significantly changed since he became a father. All of the female participants identified getting married and becoming a mom as the most significant experience in their lives whether it had just happened to them or they had made it happen for themselves; and whether they were working outside or inside the home. Although they pointed out marriage and motherhood as their most critical experiences in life for different reasons, their eagerness and effort to adapt to their new realities—new ways of being, believing, and relating—were not much different from each other.

When In-seo, who called the after-marriage era the second act of her life, was confronted with her new life as a mom and a spouse, she immediately felt the need to accommodate it wisely. She explained her perception of the changed reality after wedding vows and her effort to adapt as a mom and a wife as follows:

Shortly after I got married, I knew I was put in a totally different situation. I found there were so many things or parts of marital life that I had no control over but to just give in or change myself. If you don’t change or adjust yourself to your new reality, things get only harder to bear. Let’s say, you have babies and want them to go to bed
at 9:00 p.m. and get up at 6:00 a.m. That’ll rarely happen because babies often make their own schedules. And you soon learn your rules are not always right and do not work for everybody. Same with your husband! Even if you dated long enough and knew each other very well before getting married, you’ll easily find yourselves get into bitter fights over nothing. If you don’t want to live like that for the rest of your life, you need to learn to step back and listen for what your spouse wants.

During their long courtship, it was in fact In-seo’s husband (then-boyfriend) who always gave in and let her do things her way. She even made one of her sisters-in-law (then her boyfriend’s oldest sister) worry because she looked like a person with too much self-love and self-righteousness and thus, not ready for mature partnership and parenthood. Thus, it was quite a drastic change for her to become a negotiable partner and an understanding caregiver after marriage.

**Expanding through adversity.** All of the post-college participants reported that they had encountered some type of adversities; in many cases, those adversities came as part of new life tasks and roles. Although adversities overwhelmed the post-college participants and wore them out at times, they were the main source of growth and maturity. Specifically, in the face of adversities, the post-college participants learned to be humble, thankful, and free from conventional values. In addition, they became able to relate to other’s pain and the shared human conditions (i.e., being imperfect and vulnerable) better and became more compassionate toward others’ lives. Furthermore, they got either interested or deeply involved in faith or spirituality.
Adversities did not necessarily come after college. Although many post-college participants shared their hardships that happened after college—and it seemed more likely to have more or crueler adversities after college when life got more complicated and hard to control, some mentioned their early visitors; for example, the death of his sister with cerebral palsy was one of the most crucial events in Gi-hoon’s life, which taught him to lead a life of modesty, gratitude and service, and it occurred while he was still in high school. However, it was often the case that those who had earlier challenges would discover their meanings later or add new meanings over time. Also, when early ordeals were combined with after-college adversities, they seemed to create a synergy effect and reinforced positive life lessons.

**Lowering toward gratitude.** When faced with adversities, all of the post-college participants became aware, at different levels, that life could not be perfectly controlled. Although they could not see the silver linings behind their adversities while in their grips, they learned to be more humble and appreciative of their life as they processed those unexpected and sometimes unbearable events that happened to them. Furthermore, as they realized there were so many things, even trivial ones, for which they should feel blessed, they were able to free themselves from social standards for success and happiness, which often made them constantly and ungratefully crave for more and better.

Hae-sun’s hardship started when she was four months pregnant:

On one of my regular check-up days, my doctor told me that my baby had congenital heart defects… My pregnancy soon turned from sheer bliss into a horrible nightmare. After excruciating nights, buckets of tears, and endless research, I made the executive
decision to give birth while my other family members were trying to dissuade me from doing it… Two days after my boy was born, he received his first surgery. And then ten months later, he had another surgery. Now he is fine but might need a couple of more surgeries when he grows up… Going through all this, especially watching my son in great pain was a heart-wrenching but unbelievably humbling experience.

When I just got pregnant, I had my own expectations for my son. I was an ambitious mom-to-be, so I set the bar high. But, after having faced with the reality in which I had to decide whether to abort the baby or not, I just want my son to live a normal life… you know, just get married to a nice girl and live a happy life. [Cry] Just ordinary… healthy… That’ll be enough. I’m so thankful that he is healthy now.

I was a greedy person. I wanted to become richer, prettier, and more successful all the time. But, it’s all gone now. Well, almost… [Smile] I just want to live a simple and healthy life with people close to me. Since that mindset was set in motion, things have changed. I used to try very hard to stand out among my colleagues. Also, I tended to fly into a rage if someone infringed my rights in the workplace. Those things do not feel that important anymore… I didn’t like people. I kind of kept this to myself because people might think I am a psychopath. [Laugh] I made friends because I needed their company and solace. But now, I like people. Whoever it may be… I really do… I think I have become more easygoing and warmer and nicer to other people.
Gi-hoon also went through a similar process. A couple of years ago, he was kept in bed for seven to eight months physically and psychologically recuperating from a series of misfortunes that happened to himself and his significant others during the course of one year. First of all, he underwent reoperation as a result of medical malpractice; he was in severe pain, had ringing in ears, and lost a lot of weight. Then, his mother lost sight in one eye due to hypertension. His wife’s miscarriage followed. In the face of insurmountable pain and stress, he could neither do anything to make the situations better nor find anything positive from the situations although he was, by and large, a confident and grateful person. Fortunately, at the end of the long dark tunnel, he was able to view his life with awe and gratitude again. He was thankful that his mother could still see, and his wife was well and near him. Also, he was appreciative of his reclaimed health and bodily ableness. Most of all, he realized family and health were more precious than anything else (e.g., success or promotion).

**Connecting to others’ pain.** The realization of how small and insignificant human beings were led most of the post-college participants to become modest, content with what they already had, and free from chasing after external values. It also enabled them to better understand the shared human conditions that all humans were imperfect with limited abilities. This understanding then helped them relate to others’ pain in more empathetic fashion. And compassion toward other’s hardships inspired them to incorporate helping others (at least the idea of it) into their lives.
Gi-hoon thought that humans were vulnerable creatures in that we were not ultimately free from death just like his older sister had not been able to escape from it. Witnessing his sister’s tough life and unavoidable death, he had promised himself that he would live a life of sharing and caring; to his eyes, all humans including himself were suffering only in different forms. When he heard his high school friend/coworker died (known as an accident yet assumed as a suicide), he was guilt-ridden because he knew his friend was struggling at work just as he had struggled during high school. Gi-hoon was the only friend who would talk or listen to the deceased back in high school, but he failed to continue to hold out a helping hand to his friend while working at the same company. That friend’s death prompted him to introduce a counseling system to the company for the maladjusted or those in need of help in general. Moreover, he deliberately made times to personally—clearly, it was not part of his regular duties at work—meet his colleagues with concerns and worries. Given the fact that he had seldom made appointments with people over dinner or after-work drinks before the incident, it was a meaningful change to him.

Although not all of the participants plunged into action like Gi-hoon did, most of the post-college participants (except for Min-joon and Sung-jin) described how they had become more attentive to others’ misfortune or wellbeing. For instance, after her unfathomably neglected and abusive childhood and adolescence, Nan-hee developed a keen interest in both helping adolescents who had grown up in dysfunctional households and educating parents, especially mothers. She emphasized helping was not unilaterally giving: it was mutual. She said, “When I teach kids at church, I give them help, but they also help me. Likewise, God
sent me my husband to help me, but I believe my husband needs me as well because I have what he doesn’t have. We all need help.”

**Connecting to something beyond.** All post-college participants’ narratives of hardships contained spiritual elements such as (deeper) connection to God, religious/spiritual teachings, or religious practice. In the face of adversities, some began to have an interest in spiritual quest, some actively sought spiritual help, and some deepened their religious faith. In the absence of these events, there was at least the felt need for spiritual comfort.

Growing up, Nan-hee was sexually harassed by her father and habitually beaten by her brothers. Her mother was absent not only when she desperately needed her protection but also for every day interactions. When she herself became a mother of two, she was devastated to find out what a violent parent she turned out to be. She said:

All I could do was yelling, screaming, crying and beating. I was awfully sorry to my kids. At the same time, it was extremely painful to confront the violent side of me as a victim of violence myself and watch my kids growing up in a violent, crumbling family… I had had a tough life and begged God for help so many times. But, I had never been that desperate before. It almost felt like I was dying. I didn’t know what to do. I was too distraught to focus on praying or reading the Bible. So, I left the online sermons on all day regardless of whether I understood them or not. Those horrifying days lasted until my second son turned one.
One day, out of the blue, I felt this incredible peace of mind. I could tell it was totally different from simply feeling good when we ate good food or wore nice clothes. And I felt so relaxed for no reason. It was an odd feeling, I must say. And it didn’t go away for almost three months… I had no doubt that peace of mind was given by God. I even felt him saying, “Nan-hee! You can’t see me, but I’m here! I am here right with you!” That was my first encounter with God.

Gi-hoon believed that humans needed spirituality in order to complement our limited abilities. In fact, he received great help from a mind training practice based on Buddhist teachings when he was physically and mentally drained and could not do anything. Hae-sun also tapped into Buddhist teachings whenever she had to process difficult situations. She firmly believed that her current life was a necessary corollary of her past including previous lives. Accordingly, she humbly accepted her present (even adversities) and made conscious choices in such a way that they would create good karma. Both Min-joon and Sung-jin mentioned that they had actually relied on or considered relying on religion when life was not nice to them although their resort to spirituality was merely a means to getting what they wanted (e.g., psychological comfort), not the end itself.

