A Qualitative Exploration of South Korean Emerging Adults' Perspectives on Death and Suicide Through Short Stories

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Abstract

Despite the alarming suicide rate among South Korean emerging adults, relatively little is known about their unfettered perspectives on death and suicide. Therefore, an innovative data collection technique was developed to apprehend the meanings that emerging adults attribute to death and suicide in their explorations of the phenomena through a selection of short stories. A convenience sample ($N = 114$) responded to a survey in which participants transferred their feelings toward death and suicide to characters or events in the short stories. A qualitative content analysis revealed relatively permissive perspectives toward death and suicide. Negative perspectives on death are associated with societal victimization and positive perspectives with naturalistic fatalism. Positive perspectives on suicide are overwhelmingly rooted in existential, individual choices while negative perspectives focus on societal pressures. These perspectives contribute to illuminating tensions between traditionalist collectivism and contemporary individualism in Korean society that could inform suicide prevention initiatives for emerging adults.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, death and suicide, South Korea, collectivism, individualism
Access Options

Introduction

Suicide is an ominous public and individual health concern of extensive proportions in South Korea (henceforth Korea). Although it befalls most demographic parameters of the population, emerging adults are particularly vulnerable. The motivation for this study emanates from a perceived neglect of research on suicide among Korean emerging adults and a focus on suicide preventative initiatives for the elderly that are rooted in social or collectivist approaches. This study proposes that emerging adults' evolving individualist ontologies should be considered in formulating developmentally tailored preventative initiatives.

Arnett (2000) coined the term *emerging adulthood* to describe the challenging developmental period in the late teens through the mid-twenties (18–25) that is synonymous with profound flux, turmoil, and "growing up fast" (Foster, Hagan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008, p. 162). During this time, nascent independence ontological and existential identities are negotiated, living conditions become unhinged, emerging adults are psychographically suspended between adolescence and adulthood, they become more self-focused, and the potentials of the future are recognized (Arnett, 2000, 2005, 2007). Responses to these challenges could manifest in their lives as substance abuse, labor market-induced stress (Arnett, 2005, 2007); media-stimulated aggressive behavior, university grade deflation, the deterioration of real-life friendships (Coyne, PadillaWalker, & Howard, 2013); casual

sexual relationships (Claxton & Van Dulmen, 2013); and identity formation-related anger, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). In Korea specifically, emerging adulthood is overwhelmingly associated with university life because 70% of the country's population has completed some form of tertiary education in 2017 (Population with Tertiary Education, 2018).

With emerging adulthood being such a tempestuous phase, it is not surprising that Blum and Nelson-Mmari (2004) identify suicide as one of the five leading causes of death among emerging adults. Suicide in this age-group seems to be rising more rapidly than in all other age groups (Blum & Nelson-Mmari, 2004; Patton et al., 2009). [AQ1] In Korea, suicide contributes to 41.3% of all deaths during this challenging period (D. H. Kim, 2016).

In light of the magnitude of the phenomenon, suicide among Korean emerging adults seems to attract unreasonably little attention (H. S. Lee, Kim, Choi, & Lee, 2008). Scholarship is often devoted to suicide during adolescence (Bae, 2019; H. S. Kim & Kim, 2008; Kwak & Ickovics, 2019; J. Y. Lee & Bae, 2015; H. S. Park, Schepp, Jang, & Koo, 2006; Zong, 2015) and late adulthood (O. S. Kim & Sok, 2017; J. Y. Park et al., 2013; Sun, 2016). This observation is consistent with Patton et al. (2009) who report a global neglect of research on death in people between the ages of 10 and 24 despite the notion that approximately 30% of the world population falls in this category. In addition, H. S. Lee et al. (2008) point out that little is known about death attitudes among young Koreans in contrast with the research focus on elderly adults' attitudes. This neglect persists despite the fact that depression—a major cause of suicide (Baek et al., 2015)—has risen 6% between 2015 and 2016 among Korean emerging adults (Choi, 2018).

In addition to the relative neglect of scholarship on Korean emerging adults' attitudes on death and suicide, preventative initiatives are rooted in a partially incompatible collectivist ontology. Scholarship reports positively on means restriction and predictive screening among the elderly population (Lewiecki & Miller, 2012). For example, the restrictive regulation of pesticide in Korea has been associated with a decline in such suicides (Cha, Chang, Gunnell, Eddleston, Khang, & Lee, 2015). Depression screening tests, physical house visits, and telephone checkins have also demonstrated positive effects. These preventative efforts are considered successful within the elderly Korean population because of an important shift in focus from suicide as a personal responsibility to suicide as a social problem (J. W. Kim et al., 2019; Sun, 2016). However, initiatives that are effective for the more collectivist inclined elderly population may not fit emerging adults because of fundamental ontological differences between these populations.