**Fine-tuning.** Undergoing major role changes and adversities, the post-college participants had gotten in closer touch with their authenticity. They acknowledged that both knowing who they truly were and what they really wanted in life and living accordingly despite difficulties were important. However, most of the post-college participants believed that taking reality and others’ wellbeing into consideration when making decisions—without
seriously neglecting or sacrificing their own authenticity and wellbeing—was a key to a happy fulfilling life. In fact, many post-college participants, unlike the college participants, reported that they had spent quite a lot of time contemplating how to coordinate their authentic inner world with outer world’s expectations and demands.

Seeking for an optimal contact point. Many post-college participants tried to find an optimal contact point between their authentic world and the outer world. Although the “optimal” point is innately subjective and contextual, most of the post-college participants reported they had adjusted their wants to accommodate realistic factors or significant others’ expectations rather than clinging to their desires. Also, when they were in the search for an optimal contact point, they strived to assess their situation as objectively as possible without getting blinded by personal desires or buried under external pressures.

In-seo briefly shared her struggle in finding a peaceful contact point between her too strong personal principles and reality. She stated:

Many people say that not knowing who they are is a problem. I agree. Those who don’t know themselves very well may be more likely to drift along through their lives. But, ironically, in my case, having a strong sense of myself has been a cause for concern. Since I have a tendency to adhere too tightly to the principles that I believe are right, it’s often difficult for me to embrace reality or people that deviate from my principles... So, negotiating with reality or getting along with reality has been my constant struggle. What’s the use of having all the good qualities and ideas inside of me, if I cannot dissolve them in reality and do something meaningful with them?
Along with her effort to balance her authenticity and reality, she was also weighing her desire to work against her role as a mom. Although she was still wrestling, her search for the optimal contact point between her wants and her kids’ needs and wellbeing seemed to be on the right track. She said:

Although I voluntarily chose the current life as a stay-at-home mom, sometimes I feel like working outside the home. I think I will do well. I’m not saying I am unhappy with my life now, but people tend to have curiosity about the untraveled path, don’t we all?... Just like many other moms, I thought I would be able to work once my kids were in school. But, it seems like there is no end to it. [Laugh] I have kind of accepted the reality that my kids still need me. But, I keep on thinking about “How long does this need to be this way?” And “How do I want to live my life?” Even If I have to stay longer or even forever at home, I want to be happy with my choice and be able to find meanings in it.

Gi-hoon stated that he had been a coordinator for a long time; he actually used the English word “coordinator” to describe how he had made decisions and solved problems. He believed that a “win-win” situation was always possible if all the parties involved tried. If there were issues at work, he would have candid conversations with those with conflicting interests first. And then he would negotiate—even if he had to make some adjustments to his original position in order to accommodate others’ stances—and find solutions satisfactory to all. It seemed to him that people tended to think of making concessions as losing, but he
rather felt grateful for him being able to do so because it meant he still had something to offer to others or communities.

Gi-hoon was a good coordinator at home as well. Although his parents were not demanding or coercive at all, as a son (only son after his sister’s passing) whose parents had a child with extreme physical and intellectual challenges, he did not want to be another burden to them. Naturally, ensuring his parents’ wellbeing had been an important part of his decision-making. After getting married, his wife had been added to his who-to-consider list. Because making others happy made him happy as well, considering his significant others’ happiness along with his brought more joy than stress. His preferences often coincided with those of his parents (e.g., when choosing college, major, military, and job), but sometimes, he had to reconsider what he had initially wanted (e.g., marrying a foreign girlfriend or going abroad to study) in consideration of his parents’ needs and wants. Nevertheless, he clarified that he had never disregarded his wants just to please his parents, and his parents would not have been happy about it even if he had done so for them.

Interestingly, Min-joon and Sung-jin, the two businessmen, did not express much concern over how to pursue their inner wants harmoniously in the outer world. In fact, their lives had been guided by their strong drive or hunger (in Sung-jin’s word) to be rich and successful. Both of them were extremely success-oriented from an early age; for instance, they had wanted to go to the biggest city in Korea, Seoul, enter a prestigious school, and work for a well-known company. And their focus was still fixed on earning money. In a sense, their wants were identical with what the external world made them want.
They lacked a sense of the authentic self and purpose of life. Sung-jin said that earning money itself was the purpose of his life; however, he could not explain further why he wanted to make a fortune and what he wanted to do with the fortune. To him, it was simply the best measure of his success and self-worth. Min-joon had a hard time coming up with a word that described him best, which was one of the interview questions. He stated that the reason why he just listed what had happened in his life chronologically was because he did not really know the significance of each event to him or his life. Almost at the end of the interview, he disclosed that he felt totally clueless about how to live and in fact had thought about committing suicide.

Sung-jin and Min-joon both had gone through some hard times. However, unlike the rest of the post-college participants, they did not report any significant change in their attitudes toward life or the world. Overall, serious inner search or reflection was missing in their stories; instead, they were filled with either external accomplishments or failures.

**Walking a fine line.** Most of the post-college participants reported that they did not make decisions against their will when accommodating reality or others’ needs and wants. It was always their call, not anybody or anything else’s. Therefore, they did not feel obligated, forced, or miserable even if their decisions involved a compromise or sacrifice. How they felt about their decisions provided a reliable barometer on whether they were walking a fine line or not. And those who said they had a good sense of balance between their wants and others’ needs and expectations knew well about their boundaries and set good boundaries.
Pursuing inner joy by performing good deeds was the life Nan-hee wanted to lead. Although she occasionally encountered inner conflict between helping others and securing comfortable living for her family, she believed that the former would ultimately enrich her life whereas the latter would result in a void in her mind. She said she would choose the former not because she was told to do so by the Bible or ethics textbooks but because she believed it would free her mind, feed her soul, and bring her joy. In addition, she thought it was unnecessary to pour 100% of one’s life into helping others because taking care of one’s own life was as worthwhile as attending to others’ needs. Accordingly, she wanted to help other people to the extent that she felt joy and freedom.

In-seo’s nickname among her family members was a problem solver. Since she loved helping others, she was happy to be able to offer help to her loved ones. It also felt rewarding to be trusted and loved by the people she cared about for what she did for them. Despite her contentment, it was sometimes challenging to remain as a happy problem solver; especially when multiple things happened simultaneously or when she spent too much time helping other family members leaving little time for her own kids. In those cases, she had to ask herself whether she was living her life or others’. But, she did not believe living only for herself would be the happiest life. In addition, it was always her voluntary choice to help her family members because she genuinely wanted to help them. Also, she had healthy boundaries. She said, “I’m not that kind of person who do things simply because they can’t refuse. I’m pretty good at it. Maybe too good at it… [Laugh] And people know that. As long as I can say no whenever I want or need, I think I’m good to go.”
A gemstone in the cutting and polishing process (in vivo). Through the expressions such as getting edges rounded off, being processed, becoming a diamond, being tempered, or being schooled, many of the post-college participants conveyed that they and their lives had evolved over time. Although the process of being refined as a gemstone was not always smooth and fun, they continued to work on personally significant issues and growth (i.e., continued to evolve inwardly) while reaching out to create more meaningful and fulfilling connections in the world by contributing to others’ lives. Their efforts to become a conscious and harmonious meaning maker continued through the ups and downs.

In-seo used the expression “a gemstone in the cutting and polishing process” to describe herself and her life. She stated she was born as a raw stone with so many pointy edges but wanted to end her life smiling. To that end, she said that she would continue to fill and refine herself. She hoped her continuous effort to be a better person and a better member of society would move and inspire her kids; in her opinion, becoming a role model by living a worthy life herself was the best way to teach her sons. Hae-sun, who had wandered for a long time not knowing who she was and what she wanted, shared her realization that it was extremely important to establish one’s values system to be a stable and reliable parent. Also, she noticed that she had hurt others’ feelings unintentionally because of lack of communication, which she said she would continue to improve. Gihoon with great intellectual curiosity mentioned that he would be studying and learning even in the last moments of his life, and his later life would be spent sharing his knowledge and wisdom with others.
Nan-hee believed that relationships are the most important thing in life, and she had struggled mightily because of it. Since she had experienced no loving relationship growing up, she had a hard time giving and receiving love. Consequently, she never felt comfortable and confident in any kind of relationship. In order to improve her relationships, she trained herself very hard; for instance, she watched several hundreds of online lectures on parenting to be a good mother. Similarly, on a day when she felt small and intimidated among people, she would come home, search lectures on an inferiority complex on the Internet, and study.

Before her first spiritual and therapeutic encounter with God, Nan-hee cowered easily before people and was very self-reproaching. After the encounter, however, although she made mistakes or behaved awkwardly in front of others, she would cheer herself up saying, “It’s okay. You can’t always do things well.” She still felt a void in relationships and turned harsh to herself occasionally replaying what she had said or how she had acted. Nevertheless, she was capable of regaining her composure, reflecting on what had just happened, and starting to think about how she could do it better next time. She was well aware that she was not going to be a relationship guru at several attempts and in fact had a long way to go:

I’m learning how to make healthy relationships little by little. The simple fact that I’m getting healed and growing every day is meaningful to me… Even if I get better by 0.1% a day, I am happy with that. I still have many fears and shortcomings, but I’m sure I’m getting there. It feels like taking out a grain of sand from my body one by one. [Laugh] Even if it’s that slow, I’m on it.
The Role of Spirituality: A Source of Peace and Growth

Examining the role of spirituality in Korean young adults’ meaning making was another research question of the study. In this study, spirituality was defined as “composing and dwelling in some conviction of what is ultimately true, real, dependable within the largest frame imaginable” (Parks, 2000, p. 20). Accordingly, those who were in the search for their authentic self and seeking to live according to the values that they held dear—including religious faith or spiritual teachings—were considered to be spiritual regardless of their religious affiliation or practice.

Among the college participants, only two reported they were practicing Christians while the rest of them said they were neither religiously affiliated nor spiritually involved. In contrast, most of the post-college participants claimed that faith or spiritual teachings were a significant part of their lives although only two of them practiced their religion on a regular basis. In addition, the college participants did not bring up the spirituality issue until asked whereas those in their late 30s voluntarily mentioned it before asked. Given the fact that all of the participants—except for one post-college participant—had been recruited with their religions unknown to the researcher, it was noteworthy that those in their late 30s had more religious or spiritual engagement.

It turned out that spirituality served as both a “Psychological Refuge” and an “Inner Compass” in Korean young adults’ meaning making. That is, spirituality provided guidelines for life as well as emotional comfort and a peace of mind. It also offered the time and space...
for reflection. And those who were spiritual were optimistic and confident even in the face of adversity, growth-oriented, and happiness seekers.

**Psychological refuge.** Except for the four college students with no religion, all of the (both college and post-college) participants talked about spirituality in association with a psychological refuge. Especially in the face of adversity or something beyond one’s control, they sought consolation in spirituality. Even those three (Dae-jin, Min-joon, and Sung-jin), for whom spirituality had not nested as an inner compass yet, stated that religious involvement offered them sanctuary.

**Providing comfort and peace.** Many participants stated that spirituality provided incomparable comfort and a peace of mind. Particularly, In-seo and Nan-hee believed that the consolation and peace that came from God was fundamentally different in that only God understood their pain fully and saw them wholly. Only religious activities gave Gi-hoon the emotional strength to withstand his physical and psychological struggle when he was gravely ill.

Min-joon said just sitting on the floor of a temple made him calm; whenever he was under great strain, he would visit any temple and just sit there for a while. To Dae-jin with chronic interpersonal difficulties, it was his church in which he felt the safest. He was usually very vigilant and edgy in other places. His church was the sole place he could rest without getting too self-conscious. Also, listening to hymns helped him stay away from dwelling on negative emotions. He believed he could have been a much darker and more depressed person if he had not gone to church. In his own terms, religion was his “last bastion” and
“emotional safety net”. Sung-jin was looking for a religion after several consecutive years of legal and financial difficulties, during which he could fully relate to those small business owners taking their own lives. Although he had a good deal of personal and professional help from people around him, he felt the need to find something powerful and stable to lean on.

**Inner compass.** Many of the participants stated their faith or spiritual teachings served as an internal guide in their lives. They not only provided fundamental guidelines for how to live but also help them reflect on themselves and their lives. In this sense, they grew in and with their spirituality.

**Providing guidelines.** Although it varied from person to person, many participants stated that they had great faith in their religion or spiritual teachings and made a constant effort to live by them. Particularly for the participants like In-seo and Nan-hee, the two staunch Christians, faith was the core of their being and living. Since they were God’s children and God resided inside of them, it was almost impossible to think of themselves as separate from their faith. Their faith provided essential and ultimate guidelines for every decision. In any situation, first a few questions they would ask themselves would be “Would this decision make God happy?” Or “Is this the way God wants me to lead my life?”

Even if faith or spirituality was not the most important thing in their lives as it was to In-seo and Nan-hee, many participants said that their philosophies of life were based on religious teachings or spiritual aha moments, and they frequently reminded themselves of living according to them. And living congruent with their faith and spiritual realization
brought them joy and happiness. Helping others or performing good deeds was one of the most common teachings that the participants practiced.

*Providing reflection time.* Spirituality offered time for introspection to the participants particularly through praying. During prayer time, they could reflect on themselves, their lives, or certain issues that had been bothering them. Since they were able to think more objectively and deeply, they gained new insights into themselves, their lives, and their issues and became more mature through prayers.

Nan-hee prayed every morning according to her unique procedures. She would copy one page in the Bible by hand while reading it out loud. Then she would meditate on it and write her thoughts down. Next, she would ask God, “How do you want me to live today?” and write down whatever that came across her mind. Sometimes she would simply write down what happened in her daily lives (e.g., yelling at her kids over nothing), pray (e.g., ‘May I be gentler to my sons so that they do not grow up with emotional scars’), and wait for God to tell her how to live that day. Although every prayer did not go well, she believed that she had grown a lot through those daily reflection times.

Others’ prayers were more casual. They did not pray on a regular basis or at fixed times like Nan-hee. For instance, A-reum either prayed or read the Bible using her cell phone application during her one-and-a-half hours of commute by subway. In-seo prayed just like talking to a friend whenever she saw a chance, even for a very short time. Through praying time, she often encountered what she had not been able to see in her or her life before. Moreover, since she could think more than once over certain issues, she was more likely to
make balanced decisions. Most of all, she got spiritually connected with God away from her hectic life through her prayers. Because God saw her “from head to toe” (including dark or unknown sides of her) as a whole person, it was a very therapeutic and humbling time for her.

**Positive mindset.** As a whole, those who were living in connection with spirituality displayed positive orientations toward themselves and their lives. They reported that they were independent, active, and open to others' truths and new experiences. In addition, they knew well about themselves and felt comfortable in their own skin. Overall, they were content with their life journey and happy.

Those who had followed external and material values without a deep understanding of their unique inner needs and wants did not display positive mindsets even though religion was part of their lives (e.g., Dae-jin, Min-joon, Sung-jin). In fact, their religious involvement was merely a means to either obtain what they wanted or avoid what they did not want. On the other hand, those who had sincerely searched their inner world shared the positive attitudes and characteristics that other spiritual participants showed although they were not religiously affiliated (e.g., Jae-eun, Young-sik, and Na-hyun).

**Remaining optimistic and confident in the face of adversity.** Those who were spiritually involved acknowledged the fact that anything could happen to anybody at any time of life. Therefore, they were very accepting toward life events including adversities. Also, they had faith in their capability of dealing with difficulties in life, and believed hardship was given as much as one could take. Consequently, they did not lose their
confidence nor give up easily. In addition, they tended to seek solutions or think of alternatives when faced with challenges rather than wallow in worries and shock. Even if things did not turn out the way they wanted, they pondered how to do it better or differently next time and moved on. They had a high frustration threshold and stayed optimistic and solid (not stirred) throughout their hardships.

_Growth-oriented._ One of the main reasons why those who were spiritual remained optimistic even in the face of adversity was because they were growth-oriented. They were curious, passionate, and highly motivated people in the first place. On top of that, they fully embraced the unpredictability of life and firmly believed they could grow from literally any life experiences including adversities. As a result, they felt grateful for all the experiences they had encountered in their lives. They also had a strong belief that human beings were evolving and becoming creatures. Thus, whatever they did, they tended to have a long-term perspective and a sense of direction in life.

_Happiness-seeking._ Although all of the participants implicitly and explicitly expressed that living a happy life was their ultimate goal, those in the pursuit of spirituality particularly stressed seeking happiness in life. They did not entirely deny the pleasure from material abundance or success but naturally gravitated toward pursuing personally meaningful happiness. In order to find out what made them really happy, they tuned in to their inner voices; and as a corollary, their lives were not swayed easily by external expectations and temptations. Also, they did not waste their energy comparing or competing
with others’ lives. Furthermore, they cared about others’ happiness as much as their own and wanted to make a contribution to it.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the findings of the study are discussed in relation to the research questions and previous studies. Also, limitations of the study are discussed and recommendations for future research are provided. Lastly, implications for the counseling and education field and conclusions are presented.

Discussion on Findings

The findings from the study are compared with the current leading theory, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory. Particularly, the trajectory of Korean young adults’ meaning making development is discussed from the vantage point of the direction and timing of development. In addition, the role of spirituality in Korean young adults’ meaning making development is explored in comparison to the existing theory that only addresses epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions.

Trajectory of Development

**Direction of development: Toward self-authorship.** Based on American young adults’ narratives, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory illustrated the gradational development from entirely relying on external forces to establishing an internal foundation: from the *External Formula* phase through the *Crossroads* to *Becoming the Authors of One’s Life* and *The Internal Foundation* phases (see chapter two for more detail). The findings of this study show that Korean young adults evolve from uncritically accepting external influences through getting closer to the authentic self to connecting to other people and the
bigger world including the spiritual realm. Although the term self-authorship is not directly used in the emergent theory of the study, Korean young adults’ meaning making development definitely shifts away from following external authority toward self-authorship.