The most conspicuous ontological difference entails a shift in emphasis from collectivist to individualist thinking in contemporary Korea. In a collectivist society, worldviews are deeply affected by successful assimilation into cohesive groups that constitute the "We" consciousness. Collectivism emphasizes an individual's social roles in and responsibilities for the in-group, thus emphasizing an interdependent self-concept based on extrinsic values (Y. Kim, Kasser, & Lee, 2003). By contrast, in an individualist society, independent individuals engage in relatively loose relations with other people, which contribute to the prevalence of the "I" consciousness (Hofstede, 2011). Individualism is rooted in an independent self-concept that seeks to satisfy intrinsic aspirations (Y. Kim et al., 2003). These holistic generalizations, however, should not be considered as the personality traits of individuals.

Although reductive, it is generally claimed that Western societies embrace individualism and Asian societies collectivism (Hofstede, 2011; Kang, 2017; Loerbroks et al., 2016). Based on a World Values Survey about Korea, Kang (2017) found that "[i]ndividualistic values are highest among the youngest

age group (20–39) and decrease in successively older age groups" (p. 9). Therefore, Korea is confronted with the tensions between the two opposing ontological views and struggle with what B. B. Park (2012) calls "collective cultural ambivalence" (p. 237). Emerging adults seem to negotiate the incongruity of an existential conflict between their own ontological views that are largely shaped by individualist values and a society that is deeply rooted in revered collectivist principles. Such existential conflict might become psychologically debilitating and might lead to suicide ideation, which could partially be explained through Durkheim's suicide typology.

Durkheim (1951) distinguishes among four types of suicide based on the level of moral regulation and societal integration. Regulation refers to the social norms that govern membership to a group. Integration refers to the level to which an individual is assimilated into a group. Varying levels of regulation and integration lead to conflict between the individual and the group, which may motivate any of the following four types of suicide: fatalist, anomic, altruistic, and egoistic (see Table 1).

Table 1. Durkheim's Typology of Suicide.

Type of suicide	Value distinction	Characteristic	Example
Fatalistic	High regulation	Societal norms appear oppressive	Suicide is considered an escape because the individual feels destined/fated by an oppressive society. A victim of human trafficking or slavery might have responded with fatalistic suicide.
Anomic	Low regulation	Societal norms appear tumultuous	Suicide mainly in response to social upheaval, such as the turmoil of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, may be called anomic suicide. The social anomie prevents the individual from achieving his/her goals thus causing existential conflict.
Altruistic	High integration	Social bonds are strong and conducive to cohesion	This type of suicide benefits others, such as a parent who courageously dies whilst trying to save his/her child.
Egoistic	Low integration	Social bonds are weak and conducive to division	This type of suicide occurs in response to strong feelings of not belonging to the group. For example, an adolescent who adversely struggled to adapt to a new high school environment might in part have responded with egoistic suicide.

Source: Adapted from Hynes (1975).

It would be unjustified to assume that any one type of suicide is limited to either individualist or collectivist societies (Hynes, 1975). However, research has shown tendencies that associate collectivism with fatalistic and altruistic suicide in the context of suicide bombings, for example (Braun & Genkin, 2014; Momayezi & Momayezi, 2017). In addition, Eckersley and Dear (2002) established a strong positive correlation between young men in individualist societies and egoistic suicide. They motivate this phenomenon as Western societies' failure to provide: "[...] appropriate sites or sources of social identity and attachment, and, conversely, a tendency to promote unrealistic or inappropriate expectations of individual freedom and autonomy" (p. 1891). Scholarship on preventative initiatives that consider suicide as a social problem and use social strategies in collectivist populations successfully support the connection between a collectivist society and social preventative initiatives (J. W. Kim et al., 2019; Sun, 2016). However, in light of the magnitude of suicide among emerging adults in Korea, it is justified to question why socially based initiatives

appear to be relatively unsuccessful within an increasingly individualist Korean emerging adult population?

In pursuit of a profounder understanding of the currents that push and pull at the existence of Korean emerging adults, a dual purpose is conceptualized. The primary purpose of this study is to cautiously explore neglected Korean emerging adults' perspectives (i.e., ontological conceptualizations) of death and suicide. Secondarily, it attempts to show qualitatively how the results could contribute to informing the social-oriented suicide prevention paradigm.

Method

Data Sampling, Setting, and Collection

Data were collected from a convenience sample of N = 114. All the invited participants (i.e., Korean university students) completed the questionnaire. Participants were all of legal age that varied between 19 and 26 years with an average age of 21. The age range qualified the sample as emerging adults. Additional demographic data were not collected because it fell beyond the purview of this study. After obtaining written consent, participants freely and anonymously participated.