More specifically, Korean young adults’ meaning making before college and some times during college exhibits developmental features of the External Formula phase of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory. During this phase, all the solutions, information, and approval come from external sources, and the three important questions (i.e., what they believe, who they are and how they relate to others) are externally defined. Especially while in high school, they entirely rely on parental authority without questioning. When they get into college, they become aware of their heavy reliance on external authority and shortcomings of their old ways of being, believing, and relating. Nevertheless, they do not see the need for an inner voice yet and remain dependent on external sources.

Korean young adults enter the Crossroads when they realize something is wrong and begin to recognize the need to search for their own answers to their values, identity, and relationships with others. Although many college participants try to find their inner voice and act upon it, external forces continue to wield influence on their meaning making. As their internal voice grows stronger and gradually takes the foreground of their meaning making, they move to the self-authoring meaning making phases Becoming the Authors of One’s Life and The Internal Foundation. They know who they are, what they value, and what kind of relationships they want to form (i.e., they know their wants and priorities) and seek to find harmonious ways to position their authentic inner world in the outer world (i.e., they need to
manage their inner priorities in the context of the external world). As their internal foundation gets refined and solidified over time, they become a wiser and happier coordinator between their internal foundation and external influence.

Despite the similarity in the overall direction of development between the Self-Authorship theory and the emergent theory of this study, the two theories may appear different depending on which features are brought into focus. When looking at the 10 meaning making positions, the more nuanced developmental trajectory recently presented by Baxter Magolda and King (2012)—[Solely External Meaning Making] 1) trusting external authority; 2) tensions with trusting external authority; 3) recognizing shortcomings of trusting external authority; [Crossroads: Entering the Crossroads] 4) questioning external authority; 5) constructing the internal voice; [Crossroads: Leaving the Crossroads] 6) listening to the internal voice; 7) cultivating the internal voice; [Solely Internal (Self-Authoring) Meaning Making] 8) trusting the internal voice; 9) building an internal foundation; and 10) securing internal commitments, the theory seems to focus exclusively on finding one’s internal voice and establishing an internal foundation, which is the endpoint of the development. Due to the direction of the development that moves from solely external to solely internal, it even looks as though meaning making based on an inner voice and personal authority (i.e., independent meaning making) is more desirable and mature whereas considering external factors (i.e., interdependent meaning making) is inappropriate and even inferior (Hofter, 2010; Weinstock, 2010).
In fact, in a recent interview, Baxter Magolda mentioned that her Self-Authorship theory had been mistaken for a theory that guided young adults to pay attention only to themselves. She acknowledged that the term self-authorship was somewhat misleading and said she hoped to dispel the myth that self-authorship was the same as selfish-authorship (Crosby, 2011). Kegan (1994) originally coined the term self-authorship to describe a shift from one’s meaning making capacity from outside the self to inside the self (Baxter Magolda, 2008). He stated self-authorship could “coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer authored by them, it authors them and thereby achieves a personal authority” (Kegan, 1994, p. 185, italics in original). In this approach, the locus of authorship (i.e., whether it is internal or external) matters, and internal authority and autonomy seems to be encouraged.

When Baxter Magolda (2001) proposed her theory, however, she clearly pointed out that self-authorship was not equal to self-absorption. She defined self-authorship as the internal capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and relationships and claimed the self-defining process entailed balancing one’s internal foundation with external forces. Thus, the essence of self-authorship lies in “the ability to internally coordinate external influence in the process of defining one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. vii). To put it differently, self-authorship requires both a sense of agency—“the existence of an organism as an individual” (Bakan, 1966, p. 15)—and a sense of communion—“the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is a part” (Bakan, 1966, p. 15). Baxter Magolda (2001) stated that self-authoring
meaning makers can “… direct one’s life, choose priorities, and act consistently with self-defined boundaries. Simultaneously… connect meaningfully and mutually with others while maintaining an authentic self” (p. 184).

Research on meaning making development has been actively applied, expanded, and reproduced in college settings. Especially as more and more researchers and institutions have identified self-authorship as a building block for desirable college learning outcomes (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004; Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002, 2006; Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; King et al., 2009; Pizzolato & Ozaki, 2007), facilitating college students’ inner search for authenticity and promoting a sense of authorship has been attracting major academic and public attention. In the meantime, the coordinating element of meaning making development—which usually occurs after college—has remained less known and underemphasized.

The current study shed light on the less known later portion of meaning making development by including participants in their late 30s whereas Baxter Magolds’ (2001) theory covered American young adults’ development only from 18 to their early 30s. Although this research was unable to record each individual’s meaning making development on a continuum from his or her 20s to 30s, it definitely provided the fuller spectrum of young adults’ meaning making development. If it had focused exclusively on college years just like many other previous studies, it would have been impossible to observe the post-college meaning making development closely, let alone cultural differences between American and
Korean young adults’ meaning making development. Also, if the current study had interviewed only those in or over their late 30s and had them think back and report, it could have not collected vivid and detailed accounts of earlier part of meaning making development during and even before college.

According to the emergent theory of the study, Korean young adults spend the entirety of college years striving to understand their authentic inner world. And their internal search and effort to deeply connect to the core of their being continues throughout their young adulthood. After college graduation, they are faced with new roles and life challenges as a partner, a parent, and a part of the family and society. In the process of becoming an adaptive meaning maker, they hone their abilities to coordinate their authenticity with external demands and expectations. Particularly, post-college meaning making of Korean young adults highlights a) deciding what to believe, who to be, and how to relate on their own in connection with other people and within a bigger frame, b) taking personal and internal responsibility for one’s choices, and c) living out one’s self-defined values and identity. The emergent theory of the current study and Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory both agree on this.

One notable difference between the two theories is that Korean young adults are more likely to consider their family members’ needs and wants and harmony with others more than their American counterparts when they make decisions. Their coordination process does not always prioritize others’ pleasure or the collective good at the expense of one’s authenticity. However, when they see their sacrifice or concession contributes to communal wellbeing and
harmony, they tend to willingly compromise. Other people’s wellbeing—especially that of their significant others—and harmonious living with others seem to have great significance in Korean young adults’ meaning making. On the other hand, Baxter Magolda’s (2001) participants focused more on renegotiating their relationships in such a way that their interpersonal relations became more mutual. They decided how much responsibility they wanted to take for others, but accommodating others’ needs and wants at the cost of one’s own desires and benefits was not a prominent feature of their coordinating process.

Cultural differences between individualism (based on independent self) of European American cultures and collectivism (based on interdependent self) of East Asian cultures could readily account for this difference (see chapter one for more detail). Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, and Wang (2012) explained that due to cultural differences in selfways—the term Markus, Mullaly, and Kitayama (1997) christened to refer to the outcome of the socialization of self toward culturally agreed-upon ways of being, Asians tend to experience inner conflict (or dissonance) when other people are involved in decision making whereas European Americans are more likely to experience conflict when they have to make individual decisions. To resolve conflict, Asians tend to work toward the good of their relationships while Westerners focus more on the good of the individual self.

A growing body of evidence warns of the dichotomous division of Western individualism and Asian collectivism. According to an exhaustive meta-analysis, European Americans indeed value independence more and feel less duty-bound to follow their in-groups’ norms and expectations; however, they are neither more individualistic than African
Americans or Latinos nor less collectivistic than Japanese or Koreans (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Also, it seems possible to maintain and nourish one’s unique attributes while seeking the common good (Brewer & Chen, 2007). Furthermore, a study shows that those who hold an independent meaning making orientation along with collectivistic values tend to solve problems more creatively (Bechtoldt, Choi, & Nijstad, 2012). Thus, a more prudent interpretation is required before automatically ascribing cultural differences to the individualistic/Western versus collectivistic/Asian paradigm.

Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2001) viewed distinctions between agency and communion as an individual stylistic preference. In general, agency focuses on individuation and separation from others and entails sacrificing others’ needs and wants for one’s own autonomy. On the contrary, communion focuses on connection to others and acceptance in relationships and involves sacrificing one’s own needs and wants. They thought some people preferred to establish one’s sense of self and values and make decisions independent from others, and other people preferred to do so in connection with others. According to them, it is not a different structure but a different approach and style. All in all, since culture and an individual style each exert reciprocal influence on the other, Korean young adults’ communal tendency in their coordination process needs be understood through both cultural and personal lenses.

**Timing of development: based on the subject and object relationship.** American young adults in Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory enter into the *Crossroads*—when people start to see the need to develop internal sources of beliefs, values, identity, and
relationships and work on cultivate their inner voices—mostly in their mid 20s, and display self-authorship in their late 20s or 30s. It is difficult to provide accurate information on each Korean participant’s developmental position because the current study was not designed to assess their meaning making levels. However, all of the college participants aged from 24 to 29 clearly show the signs of the *Crossroads*, and a few exhibit characteristics of Self-Authoring Meaning Making positions. Most of the post-college participants in their late 30s make meaning with their authentic internal foundation in the foreground. However, some of them, who have not internally defined their identity, core values, and relationships, seem to be living still externally driven.