This study was exempt from institutional review board approval by the relevant department prior to data collection because of the nature of the study and noninvasive design of the data collection strategy. Exemption was granted because data were collected in a standard educational setting through normal educational means, and it did not impact student learning unfavorably or hamper assessment. Data were collected over three semesters in six identical English acquisition classes at a prominent university in Korea. The data were collected through a questionnaire that acted as revision strategy in preparation for an examination within the normal parameters of the syllabus. Participation entailed no physical or psychological risk and contributed to students' learning, as they had to reflect deeper on the course content. Because the stories were part of the syllabus, all the students read all the stories within approximately 3 weeks and wrote their responses simultaneously thereafter. No word count restrictions were imposed, which lead to responses that varied in length between 14 and 83 words per question. All responses were handwritten in English, and while students were all proficient in English, they were encouraged to use dictionaries to help convey their intended meanings.

Table 2. Summary of Pivotal Topic, Plot, and Character Information.

	2BRØ2B	*Harrison Bergeron*	*The Lottery*	*The Story of an Hour*
Topic	Population control	Dystopian equality through ultra-democratization	Maintenance of outdated traditions	Gender role perceptions and suppression
Plot	For every one child that is born, another person must volunteer to die. Volunteers make appointments with the termination bureau by calling *2BRØ2B*	Capable people are artificially disabled to equalize society. Harrison breaks free from his disabilities and is executed	Tradition dictates the stoning to death of one villager each year. The person is selected through a lottery	The protagonist (Louise Mallard) secretly celebrates the death of her husband. A twist of fate causes her to die because of excessive joy
Characters subject to death or suicide	Edward Wehling Dr. Hitz Leora Duncan Painter	Harrison Bergeron Ballerina	Tessie Hutchinson	Louise Mallard Brently Mallard

Data collection was based on participants' reflections on the following English language short stories: *2BRØ2B* and *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut, *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, and *The*

Story of an Hour by Kate Chopin. Two short stories were written by a male author and two by female authors. This particular collection of stories was probed because they all deal with different forms of death and Durkheim's typology of suicide (see Tables 2 and 3). This gave participants ample topics, plot developments, and a diverse group of characters with which they could identify or disidentify.

Table 3. Types and Methods of Death and Suicide Identified A Priori.

	2BRØ2B	*Harrison Bergeron*	*The Lottery*	*The Story of an Hour*
Kinds of death	Murder Execution Euthanasia Fatalistic suicide Anomic suicide Altruistic suicide Egoistic suicide	Murder Execution Fatalistic suicide Anomic suicide Altruistic suicide Egoistic suicide	Murder Execution	Natural death Death by poetic justice Pseudo death

The rational for using short stories as intermediaries to facilitate the research topic was to enable participants to transfer their perspectives to plot developments and characters hence decreasing psychological risk. This innovative data collection strategy is rooted in the authors' experience with a combination of bibliotherapy, narrative therapy, and transference within clinical practice and educational environments. Bibliotherapy refers to using written materials (e.g., short stories) to advance understanding of people's developmental requirements or problems (Marrs, 1995). In narrative therapy, a phenomenon is externalized by narrating stories that enable people to objectify their problems (Carr, 1998). In psychoanalysis, transference is explained as the projection of feelings and emotions toward one person onto another person (Levy & Scala, 2012). As with bibliotherapy, data collection relied on short stories to understand emerging adult developmental perspectives. The bibliotherapeutic short stories entered narrative therapeutic space as they objectified death and suicide external to the participants. Transference then occurred as participants consciously or subconsciously attributed representational aspects or perspectives to events and characters in the short stories with which they developed bibliotherapeutic relationships. This unique data collection technique, which we coin as *literary transference*, creates a degree of separation between participants and the research topic that could be perceived as emotionally arduous. The degree of separation protects participants against possible psychological entanglement thus maximizing minimal risk.

Based on the content of the short stories and the data collection strategy, two comprehensive open-ended questions were asked.

1. In each short story of the selection, at least one character is confronted with different kinds of death. What are your thoughts on the death of these characters?
2. The reader is introduced to interesting ideas about the motivations for death and suicide through the actions of various characters in the selection of short stories. With which of these characters and plot developments do you associate or dissociate? Please motivate your response.

Question 1 probed death in its different manifestations as an abstract phenomenon. Respondents could have interpreted death philosophically as human mortality and as nonsuicidal termination of life. Question 2 explored the motivations for death and suicide and how participants associate or dissociate with them. Association and dissociation played a key role in determining positive, negative, or neutral stances during the content analysis.

Content Analysis
The content analysis consisted of the following three phases: closed coding, open coding, and coding for positive, negative, or neutral responses. During closed coding, both authors read through all the responses to categorize content according to the general a priori units of analysis, namely death (i.e., mortality) and suicide. The types of death and suicide were identified prior to data collection because they were reified in the short stories thus qualifying this as summative content analysis (Lichtman, 2013). This means that an initial round of closed coding occurred based on the subcategories in Table 3. However, it does not mean that participants used the same terminology as summarized in Table 3, which motivates the second round of coding.