Time (or age) does not automatically bring self-authoring meaning making. Korean young adults begin their search for authenticity when their identity, beliefs, and relationships are put in doubt. Diverse experiences that provoke their cognitive, emotional, and relational disequilibrium (dissonance or discomfort) initiate the search. The college environment provides a wide variety of stimulation, challenge and support for their transformation. Actually, most Korean young adults start to make a shift from heavily relying on their parents to recognizing shortcomings and dilemmas of external meaning making and striving to find their inner voices upon entering college. Emphasizing the role of provocative experiences in the meaning making development, Pizzolato (2005) maintained that college experiences propped up with inspiring programs, interventions, and reforms could help the movement through the perplexing searching and struggling period time of the *Crossroads*. 
According to Pizzolato (2003, 2004), those who have early provocative moments (e.g., personal, social, or academic challenges) tend to develop self-authoring meaning making structures faster than those who do not. However, exposure to provocative experiences or environments does not necessarily guarantee one’s meaning making development toward more advanced levels. In fact, not every Korean young adult in this study who went through significant life events or situations demonstrated advanced meaning making patterns. In the absence of time to look at themselves and their lives more deeply and objectively, no significant change occurs. The findings suggest that serious reflection time or quiet praying time away from one’s hectic life is conducive to real actions and changes in meaning making development.

Baxter Magolda (2001) also claimed that intense self-reflection helped young adults analyze their experiences from various angles and develop more authentic and complex frameworks to guide their lives. Also, she believed that the subject-object relationship determined the complexity of one’s meaning making structures. The subject-object relationship is the process of “liberating ourselves from that in which we were embedded, making what was subject into object, so that we can ‘have it’ rather than ‘be had’ by it” (Kegan, 1994, p. 34). The kernel of the subject and object relationship is “to step back enough from the social environment to generate an internal ‘seat of judgment’ or personal authority that evaluates and makes choices about external expectations” (Kegan & Lahey, 2009, p. 17). After all, it is when stepping back and thoroughly processing their recognized disequilibrium and discomfort that people move to the next, more advanced meaning making position.
Both the Self-Authorship theory and the emergent theory of this study agreed that meaning-making development was neither fixed nor linear. As alluded to in the research participants’ expressions such as a work in progress or a gemstone in the process of being cut and polished, the process of meaning making development is complicated, arduous, and often frustrating. The trajectories of young adults’ meaning making development, therefore, do not always follow the straightforward sequence; rather, it repeats retreat, advance or a standstill. As Parks (2000) said, “… human beings are continuously both enlarged and diminished in the course of ongoing lived experience” (p. 30).

Young adults fall back to their old ways of meaning making when they need additional trust in their inner voices or refinement in their internal foundations (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Even when they reach the Becoming the Author of One’s Life phase, external influence remains, and each individual is still pulled by it (Baxter Magolda, 2001). As Baxter Magolda (2001) pointed out, “Constructing an internal foundation does not solve all of life’s dilemmas” (p. 166). The bottom line is that one cannot control the external world completely but can decide how they make meaning of the external world.

**Three Dimensions and Spirituality**

Baxter Magolda (2001) maintained that self-authorship developed over the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. The participants’ narratives of the current study also unfolded around the three dimensions, which concerned one’s core beliefs and values, a sense of self, and relationships. Furthermore, the participants’ lived
experiences showed that the three dimensions were interwoven. Regrettably, investigating specific relationships among the three dimensions was beyond the scope of this study.

As mentioned earlier, many of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) participants in their late 20s (i.e., those who were capable of self-authoring meaning making) brought spirituality up in their conversations. For instance, one of her participants said, “My faith is the most important thing in my life, the center of everything” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, p. 159). Without fully understanding the emergence of spirituality in her participants’ stories, however, Baxter Magolda (2001) regarded spirituality as just one component of one’s internal foundation and postponed embracing the new theme until she could explain why and how it rose up as an important element of American young adults’ meaning making development.

Baxter Magolda (2001) surmised it was a solid sense of self and internal belief system that enabled people to pay attention to others’ worlds and be more accepting toward the uncertainty and unpredictability of life. Explaining the Internal Foundation phase, she said, “The solidifying of the internal self, belief system, and approach to relationships created both a solid foundation and openness to ambiguity and change. Becoming comfortable with the internal voice yielded a security to explore others’ perspectives” (p. 155). She recently reiterated the idea by stating that as one’s sense of how knowledge was constructed became complex, an individual became more interested in others (Crosby, 2011). Furthermore, Baxter Magolda (2001) mentioned that those with a solid inner foundation were at ease with themselves and satisfied with their lives. However, she did not link their peace of mind and
contentment in their life as well as open and accepting attitudes toward others and the world with an expressed tendency toward spirituality.

On the other hand, the emergent theory of the current research suggests that Korean young adults’ meaning making development is ultimately a journey toward spirituality. It also suggests that one’s expanded understanding of and interest in others, not to mention oneself, is a pathway to spiritual meaning making. Specifically, as a sense of authenticity emerges as a result of their endless inner search during college years, Korean young adults get to ask themselves the who-to-be, what-to-believe, and how-to-relate-to-the-world questions in relation to greater purpose and meaning. Particularly, going through hardships, their understanding of the shared human conditions (i.e., we all are small and weak and living in a world that is often beyond our control) grows. Consequently, they become more attentive and compassionate toward others’ suffering (and wellbeing on the flip side) and learn to be open, humble, and grateful. Since they do not wish to live chasing after externally imposed values and expectation any longer, they get closer to their authenticity. They also develop a deeper connection with something bigger and greater than themselves. But, their spiritual connection is not necessarily bound by or to religious faith. It has more to do with the expansion of the self.

The expansion of the self to a bigger world including others or a higher being indicates the expansion of one’s frame of reference. Since spirituality refers to making meaning within the largest frame imaginable (Parks, 2000), the expansion of one’s frame of
reference means spiritual growth. Especially, the emergent theory of this study identifies a metamorphosis after adversities as a crucial part of Korean young adults’ spiritual journey.

Parks (2000) viewed suffering in life or “the valley of the shadow” (p. 26) (e.g., betrayal, loss, fear, death, physical and emotional pain, doubt, being overwhelmed, drifting without goal, prolonged struggle, yearning, or despair) as an integral part to the most profound understanding of spirituality development. With the metaphors of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement, Parks (2000) explained how spirituality evolved. When people encounter a shipwreck experience, they are disoriented and threatened because “what has held their world” (p. 28) collapses and “what has dependably served as shelter and protection” (p. 28) comes apart. Thus, in the midst of shipwreck, people search for the answer to the question whether there is any form of meaning that can explain or embrace suffering. After surviving shipwreck, “a new sense of vitality” (p. 29) beyond simple relief and “a new reality beyond the loss” (p. 29) follow. This gladness results from “an enlarged knowing and being, and a new capacity to act” (p. 29). An enlarged knowing is powerful in that it is based on “a more trustworthy understanding of reality in both its beauty and terror” (p. 30). Finally, people are amazed by newly found meanings as well as the fact that they have survived shipwreck.

Parks’s (2000) metaphors certainly fit Korean young adults’ meaning making development in which Korean young adults themselves and their worlds are expanded through struggle and pain. They also readily explain the awe and gratitude toward life and the bigger and greater world that encourage Korean young adults to connect further and deeper.
However, not every meaning-making journey leads to a spiritual connection as shown in the findings of the study. Nevertheless, if spirituality is a human universal as Fowler (1981) assumed, it seems like a worthy destination of one’s meaning making journey because many people heading toward it report they are happy and contented.

To conclude, the emergent theory of the current study shows that Korean young adults’ meaning making moves toward self-authorship, and an individual’s developmental pathway toward self-authorship more resembles a swiveling helix than a straight line. Thus, it verifies and supports the developmental trajectory of Baxter Magolda’s (2001) theory. In addition, just like the Self-Authorship theory, the emergent theory of this study regards finding one’s authentic voice as an integral part of meaning making in that without a solid sense of self and an understanding of core values, it is difficult to frame one’s life experience and construct one’s reactions to the external world. On the other hand, it distinguishes itself from Baxter Magolda’s (2001) Self-Authorship theory by a) illustrating why and how Korean young adults become a true coordinator between their authentic internal foundation and external factors and b) identifying cultural and stylistic differences in the coordinating process. Most of all, filling the gap in the Self-Authorship theory, the emergent theory incorporates spirituality into the understanding of Korean young adults’ meaning making and frames the entire development as a spiritual journey.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study facilitates an understanding of Korean young adults’ meaning making development and provides insights into assisting their wellbeing and growth. However, the
findings should be carefully interpreted and applied due to limitations of the study. First, the current study adopted a cross-sectional research design even though it had aimed to uncover the development of Korean young adults’ meaning making. Meaning-making structures transform gradually and non-linearly; thus, it is not easy to notice developmental changes and processes in a short period of time (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). In order to document those subtle changes and complicated processes over time, longitudinal observations and inquiries are more desirable. Also, the current study failed to trace the complete developmental sequence within an individual during his or her young adulthood by using two separate groups (i.e., college and post-college). Moreover, although the research participants provided detailed narratives of their experiences, reliance on their recollection could have affected the concreteness of what had actually happened.

Second, the credibility of the emergent theory of this study may be limited because of its small sample size. Saturation is a critical factor that determines the trustworthiness of grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Large sample size does not necessarily ensure saturation, but it definitely helps to gather rich reliable data. With regard to sample size and trustworthiness, Charmaz (2006) stated, “A study of 25 interviews may suffice for certain small projects but invites skepticism when the authors’ claims are about, say, human nature or contradict established research” (p. 114). For the current study, six participants for each (college and post-college) group, total 12 participants were interviewed. The in-depth interviews were rich enough to put the shared experiences among the participants into an emergent theory. However, given the fact that each group had one or two negative cases (i.e., exceptions that do not fit the pattern of others being studies),
additional stories might have resulted in a more trustworthy theory grounded in more people’s lived experiences.

Third, the transferability of the findings from the current participants to other populations is limited. Although the title of the research was given Korean young adults’ meaning making development, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Korean young adult population. In addition, the current study employed a convenience sample, so the stories of those who volunteered to participate in the study cannot represent the non-respondents’ lived experiences. In fact, generalization is not a prime goal of qualitative research using grounded theory methods. Charmaz (2006) said, “Must grounded theory aim for the general level abstracted from empirical realities? No… Situating grounded theories in their social, historical, local, interactional contexts strengthen them. Such situating permits making nuanced comparisons between studies” (p. 180). Therefore, the findings of the study need to be applied to other populations after thorough consideration of their contexts. This is why thick descriptions were provided in the results section.

Fourth, as a measuring tool, the researcher was not a seasoned interviewer. To be fair, she was a good interviewer in general, but not an expert interviewer specifically trained for meaning-making interviews. Eliciting how people have arrived at certain ways of meaning making requires a great deal of practice and experience. And the quality of data tremendously influences the quality of research findings. Although interviews got better thanks to the researcher’s journal writing and reflection, more honed interview skills may have led to an emergent theory that better reflects the realities of the participants.
Recommendations for Future Research

The current study was launched from the belief that human meaning making could be better understood through a cultural lens. The necessity for more culturally inclusive and sensitive approaches still exists in the field of meaning-making research. Hofer (2010) criticized research trends heavily skewed toward (or dominated by) Western cultures stating, “The hegemony of an independent self has led to the development of theories that erroneously permitted judgment of other cultures as deficient” (p. 135). Pizzolato (2010) also commented that research on self-authorship development had attempted to embrace culturally diverse populations, but it had not been very successful.

When social or psychological phenomena are examined in other cultures, it is more likely that cultural differences are explored first, and investigations to identify the underlying causes for those cultural differences ensue (Heine & Norenzayan, 2006). The current research revealed how Korean young adults made sense of their experiences in the context of Korean society, so further explanations about the cultural factors that caused the particular cultural uniqueness in meaning-making development need to be provided through future research. In addition to cultural context, personal context (i.e., individual characteristic)—which also plays a big role in one’s meaning making development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Baxter Magolda et al., 2012)—deserves more researchers’ attention.

There should be more research on assessment as well. In fact, there has been a growing interest in assessment issues among scholars and practitioners (Creamer et al., 2010; Pizzolato, 2007). However, until not too long ago, the literature on meaning making had
mainly focused on describing the concept itself and its development; as a result, the critical task of “deconstructing the orientation (i.e., meaning-making development toward self-authorship) into measurable chunks” (Pizzolato, 2007, p. 33) has been delayed (Creamer, 2010).

Measuring meaning making development is a daunting task because it is difficult to discern different meaning making structures (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Specifically, developmentally advanced meaning-making structures subsume the previous less complex structures, so they overlap (Baxter Magolda, 2010; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Kegan, 1994). In addition, structural development among the three dimensions is often uneven (Baxter Magolda, 2010), and cultural and personal contexts complicate one’s meaning making (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Boes et al., 2010; Fischer, 1980; Lamborn & Fischer, 1988). Nevertheless, especially in order to promote self-authoring meaning making through educational or therapeutic practice, developing simpler yet accurate—not to mention culturally sensitive—measures is an imperative. Although some researchers devised paper-and-pencil measures (see Creamer et al., 2010; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Laughlin & Creamer, 2007; Pizzolato, 2007) in lieu of time-consuming and labor-intensive in-depth interviews, they need further refinement.

Also, as part of the search for a more comprehensive framework, more research that sheds light on how to integrate the spiritual piece into meaning making development is needed. The current study suggested that spirituality was not a mere dimension; rather, our entire meaning making development was a journey toward spiritual connection and growth.
However, the findings of this study require further verification from future inquiries into meaning making development in connection with spirituality (e.g., partnership between spirituality and the other three dimensions).

Finally, future research on the relationship between meaning making development and wellbeing is expected to contribute to the deeper understanding of human wellness and happiness, which is the ultimate goal of the current study. It is known that more complex meaning making structures—which can provide more rationales and options—are more adaptive and thus, beneficial to human wellbeing (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). It is also known that those who wisely adjust external influences to suit one’s inner needs and wants are more likely to achieve higher levels of wellbeing (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004). More evidence and explanations will facilitate people to lead a happy fulfilling life through self-authoring and spiritual meaning making. Further efforts to develop educational and therapeutic interventions will be welcomed.

**Implications**

The findings from this study carry implications for the counseling and education field. However, since the findings were derived from a specific context (i.e., Korean society), the researcher stayed as close as possible to the context in which the study had been conducted when drawing out the implications of the findings. Therefore, when the implications of this particular study are considered in other contexts, special cautions are needed.
First, the findings urge Korean society to establish a stable help system readily available to young adults in need of help. The results of the study implied that one’s meaning-making journey could be treacherous and agonizing without sufficient inner search and outer connection. And the majority of the research participants—regardless of their age or developmental phase—reported that their meaning-making journey had significantly lacked proper guidance and mentors. Given the poor infrastructure for helping services and the volume of needs to fill, counselors and educators in Korea seem to have grave responsibilities.

Compared to the long history of school counseling in the United States, which began at the beginning of the 20th century, that of Korean school counseling is brief. The Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development in Korea saw the need for full-time specialists in guidance and counseling in secondary schools in 2004 and have been selecting and placing school counselors since 2005; however, it has not accomplished even its one-school-one-counselor goal yet (Lee & Yang, 2008). In this situation, it seems unlikely that Korean students receive much-needed help when they have personal or academic concerns. Since (according to the results of the study) finding out one’s true interest and passion is a constant challenge for Korean adolescents, systematic help to guide their exploration needs to be offered.

It is noteworthy that a significant percentage of Korean high school students retake the K-SAT. In Korea, almost half of high school seniors are in Seoul, and so are most selective universities. The retry rate of those who enter in-Seoul universities was 33.8% in
2013, and experts predict it will continue to rise (Veritas Alpha Newspaper, 2013). Considering quite many of the participants of the study who had retaken the K-SAT mentioned their transitional period between high school and college had been psychologically challenging yet growth promoting, it seems imperative for numerous private K-SAT prep institutions (including boarding school type)—thriving in the midst of seemingly undying education fever—to turn their attention to support their students in limbo and assist with their inner struggles beyond academic success. Furthermore, community level counseling centers, although still in the fledgling stage in Korea, need to leave their doors open to this neglected clientele.

Military counseling is another counseling area that calls for more attention and vitalization in that military service is one of the most pivotal times for Korean men’s meaning making development. In a similar vein, employee assistance programs need to be extended to more workplaces to meet the post-college young adults’ needs. According to the findings, post-college young adults in Korea are exposed to various challenges and adversities, but have limited access to professional help.

Second, the findings indicate that college is a critical period for Korean young adults to search for their authentic self and authentic meaning for their life. College holds even more importance in Korea in that college enrollment rates of high school graduates in Korea have remained around 80% since the mid 2000s (see the OECD’s annual report, “Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators”). As members of a mentoring community, helping professionals at college are supposed to guide students’ meaning making development. As
Kegan (1994) stated, when college students are having a hard time in their meaning-making journey (e.g., lagging behind meaning making expected of them), it is “more a matter of not understanding the rules of the game than one of an unwillingness to play” (p. 38). Therefore, it is fundamental that counselors and educators show college students what life expects from them (i.e., presenting a big picture rather than myopic strategies) so that they learn what to pursue during the rest of their lives (i.e., planting a sense of direction).

Having a quiet and serious thinking time turned out to be one of the catalysts for Korean young adults’ search for authenticity and further transformation. Nash and Murray (2010) also asserted that the “Eureka!” moments were the product of critical reflection. This implies that meaning-making guides or mentors in college settings need to lead college students to engage in reflection using a variety of methods.