During the second round of coding, both authors remained broad-minded to account for interpretive variations through open coding. For example, references to self-sacrifice were coded as altruistic suicide (e.g., *2BRØ2B*), and descriptions of death at the hands of a public mob were coded as executions (e.g., *The Lottery*). In other instances, open coding was much more complex. In *Harrison Bergeron*, for example, Harrison and the ballerina are executed for trying to escape a dystopia. From the perspective of the executioner, it is merely fair punishment (i.e., poetic justice) for breaking the law while the reader could interpret it as the murder of the protagonist. Alternatively, Harrison is aware that his actions will lead to his death, yet he continues to rattle the despotic system. His knowledge of his imminent death could be interpreted as fatalistic, anomic, and altruistic suicide, although not at his own hands. Similarly, in *The Story of an Hour,* Louise appears to die because of natural causes, namely, of a weak heart that could not tolerate the excitement of her husband's return. However, through dramatic irony readers know that her heart could not tolerate the disappointment of her husband's return after she celebrated his apparent pseudo death. Therefore, readers also know that she dies by poetic justice or as punishment for her *unethical thoughts*. This phase of open coding was essential to identify subthemes that illuminated the categorical clusters in the third phase of coding and informed the collectivist/individualist duality that questions the preventative initiatives in the Discussion section.

Following the two stages of closed and open coding, responses for both death and suicide were grouped into categorical clusters as positive, negative, or neutral. Positive responses were identified based on participants' association, contentment, or tolerance with death and suicide. Responses were classified as negative when they displayed dissociation, discontentment, or intolerance with death and suicide. Responses that did not express association or dissociation clearly were interpreted based on semantic expression. For example, "I think death is a natural thing [...]" (P94) could generally be understood as a positive association because it does not show intolerance or resistance to death. Death as a "natural" event does not mean that it is viewed neutrally because such a perspective communicates acceptance rather than indifference. A small proportion of responses could be classified as neutral because they did not associate or dissociate with either positive or negative descriptions. The relatively neutral perspectives are reflected in the results but not included in the Discussion section, as they expand the scope of the study beyond practical measures. This point is returned to in the conclusion.

Results
An overview of the results shows that participants held generally positive, negative, or neutral perspectives regarding the two original units of analysis (i.e., death and suicide), which constituted the three main categories into which descriptions were classified. These three categories are expressed as fractions or percentages of the total sample because all participants expressed some opinion toward death and suicide. The subthemes are expressed as fractions but not of the total sample because in some cases individual participants responded with multiple subthemes as motivations for both death and suicide. Therefore, the subthemes would render a sample that surpasses N = 114.

Categorical Clusters
Figure 1 illustrates that 33% of the responses are positive toward death, 51% negative, and 16% relatively neutral. With regard to suicide, neutral responses diminish to 7%. A small increase occurs for negative perspectives from 51% for death to 53% for suicide. A more noticeable increase occurs for positive responses; 33% of responses contemplate death positively and 40% consider suicide positively.

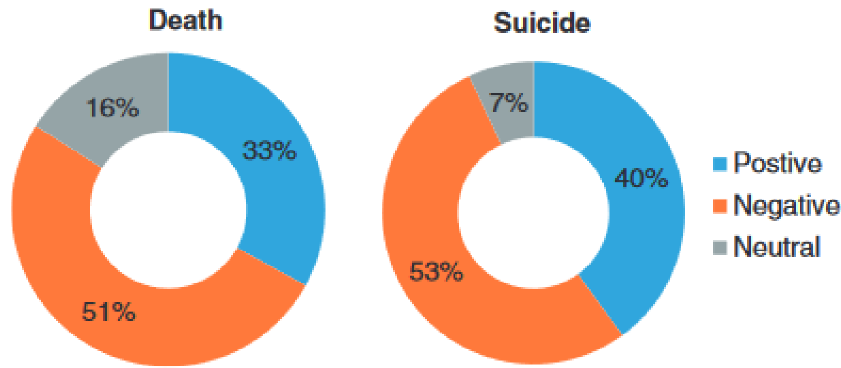

Figure 1. Proportions of perspectives on death and suicide.

Death
The categorical clusters regarding death identified in Figure 1 comprise the descriptive subthemes summarized in Table 4, and they structure the sequence of the results.

Table 4. Descriptive Subthemes Regarding Death.