Various psycho-educational programs, counseling/teaching techniques, and classes could be invented to promote self-reflection. For instance, simply having college students think over the three key questions (i.e., who they are, what they value, and how they want to relate to other and the world) would help them get closer to their authentic inner world and move toward bigger meanings. Career exploration should be a great springboard for college students’ self-reflection in that many participants of this study—as well as Baxter Magolda (2001)—mentioned career search boosted their inner search and self-understanding. Furthermore, it appears adequate to guide students to examine how they process their experiences and help them positively reframe them since the current study disclosed that those content with their lives were optimistic and growth-oriented.
For the post-college young adults, whose main struggles lie in relationships and conflict resolution as a partner, parent, and co-worker, extending access to open online and offline lectures as well as useful information on those topics seems to be urgent. Premarital or parental education offered by various community-level institutions could not only have a preventive effect but also serve as a support group for those in need. Any program that could steer those who live (only) by external cues to explore their inner world would be helpful. Since post-college young adults, according to the findings of the study, develop a deeper understanding of others’ suffering and a sense of connection, organizing and publicizing community service that young adults can take part in would significantly benefit both individuals and society as a whole.

Finally, the emergent theory of this study provides a new framework to understand human development. The “Connection” theory delineates Korean young adults’ constant pursuit of the inner connection to authenticity and expanded connection to the bigger and greater world. Counselors and counselor educators may use this lens of “connection” to develop their own unique counseling philosophies and approaches or to enrich their trainees’ understanding of human meaning making and growth.

**Conclusion**

There have been growing concerns over Korean young adults’ meaning making, which seems greatly influenced by over-solicitous parents and societal messages that stress competition and survival. While everybody flocks at the bottom of a steep and narrow ladder to climb it faster and higher than others, authentic meaning making is left in question. Dismal
statistics such as high suicide and low happiness rates among the OECD countries have reinforced the suspicion.

The present study explored Korean young adults’ meaning making development using grounded theory methods. The emergent theory of this grounded theory study depicted Korean young adults’ meaning making development as “A Journey Toward Connection”. More specifically, Korean young adults’ meaning making during high school was characterized as uncritical compliance with external influence. The unique transitional period between high school and college accelerated positive changes for those who retook the Korean college entrance exam. College years were devoted to the inner search for what to believe, who to be, and how to relate to others. Although the journey toward authenticity was sometimes painful, college was a pivotal time for Korean young adults to get to know who they really were and how they wanted to lead their lives. The post-college era was summed up as a harmonious and spiritual journey toward the bigger and greater world. As a partner, a parent, a worker, and a citizen living in the hyper-pluralistic world, Korean young adults learned how to coordinate their unique inner world with the external demands and expectations including their significant others’ wellbeing and harmony with others. Furthermore, through various challenges and adversities, they became more humble, grateful, and compassionate toward others’ suffering and embraced spirituality. Profound reflections facilitated growth throughout their meaning-making journey. All in all, Korean young adults’ meaning making development was a journey toward the actualization of one’s authenticity in connection to/with the inner and outer world. It was a spiritual journey.
This meaning making development might appear to be a two-tier journey. However, the journey toward the authentic self and the extended journey to the bigger and greater world are in fact closely linked and help each other’s evolution. Living an authentic and spiritual life seems to lead to happiness. Since those who internalize external values do not dare to risk external judgment (i.e., love and approval from others), they do not aspire to be authentic and cannot generate their own happiness; in other words, authentic people are happier (Neff, 2011). Spiritual richness and meaning in one’s life is a major indicator of psychological wealth (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008). And happy people live their lives not by genetic programming or cultural messages but by internal principles and meaning as part of the universal order (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993).

The journey toward authenticity and spirituality is an arduous and life-long journey. Fowler (1981) would have not mentioned the burden of being a meaning maker if the journey is easy. To alleviate the burden and serve as a beacon to young adults’ search for authentic and bigger meaning is the mission of our counselors and educators.
References


Exploring the concept across cultures (pp. 223-243). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.


doi:10.1177/1745691610375557


APPENDICES
Appendix A

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH (for pilot study)

Title of Study: Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making Development
Principal Investigator: Su Jung Jang
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

You are being asked to take part in a pilot study that is part of a doctoral dissertation at the North Carolina State University. Your participation in this pilot study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

ABOUT RESEARCH

The purpose of this research study is to explore Korean young adults’ meaning making development. By providing a new model of how Korean young adults make sense of themselves and their life experiences, this study seeks to lay a foundation for future educational and therapeutic practice, which is suitable to Korean young adults’ meaning making patterns as well as Korean socio-cultural context.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions about your background, significant life events and decisions, and spiritual orientation and quest. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will take place in a place and at a time that is convenient for you and should take approximately 90-120 minutes. After the interview, you will receive an electronic copy of the full transcription of the interview so that you may validate your responses. Your responses will be analyzed prior to the main study—which is identical to this pilot study—and used to inform the following main study.

RISKS

The researcher anticipates no significant risk (e.g., psychological, social, physical, financial, legal harm) regarding your participation in this study. You will be instructed to share only to the extent in which you feel comfortable. Nevertheless, discussing your personal stories related to significant life experiences and spirituality could potentially cause stress although the likelihood of that occurrence is low. Again, if you wish to withdraw from the study, you
may do so at any time. If you feel the need to address any type of discomfort or difficulty that may arise as a result of the interview, the researcher will immediately arrange further resources or assistance (e.g., counseling service). There is no provision for free care or therapy.

**BENEFITS**

There are no immediate benefits for you for participating in this study. However, you may find the in-depth interview beneficial as you reflect upon meaning and purpose in your life as well as important life events and their lessons. Specifically, you may gain deeper insight into yourself, your values, relationships, attitudes toward life, and meaning-making patterns.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked file and a password-protected computer. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. You will be identified with your pseudonym, and any identifying information will not be included on any of the research documents. Your identity will remain confidential in any publications of research findings.

**COMPENSATION**

For participating in this study, you will receive a gift card (value of 20,000 KRW) as a token of appreciation to invest your time, energy, and most of all, your personal stories. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not be eligible for the gift card.

**CONTACT**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Su Jung Jang at 017.851.3383 or sjang4@ncsu.edu, or the faculty sponsor Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan at sylvia_nassarmc@ncsu.edu. If you feel you have not been treated according to the description in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Debra Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus, 919.515.4514.

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Participant Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________

Investigator Signature: ____________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix B
North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH (for main study)

Title of Study: Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making Development
Principal Investigator: Su Jung Jang
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT RESEARCH PARTICIPATION
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

ABOUT RESEARCH
The purpose of this research study is to explore Korean young adults’ meaning making development. By providing a new model of how Korean young adults make sense of themselves and their life experiences, this study seeks to lay a foundation for future educational and therapeutic practice, which is suitable to Korean young adults’ meaning making patterns as well as Korean socio-cultural context.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions about your background, significant life events and decisions, and spiritual orientation and quest. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for you and should take approximately 90-120 minutes. After the interview, you will receive an electronic copy of the full transcription of the interview so that you may validate your responses.

RISKS
The researcher anticipates no significant risk (e.g., psychological, social, physical, financial, legal harm) regarding your participation in this study. You will be instructed to share only to the extent in which you feel comfortable. Nevertheless, discussing your personal stories related to significant life experiences and spirituality could potentially cause stress although the likelihood of that occurrence is low. Again, if you wish to withdraw from the study, you may do so at any time. If you feel the need to address any type of discomfort or difficulty that may arise as a result of the interview, the researcher will immediately arrange further
resources or assistance (e.g., counseling service). There is no provision for free care or therapy.

**BENEFITS**

There are no immediate benefits for you for participating in this study. However, you may find the in-depth interview beneficial as you reflect upon meaning and purpose in your life as well as important life events and their lessons. Specifically, you may gain deeper insight into yourself, your values, relationships, attitudes toward life, and meaning-making patterns.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked file and a password-protected computer. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which could link you to the study. You will be identified with your pseudonym, and any identifying information will not be included on any of the research documents. Your identity will remain confidential in any publications of research findings.

**COMPENSATION**

For participating in this study, you will receive a gift card (value of 20,000 KRW) as a token of appreciation for investing your time, energy, and most of all, your personal stories. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will not be eligible for the gift card.

**CONTACT**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Su Jung Jang at 017.851.3383 or sjang4@ncsu.edu, or the faculty sponsor Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan at sylvia_nassarmc@ncsu.edu. If you feel you have not been treated according to the description in this form, or your rights as a research participant have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Debra Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus, 919.515.4514.

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Participant Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Investigator Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Instructions: Please share only to the extent in which you feel comfortable and do not mention identities of third parties in the interview.

I. Opening Segment

1. Tell me about yourself: any background information that you feel is important.
   • [Probing Questions] Tell me about people who are significant to you. Describe the nature of the relationships. Tell me about your family (e.g., age, education, occupation, religion, and relationship with each family member).

II. Main Segment

Regarding meaning making development:

1. Tell me about your most significant experiences (e.g., best or worst experiences; eye-opening events; challenges or dilemmas you encountered; interactions with people who differ from you; or conflicts or pressures you experienced).
   • [Probing Questions] Why were the experiences important to you? How did they affect you? How did they contribute to your growth? How did you make sense of them?
2. What was the most important decision that you have made?
   • [Probing Questions] Why was it important to you? What are your criteria for decision-making?

Regarding spirituality:

1. What is important in your life?
   • [Probing Questions] Have you tried to find (greater) meaning and purpose in life? How important is it to develop a philosophy of life?
2. How do you feel about the way your life has turned out so far and the direction in which your life is headed?
   • [Probing Questions] How would you describe your overall state of mind? What is your overall attitude toward life? How do you view/handle hardships in life?