Positive perspectives		Negative perspectives	
• Natural event	10%		
• Upholding justice	3%	• Murder	17%
• Altruistic execution	25%	• Suppression of freedom	7%
• Individual free will	11%	• Societal determinism	32%

Positive perspectives on death. Positive perspectives are generally associated with a fatalistic view of death as a natural, inevitable, and unpredictable event. This fatalistic view of death as predestined is considered positive because death is not resisted; it is accepted as the final human developmental stage. P96 frames the response with an indirect reference to fatalism and sees death as an inevitable conclusion: "I think that death is the destiny that every human has to face." Because all humans (i.e., protagonists and antagonists) encounter death eventually, P112 argues, "[. . .] death is a natural event that makes humans equal." One could postulate that death's equalizing capacity is in its predestination, as P94 and P87, respectively, state: "I think death is a natural thing; it is not controllable" and "No one can decide another person's death." Because death is an abstract, external influence that equalizes people, positive perspectives do not consider humans necessarily as victims of death.

The responses indicate that death caused by external force summons adamant arguments for life and death as choices of free will, as P67 and P31 contend, respectively:

> I think all people have the free will to die and live. It is not fair to suggest dying to another person even though it is the way the young generation thinks. (P67)
>
> I think people can die when they want to die or be obligated to die because of disease, accident, or punishment for breaking the law. So I think in 2BRØ2B, if someone wants to

> volunteer to die, that will be ok because he/she wants to die, but it is strange to force someone to die. (P31)

The choice to exercise free will without external interference appeals to the human rights of the individual. Examples include P98 who argues that "[...] everyone has the right to choose death and suicide for themselves [sic]." P15 eloquently articulates his or her stance:

> In my opinion, everyone has the right to choose how and when to die. I don't think it is right for a vast power or society to decide peoples' death. Society, which is the gathering of humans, cannot control peoples' life and death.

These individualist-oriented opinions are in stark opposition with preventative initiatives that relay on social approaches, which are addressed in the Discussion section.

Negative perspectives on death. Negative perspectives on death consider the terminal, external actions of other individuals or of society as the cause of victimhood and death. The positive view considers death as an equalizer; however, the negative perspective considers "[d]eath [as] the [individual's] sacrifice for equality" (P63), thus adding victimhood. Negative perspectives consider the individual in an oppositional relation with the forces of society. The characters die because their thinking is different from the "mass psychology of their society" (P5), or "they [...] don't fit their social system" (P2). Even when death provides relief, it still conjures the struggle of the individual: "[d]eath is just an escape and cannot be the ultimate solution for an unfair society," contends P45. It seems that at the root of the victimization is the individuals' reluctance to conform that leads to "contrast that causes unhappiness" (P24) and death. P76 theorizes that too much contrast may be responsible for death: "It is difficult to be different from other people in society. That may be the reason why the characters died." Death is a result of facing "impossible restrictions" (P54).

Together with the perceived tension between individual and society, negative perspectives contrast life with a value judgment on death. In this regard, perspectives are explicitly negative; for example, P110 maintains that "[...] life is so valuable that death and suicide should not be referred to lightly." A stout rebuke is provided by P112: "I think killing other people could not be justified by any reason. So, the deaths in these stories are against my opinion.

Suicide

The descriptive subthemes regarding suicide, summarized in Table 5, indicate that negative perspectives are rooted in motivations that suicide circumvents the responsibility to live (9%) and is an unnatural event (12%). Overwhelmingly, the descriptive subthemes are in favor of positive interpretations of suicide that justify the event thought euthanasia (4%), depression (10%), social victimization (26%), and altruism (34%). These positive perspectives imbricate the findings of a nationwide Korean survey that found permissive attitudes toward suicide are based on circumventing life suffering, personal rights, resolution of challenging circumstances, and in case of incurable diseases (Jeon, Park, & Shim, 2013).

Table 5. Descriptive Subthemes Regarding Suicide.

Positive perspectives		Negative perspectives	
• Euthanasia	4%	• Responsibility to live	9%
• Depression/"metal pain"	10%	• Suicide is an unnatural event	12%
• Societal victimization	26%		
• Altruistic suicide based on free will	34%		

Positive perspectives on suicide. Positive perspectives on suicide consider it an individual's reasonable, existential choice. Existentialism postulates that a responsible individual determines his or her own development through free will (Johnson, 2008). Similarly, P102 is of the opinion that "[...] humans can commit suicide just as they can choose to live." If a personal goal is contingent upon committing suicide, then P30 argues free will enables one to do so: "Committing suicide to fulfill your goal is reasonable because it is your will." Free will therefore supersedes extenuating factors, such as terminal illness or self-sacrifice to save others. The self-sacrifice for the lives of children in 2BRØ2B is considered "quite meaningful" (P41). However, even without being meaningful to others, suicide, like death, is a human right: "I think people should be allowed to kill themselves if they don't find hope in their lives. People have the right about their own lives" (P93). P7 explicitly defends an individual's human right to self-termination against the collective will: "We have no right to ban suicide." The notion that suicide is a human right is consistent with what K. Kim and Park (2014) found regarding college student attitudes toward suicide, which are addressed in the Discussion section.

Depression, one of the leading causes of suicide among emerging adults (Baek et al., 2015; Choi, 2018), was reflected in only 10% of the responses. At least two responses made direct reference to psychological distress connected with depression. P27 referred to depression as unbearable "mental pain" and "fear" that cause suicide. The painter's suicide in *2BRØ2B* "is similar to my view," P27 concludes. P23 argues that suicide is the result of "negative emotional problems," but does not provide examples of such problems. While other responses did not refer to depression or these negative emotional problems explicitly, it can certainly be inferred from their references to regret, life struggles, and social discord. P97 contends that "[p]eople commit suicide because they regret their life." Such regret and eventual suicide may be rooted in "[...] the discord between a person and society, or if there is nothing enjoyable or pleasurable to do. It leads people to feel empty and commit suicide" (P26). This emptiness may be connected with disappointment or disillusionment as P112 suggests: "They all expected something, but their world didn't support that." The disappointment and emptiness could become terminal: "I think death and suicide occur when it is too difficult to endure life" (P83). These responses are supported through scholarship that explains an individual's motivation for electing suicide: "[A]n individual with limited psychological reserves who faces the same challenges [as a person with psychological reserves] might come to feel that suicide, however undesirable, is preferable to living" (Lewiecki & Miller, 2012, p. 2317).

Suicide based on emotional discord seems to elicit permissive perspectives, especially when such discord originates in societal pressures that victimize individuals and inhibit their free will thus counteracting existentialism. With reference to the fatalistic and anomic suicides in 2BRØ2B, P48 argues that the characters' choices are "justified" because they live in an inhuman and cruel world. P81 stresses the powerlessness of the individual against society as cause for fatalistic suicide: "I think suicide occurs when people have complains about society but they can't change society."

Altruistic and egoistic suicide seem to elicit more tolerant or permissive perspectives as participants recognize individual self-sacrifice and societal victimization. Of the altruistic/egoistic suicides in *2BRØ2B*, P103 comments: "I understand their behavior, which is the result of their choice, and I think highly of that." Similarly, P91 contends that he or she "[...] admires the sacrifice of oneself for future generations." Altruistic suicide is considered honorable by P80. Because there is purpose and honor to death, it becomes meaningful, as P2 argues: "Even though all life is important, I think this kind of death is meaningful."

Euthanasia is viewed positively as a means of ending unnecessary suffering, or in the words of P13: "People who are too sick to go on should be able to request euthanasia." As with death and suicide more generally, external force is also rejected in favor of individual choice. P57 argues that "[...]

euthanasia can be permitted if the volunteer really wants it," and P46 explicitly maintains, "I support the idea of euthanasia, but it should not be forced." The four positive subthemes permit suicide as an individuals' existential choice that should be free from external pressure.

Negative perspectives on suicide. Negative perspectives on suicide oppose it reluctantly with caveats that hint at permissiveness because suicide is seen as an alternative of last resort, and it goes against the "real world." P85 provides possible reasons for the various kinds of suicide in 2BRØ2B as volunteering and sacrificing. However, outside fiction P85 continues to oppose it: "Our life is important, we should not kill ourselves." Although P12 is against suicide, she or he allows it as a last resort: "I think suicide should be the last choice because human beings are not just meat loops, they are able to pioneer their destiny." Similarly, P45 considers it a solution before opposing it: "I believe suicide is a passive solution, and there must be a better way to combat the situation." A natural death is preferred by P11, but she or he allows suicide when people "want to quit their own lives." This sample of negative perspectives illustrate that even though participants oppose suicide, it is under certain circumstances permitted.

Suicide is ontologically more assertively rejected when a tension between its artificiality and the authenticity of the real world is maintained. P35 describes suicide as a premature, artificial escape that tarnishes reputation: "It means people give up their dignity and their natural exit." P101 emphasizes the escape that suicide provides from reality: "Suicide is just running away from the real world." P92 distinguishes between actual perspectives and those perpetuated by the stories by arguing the following: "In general, suicide is interpreted as negative. In the stories, it is embellished with the positive meaning of freedom and liberation." P38 contrasts the difference between suicide in the real world and in the stories based on a real-world ontology:

> I think every human has the right to commit suicide. But what is more important is the purpose of the suicide. The characters were killed by their dreams, hopes, and ideals. In the real world these may not be achieved through your death.

Accordingly, the stories glorify suicide as an act of major fictitious consequence; however, in real life, similar consequences may not ensue thus diminishing the real-world impact of suicide. Could this indirectly contribute to a more permissive perspective because suicide does not seem to have major consequences in the real world?

Discussion and Implications

Interpreting the results depends greatly on the sensibility of the new method designed for this study. It is imperative, therefore, to first consider whether the literary transference method served its intended purpose and delivered results upon which the discussion and implications could be based.