III. Closing Segment

1. What are you taking away from your life experiences?
   • [Probing Questions] How have your collective experiences shaped you? What are the implications or consequences of your insights from your life experiences?
2. Share any observations or questions.
Appendix D

Recruitment E-mail to Colleagues and Friends

Email subject heading: Research Participant Recruitment

Dear Colleagues and Friends:

I would appreciate your assistance in recruiting participants for my dissertation study. You may want to use the information of this email below the asterisk line. Please emphasize to potential participants that participation in this study is voluntary and confidential. I ask you—those who have access to college seniors in their 20s—not to make participation in this study a requirement for any students or offer extra credit to students for participating. Those who have access to college graduates in their late 30s (aged from 37 to 39) also should not impose any pressure on potential participants or provide extrinsic rewards for participating in this study.

Please note that you will not be notified as to whether those individuals you identified elected to contact me and/or participate in the research. You should not ask any follow-up questions or communicate individually with the individuals you identify. In addition, the identity of the participants and any information they chose to share during their interviews is confidential, so I will be unable to disclose such information.

Thank you for your assistance and your time.

Sincerely,
Su Jung Jang

I am currently seeking participants for my dissertation research, titled *Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making Development*, under the direction of Dr. Sylvia Nassar-McMillan, in partial completion of the requirements for my Ph.D. at NC State University.

Eligible participants for this study are Korean young adults who are either college seniors in their 20s or college graduates in their late 30s. Participants will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. During the interview, participants will be asked to answer questions about their background, significant life events and decisions, and spiritual
orientation and quest. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for participants and should take approximately 90-120 minutes.

Please find more information about the research in the attached informed consent form and interview questions. You may forward the documents to those interested in participating in this study. Participation in the research is voluntary and anonymous. There are no anticipated risks to participants, and participants are able to withdraw from the study at any time during the process. As an incentive, a 20,000 KRW gift card will be given to every complete participant.

Any questions regarding the research can be directed to Su Jung Jang at sjang4@ncsu.edu or 017-851-3383. Questions about the IRB approval of this study can be directed to Debra Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Institutional Review Board, NC State University at Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-515-4514).
Appendix E
E-mail to Potential Research Participants

E-mail subject heading: Participation in Research

Dear Potential Research Participants:

Thank you for your interest in participating in a North Carolina State University dissertation study on Korean Young Adults’ Meaning Making Development. This research study aims to explore how Korean young adults make sense of themselves and life experiences and how their meaning making structures change over time.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and confidential. Accordingly, your recruiters will remain unknown as to whether you contacted me and/or participated in the research. Furthermore, I will not disclose any information you choose to share during your interview to them.

In order to participate in this study, please check if you meet the criteria below for your eligibility:

1) Korean (born and raised in Korea)
2) Senior college student in one’s 20s OR college graduate in one’s late 30s (aged from 37 to 39)

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. During the interview, you will be asked to answer questions about your background, significant life events and decisions, and spiritual orientation and quest. The interview will be audio-recorded. The interview will be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for you and should take approximately 90-120 minutes.

Please find more information about the research in the attached informed consent form and interview questions. If you have further questions, feel free to contact me at sjang4@ncsu.edu or at 017.851.3383.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Su Jung Jang
## Appendix F

Initial, Focused, Axial, and Theoretical Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical</th>
<th>Axial</th>
<th>Focused</th>
<th>Initial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unplugged:</td>
<td>Externally driven decision-making</td>
<td>Not knowing oneself</td>
<td>Not having thought about one’s aptitude, interest, and dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During high school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing little about one’s aptitude, interest, and dream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listening to parents</td>
<td>Following parents’ opinions when making</td>
<td>Believing parents having their kids’ best interests at heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>important decisions</td>
<td>Acknowledging parents having a say in their child’s decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Considering family situation and wanting to help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizing no significant internal/external conflict regarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>following parents’ opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using grades and scores as a major</td>
<td>Choosing academic track based on grades</td>
<td>Appllying to college based on grades and scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>determinant for academic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decision-making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pursuing prestige</td>
<td>Applying to the highest-ranking college</td>
<td>Applying to the highest-ranking college that one's grades and scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>that one's grades and scores can afford</td>
<td>可以选择一个排名更高的大学，无论是否感兴趣</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>regardless of interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional shortcomings</td>
<td>Competitive education system that</td>
<td>Competitive education system that prioritizes studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-exploration, an unwelcome goal</td>
<td>prioritizes studying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tight schedules that do not allow time for self-exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of guidance</td>
<td>Providing little information and help</td>
<td>Providing little information and help to students (especially in non-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to students (especially in non-Seoul</td>
<td>Seoul areas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>areas)</td>
<td>Being influenced by TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A prelude to connection: A transition</td>
<td>Making a self-motivated decision</td>
<td>Making a decision to retake a college entrance exam on one’s own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between high school and college</td>
<td>Change-provoking firsts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Persuading concerned and skeptical parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thinking (finally)</td>
<td>Having the opportunity to ponder over</td>
<td>Getting to know better about one’s values, identity, and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>oneself and one’s life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning from hard time</td>
<td>Getting a clearer understanding of oneself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning not to give and persevere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gaining self-confidence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix F (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College, at last! A land of opportunity for path-makers</th>
<th>Privilege of being a college student</th>
<th>Having greater latitude and options</th>
<th>Receiving explicit/tacit permission from parents to do as one likes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pruning through exploring and experimenting</td>
<td>Perceiving one’s true interest as an important task of a college student</td>
<td>Exploring various interests and options as much as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carving one's own way</td>
<td>Recognizing the need to make one's own path</td>
<td>Becoming convinced of one's choice through trying-out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dawn of awareness</td>
<td>Recognizing an issue</td>
<td>Becoming aware of one’s issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growing awareness and discomfort</td>
<td>Encountering a recurring issue</td>
<td>Becoming concerned about one’s issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dealing with a recurring issue</td>
<td>Bumping into a fundamentally identical issue repeatedly</td>
<td>Getting uneasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having alone time away from daily life</td>
<td>Having a long alone time devoted to serious thinking</td>
<td>Feeling expanded yet focused or drifting with no/little sense of direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mulling over</td>
<td>Mulling over oneself and one's life in general or recurrent issues</td>
<td>Identifying one’s issue more clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tipping point</td>
<td>Feeling the need for urgent change: A moment of “no more”</td>
<td>Getting closer to the authentic self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting closer to the authentic self</td>
<td>Establishing a better sense of oneself, one’s values, and relationships</td>
<td>Gaining a sense of direction in what kind of person one wants to become; what kind of life one wants to lead; what kind of relationships one wants to build; and what kind of role one wants to play in bigger communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working through</th>
<th>Making gradual progress through a series of actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling confident about addressing other problems &amp; doing a better job in other domains of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding it hard to remain changed or continue to change: going back to old ways of believing, being, and relating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing to work on issues with awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A journey toward outer connection: Expanding and docking</th>
<th>Into the new world</th>
<th>Tuning in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanding through adversity</td>
<td>Lowering toward gratitude</td>
<td>Encountering new tasks and roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to new tasks and roles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realizing how small and insignificant humans are in the face of adversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming humble in the face of adversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming grateful in the face of adversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming free from conventional values in the face of adversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to others’ pain</td>
<td>Understanding the shared human conditions better</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating to others’ pain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming compassionate to others’ pain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming attentive to others’ pain</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting to something beyond</td>
<td>Becoming interested/more engaged in faith, religious teachings, or religious practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling the need for spiritual comfort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fine-tuning</td>
<td>Seeking for an optimal contact point</td>
<td>Coordinating one’s wants with reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating one’s wants with significant others’ wants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing one’s want and external expectations objectively</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking a fine line</td>
<td>Following one’s heart</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using emotions as a barometer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting boundaries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A gemstone in the cutting and polishing process*</td>
<td>Continue to work on personally significant issues with awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to work on personal growth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continue to work on contributing to others’ lives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The role of spirituality: A source of peace and growth</th>
<th>Psychologically</th>
<th>Providing comfort and peace</th>
<th>A source of console and a peace of mind different from that from others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing a place where one can lean on and rest during hard times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Providing emotional comfort even for non-believers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner compass</td>
<td>Providing</td>
<td>Core of life philosophy</td>
<td>Trying to live according to one’s faith or religious teachings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>guidelines</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing</td>
<td>Thinking of oneself, one’s life, and certain issues through prayer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reflection</td>
<td>Looking at oneself, one’s life, and certain issues objectively and deeply</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive mindset</td>
<td>Remaining</td>
<td>Accepting the unpredictability of life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>optimistic and</td>
<td>Having faith in one’s capability to deal with difficulties</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confident in the face of adversity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking solutions and alternatives instead of giving up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Growth-oriented</td>
<td>Believing in learning from life experiences including adversities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Believing in human growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Having a sense of direction in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Happiness-seeking</td>
<td>Seeking happiness, the ultimate goal in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tuning in to one’s voice to find out what makes oneself happy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caring about others’ wellbeing and wanting to contribute to it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* in vivo code