Literary Transference Method

Literary transference seems to have been effective because participants associated or dissociated with the shorts stories. Although a degree of psychological distance was deliberately created, literary transference still facilitated sagaciously considered opinions framed with personal pronouns. P36 expresses understanding for Harrison Bergeron's sacrifice for freedom (i.e., fatalistic/anomic suicide) and Edward Wehling's parentally motivated altruistic suicide, but contends, "I think the stories deal with the problem of death so easily. I still think that suicide is a bad thing, and the characters should have found other ways to fight with society." Transference does not seem to occur in a vacuum as it could be aided through contextual sociocultural memory. P64 responded, "I felt that *Harrison Bergeron* is quite similar with North Korea. People should obey the government and if they do not, they will be killed." Because literary transference appears to have achieved what it set out to

accomplish, namely to reveal participants' perspectives and understand the meanings they attribute to death and suicide, the method's confirmability becomes defensible (Jensen, 2008).

Polarities of Permissiveness Korean emerging adults' perspectives on death and suicide currently negotiate an ontological divide that straddles traditional collectivist culture rooted in Confucianism and an individualist ideology influenced by globalization (B. B. Park, 2012). Stimuli of globalization include greater female emancipation, increased educational and employment competition, and growing wealth disparities (Kang, 2017; J. Y. Kim, 2016; Prinsloo, 2018a). This multipolar reality is commonly described as "hell-Chosun" and hypothesized with "spoon theory." Emerging adults encounter untenable (i.e., infernal) pressure to achieve professional success while opportunities dwindle, and the Korean government (i.e., Chosun dynasty) fails to embrace important global trends. Therefore, akin to the Hindu caste system, Korean emerging adults come to believe that when someone is born with a proverbial "dirt spoon" in the mouth, there is a slim chance of excelling in life (J. Y. Kim, 2016). The results of this study provide a glimpse into a conflicted culture that could be illuminated with the polarities of permissiveness

Table 6 illustrates how polarities of permissiveness assemble. External societal determinism acts as collective phrase for motivations that reflect positively on death, and internal individual existentialism reflects positively on suicide. These polarities attempt to explain why emerging adults seem permissive toward death and suicide and how it could impact suicide prevention.

Table 6. Polarities of Permissiveness.

External societal determinism	Internal individual existentialism
Death	Suicide
• Fatalistic	• Existential
• Natural	• Depression
• Free will	• Free will
• Human right	• Human right
• Equalizing	

External societal determinism. Death is considered positively when it is externalized, there is no human interference, and when it occurs naturally even though it is fatalistically predetermined. A contradiction here seems to undermine the legitimacy of emerging adults' reasoning. How could fatalism and free will both have positive connotations with death? While fatalism subscribes to the notion that death is predetermined, the association with free will implies that death should not be caused by external human interferences. With regard to the positive view on death, free will is not in opposition with fatalism—but with societal force. Fatalism provides chronological structure that equalizes people in an imbalanced, hierarchical Confucianist society. Consequently, the permissiveness toward death could possibly be rooted in the external forces and inequalities associated with collectivism.

Internal individualist free will. Suicide could be seen as the ultimate token of exercising individual choice. Emerging adults appear to be permissive toward suicide because they view it as an internalized, individual decision that is based on personal free will. Life and death are considered existential choices. External societal determinism infringes upon the individual's will. Consequently, emerging adults' sense of individuality regarding suicide seems to be more assertive than their commitment to collectivist life because collectivist life is associated with uncontrollable stressors (e.g., hell-Chosun and spoon theory).

Korean emerging adults' tendency to embrace individualism invokes B. B. Park's (2012) idea of collective cultural ambivalence that suggests a tension between Confucian collectivism and Western

individualism. This tension generates cultural dissonance, distress, anomie, and possibly suicide; however, causal links may be tentative. Kang (2017) continues the line of argument by asserting, "[...] increasing levels of individualism and decreasing levels of collectivism not only contribute to collective cultural ambivalence and anomic suicides, but likely also create excessive levels of egoism and egoistic suicides" (p. 11). In a face-saving Confucianist culture, the higher reporting of depression between 2015 and 2016 (Choi, 2018) signals more transparency (i.e., psychological help-seeking behavior) that may have arrived with the so-called Western individualism. If individual help seeking and subsequent social preventative initiatives had been successful, suicide numbers should have declined regardless of the type of suicide. Yet, suicide is still on the increase among Korean emerging adults (D. H. Kim, 2016). Therefore, preventative initiatives should at least consider emerging adults' ontological conceptualizations of death and suicide that seem to be partially rooted in a conflicting collectivist/individualist ontological dichotomy.

Preventative Initiatives

Suicide prevention initiatives, especially means restriction, emphasize a social approach (O. S. Kim & Sok, 2017). "Means restriction entails a community or societal action that (ideally) does not depend on an individual's intention or volition" (Yip et al., 2012, p. 2394). However, the ontological disparities between emerging adults' perspectives and the prevailing prevention initiatives challenge a one-size-fits-all social approach to suicide prevention for Korean emerging adults. As a result, it would be prudent for preventative initiatives to consider the following insights:

- The multipolar nature of the realities that Korean emerging adults inhabit is not entirely estranged from the vicissitudes encountered in the fictitious short stories. In fact, reality may align more with such "fictions" as the forces of globalization continue to coagulate collectivist and individualist influences in Korea (B. C. Park & Lester, 2006; Prinsloo, 2018a). While Koreans are often perceived as a homogenous and collectivist people, rapid global stimuli inculcate bourgeoning individualist characteristics among emerging adults, which in general distinguishes them from other generations. As these individualist tendencies expand, social bonds appear to diminish and completed suicides increase (B. C. Park & Lester, 2006). As a result, preventative initiatives should be attuned to emerging adults' degree of individuality in the face of an enduring collectivist culture similar to how a psychotherapist is emotionally and developmentally attuned to the client to provide effective mental health care.
- While the right to life is universally recognized, a noticeable portion of Korean emerging adults in the sample supports the right to die and suicide. Life requires existential purpose while the prerogative to death and suicide require relinquishing such purpose. Existential purpose is mostly intrinsically motivated in individualist cultures leading people to pursue experiences that satisfy individual needs and psychological contentment (Y. Kim et al., 2003). With Korean emerging adults expressing more individualist dispositions, intrinsic life motivation needs to be fostered in the face of the decline of extrinsic, social motivation. In this regard, preventative initiatives may assume dynamic didactic roles in inculcating a sense of existential vigilance. While bibliotherapy may be used in formal therapeutic situations, research has found that Korean students attribute various functions to reading stories. In addition to the linguistic and entertainment values of literature, short stories also impart important pedagogic and critical, creative, and hermeneutic thinking skills. As such, students can derive vital ontological pedagogic values from short stories that could reinforce their intrinsic existential motivation (Prinsloo, 2018b). Fittingly, Johnson (2008) describes existentialism as a sense of knowing that "[...] although individuals may have relatively little freedom to create the social, political, and economic conditions of their existence, they do have some freedom of choice to make what they can of their situations" (p. 319).

Conclusion

The contributions of this study are threefold: First, it provides an alternative point of view on the ontological conceptualizations of death and suicide by Korean emerging adults. Their negative perspectives on death are associated with societal victimization and positive perspectives with naturalistic fatalism. Positive perspectives on suicide are overwhelmingly rooted in existential, individual choices while negative perspectives focus on societal pressures. Second, because of these insights into ontological conceptualizations that reveal individual existential tendencies, socially oriented preventative initiatives could tailor strategies for contemporary Korean emerging adults that embrace their individuality. Third, the literary transference method developed for this study demonstrated a new data collection strategy that probed psychological data while maximizing minimal risk.

Naturally, the contributions are tempered by several limitations that simultaneously motivate additional research. The focus of this study on an emerging adult population in Seoul could be criticized for merely agreeing with Jeon et al. (2013) who found that urban college students display more permissive attitudes toward suicide than rural residents. While this study agrees with Jeon et al. (2013), its purpose was not to confirm existing findings but to explore Korean emerging adults ontological conceptualizations and to inform current socially oriented preventative initiatives. Another limitation pertains to the practical consideration to exclude the neutral responses from the discussion. Although these responses comprise a small proportion, their highly philosophical nature (see P54 in the concluding paragraph) could make a valuable contribution in follow-up research. Finally, Durkheim's suicide typology is not without limitations or immune to critique (see Abrutyn & Mueller, 2016). The delineations among the types of suicide proved problematic because Edward Wehling's suicide in *2BRØ2B* could be interpreted as fatalistic, anomic, altruistic, and egoistic. These types of suicide may imbricate substantially in real live as well. This study relied on the structural function of the typology for data coding and did not rely on the regulatory and integrative differences among these types of suicide in its conclusions. Instead, the data necessitated Hofstede's (2011) collectivist/individualist cultural dimensions. However, preliminary observations indicate a possibility that Durkheim's regulation/integration value distinctions may associate with Hofstede's indulgent/restrained cultural dimensions, which could produce insightful contributions on death and suicide research.

Korean emerging adults' perspectives on death and suicide are indeed "fit for fiction," as they attempt to navigate the perfidious coalescence of clashing collectivist and individualist values. Much like Harrison Bergeron, they feel that hell-Chosun and spoon-determinism have become the shackles of a collectivist society that is misunderstanding and stifling their individuality. In the chorus of scholarship that continues to theorize their fatalistic future, a single transcendental voice echoes: "I think people commit suicide because they found more important values than life" (P54).

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